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WEEKEND

'Super Why!' creator makes heroic effort for literacy

BY DENISE I. O'NEAL

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Most people in graduate school hope to write a brilliant thesis that will earn them an A and perhaps become a published work.

Angela Santomero, a graduate of Columbia University Teachers College's master's program, took hers a lot further than that. She parlayed her thesis into the hip PBS KIDS series "Super Why!"

The show, which made its debut in 2007, features characters built around four popular fairy tales. Each character was developed based on a National Reading Panel recommendation, and each is powered by a learning skill. Super Why, Jack's younger brother Wyatt from "Jack and the Beanstalk," has the power to read; Wonder Red, from "Little Red Riding Hood," possesses word power and uses



Angela Santomero

games that focus on word decoding; Alpha Pig, from "The Three Little Pigs," is alphabet-driven, and Princess Presto, from "The Princess and the Pea," brings spelling and handwriting skills to the platform.

In support of the show's debut toy line, all Toys R Us locations across the country are hosting a Super Why! Play Date from noon to 2 p.m. Saturday.

Toys include action figures, activity books and games. Toys range in price from \$5.99 to \$24.99. Popular items include Super Why! Electronic Role Play Sets (\$14.99) and the Save the Day Talking Super Why! (\$19.99).

Santomero and co-creator Samantha Freeman's target audience is lower-income children, although the show has proven to be a big hit among all kids ages 2 through 5, rating as the No. 5 show among that age demographic.

"The theory is to bridge the gap

between reading and television by utilizing television as a 360-degree literacy platform," Santomero said.

According to Santomero, lower-income children enter school at a developmental level two years behind those from middle- and upper-income families.

Santomero, who has a master's degree in developmental psychology and is the co-creator of Nick Jr.'s "Blues Clues," and Freeman, who holds an MBA from Harvard Business School and is a former Nickelodeon executive, know a great deal about children's programming. They became partners in 2005 to form Out of the Blue Entertainment.

Santomero's master's thesis showed children from lower-income families respond better to more active stimuli and can retain more information when it is presented in a multilayer platform.

Each "Super Why!" segment is built around a reading curriculum that makes up 24 minutes of the show's half-hour air time.

Santomero believes the fact that Wyatt is a superhero is a big factor in the program's success.

"Children from lower-income homes crave adventure and action and need characters they can identify with," she said.

"Super Why!" also has an interactive online community (www.superwhy.com) built around the show to extend the learning process.

"Hope is my favorite word," Santomero said. "We want to surround kids with literacy and put all children on an even reading level when entering school."



Super Why is one of the superheroes who teach kids about reading and writing on the animated series "Super Why!"