



Nerds and Cool Kids

IT'S THE CLASSIC CASE OF THE NERD WHO GREW up to be cool. We all know one of them. They were the shy, quiet kid in your class, who always had their nose in a book, was socially awkward and could only talk about schoolwork. They faded into the background of the oftentimes cruel world of adolescence, overshadowed by the “cool” kids; the ones who were shiny and pretty and basked in the limelight of popularity.

Fast forward ten or twenty years, when a school reunion rolls around, and something amazing happens. Those popular kids who basked in the limelight have lost their luster and are suddenly less appealing than before, and that nerd, the one who seemed so boring, is suddenly interesting, kind, confident and ... cool?!

The nerd who grew up to be cool is how I affectionately describe PBS.

A memory that is seared into my mind – well, actually, my ears – is how much I disliked the music for *The McNeil/Leher NewsHour* on PBS, when I was in elementary school. It would come onto the TV a half-hour before dinner most nights. Like Pavlov's dog, at the sound of the bell, I would grow impatient, hungry and irritable at the sound of the intro music. My hunger seemed to intensify when I heard the notes of the theme drift from the television, as I knew it would still be another half an hour until dinner, with everyone watching the *The NewsHour* first.

The irritation grew from the fact that *The NewsHour* seemed so boring to me - more so than any regular newscasts on network television. This show talked about international stuff and financial stuff and, at that age, I couldn't imagine wanting to watch a show that was so dull.

The other memory that I associate with PBS was hearing the words, “*Mystery is made possible by a grant from Mobil Corporation*” every week, during the opening credits of *Mystery*, one of my parent's favorite shows. The intro's sketched scenes included a cartoon of a body slipping down into and under the water of a murky pond. I didn't mind this one so much because I actually

found it amusing to watch the little pointy cartoon feet submerge each week. It struck me as funny, and I was all about being amused. *Mystery* was right up there with *The McNeil/Leher NewsHour*; dry and boring shows for adults. Yawn....

Unfairly, I attached that dry and boring stigma not just to those two shows, but to every show that was on PBS. To me, the term “public television” translated to “boring television.” Surfing the channels always included a speedy trip past channel 7, the PBS station, but never a stop. PBS was too boring for me. It was the nerd of the television world.

For years, it went on that way until it gradually dawned on me: I had been watching PBS on a fairly regular basis. It started when I discovered they televise concerts - good concerts. I like to turn them on while working in the house, I justified to myself. *The Roosevelts*, the historic documentary, was on and I caught one night of it and wanted to see more. I'd seen the book the series was based on, at Costco, I reminded myself, and simply wanted to see if the series stuck to the flow of the book.

This past spring, *Cancer: The Emperor of All Maladies*, a Ken Burns special, aired over three nights. I watched two of the three. In fact, I scheduled my availability in the evenings that week around the special.

Folding laundry one evening this past May, I turned on the television and somehow settled into watching *Frontline: The Trouble with Chicken*. It was a documentary about the chicken industry, and it was fascinating!

Having never been a fan of *The Food Channel*, with shows focusing more on the antics of the hosts than on cooking, I did become hooked on PBS's *America's Test Kitchen* after catching an episode where they braised pork chops and brined lentils for a salad. Within an hour, I was at the store, buying French green lentils from the bulk aisle. “What has happened to me?” I thought as I knelt by the bulk bins, filling the bag with the small legumes. “I'm watching PBS, the ‘boring television’ station.”

Taking a mental inventory, I realized that PBS was no longer the boring nerd I had long made it out to be. It was cool. Maybe I had been the real nerd in the situation, never willing to stretch my mind or challenge myself. It's often easier to take the empty calorie choice over the nutrient dense item, whether it is food, television programs or people. It is easier to go with what doesn't challenge us to think, to imagine, to stretch or to get out of our comfort zones.

The routines and the easy options we take in life might appear cool at first – the popular choice – but often come up empty in the long run. Stretching ourselves to try, see, view or experience something new takes a little more effort, but effort is where interesting is born.

In this and every issue, we hope to introduce you to new, unknown stories about local people, places and events you might not immediately be drawn to or know about, but which make your life richer. From the local art scene, to restaurants, people and yes, even a story on PBS, join us on this adventure, one page at a time. We'll all set out together, in a nerd herd. By the time you reach the last page, we hope you realize that our region and the people in it are pretty cool.

Happy reading!

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