

# Column: How San Diego educator Lucille Burbank left her mark on 'Sesame Street'

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When "Sesame Street" celebrates its 50th anniversary on Saturday with a big HBO special, the famous guests will include Whoopi Goldberg, actor Sterling K. Brown, violinist Itzhak Perlman, and singers Patti LaBelle, Norah Jones and Elvis Costello. There will be hugs from Big Bird, cranky trashcan commentary from Oscar the Grouch, and showers of crumbs from Cookie Monster, who is still very, very hungry after all these years.

Chances are, there will not be any appearances by current or former members of the "Sesame Street" research department. But if you were ever a kid who learned your numbers from Count von Count or a parent who taught the alphabet with some major TV assistance from Kermit, you should raise your juice box to the people who helped give "Sesame Street" its educational chops. The show would not be the same without them, and Point Loma resident Lucille Burbank is here to tell you why.

“There were many instances of (the research department) monitoring the production to make sure the educational component was there. The producers expected us to be there, and they listened to us,” said Burbank, an educational-media expert who worked as a researcher and consultant at “Sesame Street” for 10 years. “Researchers were considered just as valuable as producers, because if the show’s message wasn’t getting across, that was not good.”

Since making its debut on public television stations on Nov. 10, 1969, “Sesame Street” changed everything about the way children’s TV shows interacted with their young audiences. (Beginning in 2015, new episodes aired first on HBO before turning up on PBS stations nine months later.) With the help of Jim Henson’s marvelous Muppets and a multicultural human cast, “Sesame Street” showed that a children’s TV show could be fast and funny. That it could teach everything from shapes and colors to manners and math without losing its playfulness and goofy sense of humor.

It also taught TV creators and producers that if they wanted to do more for children than sell them toys and cereal, they might need a little help.

That is the element of the “Sesame Street” magic that Burbank explores in her book “The Inside Secrets of Sesame Street,” in which the Temple University-educated author looks at how the show’s research department helped the pioneering series get its many educational messages across while also selling kids on the joys of learning.

The 2016 book, which is an illustrated version of Burbank’s 2013 reference book, “Secrets from Sesame Street’s Pioneers: How They Produced a Successful Television Series,” features interviews with such “Sesame Street” VIPs as show co-founder Joan Ganz Cooney and Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch puppeteer Carroll Spinney. Burbank also interviewed media consultant and early “Sesame Street” research guru Edward Palmer about an early research epiphany that shaped the show before it went on the air.

In December of 1968, almost one year before “Sesame Street” made its debut, Palmer tested a segment from the pilot episode on some young viewers. To his dismay, he discovered that the kids remembered everything from the segment about the letter “W” — the animation, the jingle, Kermit — except the letter itself. Palmer and his research team came to the conclusion that in order to make an impression, the letter needed to be less of a bystander and more of a co-star.

So



when the final segment aired, the letter “W” acted out the words “walking” and “wandering” by sneaking up on the poor, unsuspecting Kermit. The letter also gave our favorite frog a memorable thrashing. To which Kermit cried, “W is for weakening. Woe is me!” Since then, the “A” in the “Sesame Street” alphabet has always stood for “Action.”

When research showed that children were afraid of firefighters because the scary masks they wore, Burbank’s book says, “Sesame Street” invited firefighters onto the show so kids could see that they were helpers, not monsters.

When Will Lee, the actor who played grumpy grocer Mr. Hooper, passed away in 1982, Burbank and her fellow researchers helped producers and scriptwriter Norman Stiles figure out how to use the very child-like Big Bird to help explain Mr. Hooper’s death in a no-nonsense way that the show’s young viewers could understand. Stiles’ script for “Farewell, Mr. Hooper” won a Peabody Award and a Daytime Emmy.

For Burbank, it also shows the magic that happened when education and emotion combined to make indelible entertainment. Burbank is currently working on the third edition of her book, which will tackle the show’s move to HBO. Burbank is not a fan of the reboot, which she thinks is much too slick and a little too saccharine. But she will always love the show and the lessons that will live in its audience’s heart forever.

“People growing up with ‘Sesame Street’ loved learning. They loved reading,” said the 72-year-old mother and grandmother. “The show also taught them that different groups of people can live together in harmony. That was a big one. Working on ‘Sesame Street’ was heavenly. It was just heavenly.”

