

"GIVE ME A LITTLE SIGN"

Q&A with Production Team:

Deborah Forte, Creator and Executive Producer; Machi Tantillo, Producer; Tony Kluck, Animation Director; Igor, Producer; Jackie Roth, American Sign Language (ASL) Consultant

Question: How did this special episode come about?

Answer: Deborah Forte, Creator and Executive Producer: I was at a voice recording session working with Lupe Ontiveros and she began to tell me about both of her sons, who are deaf. Lupe and I had many long conversations about them, specifically about learning a language and how the challenges of learning sign language closely relate to the challenges that English-language learners face, which we address in *Maya & Miguel*. I immediately asked the production team to dive into this subject and the storyline for "Give Me A Little Sign" was conceived soon after.

Q: What made "Give Me a Little Sign" so different to produce than other *Maya & Miguel* episodes?

A: Deborah Forte, Creator and Executive Producer: Every step of the production process was handled with the utmost care. It was imperative that American Sign Language (ASL) be animated accurately. That meant that the ASL signs had to be clearly and correctly drawn, (hands and fingers in proper positions), with the correct directional movements and animated at the correct speed. On top of all this, the entire story had to still be entertaining, funny and move our audience. The trick was to strike the balance between technique and heart.

Q: How did you ensure authenticity and accuracy on the signing for the episode?

A: Igor, Producer: I developed a system that enabled us to accurately animate sign language. The system had to be set up in a way that would ensure the best communication between the studio in Korea and our team in New York City. It had to be as simple to understand as possible, while accurately animating sign language. We filmed our ASL consultant signing lines from the script and took photos which were used as "keys" for animators. Once the show came back we had three ASL signers watch and make sure the animation was correct. The goal was to animate sign language that any ASL user could clearly understand from watching the animation without sound.

A: Jackie Roth, ASL Consultant: I provided the ASL translations on the "Give Me A Little Sign" script as well as consulted on the portrayals of certain characters in the episode. We wanted the show to be as realistic as possible in terms of how each character would behave in given situations. I took into consideration how each character would sign. ASL is my first language and I am bilingual. The challenge was how to make the animated characters understood. Since verb signs are directional and encompass certain, what we call, "signing space," some adjustments had to be made. We photographed in sequence all the signs that are used in the episode so that animators could draw them in 3D. The process was meticulous and time consuming, but what viewers will see will be most rewarding.

Q: How long did this show take to animate in relation to others?

A: Tony Kluck, Animation Director: It took us three times as long to prepare the show. Then it was sent to the animation studio where it took them one and a half times as long to do the animation.

Q: How important is an episode like "Give Me a Little Sign" to the overall children's programming landscape?

A: Deborah Forte, Creator and Executive Producer: Bringing ASL into the world of children's animated television is a wonderful way to build on some of the educational themes in *Maya & Miguel*. In *Maya & Miguel*, we portray the value of being bilingual and ASL, like Spanish, is another language. We also celebrate diversity of all kinds, and in this case, we introduce viewing children to a deaf child who uses ASL to communicate, something many children have never been exposed to. The portrayal of Marco, who is very appealing and a successful communicator, adds a new dimension to children's understanding of others who may be different from themselves. Whether it is English, Spanish, or ASL, learning a language is about communication.

Q: Is this community underserved?

A: Jackie Roth, ASL Consultant: Yes, in a number of areas. Even though sign language is noted to be the fourth most in-demand in foreign language studies, not everyone has the opportunity to study it. Even if they do, they do not have a chance to master the language because the opportunity to do so is not there. With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, television programs for the most part are closed captioned, providing this community access to entertainment. However, it is still limited. There is nothing like having "direct communication," when one can speak to you directly in your own language. With interpreters now available to deaf people, greater access is realized. The bottom line is that we do live in an aural society where communication and access to communication is

key to progress, information and personal development. It makes it harder for deaf people to mainstream in many situations, and without the assistance of a sign language interpreter or other technology, they are pretty much shut out.

Q: How do you think deaf and hard of hearing children will receive this episode?

A: Jackie Roth, ASL Consultant: They will love it. It will be discussed and analyzed in the classrooms and among children themselves.

A: Igor, Producer: I think they will be delighted. I think it will be very important for deaf and hard of hearing children to see themselves represented on television. For many, it will be a first.

Q: What do you hope fans and viewers will take away from the episode?

A: Machi Tantillo, Producer: I hope that viewers take away the importance of friendship and that being deaf should not be an obstacle in developing new friendships. There are many ways to communicate with people if only we try. It is also important to see practice and determination yielding real results.

A: Jackie Roth, ASL Consultant: An appreciation of different cultures, respect for their own, and respect for sign language. And for those who have not watched *Maya & Miguel* in the past, they may want to follow the series now.

A: Igor, Producer: I hope our viewers develop some interest in learning ASL and feel more comfortable around deaf people.

Q: How did the voice actors react to the episode?

A: Machi Tantillo, Producer: They were all very excited to be part of a show that celebrated differences and one that could express in a respectful and endearing manner a friendship between Tito and Marco. None of the actors had recorded for an ASL show before, so they were all very humbled. Lupe Ontiveros was particularly keen on the show as she and her sons were what inspired Deborah Forte to tackle this story.

Q: Was there anything you learned during the production of this episode?

A: Machi Tantillo, Producer: I learned that it is a common misconception for people to think that they need to yell to communicate with deaf people. Of course, it does not help them hear any better. Being around Jackie so much I realized all the similarities we have -

her being hard of hearing did not affect the way that we could communicate with each other. I also learned that if you take enough time with a special project like this, which might seem impossible at first, it will happen. I have a newfound respect for the deaf and hard of hearing and I want to learn ASL fluently one day, but for now at least I learned enough to be able to sign with a friend.

Q: Are there any additional comments or insight that you would like to share?

A: Jackie Roth, ASL Consultant: I think many of the young children today will know some signs or have been exposed to ASL and will appreciate the show. On a personal note, I am so appreciative of Scholastic Media, of the producers and the entire staff for making this possible. Everyone has been terrific and so committed to making this episode as authentic and as wonderful as it is. It was such a joy to work on this production and I am honored to have been a part of this "Give Me A Little Sign" episode.

A: Tony Kluck, Animation Director: It was great to see how Tito, who had such a hard time pronouncing certain English words, overcome his problems and even told his friend Marco that he was tri-lingual now, having learned some ASL and of course speaking English and Spanish.