

A photograph of Michael Healy, a man with glasses and a goatee, sitting at a desk with an iMac. The iMac screen displays the website PremEARS.com, which features a child's face and the text 'Migraine In Learning'. The background shows a window with a view of a hallway.

Lights, Camera, Action!

Meet Michael Healy '70,
the man behind the
Disney Channel movies.

by **Debra S. Park**



Act I, Scene 1

The college years

It was tradition that brought Michael Healy to 2001 Main Street. He entered his father's *alma mater* in the mid 1960s after graduating from Canisius High School. "I ended up having a great experience at Canisius," said Michael, a member of the class of 1970. "What Canisius did for me was to say here's the intellectual world—go at it. It has taken me a long time to go at it, but now I have."

It was also an education that prepared him well for Harvard University, where he went on to earn a master's degree in English in 1972. Michael returned to Buffalo and to Canisius College where he taught poetry and freshman English for a few years. He also reconnected with his classmate, Gregory Maday (BA '70, '73 MEd), who was teaching across the street at Mount St. Joseph's High School. Mt. St. Joe's was always looking for male actors for their theatrical productions and so Michael lent his thespian talents to the cause.



Act I, Scene 2

The early career

In yet another instance that proves that Buffalo is just one big living room, a friend-of-a-friend of Gregg Maday's (Got that? We are now three degrees of separation from Michael) was the wife of Doug Turner, the editor of *The Courier Express* (that makes four degrees of separation). With great writing skills but no real journalism experience, Michael was hired as a freelance writer for *The Courier* in 1974 but quickly became a full-time employee. He wore many hats at *The Courier*, including general assignment reporter, columnist and entertainment editor, the position he held when the paper folded in 1982.

"It's still a pain when I think of it. I really enjoyed *The Courier*. It was a spunky newspaper. Not bought by anybody but I think it kept *The Buffalo News* on its toes." Knowing that *The Courier Express* was going to close, Michael had already started working on other writing projects, including short stories and a movie scenario with Fred Keller. The movie, *Vamping*, starred Patrick Duffy, who you may remember for his role of Bobby Ewing, J.R.'s little brother, on the television series *Dallas*. Filmed in Buffalo, *Vamping* "tells the story of a down on his

luck saxophone player who attempts to rob a woman to get enough money to get his saxophone out of hock. Instead he falls in love with his intended victim."

After *Vamping*, Michael says he needed a job "with a dental plan" and so he decided to head West. He went first to Dallas, where other *Courier Express* refugees before him had found work. There was nothing available for him at the time. So he moved on to Denver where he landed the job of movie critic for *The Denver Post*. It was a position he held for five years.

"It was a real hard job to complain about. I saw lots and lots of films," said Michael. "But I felt that ambition to go for the unique and more creative things—than just critic."



Act II

The other movie career

Michael says Gregg Maday urged him to move out to Los Angeles "if he really wanted to get into the movie business." Gregg had done just that years earlier and is now vice president of movies and miniseries for television at Warner Brothers. So, Michael took his friend's advice and left the Mile High City. He spent his first year in California working



at a newspaper until landing a position at Warner Brothers. A few years later, Michael left Warner Brothers to work for a smaller company but his career really began to take off when he moved to CBS, where as director of development for movies he made more than 60 films in five years.

In his present position as vice president of original movies for The Disney Channel, Michael is now overseeing movies for a target audience that is fairly specific—nine to 11 year olds. And it is an audience that hits pretty close to home. Michael and his wife, Beth Shuster, have two children—nine year old Claire and seven year old Charlie. He knows, firsthand, the concerns many parents have when their kids are watching television.

“It’s the sort of thing we face in our house all the time because Charlie is a TV watcher. And we pretty much go into the living room to see what he has on. Even with broadcast things like FOX there is some pretty rough stuff on there,” said

Michael. But not so with the Disney Channel. “We step out and take some chances, but we are sort of a safe haven for parents. They know they are not going to hear any rough language or see in our movies,” he added.

Unlike other channels programmed especially for young viewers where the parents are sometimes depicted as stupid, Disney Channel original movies have real issues and real parents. “I think if there is anything I like to bring to these scripts it is a psychological reality,” said Michael. “The characters are identifiable to the kids. They have the same types of problems that kids are going through whether they take place in Halloweentown or on a beach in Venice. So that’s what I like best about this—that popular culture like this can be high culture at the same time.”

Twelve movies are completed each year at the Disney Channel. It takes about 18 months for a Disney Channel movie to be made. That is a relatively short period of time when you consider that a movie is something that will last forever. Michael is involved in the process from the “idea to on air and all the stuff in between.” It begins with a concept that is bought and developed into a script. Once the script is approved, his job becomes more production oriented, with the hiring of a director, actors and the management of the production itself.

After the movie is shot and edited, the sound is mixed and an advertising campaign is created to promote the effort.

Among the many movies Michael has made with Disney are *You Lucky Dog*, *Halloweentown*, *Stepsister from Planet Weird* and the Humanitas and Emmy award-winning *The Color of Friendship*. His most recent effort, *Mom’s Got a Date with a Vampire*, premiered on October 13 and will repeat many times. Unlike network movies, these are movies kids and their parents enjoy watching again and again.

“There’s a great kick in seeing your stuff on television and the stuff you had a hand in. There are many, many creators of each one of these products. I only had a portion of it, but it’s fun to be able to point at it and say that’s mine and my kids seem to like them.”

And his children are not the only ones. Because Disney Channel reaches about 65 million homes, there are a lot of people watching the work of this Canisius graduate. 🐻

