

“JOJO” PUSHES HER OWN DREAMS TO REALIZATION

The Somerville News

By Elizabeth Bernardi

In each episode of the children’s show “JoJo’s DreamCart,” Joanne LaRiccica encourages her young audience to pursue their dreams with gusto. And in real life, the show has this month begun airing on Rhode Island PBS, an indication that LaRiccica’s own passion and perseverance are just starting to pay off.

A lifelong Somervillian (aside from her first two years, spent in the North End, and a brief stint during her adulthood in Hawaii), LaRiccica grew up helping to sell wares from her father’s downtown pushcarts. In 1985, the business was passed on to her, and LaRiccica ran her cart outside the New England Aquarium until 2005, logging a total of 35 years. Her knack for performance was long evident.

“I was always singing to my customers,” said LaRiccica, who studied composition and voice at Berklee College of Music. The pushcart, she explained, “was my stage. There’s videos of me all around the world; people would stop and videotape me.”

Her love of performing for a camera started at her pushcart, but the idea for a children’s television show wouldn’t come until 2001, when the advice of customers and family who recommended she perform on television finally sunk in.

The idea: “JoJo’s DreamCart,” an inspirational program designed to encourage children’s natural curiosity and empower them to seek their dreams.

“We inspire kids to believe in themselves,” said LaRiccica, “and if they have a dream, they can live out their dreams. We give them a roadmap.”

In each episode LaRiccica is joined by four or six local children, who work together to guess the “dream of the day.” One episode, for instance, is dedicated to fish: how they are caught, chosen, prepared and served at Legal Sea Foods. Another episode introduces children to Kung Fu, emphasizing the mental and physical empowerment of the martial art. For each day’s dream, LaRiccica brings out a “dream expert,” such as Legal Sea Foods owner Roger Berkowitz, to share his or her knowledge.



Then, just as JoJo and the children are getting excited, in walks a “Negative No-No,” a costumed character who arrives to criticize the children’s dreams. Together with the children, JoJo persuades this “No-No” to join the group with enthusiasm as a “Positive Yes-Yes.”

In describing the show, LaRiccica quickly adds that “JoJo’s DreamCart” emphasizes the work involved in achievement: “You can have whatever you want in this world, but you’ve got to be willing to take the time to learn.”

LaRiccica herself is an enthusiastic and lifelong learner, and she is constantly considering new show ideas, even as she is being interviewed.

“I think to myself, ‘What did you have to do to be a journalist? What classes did you take? Did this start when you were a child, writing stories?’”

This natural curiosity is something “JoJo’s DreamCart” tries to impart, and LaRiccica’s own real-life efforts to pursue her own dream may well make her the best model for her “Dreamdoers,” as she calls the children who join her each episode.

Developing a show for television is no easy task, LaRiccica discovered. She taped her pilot in a rented studio, financing the process herself, as she has done all along. (A testament to the benefits of lifelong saving, LaRiccica credits the long hours she spent working the pushcart and her own thriftiness with her financial ability

to focus solely on her dream.)

She took the pilot to the 2003 convention for the National Association of Television Producers and Executives (NATPE), and tried to shop it around. She found no takers.

“I walked around visiting people in all the booths,” she recalled. “They said, ‘You need a booth of your own.’” She also learned that she would need to have more shows than just the pilot.

So LaRiccica went back to the studio, at Somerville Community Access Television this time, and taped 18 episodes. LaRiccica wears most of the production hats, hosting the show, writing the music, singing much of it herself, and taping all of the b-roll, on-site footage that she says lends credibility to the show’s message about exploration.

The only task she has hired out on her production has been the editing, which has been done by professional editor Rachel Eisengart. “I’m too close to the show to edit it,” LaRiccica explained. But that does not mean she is uninterested: she is currently taking classes in editing, evidence of her thirst for knowledge of all aspects of production.

The fact that LaRiccica does so much of the production work herself should not be mistaken for a sign that she has no help. She has an entire board of advisors, in fact. Among them is Dr. Paula Stahl, a child psychologist who serves as a sounding board for LaRiccica’s ideas and co-starred in an episode dedicated to coping with loss. LaRiccica has a business advisor, as well – a whole team of the positive influences she would encourage anyone pursuing a goal to find.

In 2005, she returned to the NATPE convention, with her batch of shows and several members of her team in tow.

“It was extremely difficult,” she said. LaRiccica encountered her own “no-nos” at the convention, people who told her that advertisers would not buy time for a show aimed at 7-9-year-olds. But one good thing came of the experience: the Bridges network offered to air her shows. It was a small success, since LaRiccica would give her work to Bridges for free and split the responsibilities of seeking advertisers with the network. But at least the shows would be aired.

Then, last winter, LaRiccica found her first real break: a mutual friend, Rex Trailer, introduced her to Mary Lou Palumbo, of Rhode Island PBS, who had been hired to find more local program-

ming to add to the station’s line-up. Palumbo was impressed, both with LaRiccica and with the show.

“She is very passionate, for one thing, about what she does,” said Palumbo, “and she is very good. She’s very creative, she’s good with children. She’s got quite the imagination.”

Beginning this month, the show airs on Sundays at 9 a.m. on Rhode Island PBS, and Palumbo said that “JoJo’s DreamCart” will hopefully be the cornerstone of the local children’s programming Rhode Island PBS plans to air. There will be 15 shows in this first fall season, and beginning in February, PBS will seek underwriters to take the financial burden off of LaRiccica, and to finally pay her cast and crew.

Meanwhile, LaRiccica has not slowed down even slightly.

On a recent weekend, she spent time filming b-roll footage for upcoming episodes at the site of a home in construction, the progress of which she will be following for at least nine months. Then she was headed out to tape a religious ceremony on Saturday night, to be followed by the taping of a wedding on Sunday. She is used to the long hours – the pushcarts demanded her attention 15-16 hours per day, nine months per year.

When she is not taping her own shows, LaRiccica can be found working with the Somerville Producers Group, a collective of community producers who educate themselves through the practice of producing local programming. It is just one more way LaRiccica can acquire more production experience.

She is not stopping with television, either – LaRiccica is also planning to become more Web-savvy in the near future by taking classes at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education. LaRiccica is determined to exploit all of the resources available to her, anything that might help her pursue her dream.

And what happens when she meets naysayers?

“I am encountering ‘negative no-no’s,’” she said, “and they don’t bother me. I just say, ‘next.’ These things make me stronger, and make me want to persevere even more.”

LaRiccica is convinced that it will only be a matter of time before she reaches her ultimate dream: to bring “JoJo’s DreamCart” to the international stage, inspiring children to achieve whatever goals they dare to dream.

Perhaps LaRiccica herself is the real dream expert here.