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Reshaping the Future When Michael Mish Asked Kids What to Do About Pollution, He Didn't Get Recycled Ideas [Home Edition] Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext) - Los Angeles, Calif. Author: CONNIE KOENENN Date: Apr 19, 1989 Start Page: 1 Section: View; 5; View Desk Text Word Count: 1703

Even Michael Mish was surprised at the passion of the response when he asked 7-year-old Matthew Andron how he felt about air pollution in Southern California.

The first-grader didn't even pause: "Capture the people that do pollution!" he demanded. "Put them in jail! That's what I think they should do."

Mish, actor/composer/producer/environmentalist, has been asking this question and others like it over the past four months, dragging his tape recorder from preschools to kindergartens to elementary schools, alternative schools and Sunday schools, to talk about the environment.

"I've interviewed kids all over the place, from 3 to 9 years old," he said recently. "They are very worried about what's happening to the environment.

"The killer for me," he continued, "was just last week at P.S. 1, a little school on a residential street in Santa Monica. It was so poignant. The kids were between 9 and 10-older than I had been interviewing- and they were so articulate.

"With my first question, 'What do you think of the air?' I nearly got avalanched. Hands were waving all over the room. Some of them were telling me more than I even know myself-and I'm fairly well researched. They were citing specific facts about the ozone layer. One little girl said the thing that bothered her the most is that big companies that pollute will pay their fine and go on as if nothing had happened."

Advance Waivers From Parents

Mish, who launched his project by "just calling schools cold," gets advance waivers from parents, records the sessions and lets each one take its own course.

"I just ask a straightforward question and let the answers govern my next question," he said.

"If they say they're unhappy with the way cars pollute the air, I ask how they might make a smokeless vehicle. I try to keep all the discussions positive, not negative. That's the underpinings of my project: to give them the idea of a kids' coalition."

With the classroom interviews finished, he's now working from the notes, writing rock-beat songs and a few ballads with titles like "The Air," "My Electric Car" and "Recycle It." They are all solution songs ("What you gonna do with all that trash? Recycle it, recycle it!").

The result will be a music cassette for children, "A Kid's-Eye View of the Environment," which Mish envisions as "an upbeat, uniting call to action."

"Children are wonderful visionaries," he said, "and they have ideas for solutions-but they feel powerless to do anything about it." And children aren't alone, Mish maintains.

"I think most adults have this powerless feeling," he continued. "I feel powerless. So do all my friends. This Exxon oil spill-what a travesty! The oil companies said unequivocally they would be ready to act in dealing with it. They weren't. . . . We should let them know we don't like being treated like this. We should do a month of boycotting. . . ."

"Why don't people do that more? Because we have an overriding sense of powerlessness. We have been trained since childhood to think some authority-the government, or business-will take care of things. I think change will have to start from a grassroots level-when we change that powerlessness into the feeling that a vital individual can make dynamic change."

In fact, Mish had spent several years fuming about the environment before he reached his own personal turning point.

Now 39, he grew up in Reseda, in a house tucked in between farms. "There were beautiful alfalfa fields and you could always see the mountains," he recalls. "Last Christmas I made a video for my parents and put together all our old 8-millimeter family movies. In one, my little brother and I were flying kites in the front yard and I could see how blue the sky used to be."

Although Mish has lived the last 17 years at the beach in Pacific Palisades, he suffers an increasing allergy to smog, which may eventually force him to leave Southern California. "It was mostly clear in the Palisades-you could count the smoggy days on your fingers-until about three years ago, when something changed," he remarked with a touch of wistfulness. "My doctors said I am just very sensitive to smog. I'm not sure I can continue to live here."

It's a depressing possibility for an ordinarily cheerful man who has built a multifaceted career in Hollywood. As an actor he is rarely seen but frequently heard in voice-overs for radio and television commercials. ("I'm the guy promising quick delivery of Domino's Pizza in their radio commercials.")

And though he is a bachelor, working with children would prove to be a natural connection, partly because of his work in entertainment. Mish's show business resume includes the TV cartoon voices of Turbo-Teen, Hop-Bug and Timothy on ABC's "Dragon's Lair," and his last two recording projects have been for children.

For Macmillan-Checkerboard Press he produced an eight-volume cassette version of "The Real Mother Goose," and, having formed his own Mish Mash Music Records, has created and produced an updated version, with music, of "Aesop's Fables."

Through the smog attacks, he continued to operate at full steam as a jingle writer, singer, composer and voice-over actor. He also produces music tapes in his home studio, an elaborate facility of computer-controlled tape recorders and synthesizers. But he was beginning to get obsessed about air quality.

"Until last spring," he said, "I was concerned about my own unhealthfulness, about being crippled by the smog. I was angry about it."

Changed His Life

A tumbling accident changed his approach. Mish had been a competitive gymnast at Hollywood High School and in college. (He attended Valley College and San Jose State.) He kept up the sport, tossing off an occasional back flip to impress friends and "fancying myself as a never-grow-old kind of guy."

Then last April, auditioning for a Toyota commercial in a Hollywood casting office, he "pushed too hard," he said, on a series of back handsprings and ruptured an Achilles' tendon. Four months of recuperation, he said, gave him time to think and reposition his life.

"I decided only to do things that are important to me, and contributing in a positive way to society." To Mish, that meant becoming an environmental activist.

His first step was to become involved with Proposition O, the ballot measure passed Nov. 8 that prohibited Occidental Petroleum Corp. from drilling for oil in the Pacific Palisades. "I called (co-sponsor) Councilman Marvin Braude's office and asked what I could do, and that's how I got active. . . ."

Mish's upbeat song, "Don't Drill Here," became the unofficial theme for the campaign, says Karen Kelly, Braude's executive assistant.

Need the Activists

"Michael's terrific," she added. "He's very creative, and he digs right in. That's what we need if we're going to make any difference. We have plenty of lip service. We need the activists."

Mish also picketed for Proposition O with businessman friend Channing Clarkson for a month before the election.

He has also involved himself in an informal educational program. With a friend, Peggy Klein, he has been inviting friends to his house for a screening of last September's ABC special, "The Poisoning of America," hosted by Hugh Downs. "It's a very compelling look at the American environment," Mish said. "We watch it, then talk about what we can do to change things."

But those were peripheral activities. As his central focus, he decided to do something positive for kids. "For one thing," he explained, they have the mind unfettered and they can see solutions far more clearly than we.

"For another, they are the generation we are handing this to."

That is what has sent him on a round of classroom interviews, sometimes standing in front of a class, occasionally sitting in pint-sized chairs around a grade-school table and asking such questions as: "What do you think of air? What do you think of the water shortage? What do you think of cars?"

Children Are Concerned

He was not surprised, he said, to find that children have spent some time pondering the state of the planet's air, water and freeways.

"I almost anticipated them telling me what they did: I figured kids are mystified, miffed and bereaved. . . . They are very concerned and very aware."

For example, among the schoolhouse suggestions:

- "Try to build a car that has a little container in the back of it that catches the smoke and every 500 miles you take the thing out and get a new one."
- "We could get drinking water from ice cubes."

- "It would be good to have a pesticide that's not bad for you, like a soap and water spray."
- "We should have the ocean water going through a pipe, a net catches the fish so they don't get hurt, then water goes into a steamy room where the salt gets separated. We could use the salt for table salt and the water could go to places with water shortages."
- "They should line the water pipes with a plastic, so no lead comes through."
- "When I get old enough, I'm going to get myself an electric car, so I can charge it up while I'm sleeping."
- "Maybe they could use cooking oil for an alternative fuel."

When Mish reminded a group of Santa Monica youngsters that they could air their discontent in letters to elected officials, the children unanimously protested that they were just little kids and no one would listen to them.

Refinanced His House

As a result, one of the songs on the cassette will be titled "Write Your Senator."

Mish has refinanced his house to support his work on "Kid's-Eye View of the Environment" and is totally consumed by it. The ruptured Achilles' tendon, he thinks, was fate.

"I saw all the things I've done in the past as part and parcel of what I should be doing," he said. "Singing in nightclubs for six years, composing, animated voices, selling. . . ."

"You have to be stopped dead to make a life-changing decision. We get so caught up in the treadmill, we really don't make important decisions until somebody smacks us down."