

How Winkler went from 'Zipzer'-like underachiever to star; Mario Lopez enjoys juggling multiple commitments

by Marilyn Beck & Stacy Jenel Smi

Henry Winkler reports he and his writing collaborator Lin Oliver have just completed penning their 16th Hank Zipzer kids' book — in which the mother of their learning-challenged hero gives birth to a sibling for Hank. "And, like my oldest son, he says, 'You know, I don't really want a brother or sister. I could go for an alien.'"

Henry, who only learned of his own dyslexia as an adult, has won numerous accolades for the best-selling books that take young readers through the travails of Hank's zany home life and not-so-hot academic career as the "world's greatest underachiever."

So how, in real life, did Henry transform from Zipzer-esque problem child to Yale star?

"The answer is, I swear, if I had to put in three words: preparation, tenacity and will," he says. "If you apply those three concepts to your life, it is very surprising how you wind up at your destination."

"I never thought I could succeed. I only knew I wanted to succeed," he adds. "Wanting is a major force — that's where will comes in."

Henry has spoken to numerous parents' and educators' groups, and has been moved by stories his books have generated. "We're all the same. It is unbelievably touching — You grow up thinking you can't achieve, because people have told you that. And that doubt is still sitting there."

It even sits there with Henry sometimes, he admits — after decades of stardom, pages of actor-producer-director credits and shelves full of awards. "I certainly am proud of the stuff that I do, but it's like achievements have an expiration date. They're good for six months," he claims. "And then you have to find something else to feed you."

Next up for Henry: "Sit Down, Shut Up," Fox's April 19-premiering animated sitcom from Mitch Hurwitz, with whom he worked on "Arrested Development." Henry voices a suicidal German teacher at a high school so dysfunctional the staff considers locking out the students as a way to ensure a trouble-free day. Jason Bateman, Will Forte, Will Arnett, Kenan Thompson, Tom Kenny, Kristin Chenoweth and Cheri Oteri are also lending their voices to the show.

FROM THE INSIDE LOOKING OUT: Last year, Mario Lopez became the permanent host on "Extra," and while it's keeping his plate full, he tells us he likes the challenge of balancing all his activities. Mario also likes the fact that "Extra" has been adding an interactive element to its show, which has allowed him to keep in touch with fans.

"We were the first to really let fans talk to us, creating our own social networks. The fans get to win great prizes every day â€” everything from new cars, to trips to Australia, to spa treatments. I feel like Willy Wonka giving away all of these prizes, which is really cool," notes Lopez, who guest stars on "Nip/Tuck" and hosts "America's Best Dance Crew" as well.

"I'm happy with the way the show looks and the direction we're going. Our social networking is blowing up. We're up to like a half a million people. The celebrities really like this, too. Fans can talk directly to the stars, and celebs can ask other celebs questions. It makes you feel like you're a part of the show."

While currently on hiatus from his MTV gig, Lopez is also keeping busy writing a children's book called "Mud Taco" with his sister Marissa. "It was more her idea, but I thought it was a good one. We're trying to focus on brother and sister bonds, and encourage kids to use their imagination," says Lopez. "We're really happy with the way things are turning out. We're even hoping to turn it into a cartoon at some point as well."

LOOKING FOR 'WRIGHT' MAN: Casting forces on Queen Latifah's "Just Wright" are meeting with candidates to play her love interest in the forthcoming Fox Searchlight feature. The actor has to be handsome and hip-looking â€” and convincingly come across as the star player for the New York Knicks.

The storyline has Latifah as a physical therapist named Leslie Wright who gains the interest of said BBall superstar, only to find him distracted by a gorgeous she-devil. But all is not lost. There's a reason they're calling this a modern day-Cinderella story.

STEPPING OUT: "The Office's" Jenna Fischer will get to exercise her acting chops playing a recently widowed woman "who is immature and has had problems connecting with the world" in the soon-to-shoot low budget indie dramedy "A Little Help." Chris O'Donnell plays the former flame who married her sister.

With reports by Emily Feimster.

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