

Autism Points of View: “The power of animated characters with Rob Paulsen”

Yakko Warner:

Hey, you know what this is? I'll tell you what this is, this is Autism Points of View by Autism Speaks. And you know who this is? It's me, Yakko Warner...

Pinky:

E Gad! This is Pinky...

Rafael:

This is Rafael from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles...

Carl Wheezer:

Hi this is Carl Wheezer of Jimmy Neutron Boy Genius.

Host:

This is Felipe Maya and the voices you just heard introduce this episode belong to one man, Emmy award-winning voice artist, Rob Paulsen. Rob is the voice of countless animated characters and if you were a child of the 90s like I was, he voiced many iconic characters you likely watched like Pinky from Pinky and the Brain...

Pinky:

“NARF!”

Host:

Yakko Warner from Animaniacs...

Yakko:

“Helloooo nurse!”

Host:

Carl Wheezer from Jimmy Neutron Boy Genius...

Carl Wheezer:

“Oh, are you going to finish that croissant?”

Host:

...and Raphael from The Teenage Mutant Turtles.

Raphael:

“Turtle power!”

Host:

As you can imagine Rob has a lot of fans both young and old and as he's met hundreds of them at conventions across the country, it's at these conventions that he began to realize that some of his most devoted fans are autistic. But while they adore him and his work, he says they truly connect to the characters he plays.

Rob Paulsen:

Couple weeks ago, I was at an event and a young woman came up to me and she said Mr. Paulson, my brother is here, my little brother is 28. He is autistic and he has profound anxiety issues, but he had to meet Yakko, and he pushed and insisted we go despite the fact that this would be really tough for him. She said, that's my brother right down there, and the poor child was shaking and rubbing his hands, rubbing his thighs and tearful, but he stuck it out and he didn't know what the hell I looked like, he just wanted to meet Yakko, because Yakko got him out of his head and provided him with utter joy. Ok, so finally the young man makes it up to me and I have a tendency to do it I'm doing here. I talk because I want to talk to the people are kind enough, it just makes them happy not least of whom is me. Little boy, 28, makes it up to me and he's a mess, an absolute mess, shaking, crying, apologizing, sister backed away and started taking photographs and you guys she sent me a three; I'll show you at the end of this, I never blasted it out on social media because it's not my job it's not my business and it's private. I would never even say his name but the young man in a sequence of three photos went from despair, crying going like this and then next photo is him kind of going, sniffles, getting his shit together. And the third photo is me saying, hey, how you doing? And he focused immediately like a laser and not only that, but his face lit up. And it was ridiculous to see that happen literally in 20 seconds. And you know naturally his sister was pretty careful, but she took these pictures and of course she thanked me profusely for doing what I do anyway. And it was I, who had the incredible gift of that experience, but I'll never forget it. And it's one of, I don't know, 100 I've had in the last seven or eight years. You guys it was frickin' ridiculous. Incredible to see that transition. And I don't know that he knows my name and it doesn't matter. I didn't say hi it's Rob, I said it's Yakko and sang the song; Tunisia, Morocco, Uganda, Angola, Zimbabwe, Djibouti, Botswana; and he left excited, happy. His sister was happy, and that boy pushed through something that I will never know how difficult that is. I get nervous. Yeah, we all get nervous, going to the dentist you get nervous, but not like that. Not like something where you go, oh my God I might fall over, I might embarrass my sister and myself by doing what I can't control. But he stuck it out so he could meet a god damn cartoon character. Who knew? I, honestly, I don't even know how to how to quantify that compliment.

Host:

Rob's nephew is an autistic adult and he told me he learned a lot about how to connect with his autistic fans from connecting with his nephew throughout the years.

Rob Paulsen:

As Andrew grew, it was clear that he was different. And I presume that I'm telling a story that is not atypical of the autism circumstance. And my sister Shelly who is nothing short of heroic and her husband Dave took it upon themselves to learn everything they could about what at the time was relatively new. This is almost 30 years ago so I don't know about the chronology of autism but I do know that he was clearly a little bit behind with what is typical and that they have many measuring sticks for development whether it's physical or emotional.

When Andrew got a bit older and he began to speak. Shelly would tell us when we come over: you know Andrew fixates on things. For me and my relationship with Andrew, at the beginning when he was younger it was about a pager. This was before we had cell phones right or used cell phones a lot. "Hey Uncle Rob can I see your pager?" You can buddy and he would turn it off and on and turn it off and on and turn off and on.

Host:

Rob brings this same compassion and understanding when meeting his autistic fans.

Rob Paulsen:

The relief on the faces of the parents that someone whom they perceived to be a celebrity and you make it clear I don't draw them and I don't write them. I'm just an actor. But the children sometimes get so, and I say children, I mean, could be eight, could be twenty five and they get so enamored by Yakko or Pinky or Carl or Donatello or you name it and they don't care about Rob. They love Yakko but their parents of course understand that it's me. And so they feel like they have to and I understand why they have to sort of a pre-apologize for what is not neurotypical behavior to the average human. And I totally get that.

So when I say I got this, I know. Thank you so much. OK go ahead. Dino you go talk to Yakko... and it's glorious for me because it lends a value to my work. That is way beyond a paycheck. Way beyond an action figure I'll be god damned. It makes a difference in their lives and I can only imagine because of my experience with my sister - five minutes of joy. Well you don't have to try to explain anything to someone else about why your child is behaving a certain way has got to be just like a tonic for your soul. So man I'm just spreading the word to my friends and like, can you guys believe this? This is incredible.

People will tell me, we flew here from Canada to meet you in St. Louis because we didn't know if we'd ever get a chance and I got to tell you every time Jordan here hears, "United States, Canada, Mexico, Panama, Haiti, Jamaica, Peru..." He does what you kids are doing right now. He just smiles and then he learns that he can almost sing it backwards. Talk about

a gift. But it's a very specific gift. And I'm the one who's learning a lot. I'm the one getting the incredible payoff. It's not about them. It's about the character. And I'm just a part of it.

Host:

Rob mentioned the name Dino just a bit ago and Dino Cencia is a real fan of his, I spoke with him for this episode.

Dino Cencia:

Well first I heard about Ron Paulsen when I was watching "The Land Before Time II" when Rob was one of the egg stealers from that movie. He played Spike, he was alongside Jeff Bennett, he was one of the egg stealers, trying to steal an egg from one of the dinosaurs and stuff. And when I was watching that movie for the first time, I thought I should get into this guy, I really like his work. That when I really got into Rob Paulsen, when I watched my first movie, called "The Land Before Time II: The Great Valley Adventure."

I grew up with everything Disney. The Disney afternoon of the 90s classic morning cartoons like Bonkers, Aladdin, New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh, Duck Tales, Dark Wing Duck. I grew up with everything Disney in the 90s and I would watch these cartoons growing up and I also grew up watching the old classic movie is like Pinocchio, Dumbo, Aladdin...I used to watch Snow White.

I still watch them today and I still watch them. I watch them once in a lifetime when I'm between before and after work when I have free time. I still watch Tiny Toons, Animaniacs, Pinky and the Brain, Dark Wing Duck, Tales Spin, Duck Tales. Mostly the old 90s cartoons I have on DVD.

Host:

The more Rob shared stories about meeting his autistic fans with his colleagues who voice characters like Sponge Bob, Goofy, Winnie the Pooh just to name a few, the more he realized that they had similar experiences with their autistic fans.

Rob Paulsen:

Nancy Cartwright whose Bart, Tom Kenney who's SpongeBob, Jim Cummings is Winnie the Pooh. So I've had other actor friends who, you know, whom I've said to, oh you got to go to these conventions. You will meet people who say Bart Simpson changed my life.

So what inevitably happens is folks on the spectrum show up in the lines and these actors come back home and tell me, Jesus Rob, I met a girl who knitted me, crocheted a Sponge Bob blanket with every character. There was no pattern, she just did it and she had to make sure that Sponge Bob got it. And all I did was do Sponge Bob, Tom Kenny, all I did was and she was out of her mind happy and her parents were and then she gifted me with this six foot by

eight foot crocheted blanket that she knocked out in her spare time. Rob, does that ever happen to you? I said you bet it does man.

My friend who you guys know is Wacko and he really is in real life too. The same thing and he called me, oh gosh I guess a couple of weeks ago and he said Robby I just got back from Salt Lake Comicon which is a big one, about a hundred thousand people - pretty good size. And I had the opportunity to see this young woman again whose parents had brought her out to meet me a couple of years ago at the same show. I had encouraged her as the character again, interestingly to go ahead and you know she saw it, showed me her artwork and it was really good. And her parents brought her again because she is not able to drive but he was in tears. He said my god this girl just got a job as an artist on a YouTube animated project and they're paying her, they give her a hundred bucks for every drawing and blah blah blah and she's got a little savings account and her parents were over the moon because she works from home. She is making her own dough and she says I want to buy blah, blah, blah. And her parents say well you know she's like no, no, no it's my money. You're right. Let's take you out and buy whatever.

Host:

Rob admits that comic conventions can be chaotic and aren't very sensory or autism friendly events and it's a shame that it's likely many of his autistic fans can't experience them because of this. But there's someone trying to change that, his name is Adam Wilson.

Adam Wilson:

You know I kind of grew up in a time before we had a lot of options for media. You know I had two television stations for a lot of the time when I was growing up and so comics were kind of a way for me to escape and to I really got drawn in because I like to read as well but it was more like the visual aspect other kind of drew me to it. You know the bright colors and you know the kind of Iconic characters, right, for Logan, he likes that sort of stuff but he's mostly into the animation part of it.

Host:

Adam's autistic son, Logan is a teenager now but Adam told me that when Logan was a child he was minimally verbal and it was animated shows and movies that led to a breakthrough for him.

Adam Wilson:

If any of you who are listening out there have been around kids at all in the last 20 years kind of understands how kids like to repeat-watch, you know a lot of those types of things. So, I think just kind of watching these things over and over again kind of really draws you in. And you got to be, he's really fixated on the minutia of things. And so, he would kind of pick out little things that he would wait to try to catch the next time around. What I didn't also

realize when he was younger because he was very minimally verbal was that he was kind of practicing the, you know, could do the voices of his characters when he got a little older and he found his words. It's really one of his favorite things is to kind of mimic and repeat the dialogue from these animated shows and movies. It really was kind of a godsend to us for him to start using his voice and to be able, you know, the only time we ever heard more than a two or three word sentence was when he would run a paragraph worth of dialogue from one of these animated series or movies. So just the fact that he knew that Logan was capable of that was really quite a breakthrough for him. And that all came from his love of that stuff.

Host:

Inspired by his son, Adam started Calm Passion, an organization whose mission is to make comic conventions more autism-friendly for fans like his son, Logan.

Adam Wilson:

That's kind of how we got the idea originally, because we would go to conventions, comic book conventions. And it was just because part of his autism is, he has a problem with loud noises, bright lights, sensory processing issues, including being in close proximity to too many people at once, you know crowds bother him, so, in those environments that's basically what it is, for people who don't know a comic convention it's usually held in a big hall, with a bunch of vendors. And so, it's a bunch of people crowded into not enough space and there's a lot of cool stuff going on but it's loud, it's hot; It's usually bright lights in it there's a lot of people. So, it's kind of hard for him to exist in that environment.

So, because of that my first thought was to have a space at these conventions where people that have sensory issues could kind of go to decompress, to relax. And so, I started contacting conventions, I'm like look I can do that, I can probably set up a space and do that. But at that point in time I didn't have an organization, I didn't have my you know all my stuff together as I should have. And so, to them I'm just a concerned parent and you know without any real track record. So, I kind of had a lot of doors closed in my face because of that. So, once I met the resistance with that, I decided well why don't I just hold my own convention for people that have these types of issues and so that's kind of how Calm Passion started.

Host:

Since then, Adam has hosted "Calmer Con" events for people with special needs to get that comic con experience but in a more sensory-friendly environment. He's even gotten celebrities and cosplayers to attend. Cosplay is a performance art that involves fans dressing up as some of their favorite characters.

Adam Wilson:

Also, I was fortunate enough to have a group called the, 500 first Legion, which is a sanctioned group of Star Wars cosplayers and my contact person with that organization is an

autism dad. He also plays Chewbacca, so he's amazing with the kids like you would think that Chewbacca would be really scary for a lot of these kids and at first it is. But they really warm up to those characters really quickly because they're, you know, they're benign, they just want to be friends. And so, you know, I just I'm really lucky and blessed with the costumes that I've come across. As far as like celebrities and people of that nature that's also been a matter of you know I'll go on social media and just touch base with these folks and, you know, some of them been really great, particularly the voice actor named, Rob Paulsen, who has really befriended me over the last couple of years and a support system for me.

Rob fully supports the mission of Calm Passion and says that his fans both autistic and neurotypical have given his life and career a new kind of purpose.

Rob Paulsen:

I love what I do. And as a result of you folks on the spectrum you have given me a whole new reason for doing it. And all I ask on behalf of me and my friends who are not on the spectrum is if you just give us a little time to understand how it works because we really want to understand it. But you guys got to a really special place faster than us. And so, you got to cut us a break too. But we really are in this together folks.

Host:

I'll leave you with some parting words from Yakko Warner.

Yakko Warner:

This is Yakko Warner, please support Autism Speaks to create a brighter life on the spectrum. And then you can go visit the United States, Canada, Mexico, Panama, Haiti, Jamaica, Peru, Republic Dominica, Cuba, Caribbean, Greenland, El Salvador and all the rest of those places, bye.

Host:

I hope you enjoyed this episode of Autism Points of View as much as I did. Make sure to subscribe to Autism Points of View wherever you listen to podcasts to get new episodes as soon as they're available.

I'd like to thank Rob Paulsen for taking part in this episode. Rob Paulsen recently released a memoir titled, Voice Lessons, where he writes about his battle with throat cancer which almost ended his career. I'd also like to thank Dino Cencia. Dino hosts an online radio show on Gold String Radio, a station run by adults with disabilities.

Lastly, I'd like to thank Adam Wilson for speaking with me about Calm Passion. If you'd like to learn more about Rob, Dino or Calm Passion, visit our website at autismspeaks.org/podcast. This episode was written and produced by me with help from

Autism Speaks intern Nicholas Scognamiglio and edited by Chris Skiles. I'm Felipe Maya, thanks for listening.