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Columns



What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

By Nan Mooney

Kids start dreaming early about what they want to be when they grow up. For most of us, those ambitions to become an airplane pilot or the shortstop for the Yankees fade into more realistic, and prosaic, professions.

But for a lucky few those childhood dreams become an adult reality. Whether you want to publish comic books, fly to the Moon or become a rock star, the keys to success are similar: perseverance and a first-rate education.

Scores of kids have holed up with piles of comic books and wondered what it would be like to be the person who created all those tales. For Mark Siegel, illustrator and publisher of the graphic novel imprint First Second, the fantasy came true.

"Comic books had always been part of my reading diet," says the 41-year-old, who grew up in France where comic books, or graphic novels as they're known in the trade, have long played a significant role in mainstream literature.

Siegel's bent for art and illustration started early. At age 7 he apprenticed with an illustrator, Abel Renault, who'd written comic books right after World War I.

Later, he went on to study fine arts and creative writing in college, acquiring skills that would lead him to an early career in professional design.

He started out in the art department of a children's book publisher while writing picture books on the side. Along the way an idea began to percolate, fueled by the thriving European and Asian markets for graphic novels. Siegel suspected that the United States was ready for a high-end comic book imprint specifically tailored to the American market.

"MacMillan came to me," says Siegel of the publishing company that houses First Second. "I thought they wanted me to illustrate a book for them. Instead they offered me my own imprint."

Siegel laid out his dream of a bold, high-quality collection of books that drew from a worldwide stable of talent, and the publisher agreed.

"I told them we had to do this thing all the way or not at all," he says. "It couldn't be an eyedropper. It had to be a fire hose."

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Today, Siegel has carte blanche to travel the world seeking his favorite comic book artists and fostering their work. First Second publishes 12 books a year, ranging from children's tales to social commentary, and Siegel's four-day work week means he still has time to pursue projects of his own.

"Our success has gone far beyond what I could've imagined," says Siegel. "Within a year we'd taken center stage in the literary comic world."

More of an artist than a businessman, Siegel has done a lot of learning on the fly. And he continues to have big dreams for First Second, the kind of dreams any comic-hungry kid could surely appreciate.

"I want to build a shelf full of high-quality, wildly eclectic books," he says. "And I want to bring readers everywhere to an appreciation of the graphic-novel form."

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Real-life rocket man

As far back as he can remember, Leroy Chiao, 48, was creating model rockets in his garage.

"I was always messing around building things," he recalls. "After watching the Apollo Moon landing on TV when I was 8, I started dreaming about becoming an astronaut."

To make that astronaut dream a reality, Chiao earned his bachelor's degree, then went on to earn a master's degree and a Ph.D., all in chemical engineering. Shortly after finishing school, he joined NASA and a year later was selected to join a class of 23 fledgling astronauts.

"It was certainly a dream come true," Chiao says of his career path. "We trained together, got to know NASA, spent time at Cape Canaveral watching the shuttle launches. It was hard to believe all this was really happening to me."

Chiao flew four missions over the course of his career. Three were shuttle flights aboard the space shuttles Columbia, Endeavour and Discovery.

In his final mission, Chiao spent 6.5 months as a commander and chief science officer of the International Space Station, a joint U.S. and Russian venture that launched from Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

Hard work

Of course, the 15 years he spent at NASA weren't all glamour and excitement.

"Astronauts spend relatively little time actually flying or training for flight," explains Chiao. "Most of their time is spent filling support jobs."

Chiao spent about a year training for the one- to two-week shuttle flights and nearly four years training for the space station mission. The rest of the time he tested equipment, flight simulators and space-suit modifications, or manned mission control.

Chiao left NASA soon after his final mission, feeling he'd achieved all he could as an astronaut and not relishing the prospect of a desk job. Today, he works as a speaker and consultant. He also serves as an executive vice president for a private space-flight company devoted to creating opportunities for kids who would like to travel into space.

"Flying in space was as fantastic as I imagined," Chiao says of his dream career. "Like any large bureaucracy, NASA had its challenges. But overall I

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was extremely lucky to have had the opportunity to achieve what I did."

Making the band

Sarah Rudinoff, 37, has always been a performer. She graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in theater and spent the ensuing years crisscrossing the country, acting in everything from Shakespearean dramas to an autobiographical one-woman show. But all along, a secret dream was bubbling away underneath -- to front a rock-and-roll band.

Rudinoff's music career had consisted mostly of musical theater and cabaret shows until friends hooked her up with Gretta Hartley, a professional music teacher with a master's degree in classical composition.

"We hit it off immediately," recalls Rudinoff. "We both wanted to write our own music. Gretta had been in a bunch of bands but this time she was ready to make a go of it, no wasting time. She didn't want this to be a hobby. I felt the same way."

Rudinoff and Hartley launched their band, called We Are Golden. The group performs original material backed by a band composed of the usual drums and guitar plus a cellist and a clarinet player. Their music is soul pop with rock and classical underpinning, a sound original enough to garner attention in the crowded Seattle music scene.

They sold out the release party for their first CD. They also got radio airtime, including a live show, and now play regularly in several Seattle clubs.

"Having a band is a huge amount of work," confesses Rudinoff. "It's a tough time to be in the music business. With the ease of digital downloads, suddenly everyone is in a band and no one is sure how you make money doing it. You really have to want to make it work."

So far, Rudinoff and Hartley haven't quit their day jobs selling real estate and teaching music, respectively, but as they continue to draw healthy audiences in Seattle, all that could easily change. They've been meeting with managers about what it would entail to take the band to the next step.

"We're going to go for it," says Rudinoff. "There's this attitude that you have when you dream about something as a kid that's all too easy to lose in adulthood. The feeling that you've got nothing to lose."

About the Author

Nan Mooney's third book, "(Not) Keeping Up With Our Parents: The Decline of the Professional Middle Class," is available now. Mooney is also the author of "I Can't Believe She Did That: Why Women Betray Other Women at Work" and "My Racing Heart: The Passionate World of Thoroughbreds and the Track." She lives in Seattle with her son Leo and lots of rain. [Visit her Web site.](#)

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