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Winkler finds many new happy days

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Hanging on an office wall at KTVT/Channel 11 is a portrait of Michael Richards as Kramer, the hipster-doofus character the actor played on Seinfeld. Sitting in front of this portrait on a recent morning is Henry Winkler, who played '50s hipster Fonzie on the classic sitcom Happy Days, a TV icon underneath a TV icon.

But as he chats, Winkler -- who now stars on the CBS sitcom Out of Practice -- could hardly seem less Fonzie-like. It's not just that he's a handsome 60 now, or that he's traded in T-shirts and leather jackets for a sportcoat and a shouldn't-work-but-does combination of purple shirt and yellow tie. No, the difference is in Winkler's demeanor. He's polite but serious, occasionally breaking into nervous habits such as fiddling with a pen or tearing at a piece of paper, at one point interrupting the interview to marvel at how some woman on a TV monitor playing The Price is Right could be so excited about being on TV. These are the habits of a shy person, not of the coolest guy in the neighborhood.

Don't get Winkler wrong. He loves the Fonz, but the Fonz ain't him.

"I was a nerd," Winkler says in near-perfect diction about his days before Happy Days. "Being dyslexic, I was always in the bottom 3 percent in the country academically. I was in the bottom 3 percent in the class of high school. I went to an all-boys private school where your grades and your college were your calling card. I didn't have a calling card. . . . I would call a girl in the middle of the summer in New York, sweltering heat, I would have to wear an overcoat because I was shaking. The Fonz was my alter-ego. He was everyone I wasn't, everything I wasn't, everything that I wanted to be and couldn't manage."

Winkler discovered his dyslexia in 1976, when he was narrating a documentary about children with learning disabilities and recognized his own problem. Since 2003, he has channeled his childhood struggles with the learning disability into a string of humorous kids' books. The Hank Zipzer series -- nine titles in total (a 10th is due in August), with the latest, The Secret Life of a Ping-Pong Wizard, published in September -- is aimed at fourth-graders and is about "the world's greatest underachiever." Co-written with Lin Oliver, the books all take off from some struggle Winkler's dyslexia caused him in school.

"Kids write me from all over the country," says Winkler, who was in town to promote Out of Practice's move from Mondays to Wednesdays on CBS. "I guess hilarious must be a fourth-grade word, because they say, 'Your books are hilarious.' And they say, 'How did you know me so well? How did you know how I felt? I don't feel alone. Hank can't spell; I can't spell. I could be a writer.' My job is done. Just that one comment alone, that a child now believes that they could be a writer. I didn't know I could be a writer until 2003."

It's not that Winkler, who notes that one in five children suffer from some sort of learning disability, has conquered his dyslexia. It's just that he's learned to adapt. "You don't overcome it," he says. "What you do is, you integrate it. You learn to live with it. You learn what's best for you. I can't spell; I don't use a computer. My

assistant uses the computer and gets my e-mail. Over the weekend, I have no idea if I got an e-mail or not, because there's no way I'm opening that up to figure that out. I know what my limitations are, and it doesn't stop me from going for the gold."

Later in the day, at a reading for patients at Children's Medical Center in Dallas, Winkler will tell his audience the inspirations behind his books. In one of them, Hank's problems grasping math led him to seriously overspice a recipe for enchiladas, causing his humorless teacher to have a five-alarm case of firemouth -- and an embarrassing bout of flatulence. In another, Hank studies and studies for a spelling contest, only to get tripped up on the 'i before e' rule in front of his laughing classmates. In still another, Hank, who has poor hand-to-eye coordination, is petrified when he's asked to pitch for a baseball team. (Winkler learned to play catch from his Happy Days co-star Ron Howard, who bought his co-star his first mitt.)

Winkler's message is that all children have greatness within themselves, whether they have a learning challenge or not. Despite his dyslexia, he found his gift in acting and clung to his childhood dream of being on TV until that dream came true. And he'll never dismiss that dream. He could have turned his back on Happy Days, but he's stayed close to many former co-stars: Winkler played a recurring role in the Ron Howard-produced series Arrested Development. Marion "Mrs. C" Ross appears on this week's Out of Practice, which returns in a new time slot at 7 p.m. Wednesday. He spoke with Don "Ralph Malph" Most just this month. Some stars try to reject their TV past, but Winkler isn't that way.

"I think they're shortsighted," he says. "I think that it's going to be with you anyway. I had a really great time playing [the Fonz]. I had a great time being with those people for 11 years. Why would I then, all of sudden -- the one thing that shot me onto the world stage -- why would I say, 'Well, it doesn't exist'?"

Winkler also could have turned into Surreal Life fodder, but he's made a point to branch out, playing a right-wing talk-show host in the short-lived Fox sitcom Monty, taking bad-guy guest-star roles in several series, and appearing in such non-Happy Days-ish projects as the movies Scream and The Waterboy. When acting opportunities dried up for a while after the 1982 Ron Howard film Night Shift, Winkler stepped behind the camera, taking several movie and TV directing projects and racking up nearly three dozen producing credits, including last year's Happy Days: 30th Anniversary Reunion Special.

"Fear is a tremendous motivator, and I never wanted to be in a magazine with the title 'Where are they now?' " he says. "I think that would have just sent me over the bend. . . . People say, 'Give me one bit of advice about being in this business,' and I say, 'You have to write the word tenacity. You have to write it in red, and paste it on your mirror, so that you see it every day. You have to take your pick and your shovel, and you have to mine the system every day. Because nobody is going to do it for you."

Out of Practice, which debuted in September, had a seemingly cherry time slot following Two and a Half Men, CBS' top-performing sitcom. But the show, a traditional but raucous comedy about a family of doctors, was bounced to make room for Jenna Elfman's Courting Alex and now Julia Louis-Dreyfus' The New Adventures of Old Christine. With its new 7 p.m. Wednesday slot, Out of Practice has landed in a soft time period that CBS has treated as a dumping ground for sitcoms,

but the show has improved since September, with the writing snappier and funnier, and the cast chemistry jelling.

Winkler knows the move is risky, but he believes that fans of the show will come back -- as will people who checked it out once or twice last fall, then drifted away.

"The thing is, we were on the rise when they took us off," he says. "What we have to do is remind [viewers] that they had a good time. What I honestly say is, 'You give me a half-hour of your time, we will make you laugh out loud. And if we don't, I'll come to your house and make dinner.' "

Out of Practice

7 p.m. Wednesday