

THE Whiz Kids

Apples Get High

RATINGS!

by Lenore Wolgelenter

The television world of good guys vs. bad guys is catching up to the "real world" and script writers have decided that computers can be used to catch the bad guys. Not only have the writers in TV land discovered computers, they have also discovered what most of us have known for a long time...when you need help with computers...look toward kids. With that concept in mind, a television program was born. The Whiz Kids airs every Saturday night, at 8 p.m., on CBS.

I had the pleasure of meeting Maxwell Gail, star of the show, on location in Los Angeles' Griffith Park. Max's TV credentials go way back to "Barney Miller," in which he played "Wojo" for seven years. In addition to acting, Max writes songs, poetry and plays piano. His original career goals did not include acting. At Williams College in Mass. he majored in math and physics, but graduated with a degree in economics. After moving to Detroit, he taught both history and English, and proximity to the University of Michigan led to an MBA. Evidently, something was not quite right with all these academic disciplines as Max was still looking. With free time on his hands, he took his first acting class; simultaneously, he studied for the law boards. He never took the boards, because acting answered the questions and all his energies went into performing.

Max was hired for the role of Lew Farley. Farley is a friend of Richie's (the leading Whiz Kid) family and an investigative reporter. Farley is a tough character with an inquisitive

mind and a set of values left from his college days in the sixties and early seventies. This makes him trusted by the Whiz Kids and brings adult experiences to the show. He goes to the kids for their computer expertise and in return, they come to him for opinions and friendship.

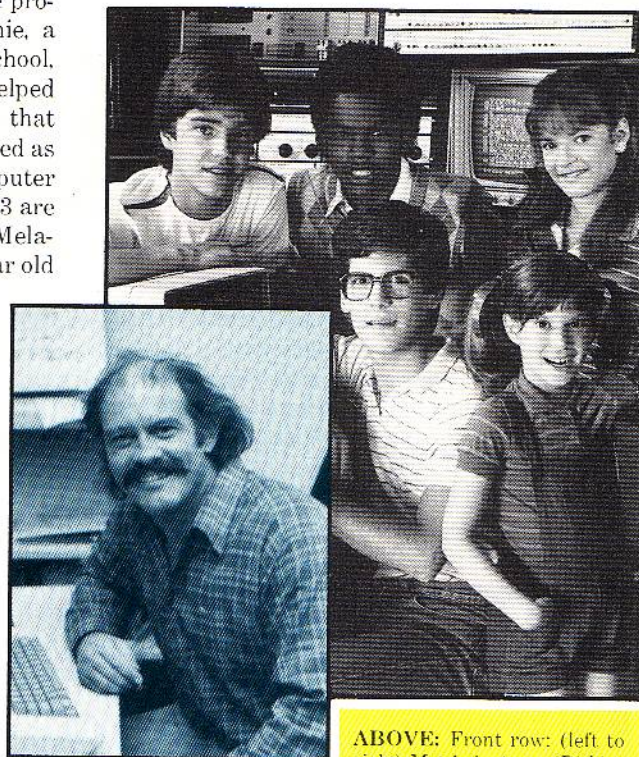
The "kids" on the show include Mathew Labordeaux, age 18; Jeff Jacquet, age 18. Todd Porter, age 16; Andrea Elson, age 15; and Melanie Gaffin, age 10. For the program, Mat plays Richie, a sophomore in high school, whose father had helped him build a computer that talks. Richie is portrayed as the brain and computer hacker while the other 3 are in supporting roles. Melanie plays the seven year old sister, Cheryl, and is portrayed more as a tag along, but she too is becoming more involved with computers.

Off stage, Mat is very involved with computers and is on the National Advisory Board for Atari Computer Corporation. Jeff is beginning to do some programming with the Apple, and Todd uses his Apple //e at home. Melanie is becoming expert at Frogger and learning to program. Between takes, all four kids can be found playing games with the offstage Apples, learning to program riddles for the others to solve. Every now and then, and with slow persistence, they are getting the non-computer crew members involved with Apples.

Max, as the reporter, Farley, uses a word processor on the show and turns to the "kids" for the hard-core computer work. In real life, he is about to purchase his first computer. As a poet he wants a word processing system, and a synthesizer for recording his songs.

During the planning stages of the show, Max's objectives included scripts which realistically approached kids, portrayed the sophistication of their lives and de-mystified computers. The program is targeted towards middle-class families with a

strong emphasis on education and achievement. To Max, and others I interviewed, this was an opportunity to present kids and the technology of today in a substantive manner. Instead, the writers and producers are going towards a more "solve the crime of the week" type of script, and away from the building of interpersonal relationships. As Max said: "Sometimes, the powers that be listen, and at other times high ratings come first."



ABOVE: Front row: (left to right) Mat Labordeaux (Richie), Melanie Gaffin (Cheryl). Back row: (left to right) Todd Porter (Hamilton), Jeff Jacquet (Jeremy), and Andrea Elson (Alice). LEFT: Maxwell Gail (Farley).

The day I was on the set, the crew was filming a sequence at Griffith Park. In this sequence, Max, as the reporter, was driving his Mustang and was instructed to turn at the edge of the cliff and stop. Down at the bottom was a brand new sports car with the "victim". Later on in the filming process, the "bad guys" came along and realized that someone had killed their possible informant. As a neophyte to this type of production, it was fun to watch a show being produced. For every few minutes of TV viewing, there are repetitive "takes" to get it right. Watching the filming process was interesting, but it was not the reason for my trip to Los Angeles. Bob Garon, Max's agent, called the studio and got the people behind the computers out to the set.

I wanted to think it was my interview that induced them to go through the L.A. traffic in mid-afternoon. Then I discovered, with great pleasure, that it was really the lunch. One of the benefits of going on location is the wonderful food served to the crew. With tables set under the trees, Rick and Jim gave me some insight to their computer backgrounds. Ric Edelman has been in the computer business since 1975. He started selling Apples at the original Computer Mart in the city and was hired to train the secretaries at CBS to use computers. After working as an instructor, he consulted for the Whiz Kids program. This led to his job as the show's resident computer expert. Jim Michaels was an accounting major in college and a computer hobbyist. He graduated college in 1983. While attending college, he held various positions involving computers. He was hired as Ric's assistant and after a short time of proving himself, he too was offered a permanent position. The third member of the team, Kurt Borg, was credited as the mastermind behind the show's computer graphics. Kurt's background includes an MBA; his strong interest

in computer graphics led to an exciting professional position.

Both Ric and Jim were quick to show their enthusiasm for the Apple computer. While their Apples were not shown on the stage very often, the three Apple //e's back stage are referred to as the "work horses" of the set. In one instance the Apples are communication tools for sending digitized photos over phone lines. As the onstage computers are not working terminals, all images and typing simulation that appears on your screen is being generated off stage by the Apple //e's. Individually Ric and Jim are responsible for programming the story points for on-screen viewing. As I needed translation for the trade jargon, story points are pieces of information or dialogue that the viewer sees. All of the work has been pre-programmed on the Apples and they serve as the control computers for what is (or will be) filmed. Keeping up (and ahead) is a challenge which all three computer people readily accept and enjoy.

One particular show which generated excitement involved dolphins

and dolphin sounds. For the dolphin sound effects, they were delighted to tell me all about their lucky find, "Dolphin Dialogue" from Syntauri Corporation*. (Neither of these people knew of my previous association with Syntauri.) We discovered a wonderful common interest and went off on a long conversation about the software and work being done with dolphins both in Florida, and at Marine World, in California. They were also delighted to find out the history of this program and more information about the alphaSynturi synthesizer. We traded anecdotes about our longevity in this industry, music, computers, the future for computers as the new tools for creativity and communication. Our conversation headed towards completion with a discussion of the Macintosh and the Lisa, the L.A. freeways and departure for another interview. The final note came when Ric described with pleasure how he managed to get the show's producer converted to computers and to purchase a Lisa.

* Dolphin Dialogue is available from Syntauri Corporation (800) 227-1817 and proceeds go to the Delphind Research Institute, Key West, Florida.

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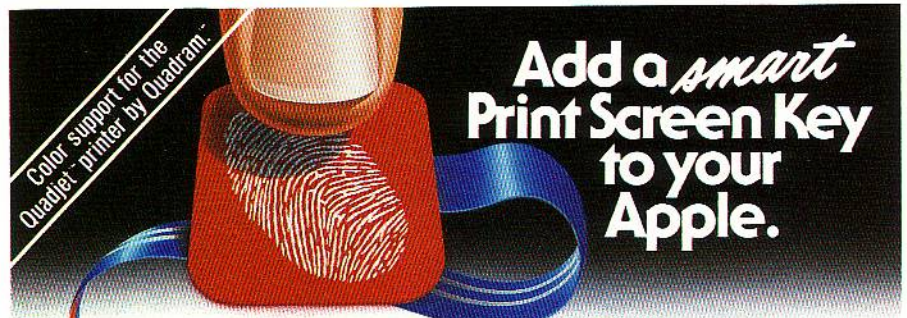
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