

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB NEWSMAKER LUNCHEON WITH MARVA SMALLS, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND CHIEF OF STAFF FOR NICKELODEON, AND OTHER NICKELODEON REPRESENTATIVES MODERATOR: JONATHAN SALANT, PRESIDENT, THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LOCATION: THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB, WASHINGTON, D.C. TIME: 1:00 P.M. EST DATE: WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 2006

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MR. SALANT: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Press Club. I'm Jonathan Salant, reporter for Bloomberg News and president of the Club. I'd like to welcome Club members and their guests in the audience today, as well as those of you watching on C-SPAN.

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Before introducing our head table, I'd like to remind our members of future speakers: On July 6, Dale Petroskey, the president of the Baseball Hall of Fame, and on July 10, Senator Arlen Specter, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

We have a very special luncheon program today, as you can see by all the kids in the audience, as well as any preschoolers in another room happily coloring with Dora the Explorer. In fact, anyone here who would like to take a break from the speeches are invited to go quietly with an adult and join them in the John Peter Zenger Room on this floor. We have crayons and coloring books and Dora. What more can you ask for?

A special thank you to Angela Greiling Keane, vice chairman of the Press Club Speakers Committee and the organizer of today's luncheon. Angela is also the parent of a young daughter who is just about ready to start watching Nickelodeon.

Also thanks to Nickelodeon for bringing so many of its programming executives and stars to the Press Club. They will all join me on stage for questions and answers after the speech.

Please write down your questions on the cards provided at your table; pass them up to me. I will ask as many as time permits. Because

this is a kids' luncheon, I will give priority to the questions submitted by the kids in our audience.

Before we begin the program, I'd like to recognize the children and chaperones of the Capitol Hill Group Ministry's "Mission Impossible" program. They're in our audience today as guests of the Press Club. The ministry serves more than 4,000 vulnerable individuals, youth and families. It supplies shelter, intervention services and educational programs. The group was brought to our attention by Alison Bethel, one of our board members and the executive editor of Legal Times.

We hope that some of you will grow up to be journalists. In fact, the Press Club offers full four-year scholarships to help increase the number of minorities in our profession. To raise money for our scholarship program, we hold an annual 5K run and walk each fall. We need runners. We need walkers. We need sponsors. And we also need donations for our silent auction which accompanies the event. For details, please check our web site at www.press.org.

I would now like to introduce the head table and ask them to stand with me when their names are called. Please hold your applause until all their names are introduced.

From your right, Neil Rowland (sp) with Bloomberg News; Tom Kenny, who you heard, the voice of SpongeBob; Morgan Felchner, editor of Campaign and Elections Magazine; Miranda Cosgrove, the co-star of the TV show "Drake and Josh"; Ellen Bierga (sp) with the Wichita Eagle and a member of the National Press Club's board of governors; Tommy Lynch, the creator of "Romeo!"; John Hughes (sp), my colleague at Bloomberg News and chairman of the National Press Club Speakers Committee; Marva Smalls, who will get a big introduction later, but she's the executive vice president of public affairs and chief of staff for Nickelodeon; Janice Burgess, creator of "The Backyardigans"; the aforementioned Angela Greiling Keane, associate editor of Traffic World Magazine; the aforementioned Alison Bethel, who's on the Press Club's board of governors and also the executive editor of Legal Times; Romeo, the star of "Romeo!"; Kathleen Herles, who you've also heard from before, the voice of "Dora the Explorer"; and Lisa Lambert of Reuters. (Applause.)

A few years ago, when I was covering the Federal Communications Commission for the Associated Press, the chairman at the time, Michael Powell, walked by us after the meeting. He said just two words to show how up he was on popular culture: "SpongeBob SquarePants." Immediately those of us with kids started laughing, because we knew exactly what he was referring to, one of the most popular programs on cable TV. Indeed, of the 15 most popular basic cable programs, six of them, including "SpongeBob," are on one network, Nickelodeon.

Today, Nick cartoons such as "SpongeBob" and "Rugrats" have taken their place in the hearts and minds of today's kids the way we grew up with "Bugs Buggy" and "Rocky and Bullwinkle." At a time when the commercial networks have been criticized for their lack of diversity, Nickelodeon brings us programs like "Romeo," featuring an African-American character in the lead, and Teen Nick programs such as

"Zoe 101" and "Drake and Josh," which show how programmers can do television without sex and violence and still appeal to young people.

For the very young, there's Nick Jr. and stars such as Dora the Explorer, Blue the dog and Little Bear. And this being a Press Club, we're delighted to acknowledge former network news veteran Linda Ellerbee, host of Nick News, which brings real headlines and tough topics to kids.

Nickelodeon, which accepts commercials, has drawn criticism from the Center for Science in the Public Interest. The center says Nick should not be running ads touting junk foods and sugary cereals and should not be licensing its characters to less than nutritious food products.

For its part, Nick says that it also licenses "SpongeBob" for spinach and carrots and is undertaking its own efforts to combat childhood obesity. In fact, overseeing Nick's new "Let's Play" campaign is our first speaker, Marva Smalls, executive vice president of public affairs and chief of staff for Nickelodeon and its sister networks, Nick at Nite, TV Land, Noggin, and Spike TV.

She holds master's and bachelor's degrees from the University of South Carolina and lives in the Palmetto State when she's not in New York. She's a former aide to South Carolina Governor Richard Riley, who we in Washington know better as the former secretary of Education under President Clinton. And she's the former chief of staff to Congressman Robin Tallon. She's been active in the NAACP and sits on several boards of directors, including the National Council of Families and Television and the Children Affected by AIDS Foundation.

Let's welcome Marva Smalls to the National Press Club.
(Applause.)

MS. SMALLS: Good afternoon, and thank you all for coming today. On behalf of the president of Nickelodeon, Cyma Zarghami, who couldn't be with us today, I want to thank you, Jonathan, and the National Press Club for allowing us to blow up the format a little bit and to let kids rule in the nation's capital, at least for the next hour or so.

So I'm really, really pleased to see all you kids in the audience, because at Nickelodeon we love to listen to children and we love to have kids help bring the kid out in us as well.

Today we brought some special guests for all of you to talk to and ask questions. But before we introduce them, I'd like to ask you a few questions of my own. And this is for the kids first.

So kids, how many of you own your own cell phones? (Show of hands.) Okay. How many of you have TVs in your bedrooms? (Show of hands.) Okay. How many of you kids eat breakfast? (Show of hands.) How many of you decide what you eat for breakfast? (Show of hands.) And how many of you think you get too much homework and you're glad school is out? (Show of hands.)

So now think about it. How many of you think it's tougher for you to be a kid today than it was for your parents when they were kids? (Show of hands.) Okay.

So parents, I don't want to leave you out. How many of you feel it's tough being a parent today? (Show of hands.)

Well, these are just some of the questions we ask kids and parents just about every day. At Nickelodeon, our mission for 27 years has been to connect with kids and to connect kids to their world and to each other through entertainment.

So let me share with you some of the answers to some of the questions we've asked, based on research. Twenty-eight percent of kids between ages eight and 11 have their own cell phones, and that number has doubled in the past year and is obviously still rising.

Sixty-nine percent of kids have TVs in their own bedrooms. And, by the way, nearly 50 percent of them also have a video game system in their room.

Only 50 percent of kids eat breakfast every day. And of those kids, they're more than likely to decide what it is they eat.

Sixty-two percent of parents think it's tougher being a kid today, and 73 percent of parents feel it's tougher being a parent today.

So I think that you're pretty representative in a lot of ways of what our research has told us. But we use this information that we learn from kids to help create the programs they love -- "SpongeBob," "Dora," "The Backyardigans," "Drake and Josh," and "Romeo!", as well as to help them navigate issues in their lives.

We believe it's important not only to entertain kids but to also help provide context to them about the issues they face every day. On Nick News with Linda Ellerbee, for example, we've talked to kids about everything from the impact of Hurricane Katrina, bullying in schools, the war in Iraq, and the growing obesity crisis. We love making kids laugh, but we also try to empower them with information they can use when they turn the TV off, like living healthier, balanced lives, for example. Recently, in partnership with the Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association's Alliance for a Healthier Generation, we launched the "Let's Just Play" challenge to encourage kids to live a more balanced, healthy lifestyle.

We're all struck by the headlines that many of you have covered that says this generation of kids is one of the most obese generations and they are at risk. So we want to turn this around by creating the healthiest generation.

We picked four kids from different parts of the country with diverse backgrounds, different goals to be healthier, and they've become role models to other kids. To date, almost 70,000 kids have signed on to our "Go Healthy" challenge and have agreed to adopt a more healthy, balanced lifestyle, which just shows what leaders kids can be

when you give them the right information and you give them the chance to make change in their own right.

Nickelodeon has operated for 27 years under the premise, what's good for kids is good for business. One of the most consistent messages kids have told us over the years is that they don't want to be talked down to. They want to see kids that look like them and are dealing with the same issues that they face every day, whether it's sibling rivalry, bullies in school, or the pressures of being popular.

The kids' population today, again, as evidenced by this room, is more diverse than ever before. And according to our new Normal study, a compilation of research on kids' attitudes, a vast majority of Hispanic, African-American and Asian kids say it's important for them to see their own ethnic group in the TV shows and the movies they watch.

At Nick and throughout MTV networks, we've worked to infuse diversity into our DNA to ensure that all kids are represented in every facet of our brand. We've also looked to partner with creators who share our sensibility and who also bring their own unique vision and experience to storytelling.

We've strived to be one of the most diverse brands in entertainment. And as of yesterday, Nickelodeon has been the number one rated cable network for 11 straight years. (Applause.)

So I say that if you want a business case for diversity and the importance of listening to all of your audience, we're probably it. But right now you're going to hear from two of our creators who have made some of our most popular shows, Tommy Lynch and Janice Burgess. They're going to talk about what goes into making a successful kids' show today. And first up is Janice Burgess. Janice is a long-time Nickelodeon veteran who joined the Nick Jr. production and development team in 1995. Janice oversaw the production of the Peabody and Emmy Award-winning Nick Jr. shows, including "Blue's Clues" and "Little Bill."

A couple of years ago, Janice came out with a show idea of her own, "The Backyardigans." This epic musical adventure Nick Jr. series is currently one of the top five on preschool TV.

Please join me in welcoming Janice Burgess. (Applause.)

MS. BURGESS: Thank you very much, Marva.

Hello, everyone. I'm happy and excited to be here. And it's sort of my first time, so be kind. And I will tell you a little bit or try to - or I was asked to tell you a little bit about the first-person experience of being the creator of a television show.

One of the things that I am really asked quite frequently is, "How did you come up with the idea for the show?" And most of the time my answer, oddly enough, is kind of "I don't know. You know, it just kind of came to me."

But for this occasion, and because I was asked to, I decided to give it some thought. And you are the lucky beneficiaries. (Laughter.)

As Marva mentioned, I'm a graduate of Nick Jr. I worked as a production executive there for almost 10 years. And Nick Jr. is where I learned every single thing that I know about how to make television for young children.

And all of that can be summed up as follows: Think about the audience. Think about who you're talking to. Think about what they like. Think about what they do during the day. Think about what they eat for breakfast. Think about what makes them laugh. Think about their clothes and their shoes and their bedrooms. Think about everything that you can imagine about kids.

You will probably not know all that much about it, I've found in my experience. And what that means is that you sort of have to go out and find out. We do a lot of research at Nick Jr. We talk to kids. We ask kids. The creator of "Blue's Clues" called it cheating - make sure that you know, before you make the show, whether kids are going to like it. Do they understand it? Is it fun?

And then you put all of that stuff into your show. It sounds pretty simple, except, of course, that it's not; I suppose mostly because when you get an opportunity, like I did, to create your own show, you are again faced with a really tough question, that being, "Well, you know, since you can do anything that you want, what do you want to do?" And, in fact, it's almost - well, it's a really hard question to answer. Here's how I think I did it. I thought about when I was a kid, but I thought more about what I like now. I am a great, great, great fan of big, fat, stupid adventure movies, car chases, dinosaurs rampaging through cities, people flying through outer space. I love that stuff.

I love adventure heroes and all adventure genres. When I was a kid, I read "Treasure Island" and "Kidnapped" and I consumed "Star Wars" and "Narnia" and "Oz" books and "The Hardy Boys" and anything in which there was a sword fight. So that is me.

Another part of me, something that I like a lot, is music and dancing. I cannot sing, I do not play an instrument and I cannot dance at all, other than in the privacy of my own home, obviously. But I've always enjoyed those things and watching people do them.

And then, of course, I started to think about what it was like when I was a kid, my childhood. And I found that I remembered, really, something that was always part of me, that playing in my own backyard was the place where those sort of two things, that sort of music and adventure, kind of came together.

I think, you know, my parents and their friends probably just, you know, put us in a nice, safe, you know, environment and let us run wild, and there's probably nothing better than that. And because of that, for me, every day was a big adventure. You know, you were able to go out there and make up whatever you wanted to. You could perform the living room musicals -- you know, "Grease" and, you know, dance

like the Jackson Five and do all of that stuff in the freedom of your own world, a world that you created with your friends.

And that's how, in a nutshell, I came up with the show. "The Backyardigans," as you know, is a big musical adventure for kids. It's what's called a CG image, so it's in 3-D. It's a 3-D computer-animated show. And the way that the characters are created is that they're little models of them -- this is how I think of it; obviously I'm not a technician -- that are moved around in the computer by animators.

But the thing that's really interesting about the characters is that they're not sort of one single person. We actually do - we have three people who sort of combine to make one character. We have a dancer, who is choreographed by Beth Bogush, who is a former director of the Ailey School, who does all of the dancing for the show. And those images are used as reference for the animators. Then we have a singer, the singing voice of that character, and a speaking voice, both kids. So they sort of all meld together into this one being who gets to play in our backyard.

The thing that sort of I found out in making the show - it's a little bit "Be careful what you wish for." I always wanted to be the creator of a show, and quite frankly it's very hard work. But on the other hand, making "The Backyardigans" has become sort of like an adventure that I go on with my friends. Of course, we get paid, but we do get to be carefree in our work, enjoy each other, hang around a lot, travel a little bit, and make up stuff. And sometimes we sing and dance too.

So thank you very much. (Applause.)

MS. SMALLS: Thank you, Janice. Now it's my pleasure to introduce you to Mr. Tommy Lynch. Through his company, The Tom Lynch Company, Tommy has produced some of the most popular and kid-tween shows for the past 15 years. At Nick, he brought us "The Secret World of Alex Mack," "The Journey of Allen Strange," "Kaitlyn's Way," and now "Romeo!" And I'm sure there's even more cranking in his mind as we speak.

So please join me in welcoming Mr. Tommy Lynch. (Applause.)

TOMMY LYNCH: Oh, how dangerous to allow me the mike in such an austere place as Washington, D.C. I actually kind of want to announce my new series that nobody else knows about, but I figured I'd better hold that back. Marva and I and Nickelodeon have shared an incredible relationship over the past 15 years, and it's one that I am just -- I treasure as much as I treasure the one with my own family.

When Marva was talking, she mentioned diversity in her opening remarks. And I started thinking about the last time Cyma, who can't be here tonight, called me and she said she wanted me to go somewhere. And I got a call to come here to Washington. I'm like, "That's cool."

But last time she did this, she gave me a call and I went to Beijing. Now, that was a little out of my normal, you know, kind of circumference of life. And I go to Beijing; I'm supposed to do -- do

the kids here know what the Kids' Choice Awards are? Everybody who knows the Kids' Choice Awards, give a clap. (Scattered applause.) All right, you kids are a little quiet. I'm up here. You can get loud.

Now, does anybody here know what slime is? I want to hear clapping -- clapping loud. (Scattered applause.) All right. Okay. So slime is -- if you adults don't know this, slime is part of the DNA of Nickelodeon, part of the kids' rule. And there I was in Beijing, and there was 30 members of CCTV, which is the government network, and myself with my interpreters, and I was trying to explain to the head of the network what slime was and how vital this was to the Chinese kids. And they just kind of looked at me.

And I grabbed them -- well, I got up and I went to hug them; I'm a hugger. And they weren't too sure of this American they'd never seen before. And I grabbed the president of it, and, like, all of my handlers were like, "Oh, my God, it's over. They're going to send him away." And I took this kind of gooey, juicy thing and I poured it, not on him, but on, like, a cookie. And I said, "That's slime." And he looked, and there was 30 seconds of silence where I thought Marva would call me and say, "Leave the planet." But they just said, "Okay." And that was the power of slime and the power of Nickelodeon.

When she was talking about diversity, my belief is that people are diverse, and they are wonderfully diverse, but they all still share common goals -- the love of fun, the love of their lives, the love of the world around them. And the experience I had in China was I was told again by people, who got the slime okay, which I think took an act of government to get that done, I was told Chinese children don't respond to television, don't respond to entertainment the way American kids do. I'm like, okay, this is a headache, because kids rule in our world and they're going to rule in China, and that's just what we're going to do.

And so we had 2,000 kids in the audience, and they had never had this assemblage of kids there before. And I thought, "Oh, man, they have to respond to this. They have to get into it." And I walked out on stage, and again, I learned my lesson from the head of the network. I looked out and I just yelled out, "Neehao, China." Now, "neehao" means hello. I yell out, "Neehao, China" - nothing; the whole place is staring at me like, okay, this is a problem. We're counting down. In about 10 minutes we're going to make the show.

And I started to do exactly what I did with the chairman. I started going like this and like this and yelling, "Neehao, China," running up and down, and in five minutes that whole audience was up on their feet and they were cheering, and the show started. And for the next two hours they did not sit down.

And that illustrates a great point, that kids are magical and they are connected and that Nickelodeon is the tool, this great tool, this great thing that has evolved over the years, that touches kids of all ages around the globe. And I'm really proud to be part of that and proud to be asked to be here today.

Marva asked me to talk about what goes into making a successful kids' show. You know, my company produces a lot of them and

we produce for kids; for tweens is kind of my specialty, you know, that wonderful age of what I call eight to 14 where you kind of don't know what's going on in your life and you're still a kid, but you're a little unsure about what you're supposed to do and everything you do feels stupid, but you kind of want to do stuff. And that's kind of what I specialize in, probably because that's where I stopped growing. There is a rumor that about 14 or 15, it just stopped - gone, done.

But I found my place here. You know, the tween years, I believe, are the most sensitive and character-building ones in our lives. And the "Romeo!" show, which is, you know, on Nickelodeon -- Romeo, thank you for being here; always cool to see you -- is the 18th show that I've created for the genre. I've been blessed and fortunate to be able to do this. And I get asked a lot about why I do this.

Well, there's nobody on the planet that can't relate to their first day of junior high, that we've all had our first crush. We've all had our first summer job. We've all had moments that we realize how embarrassing our parents can be, especially in front of our friends. I mean, whenever I'm stuck for a scene, it's like, "Okay, the parents are going to walk in on the friends, because that's just going to be funny right away."

You know, and we never forget them because they so inform and shape who we are. I mean, to the older members of our audience, you remember these days. And to the kids in our audience, they're going to have them. And they're wonderful times.

It's why I love creating programming for this demo, because by telling these stories, it shows that all kids are unified by these watershed moments. They may feel alone, but hopefully after watching our shows, they realize they aren't. They're part of the greater world. There's so much inherent comedy and drama in growing up when you're a tween. It's easier to laugh than cry, and most of the time, as was the case with me, I did it in the same minute. The emotional clock of that age is huge. Everything is constantly changing, which is terrifying and kind of wonderfully comical.

For (one of the ?) comedy, we do it in drama. Some of the first shows that I did for Nickelodeon were comic and adventurous. You know, when Janice was talking about her kind of love of adventures, "The Secret World of Alex Mack" was one of those shows. We got to do an adventure show. We got to have a girl lead, which at that time was so groundbreaking, none of the networks had them except Nickelodeon. And people have credited that with being the start of the tween generation, the tween genre.

And one of the great secrets of that show which I have to admit now, after so many years, Marva, was that I originally wrote Alex as a girl -- I mean, as a boy. I come from six brothers. I have four sons. I'm writing a boy. And I got a call from the then-president of Nickelodeon that said, "We love the script. We love this project. Can you change it to a girl?"

Now, in those days I needed the job. I mean, I really needed the job, okay? My wife was pregnant and, you know, babies were coming, and being Irish as I am, we had four kids in five years. So we needed

the job. It was the thing, man. And I remember just saying, "Don't say anything" -- just my brain -- "Don't say anything. It's the president of the network. Just stop." And I said, "Okay, let's try that out." And, you know, we went back to work on it and we made that change and made her a girl, and I think it's what broke out the show.

That's a wonderful relationship of a creator and of a network, where they collaborate together and they use their information with each other to make something better. That's where one and one make three.

They asked me to -- one time I went to them and I said, "I want to do a drama," the show "Kaitlyn's Way." And they said okay. And it was the first time a drama had ever been on Nickelodeon, and I think it was the first time that a series on Nickelodeon opened up with a girl coming out of jail.

And again I got a call. And it's like, "Tommy, what are you doing here?" I said, "No, no, it really shows -- it's a metaphor for showing how kids feel alone sometimes," and it was about a foster kid. And they allowed me to make that show and they allowed that show to go on. That show is still running around the world in different parts of the world.

You know, people, when they ask me where I get my ideas, they come from two places. One, they come from personal experience. I write about the world that I want to be, that I want to exist, not about the world I came from. But it also comes from my cable. As I said, I have four children. I have a beautiful daughter. I have four boys and a beautiful daughter. And just being around the table, you know, those kids grow up and you hear these stories, and they are so wonderful and they are so funny.

One of my earliest shows, "The Journey of Allen Strange," was about an alien who came down to earth and had to hide out. And that came from when I was, I think, 14 years old. This is going through my personal stories, because if my kids ever did this, I would kill them. But at 14 years old, I was one of eight kids. I left home and lived in my friend's garage as a little experiment in my brain about how long would it be before anybody knew I was gone.

Well, after six weeks I went back home. (Laughs.) I'm like, "Man, nobody missed me." But that became the basis of "The Journey of Allen Strange," where this alien ended up living in this kid's attic and nobody noticed. They just thought he was a kid. And it shows the kids' world of how, as a kid, we are invisible and the world goes around. So what is that point of view? So that's what captured me on that one.

And I also like the metaphor of the alien, because if you're 11 or 12 or 13, you are pretty much an alien. You know, it's just not working right. You know, when I was that age, I tried to be cool. I tried to be the hippest guy out there. And I tripped and fell and had acne and just didn't -- my clothes never looked right. And if a girl ever looked at me, like, 14 or 15, I just, like, turned away and walked away. I was a wreck.

And now I get to write these stories about that, and I get to do them in a landscape, Nickelodeon, which is one that's empowering to these kids. So hopefully some kid out there can laugh at himself and realize it's just part of growing up. It's part of what we have to do.

One of the other great things about "Allen Strange" was when I wrote the pilot, I wrote it just with no cast member in mind. And it was the first time that I saw the actors and I called up Nick and I said, "I found the right actor for this." And I said, "He's African-American." They said, "Fine." And it was never written for that. Color was never an issue. We strive for diversity, but it's never about a specific thing. It's about what is the best thing to do; what's best for the show. And they've been very supportive of my work with that.

Let me see where I am on this. I'm very thrown by this, because I never -- I try to be prepared, because it's Washington and you guys are, like, all really kind of cool, and you're running the world. And I usually don't go off the notes, but I do.

Anyways, another area where I get my ideas from is my cast. I mean, when you're working with young people and you're working with actors, it is a tremendous responsibility they have that -- you know, Romeo -- and I will embarrass him for a moment -- has to maintain his high B-A average that he has in school. He plays on a basketball team that was number three or two in the AAU championship around the country. He attends school regularly. He has a music career. And he does these things.

And it's like a lot of actors on the shows. They have to lead this disciplined life, and they still have this job that's an adult job. And so I go to them for ideas, and Romeo pitched me an idea which -- I said, "Romeo, if you have an idea, think about it." He comes up to me and we're on stage; we're kind of wandering around. He said, "Hey, Tommy, I've got an idea." I go, "What's up?" He goes, "I got this idea about, you know, like, what if I had two girlfriends?" (Laughter.) And I'm like -- his father, Master P, is an executive producer and creator of the show with me, so I said, "I'm going to run this one by your dad. I'm going to check this out." And it was cool, and we wrote this story, and it just aired two weeks ago. And it was the idea that -- and it wasn't about a girlfriend story like they do on some of the other networks, which is kind of salacious and stupid. It was about there were these two girls and they were both nice and he liked them both, and, oh my gosh, they both showed up at the same place. And it was really, really a wonderful show. I love the openness of creating television shows. I have always said to myself -- reminded myself and told my staff, "Be available to what is out there right now. Be available to the moment. Talk to kids," as Janice talked about. "Tap into your own experiences. Tell stories that you want to tell, because if you want to tell them -- if I have a story that I want to tell or Romeo has a story they want to tell or Janice does, chances are, going back to the commonality we all have, we're all going to want to hear that, because we all are connected.

And it has been just a great event in my life to have that connection expressed to kids around the world and through Nickelodeon.

I am so grateful to be part of their team. I am so grateful to use the power of television in a positive way.

I'll close with one last story. I had -- in one of my earlier shows, there was an episode where it was a boy in a wheelchair. And again, it had to do with just what is that like? What is that point of view like? And we did the show, and it was a very fine episode. And I always try not to do the special episode; you know, this is a real good show. We work on our characters in a very natural, normal way.

About six months later, I get a phone call. My assistant says, "There's someone on the phone that says they've been trying to get you for six months." And I'm like -- you know, I'm the easiest guy to get. Just call; I'm on the phone. I ain't got that much to do. So I figure, "What is this?" So I pick up the phone. I go, "Yes." She introduces herself. She's a mother whose boy was in a car accident with her and he snapped his spine. (Laughs.) I choke at this. And he hadn't spoken for six months. He saw the episode and he spoke.

And that's not me. That's the power of the media that we're involved with. And that is why I love to do it. Every year I get to write these network primetime shows. I get to write these movie scripts and all that stuff. And I write them because those five kids are now in college, so I've got to write them. You know, I'm like, "You need any night work? You need any editing? I'm available." (Laughter.)

But I do it because it's a vocation. It is a great love to entertain your children and the children of the world. There's no greater calling, and I am just blessed to have it.

So thank you all for listening to us and thank you for being here. (Applause.)

MR. SALANT: I'd like to ask our stars and our producers and Marva to come up behind me, because we have a lot of questions for everybody. And I'll ask as many as we can.

Miranda, you're going to get the first question from Mia, age five, who says, "How do you play such an evil person when you look so nice?" (Laughter.) But she adds a P.S. -- "I love you when you are nice." (Laughter.)

MIRANDA COSGROVE: I don't know. That's a hard one. I think I'm really lucky just to have such great writers on the show, and I'm excited every week to get the new scripts and find out what I'm doing to Drake and Josh on the show. And it's just a lot of fun getting to do things to them. And, of course, they never really get hurt and they have, like, it all set up on the show so nobody gets hurt and everything's going to work out perfectly.

So I think I'm lucky to get to do all these evil things on the show. And in real life I kind of already have my fill on TV, so I don't have to do it in real life. But it's just a lot of fun.

MR. SALANT: Isabel, age eight, writes, "(Megan ?), what is it like to be an actor?"

MS. COSGROVE: Well, it's the greatest thing ever. I mean, I love being with my friends and I like kids recognizing me and just getting to talk to them and, like, they tell me they watch the show and they know what all the episodes are about and stuff. And it's just a really great feeling.

MR. SALANT: Jamie, age nine: "How does acting affect your personal life?"

MS. COSGROVE: Well, acting is a big part of my life, but I still hang out with friends, like, constantly, and I go to movies with them. And a lot of my friends are people that I knew in elementary school. So, like, they just see me as the goofy girl they knew in elementary school.

They don't see me as, like, a TV actor or anything like that.

MR. SALANT: Your bio says you were discovered as a toddler in a restaurant. Could you tell us about that, please?

MS. COSGROVE: When I was three, I was dancing at a restaurant. You know how, like, you always hear those stories about kids getting, like, asked to be with agencies in malls and stuff? And it was kind of like that. So they just asked me to be with their agency, and I did, like, commercials and little things like that. And then I switched agencies and I started trying out for TV shows and things, and I really got into it. And I found out that I really liked it, and I started acting classes and I just kept going with it.

MR. SALANT: Romeo, you're next. Jimmy, age six, wants to know, "What is Romeo's favorite sport and his favorite team?"

ROMEO: Just before I start, I just wanted to let you all know I wrote Tommy's speech that he was giving. (Laughter.) But my favorite sport is basketball. I've been playing basketball since the age of two. That's what keeps me going, you know, with all my friends. I beat Tommy a couple of times, you know. And my favorite team, I'd have to say, is -- I have a couple. I like the Pistons, though, because of their team work and everything. So I'd say the Pistons. Washington's good, too, though. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: How did you get to be such a good politician? (Laughter.) Is it hard being a role model for young kids, especially young African-Americans?

ROMEO: Yeah, well, me, that's the reason I do it. I do it just to teach kids that they could be different -- (audio break).

MR. SALANT: Jamie, age nine, asks, "How did you learn to rap?"

ROMEO: How did I learn to rap? Wrap presents, or, like, rap? (Laughter.) No, my family -- like, my whole blood line, everybody raps just, like, really crazy, from my mom to my dad to my uncles, everybody. So it's kind of like just in my blood. So I guess I just got lucky.

MR. SALANT: How did you get the job? Did you take any acting classes? MR. LYNCH: Tell the truth. (Laughter.)

ROMEO: All right, it was kind of crazy how we got the "Romeo!" show (involved?). I started rapping at the age of, like, nine or 10. And my first single, "My Baby," was actually number one on the charts for 10 weeks in a row. It actually beat out Michael Jackson's record.

And my dad met this crazy guy named Tommy right there, and we just kind of, like, had good chemistry with each other and we just started something real creative that kids would love. So I wasn't really into the acting scene at first, but they seen something in me and then brought it out.

MR. SALANT: A question for both Romeo and Miranda from Jasmine. "You two have both inspired me to keep my acting dream going, but I need to know more about it. How do you do school work and acting, and how did you get interested in acting?" And then the third question, "How hard is it to be a kid actor, and what do you give up?"

ROMEO: All right. Yeah, you scared me with that question. (Laughter.) Well, with me, I just always say do what you love doing. Don't let anybody force you to do it, because if you're not happy doing it, then you're not going to be successful.

And with the school part with me, I love going to school, actually. Tommy always said I had to go fly back to school to take my finals and everything. That's why he's got that gray hair on his head. (Laughter.) But me, I love just going to school. And if you focus, like I said, you can do it. You've just got to be focused. It's all in the person, because everybody here, everybody's different and everybody looks at life different. (Inaudible.)

MS. COSGROVE: That's okay. Sometimes the school situation is hard, you know, being on the set and having so much to do. But I'm lucky, because my dad's really great with math. So I go home and I go after math and stuff. And I just started algebra, which has been really hard.

ROMEO: Ooh.

MS. COSGROVE: I know. But I don't know; I think just follow your dreams and keep trying, because I've been trying since I was three and it took me a really long time to, you know, start really getting things. And I had to take a lot of acting classes and stuff. So just stay with it.

ROMEO: What she said. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: A couple of questions for the voice of Dora. Johnny, age four, wants to know why Dora wants to be an explorer. KATHLEEN HERLES: Hold on, let me think about this one. I think because she just loves to help people; like, through her show, she helps her friends. She even helps strangers; like, she'll see a little animal on the floor she'll just ask them if they need any help, you

know. And I guess she just loves to learn new things and, you know, teach them to her friends, too, so that she can talk to them about it. And she just loves exploring. It's like her own little world, you know.

MR. SALANT: Only in Washington would we get this question. Is Dora given fair and equitable pay for her work? (Laughter.)

MS. HERLES: I don't know if I can answer that question. But to me, like, doing Dora is just like such a great thing, you know; teaching kids, you know, about learning Spanish. I mean, a lot of people come up to me saying, "Oh, my daughter, she's just talking Spanish. I don't know what she's saying," like their first word is either "Dora" or "Gracias" or something. You know, it's just a great feeling. But the money -- I don't know. My mom takes care of that stuff. I don't really know about that. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: How did Dora's voice come to be?

MS. HERLES: I've heard a lot of stories from all the creators and stuff. But at first it was supposed to start, like, as a bunny and, like, you know, two little bunnies and, like, all that. But then Brown Johnson, one of the executive producers of Nickelodeon, she went to this meeting and they were talking about Hispanics and, like, the Hispanic community and how Nick Jr. needs to be involved in that. So then she started to make it a Latina girl and, like, they just started going with ideas. They started researching, you know, Latin America. And they just put the show together, and it's a great thing now.

MR. SALANT: Jimmy, age six -- changing the questioners now -- wants to know why SpongeBob lives in a pineapple.

TOM KENNY: I guess that's me. Thank you. Well, Jimmy, thanks for giving me one sympathy question, one pity question so I have something to do. (Laughter.) Settle down. You guys, come on. Settle down, really. I don't want to have to throw you all out.

Why does SpongeBob live in a pineapple? You know, because the banana got too squishy, Jimmy. (Laughter.) The salt water affected it in a strange way. But good question. And he's going to be moving into a grapefruit in season six, so we're looking forward to that. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: Izzy, age eight, asks, "How long have you been playing the voice of SpongeBob?"

MR. KENNY: Oh, another one for me. (Laughs.) Let's see. I have been the one and only voice of SpongeBob. We did a seven-minute pilot in 1997, which is the one where the anchovies invade SpongeBob's restaurant and he has to cook a lot of food really fast. And there's a Tiny Tim song in it, you know, which is really cool.

And so I've been the voice of SpongeBob since before Steve Hillenburg, the creator, pitched it to Nickelodeon. Of all the cartoon voices I've done, SpongeBob is the one of the hundreds I've done that I didn't have to audition for. It's the only one that I didn't have to, like, go in and go up against a bunch of other voice actors in that

frustrating process. So we did that in '97. It went to series in '99. We did the movie in '03. It came out in '04. And now we're in the midst of recording season five.

MR. SALANT: When did you realize you had a special gift for the voice of SpongeBob SquarePants? How did you get started?

MR. KENNY: (Laughs.) You know, it was funny. Steve Hillenburg, the creator, and I had worked on an earlier Nickelodeon show called "Rocco's Modern Life" that I think is still shown on the Nick Jr. show, early '90s. And Steve Hillenburg was the creative director on that show, and I did the voice of a character called Heifer, another goofy yellow character that I seem to do. It was a yellow cow. (Laughter.)

And Steve Hillenburg and I just clicked. It was his first job in animation.

It was my first job in animation, you know, something I had been wanting to do my whole life. And him and I just got along very well. And when it came time for him to step up to the plate and create a series of his own, he remembered a very obscure voice that I had done in an episode of Rocco, like -- (mimics voice) -- in the background of a crowd scene, just one little guy in the back of a crowd scene, and had, like, one line in the show. I didn't even remember doing it. (Returns to normal voice.) And he called me and said, you know, "That voice that you did in that Rocco episode six years ago." And I said, "That was 8,000 voices ago, Steve. I don't know what you're talking about." And so he went and got a VHS copy of that episode of Rocco and said, "That guy. Listen -- right there, that guy in the background there." And so that's how the SpongeBob voice came about.

MR. SALANT: Tom, age 43, asks -- (laughter) -- "How does it feel to be the greatest voiceover genius currently working in the media?"

MR. KENNY: Wow. Oh, wow. Wow. Tom, thank you. I was a little scared that nobody was going to ask me a question, so I sort of wrote one for myself -- (laughter) -- just in case. They flew me to Washington and I had to do something. You know, that's first-class thinking, guys. Come on. I got my shoes shined at the Mandarin for free. They do that there. (Laughter.)

That's just a good question. There is no answer to it. I'm sorry. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: Marva, how many hours of Nick and other TV is the right amount per day? Does the existence of 24-hour cable children's programming contribute to child obesity?

MS. SMALLS: Well, thank you for that question after all these others. I think the right amount of TV, just the right amount of food, the right amount of anything, is about balance in your life. And we don't pretend to decide what goes on in the home. But what we believe we have an opportunity, through the power of air, to use it responsibly, as we have.

I think our being the number one rated cable network for 11 years is because we've earned the trust and respect of both parents and kids, and also what we've learned from parents. Parents have said to us there are four filters they use in how they parent or raise their kids: One, does it make their life easier? Two, does it make their kid happy? Three, does it affect whether or not their kid is going to grow up to be a good person or not? And four, what are the financial implications?

So when we think about the real-life challenges of what parents face and the opportunity we have through the power of the broadcast and cable medium to touch kids, I believe that as long as we're doing it responsibly, we are, we're connecting kids to a wide range of information that can help them, not only entertain them when they're watching our air, but also leave them with useful tools when they turn the TV off at the end of the day. It is about balance in lifestyle. And we have a network that achieves that with our audience.

MR. SALANT: How do you decide which ads are appropriate?

MS. SMALLS: Which?

MR. SALANT: Ads.

MS. SMALLS: Well, one, we pride ourselves -- first of all, we abide by CARU, which is the Children's Advertising Regulatory Unit, which governs both the advertising creative side of what goes on our air. But beyond that, we go a step beyond what is required of CARU. We follow the Kid-Vid guidelines, as established by the FCC, so we're regulated.

But in terms of ads, we make sure that they're age-appropriate, they show kids in settings that are not disrespectful, that are devoid of stereotypes. We partner directly both with agencies in telling them what we look for in reaching our audience. But, first of all, we are regulated by the FCC, and second, we have a self-regulatory arm throughout the agency, CARU, and our own internal marketing creative principles that we use in terms of how we connect with our audience on air.

MR. SALANT: Considering the work Nick has done to make the world a better place for kids on social issues, what are you most proud of? And what's next?

MS. SMALLS: I think what I'm most proud of is the time we take to listen to kids and the amount of care and attention to making what we do authentic for our audience.

You know, the question asked earlier about Dora, you know, or Kathleen, you know, part of what went into that show was actually getting experts, you know, from the Latino and Hispanic community that made sure that the dialect we used -- you know, how we were communicating, the words we were communicating -- were true to the culture, to the Latino and Hispanic culture, for example.

The research we use to inform our shows, to make sure we aren't dumbing down to kids, is age-appropriate, you know, and is kid-

tested, you know, sort of parent-trusted and validated, you know, there is so much in the Nickelodeon DNA that it truly is about what's good for kids is what's good for business.

So whether it's about the millions of kids that we connected to volunteerism through "The Big Help," the journey we're on now in terms of getting kids to become the healthiest generation, whether it's the diversity of our screens in terms of having kids, no matter their shape, size, gender, ethnicity, they can look at our air and see themselves reflected; the trust that parents know they can leave the room and we're doing right by kids; the many complex issues we've tackled through Nick News.

I'm just proud of the DNA and the legacy of Nickelodeon living to the spirit of what's good for kids is good for business, and that we actually take the time to go out and talk to parents and kids to make sure we're getting it right.

MR. SALANT: Before I ask the last question, Ms. Smalls, I'd like to give you a certificate of appreciation for appearing at the Club today.

MS. SMALLS: Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. SALANT: And, of course, the ever popular National Press Club coffee mug.

MS. SMALLS: Very good. (Applause.)

MR. SALANT: We've got mugs for everybody. And, you know, when you're watching Nick, you can now have a nice beverage and think of us. Oh, we can't forget SpongeBob and Dora, can we? (Laughter.)

Tom, will you take the cup for SpongeBob?

MR. KENNY: Yeah, sure. I also want to say, Jonathan, that I have to admit something here, in the spirit of full disclosure. I ate the fish for lunch. (Laughter.) I'm sort of a cannibal. I'm sorry. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: And will you take a mug to Dora? Gracias.

Our last question needs to go to Marva. Whatever happened to slime?

MS. SMALLS: Well, slime is very much alive, as evidenced by our recent Kids' Choice episode where Jack Black and Robin Williams were in the ultimate sliming contest. It is the highest honor. So maybe when we come back again, you have us back, we will bring the slime. But the kids will decide whether to slime themselves or slime their parents. (Laughter.)

MR. SALANT: Thank you very much. (Applause.) I'd like to thank National Press Club staff members Melinda Cooke, Pat Nelson, Jo Anne Booze and Howard Rothman for organizing today's lunch. Thanks to the Eric Friedheim Library at the National Press Club for its research. And please, at the end of the show, we will have children -- we'll have

SpongeBob and Dora and Miranda and Romeo who will meet some of our kids and pose for photos right next door, right after our program.

We're adjourned.

END.