

Spongebob's Dad Tells All

He's headlining one of the most popular comedy programs on television, and even if you're not a fan, you're no doubt familiar with his gap-toothed-grin or his crackling banter with his loopy sidekick. Or perhaps you heard about his major surgery, or the ugly tug-of-war for his services.

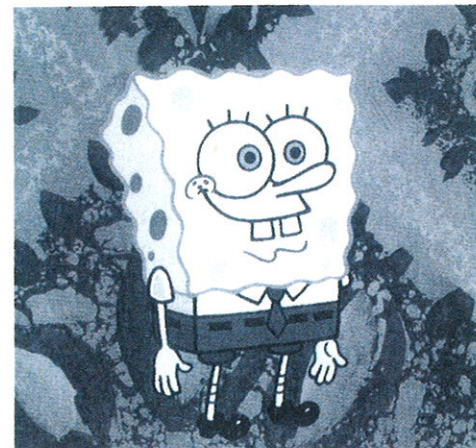
We all feel we know David Letterman. Except we're actually referring here to Spongebob Squarepants, a sea sponge, who, unlike Letterman, is best friends with a starfish, had his brain removed (temporarily), and is a much-in-demand fry cook in the undersea cartoon world of Bikini Bottom. Also unlike Dave, he's profoundly optimistic, which is how his father, 1991 Film Award Winner Stephen Hillenburg, made him.

"We are following the life of a childlike character that is an adult in his world—he's innocent and...doesn't think the way most adults think," explains Hillenburg, creator and executive producer of "Spongebob Squarepants," which first aired on Nickelodeon in 1999 and is now the No. 1 kids' show on television. Influenced in part by the classic man-child characterizations of Stan Laurel, Charlie Chaplin, and Jerry Lewis, as well as such animated shows as "Popeye," "Beanie and Cecil," "Rocky & Bullwinkle," "Ren & Stimpy," and "The Simpsons," Hillenburg also brought two unusual pieces of experience to his creation — his master's degree in experimental animation from the California Institute of the Arts and, something he "never really imagined would come in handy," his background as a marine sciences undergrad and educator.



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SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS (BELOW) AND HIS DAD, STEPHEN HILLENBURG (LEFT).



© STEPHEN HILLENBURG

there was a house that was a pineapple," Hillenburg says, imagining it to be an upbeat and sweet-smelling place to live. "Spongebob is an optimist, and I thought if anyone would live in one it would be him."

There was a time when Hillenburg was perhaps less optimistic than his creation - back in 1991, when he was trying to scabble together funding for his Cal Arts graduate thesis production, "Wormholes," what he described as "a poetic animated film based on relativistic phenomena," in his proposal to the Princess Grace Awards. Luckily for future Bikini Bottom fans, he got the grant.

"It meant a lot," Hillenburg says. "They funded one of the projects I'm most proud of, even with Spongebob. It provided me the opportunity just to make a film that was personal, and what I would call independent, and free of some of the commercial needs."

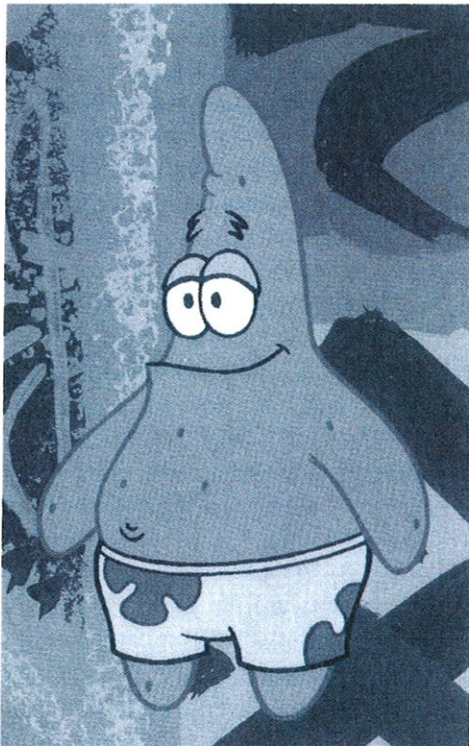
"That was the one time I thought I could express myself as an individual and a person," he added, along with a

WHY A PINEAPPLE?

"One day it dawned on me that there was this whole environment under water," he says, "and I thought, what about a world that is steeped in all of this, but what if the characters act the way the way we do?" A surfing fan and self-described ocean nut, Hillenburg uses the term "nautical nonsense" to describe this world, which he and the writers populate with kitschy, beach town elements and plenty of surreal images. This helps explain why the lead character lives in a two-bedroom pineapple. "If you go to Hawaii and go to a gift shop you see pineapples for sale, and I thought it would be funny if

cautionary note to present and future award winners, "you probably won't get [this opportunity] again, so don't squander it or think too heavily about 'what's my next move', and think creatively about what you want to express." It was for him, Hillenburg, acknowledges, "a really romantic time."

"Wormholes" ended up in an international animation festival (and has since appeared in others), "and that's how I ended up finding work in the industry and got a job at [Nickelodeon], which led to my still being there." Hillenburg ultimately became creative director of the network's animated series "Rocko's Modern Life" in that show's final season prior to selling Nickelodeon on "Spongebob."



SPONGEBOB'S BEST FRIEND, PATRICK STAR

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Along with funding, Hillenburg picked up what would also be a valuable approach to filmmaking while at Cal Arts. "I was in the experimental program where you actually learn every aspect of making a film, and there the idea was that you were the director and the creator of the project, that you would actually design and write and do all the editing and in some cases the music...that was for me invaluable because I wasn't just studying how to be a character layout person for a commercial job. The hard facts are that in the industry, things are broken into jobs, and that experience helped me... to see the whole picture."

In the years after "Wormholes," Hillenburg says he learned the simple truth that "without a story, you really can't captivate anyone's attention," and in the case of "Spongebob," he "decided to keep the stories incredibly simple and [focused] on character — the challenge being, can you write a story about two characters fighting over a piece of paper?"

Evidently you can. While Hillenburg is currently at work on a "Spongebob" feature film (the series will suspend production while he's making the movie) he and his team would work on up to five different episodes at once. "It's basically crazy... you're figuring out the germ of one story...storyboarding another one and another is being animated overseas." It takes approximately nine months to do an episode, Hillenburg says, from the beginning of an idea to the completion of post-

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

The 2003 Princess Grace Gace Awards will be held on Tuesday, October 28, 2003 at the Waldorf=Astoria Hotel. In the presence of HSH Crown Prince Albert of Monaco, the Foundation will recognize Award winners in theater, dance, and film. Check our website at www.pgfusa.com for regular updates.

production work. "Ultimately it relies on a great crew — this show is not just me, it's a collaboration — it's really like being a bandleader."

For one night, anyway, during the 2002 Awards Gala, the job of bandleader fell to someone else while Hillenburg accepted his Statue Award. When asked about the Award shortly before the event, Hillenburg described it as "an incredible honor, because I associate the Princess Grace Awards with supporting arts and projects with social meaning, with some kind of benefit to society, and...I feel proud to be still thought of as important and a commercial success." He adds that he hopes the award points to a lesser extent to his success and more to the fact that "we really are here trying to make funny and long-lasting cartoons."