

"I want the kids to come out of this feeling like I do: that each day they wake up, the world is a better place because they exist"

IN PROFILE – BY KAREN MARIE MARZOCCO

Michael Williams-Stark

Making Faces and Raising Voices

I KNOW THAT people would yell at me all the time or scream things at me out of cars. I just thought I was a really popular guy.- Everything is about me."

At the time of his birth in 1955, Michael Williams-Stark's was considered the worst bilateral cleft lip and palate case in British Columbia. "Then I realized people were being mean and I couldn't figure out why. I was just a little kid." Michael vividly remembers his mother lifting him in her arms and holding him in front of the medicine cabinet mirror. "She explained to me why I'm different and pointed things out on my face that were different from other people's."

Today, Michael is an improv comedian, public speaker, voice actor and musician who is the subject of the international-award-winning CBC radio documentary, *Making Faces*. The documentary, also featured on National Public Radio in the U.S., bears the same name as the registered charity Michael founded to foster life skills through improvisation for children with facial differences.

Michael describes his own face as a boy as having a gaping hole where the roof of his mouth and his lips should have been and a pudding-like mass in the middle for a nose. He says he learned years later from his sister, Frankie, that the neighbourhood kids would jeer at him even as a baby. "She would push me on the playground swing... She told me she learned what a broken heart was that way."

Michael explains that he never knew anyone with a facial difference when he was growing up. His early years were a lonely and isolated existence. "I remember being world weary and very tired... I started to mistrust people and think what a monstrous and nasty species they are." Then, the little grade one boy looked to the TV series *The Untouchables* for release. "I used to want to be a hit man - 'cause people didn't mean anything to me as far as kindness goes. They're cruel to me, so I may as well make a living out of bumping them off... not a healthy way for a kid to think!"

His bio quips, "OK, I'm facially disfigured and vocally distorted... how can I make life even tougher for myself? I know! I'll become an actor and specialize in voice work and public speaking!" Michael cheekily refers to himself as a "harelip for hire." He lays claim to the title, drawing it back from its negative connotations. He realized the power of words at an early age, when his audacious comments in grade three upset the nuns and

earned him the strap. "I wreaked all this havoc just. by saying something. It made me feel very powerful."

Michael credits the Beatles song, "Please Please Me," with completely changing his world. He first heard it on the radio in early 1963. "What is that sound? I just loved it!" The Beatles magic so inspired him, he got a guitar and a book on chords and taught himself to play. Michael believes his passion for performing overwhelmed his fear of rejection and helped him to accept himself for who he was.

Michael explains that all of his perceptions are shaped by his facial difference. "I don't know how to be anything but facially disfigured. So if I'm going to be a facially disfigured singer or actor, well, so be it. What kind of a life would it be otherwise if I just gave up? Live like a recluse in a rooming house?" - a fate, Michael says, that is all too common for many with a facial difference.

After being active in comedy sketches in junior high and high school, Michael majored in theatre at college. "Then, like all graduating students, I formed a band." Michael played the small-town band circuit in rural B.C. and Alberta in the early 1980s, then moved to Toronto, where he studied improv at the Second City theatre. He formed 'his own comedy troupe and took over the Rivoli comedy space offered to him by Scott Thompson of the Kids in the Hall. During this time, he developed his skills at mimicry and character voices.

The popular children's series, *The Noddy Shoppe*, is just one of Michael's character voice successes. Originally asked to audition for four of the animated character voices, Michael sent a tape to the New York casting office featuring the conversations of 30 different . " characters. "Never just do what they ask you to do. Always go for more," he says. As a result, not only was he the first voice cast for the show, but he got the parts for all six of the main *Noddy Shoppe* characters. "It's all the sweeter because every voiceover guy in Toronto probably tried out for that show."

Other animated series under Michael's belt are *Beetlejuice*, *Rupert Bear*, *Little Shop of Horrors* and the lead character in *Super Mario Bros*. And in an odd twist on his boyhood yearning to be a hit man, Michael voices the part of a villain on a Sony PlayStation 2 game. "Children all over North America are killing me now," he laughs. "Lovely thought."

Michael has endured over a dozen reconstructive facial surgeries in his life- time. His first three months on earth were spent in hospital, "which explains my nurse fetish," he grins. "My sister said when they brought me home I was always looking above their heads... then they realized I was looking for the nurse's cap!" Today, Michael says he looks like Jesus might after losing a prizefight. "I don't look so much facially disfigured now... but I've never stopped seeing through those eyes the eyes of a disfigured child... That little guy still lives inside of me."

A time that stands out in Michael's life is the age of 14, when he had just come through the facial surgery that would largely shape the face he would wear for the rest of his life. His doctor for all his surgeries since birth, Dr. Robert Cowan, stood back and viewed the

boy objectively, like a fine sculpture. "He's really quite handsome, isn't he?" Michael recalls the doctor saying to his parents. "I believed him. What a lovely moment."

Now, Michael says the pain he felt as a child has led to the greatest joy in his life. Through his volunteer work with AboutFace International, a support network for people with facial differences, Michael developed Making Faces, an eight-week improv comedy workshop for kids with facial differences.

"We're not just like any other boys and girls. I tell that to my kids. They face a very different set of challenges. We all have wounds or hurts but those with facial differences have to wear them. These kids are beautiful, creative little beings, and they have the right to participate and love and be loved and chase down [their] dreams." The kids interact with each other and play improvised games tailored to develop eye contact and improve voice skills, teamwork, self-confidence and self-expression.

According to Michael, the children pick up intuitively on improv acting techniques. "They've been observers. They know what it is like to be on the outside looking in: They bring a whole fresh perspective to improv or any art form. The next Margaret Laurence, Robertson Davies or Sir Alec Guinness could come from these kids, because they have such insight." Michael plans to bring his Making Faces workshops to all chapters of About-Face International and train other facilitators with facial differences to lead workshops. As well, Michael conducts seminars and workshops for corporations and healthcare facilities, and he has launched a career as a public speaker. He uses his own life lessons to teach others to pursue their dreams. "You put enough barriers around yourself. You can't allow others to say what you can and can't do."

Michael is also working on the development of *InsideOut*, a children's television series, with Toronto production company The Film Works: In this series, he hopes to help parents and children deal with the fears and uncertainty of hospital stays. He recalls a time when he was five years old and his parents drove him to the hospital, then left him at reception. "They couldn't break it to me that I had to stay for another surgery."

Michael also hopes that the TV series will help children and parents to share their feelings when dealing with their physical or mental differences. He reflects on his own father, whom he describes as looking like David Niven and acting like Basil Fawlty, "I know my Dad loved me. He used to visit me every lunch hour from work when I was in the hospital... But we never had a conversation in my life about my facial disfigurement."

Michael's life has come full circle, from the boy who felt alone and barely human to the man who feels he has achieved a spiritual and very human renewal - through his acting, voice work and most especially his improv work with children with facial differences.

"I celebrate my past instead of hiding from it. These kids make *me* proud of who I am and where I come from. It's like discovering you have a people. They make me proud of the little boy I was. Of who I am.

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To book Michael Williams-Stark for a public speaking engagement, seminar or workshop, contact him at makingfaces@sympatico.ca or (416) 598-4429. To find out more about Making Faces, visit www.makingfaces.ca.

Karen Marie Marzocco of Toronto, Ontario, is the head writer for the Inside- Out television series in development, along with creators Michael Williams-Stark and Abby Thomas.