



A HERO IN THE MAKING: **The Mild-Mannered Man Behind One of PBS's Newest Superheroes**

By
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PBS premiered a new multiplatform animated PBS KIDS series, co-produced by Twin Cities PBS and Portfolio Entertainment, titled “Hero Elementary” on June 1, 2020. The school’s students are a diverse cadre who are super – literally. Because they’re still kids, however, their powers and other aspects of growing up are still a “work-in-progress.” One student in particular named AJ Gadgets has a passion for all things super: comic books, superheroes, and the gadgets they use. AJ also happens to be on the autism spectrum. When Twin Cities PBS decided they needed a consultant to make sure that AJ was portrayed as accurately as possible, they went to someone with first-hand experience: Dennis Taylor.

Sometimes the best partnerships are serendipitous. As the saying goes, “you never know who you might meet,” or, as a classic “Sesame Street” song states, “They’re the people that you meet when you’re walking down the street...” A chance computer malfunction at an annual ASPEN (Autism Spectrum Education Network) conference allowed Dennis Taylor, a twenty-seven-year-old man from Englewood, New Jersey to come to the rescue of Christine Ferraro, a writer for that very PBS show and part of the Sesame Street Autism Initiative. Ferraro was about to give a presentation on the Initiative and her involvement in the creation of Julia as Sesame Street’s first Muppet who is on the autism spectrum. “Dennis saw I was in need and immediately wanted to help,” she stated. “I was so grateful to him for coming to my rescue so readily... but that’s what superheroes do!”

Attending the conference was the suggestion of Ann Marie Sullivan, the founder of Spectrum Works, Inc., a New Jersey-based non-profit dedicated to providing job training and life skills for young adults with autism. Taylor was one of Spectrum Works’ first students, and he credits the organization for

helping him realize the potential of his talents as a graphic artist. After several years learning, working, and honing his skills at Spectrum Works, Sullivan helped Dennis secure a graphic design job at one of their partner companies, FM, as well as speaking engagements on issues of autism. As Taylor states, “My experience at Spectrum helped me with feeling comfortable enough to do public speaking...like Dare to Dream conference and Autism Speaks in Washington DC. I never would have been involved with [Hero Elementary] had it not been for Ann Marie and her commitment to helping me gain the skills and confidence I needed to be part of a project like this.”

“Dennis had shown so much growth as a person and artist during his time with Spectrum Works. His ideas were so inventive and captivating. You can’t really teach talent. What we did was guide him on how to take what was in his mind, bring it out through design, and communicate those thoughts in a way that would engage potential employers.”

Ferraro and Taylor’s first meeting initially had nothing to do with “Hero Elementary,” a series that, at the time, was only in the very early stages of development. Taylor was eager to get some professional guidance on how to “pitch” his own idea for an animated series titled “Taylor Cubs” and greatly wanted Ferraro’s input. Sullivan saw a rare opportunity to help Dennis build upon a valuable networking connection he had already made and sought to arrange a meeting with Ferraro, who was only too happy to help after having Taylor “save the day” at the conference. A lunch meeting at Ferraro’s house was arranged, and Sullivan began helping Taylor to incorporate all he had learned through her program. Together, they refined his pitch presentation and prepared him to make a great first impression. Ferraro commented, “I was so impressed by the amount of work Dennis had put into it; it was so thoroughly thought out, from characters to storylines with story arcs. He even did all the artwork, which was well done. I could see how much passion he had and was impressed by his skills.”

According to Ferraro, the concept for AJ Gadgets did not originally include his having autism. “He started as just this guy who knew everything about superheroes! He was an expert on every fact about every character! He also was obsessed with creating gadgets.” These superpowers would help his classmates at Hero Elementary as they all learned to work as a team – and then it occurred to her that AJ began to resemble her brother who was on the autism spectrum. She added thought projection as another of his powers, allowing everyone to “see” into his mind, with instant replay to help the others remember details they may have forgotten.

Those who are familiar with autism will recognize AJ’s traits: his sensitivity to noise, scents, and his high attention to details. However, the series creators were intent on avoiding labels, having him be just part of the team, a regular guy – who just happened to have autism. In fact, autism is not even mentioned until a forthcoming double episode which will premiere during Autism Awareness Month in April 2021 (on which Taylor was a key advisor before writing had even begun).

Ferraro uses her art to introduce characters like AJ Gadgets and Julia the Muppet to children at an early age so that they develop a familiarity with people who are different from them. This is a common goal with her and Sullivan, who states, “If we educate [children] while they are young by introducing diversity and inclusion early on and continue through high school, by the time they become adults and fellow company employees, there are no labels. People with autism are valued members of the team and that is the vision of true inclusion.”

Even though AJ's autism is seldom mentioned by name, the Hero team still needed to make sure that everything about him was authentic. And that's where Dennis Taylor came in.

"We didn't want AJ's autism to be the focus but wanted to make sure this part of him was portrayed as truthfully as possible," said Ferraro. AJ is also African American, as is Taylor, whose mother provided valuable insight to the series writers into different expectations for young men of color in society, especially with a perceived disability. "AJ is his own self -- no expectations, like Dennis," Ferraro adds.

Taylor was first brought on as a consultant for AJ's autism traits. However, as the project moved forward, the character began to resemble a lot of Taylor's own personality, behavior, and outlook on life. Ferraro states, "The spirit of AJ is based on Dennis. Someone who is smart and likable and has some challenges but also unique talents...someone who comes to the rescue and is always willing to help."

The entire scripting process took over two years, and Taylor reviewed every episode – all 80 of them. He, along with some help from his mother, provided insightful feedback, observations, and copious notes which were then incorporated into the scripts.

Beyond Taylor's contributions as consultant and character muse, Ferraro was particularly impressed with his extraordinary attention to detail. "He would notice inconsistencies in scripts that we as writers overlooked! He'd say, 'Wait. Didn't X say this in X episode before? So that wouldn't make sense now.' We got a continuity as well as an autism advisor!"

When asked about similarities between him and AJ, Taylor is quick to point out a high sensitivity to loud noises (AJ wears noise-cancelling headphones), although he views his own as more like "pantophobia" (look it up!). They both have some challenges with adjusting to change. "I get used to my bubble," claims Taylor. He and AJ don't always understand sarcasm either, tending to take things literally, as when teammate Benny compliments AJ by saying, "You're the man," to which AJ replies, "I'm only seven." But Taylor most identifies with AJ's commitment to observing, testing ideas, more often than not, failing, and trying again; a valuable lesson learned at Spectrum Works that influenced this "hero in the making." "I don't have a plan on giving up anytime soon," he said.

He gushes at the unique opportunity to have been part of developing a new kind of cartoon character for television. "Everything just happened at once! Just as I was really reaching a new level of skills and confidence through my job at FM and Spectrum Works' support and felt ready to take the next step, I meet Christine, have lunch at her house, and become a consultant for this amazing series. Now my mom's posting about my experience on Facebook all the time!" He adds, "So many cartoons talk down to kids. This show does not."

Sullivan states, "The success of our program is measured by the success of the students who are now able to realize their potential and achieve their dreams. This has been a dream come true for Dennis and I could not be any prouder of what he has achieved. He was a hero among us long before we shared him with world!"

Ferraro comments, "I've gotten to know Spectrum Works through Dennis. I am so impressed with what they do on behalf of ASD clients. Connecting them to work opportunities is wonderful, necessary work, and it's a benefit to EVERYONE to have more neurodiversity in the workplace." Taylor adds, "[Spectrum Works] and Ann Marie have really helped me personally and professionally. She's a part of the family. And of course, I thank Christine for one of the most rewarding experiences I've ever had."

New episodes of “Hero Elementary” for season 1 will be intermittently rolled out on PBS over the next months. Ferraro states, “Fingers crossed for a season 2, but it’s too early to know yet. We have 80 11-minute scripts.”

AJ Gadgets (with a little help from Dennis Taylor) and his “Hero Elementary” friends are flying to a television near you. Well, not literally. But it’ll be a fun ride anyway for anyone who chooses to tune in to their latest adventures!

Check out “Hero Elementary” on your local PBS station: <https://pbskids.org/heroelementary>

Find out more about Spectrum Works: www.spectrumworks.org

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