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The Fonz

On Nov. 5, 2003 Henry Winkler was in town to host the Jewish Federation of Greater Indianapolis 2004 Annual Campaign Celebration, and promote his new book.

"Hank Zipzer: The Mostly True Confessions of the World's Best Underachiever: I Got a 'D' in Salami," co-authored by Lin Oliver, was inspired by Winkler's childhood experience of undiagnosed dyslexia that caused him difficulty in school.

Winkler is best known for his role as "The Fonz" from the television show "Happy Days," which played for 10 seasons beginning in January 1974. Since then he has directed and produced a number of feature films and recently starred on Broadway in Neil Simon's "The Dinner Party." He is also well known as a humanitarian for his efforts to help the needy, especially programs that help children.

In school, even though Winkler had problems academically, he appeared in class productions. But when preparing for college, his SAT scores were low. He applied to 24 colleges and was accepted by two. He attended Emerson College in Boston where he studied drama. Later he earned a master's degree at the Yale School of Drama.

After graduation, he acted in plays, but the pay was very low. He auditioned for and acted in commercials to boost his income. He saved enough to go to California where he planned to stay for a month. He got small parts on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "The Bob Newhart Show."

"On Sept 18, 1973, at 2:45pm – not that anyone is keeping track – I auditioned for Happy Days," Winkler said.

Six weeks later on his birthday, Oct. 30, the part of Arthur Fonzarelli was offered to him. He responded that he would accept only if they would allow him to show more sides to the character.

To our good fortune, they agreed. Winkler's creativity with the role played a big part in making the show a huge success, and made an American icon of the character. The black leather jacket he wore in the show can be found in the Smithsonian. Winkler said he received 50,000 fan letters a week.

"My parents became lobbyists," Winkler joked. They would hang out in the lobby of hotels, signing autographs, 'Parents of Henry Winkler.' If someone asked them for their son's autograph, they would promise to get one. Winkler said he finally put his foot down when his parents gave out his phone number to

every member of their synagogue in New York who was visiting Southern California.

Everyone knows what a good actor Winkler is, but who knew he is also a great comedian? He gave a standing ovation performance of stand-up comedy, mostly autobiographical material.

Throughout the routine, he interspersed humor with more sober remarks. For example, he deplored the great amount of violence on TV today. He spoke about the importance of helping others. He believes everyone can be a helper even if he or she helps only one other person, he said. He recalled his childhood low self-esteem and exhorted the audience to not let negative thoughts dominate, but to replace them with positive ones.

Winkler said he knew by age 7 that he wanted to be an actor. He quoted Chaim Weitzman, "If you will it, it is not a dream." He said part of what led to his success was never letting go of his dream. He said we can all achieve great things if we follow Weitzman's advice.

Winkler's parents had fled Germany in 1939 with few possessions except some heirloom jewelry that had been given to his father, who concealed the jewels in chocolate to keep them from being stolen or confiscated.

When he arrived in America, his father sold the jewelry and started a lumber business that he hoped Winkler would one day take over.

Shortly after Winkler started shooting "Happy Days," his family was vacationing in Nice, France. His mother wanted him to join them, but it was not a good time for him to leave. With traditional Jewish mother pressure, she said he should come now because, "Who knows how much longer I will be around?" She lived another 24 years.

The most challenging job Winkler said he has faced is parenthood. He and Stacey Weitzman wed in 1978 and now have three children, stepson Jed Weitzman, 32; daughter Zoe Emily, 23, and son Max, 20.

His fame did not always impress the children. Living very close to the Dodgers stadium, one day they were attending a game when the cameras focused on him, and he appeared on the Jumbotron – a giant TV monitor. The crowd started yelling alternately, "Hen-ree, Fon-zee, Hen-ree." As people started to crowd around him, he decided they would have a better chance of watching the game from the TV in their vehicle, and they left.

After his talk, Winkler took questions from the audience. Someone asked why he never took a stage name. He said he thought about calling himself, "Vic Avalanche," but to this day he still does not know how to spell Avalanche so he decided against it.

Another person asked what it was like working with Ron Howard. Winkler said when they started shooting "Happy Days," he was 28 and Howard was 18, but already a big presence on the set.

Winkler said they became close friends and he loves him dearly. Back then, Howard confided to Winkler that someday he would like to try directing. Not trying to foresee the future, Winkler told him he thought he would be good at it.

Winkler is godparent to Howard's children. He said he jokingly assured Howard that if something happened to the Howards, not to worry, Winkler would make sure the couple's children got bar mitzvahed.

A man asked, "Is it true that there is a Jewish conspiracy in Hollywood?" Winkler asked what he meant by that. The man explained it is like the belief that Jews control the world by controlling the media.

"No, I do not believe there is a conspiracy," Winkler responded. "For 5,000 years we Jews have been accused of all kinds of things, but look, we are still here!"

It was exciting to meet an actor-producer-director of Winkler's magnitude. I think everyone who attended felt as if they were seeing an old friend. Even though it was only a role he was playing, he was a steady part of our lives for at least ten years.

On the other hand, we were strangers to him, but he treated us as if he knew us well. He was generous with hugs, kisses, smiles, and compliments.

Several people told me they felt uplifted by Winkler's presentation. Some said when the evening began they felt tired, but they went home energized. It must be a great attribute to be able to make people happy with one's presence.

A friend of mine was wearing a black leather jacket and matching pants. As Winkler was signing his book for her, she told him she wore the suit in his honor. In her book, he wrote, "Ya look great in leather!"

Jennie Cohen 2003

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