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MICHAEL AND DENISE OKUDA: A *Star Trek* Love Story



Michael Okuda was the Scenic Art Supervisor on every live action *Star Trek* series except for *The Original Series*. One day, while working in the Art Department for *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a young woman named Denise approached his desk and commented on a Max Headroom figure that Mike had. Denise had been consulting with the *Star Trek* writers and was on a tour. For Mike and Denise, that was the beginning of a love story.

Mike Okuda is most famous for having created what John Dwyer affectionately called “Okudagrams.” When TNG began “Gene Roddenberry wanted to really differentiate the *Enterprise-D* by having it be so sophisticated that the design had become greatly simplified.” Mike created these fantastic monitor and console designs that could be mounted under Plexi-glass and lighted from beneath to give the impression of advanced computer technology. “From a distance you could see a distinct structure that implied order and technology. We were lucky in that we got considerable freedom from the producers to be reasonably consistent. Like Matt Jeffries’ TOS designs weren’t necessarily what the 23rd century will look like but he managed to keep a consistent style which gave the series a sense of credibility.” That design ethic would remain consistent across the *Star Trek* spin-offs that would follow.

Denise would become a pioneering Video Coordinator and Video Supervisor on *Star Trek: Voyager* and *Star Trek: Enterprise* but it all began when she started dating Mike. “When we were dating I would spend time

in the Art Department. I got to know Herman Zimmerman and worked as a Production Assistant (PA) on *Star Trek VI*. Then later I was hired as a Scenic Artist on DS9. Video wasn’t used until near the end of TNG but on DS9 Mike decided that he wanted to create a lot of moving video monitors. We had even more on *Voyager* and I became Video Supervisor so I could coordinate those.”

In the 1990s, before the Internet exploded into the incredible information-gathering tool it has become, the Okudas wrote two books that were essential reading for Trekkies: *The Star Trek Chronology* and *The Star Trek Encyclopedia*. Mike remembers, “In 1990 I wrote the *TNG Technical Manual* with Rick Sternbach. Shortly thereafter Gene had a meeting with the *Star Trek* licensees including Pocket Books. One of their comments was that it was difficult to keep things consistent between all the novels and the show. They requested some kind of standard reference or baseline and Gene suggested that I could do it.” At first, Mike turned Gene down. Denise says that they had “...great admiration for Gene’s universe but the thought of

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trying to create a reference guide that encompassed the whole universe was a hopeless cause, and it would open a Pandora's box of work!" Eventually, the Okudas agreed to think about it. They created a spreadsheet and began entering *Trek* events by date. "We were surprised to find that things held together very well. It was sort of like putting together a puzzle and when we saw that things did fit together we agreed to do the *Chronology*."

Following the success of *The Star Trek Chronology*, the *Star Trek* editor at Pocket Books asked the Okudas to write an encyclopedia. Again, they were initially skeptical "...but he was persistent and eventually we realized that it was the same basic information as the chronology but it was organized by alphabet instead of by date." Denise remembers that "The 90s were really a blur we were so busy. Most of the work was done in the evenings and weekends. We wrote on planes. We took our laptops everywhere. I remember one 4th of July weekend with my family and we were close to our deadline and here we were on a blanket in the park with our laptops!" Now, years later, they remember it as being "an

ambitious and challenging task but it was rewarding."

In 2006, the Okudas embarked on another ambitious *Star Trek* project: the remastering of *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Denise remembers that "it was a little more than two years. It was an extremely difficult time. At first we didn't want to do it. We love *The Original Series* and didn't want to do any-

thing that wasn't in the thought process of the original artists." And Mike continues, "This was fundamentally different than what George Lucas did with *Star Wars*. Lucas was the creator so he had license to do whatever he wanted with his creation. In the case of *Star Trek*, the creator was no longer with us and we didn't want to presume to change his vision. Dave Rossi came to us and ... I ended up listing these guidelines for how it should



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be done, and Rossi suggested that if I felt so strongly about it, I should do it." Denise remembers the process being a tremendous challenge. "As with so many things, there was never enough time or money. We were on a very compressed schedule. It was really a seven-day a week project for two years. Given the constraints, I'm very proud of what we accomplished. Shortly after the first one aired, Bob Justman called us and said the show looked better than he ever could have imagined. That was very rewarding."

By all accounts, working in television, perhaps especially on *Star Trek*, can be a very immersive and draining experience, but Mike notes that even though "*Star Trek* is a very demanding job, we never lost sight of it being fun and we felt it was a privilege to do it." And Denise continues, "We knew we were very fortunate but absolutely we got burned out. We knew it could only last for a finite amount of time and we were determined to enjoy it as much as possible. What often made it easier is that we were working with such great people! Herman Zimmerman ran a great department. It was a pleasure to work there." Mike

also praises Zimmerman, saying "Herman is one of the few managers who really has faith enough in the people he hired that he can give them freedom and trust that they're going to do their best possible work to make the show look as good as possible. It was a pleasure to work with him and to do your absolute best for him."

In October 2006, Christie's held a landmark auction that really helped make the hobby of collecting screen-used props and costumes explode. *40 Years of Star Trek: The Collection* was a monumental event, and it was really the birthplace of Propworx. Mike and Denise were contacted by Liz Miller from CBS, who was looking for someone to spearhead the project. "They had actually been planning an auction for some time. They knew about the importance of this stuff and were looking for people who would treat it seriously and with the proper respect." Mike and Denise had "... five warehouses of things to go through and we were told that whatever Christie's didn't auction would be destroyed. We were horrified and so it became a mission to get as much of the good stuff into the

hands of fans as possible because we knew they would take good care of it."

The whole process was over in about six months. In addition to searching through vast amounts of material to collect the gems for the auction, the Okudas wrote the text for the auction catalogs and their words were accompanied by breathtaking photos of iconic items from the history of *Star Trek*. The Christie's auction helped create a new hobby for literally thousands of Trekkies who are now able to own pieces of the franchise they love so much. Did the Okudas have any idea that their work would have such a huge impact on the hobby? "No. We were just focused on treating these artifacts with due respect. We wanted to do the best we could by *Star Trek*."

The Okudas have been working on *Star Trek* for over twenty years. They have uncountable amazing memories from this work, but when asked about the most memorable, neither hesitates: "Trials and Tribble-ations." "Without a doubt that was one of the most amazing episodes we ever did." To celebrate the 30th anniversary of *Star Trek* in 1996, the

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cast and crew of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* created this amazing tribute to the franchise. It was life-changing for everyone involved. Denise says that "Everyone really rallied on that episode." Mike praises the work of Doug Drexler who "... was sort of volunteered to be in charge of research. This was before DVD so we had piles of VHS tapes and he'd have to go through them and we'd get prints. It's really a testament to his incredible dedication. He'd be looking at a panel in one episode and comparing it to another where Leonard Nimoy was standing next to it so he could gauge it's height. That kind of thing."

Today, Mike is still working in graphic design, but rather than designing for spaceships of the future, he's designing for spaceships of the present. His work at NASA started when his friend, Flight Controller Bill Foster contacted him. "Among other things, he's in charge of the video screens in Mission Control, and he wanted a commemorative image to honor the lost astronauts to put on the screens. I worked with him on that and it ended up being an embroidered patch. That led to the re-design of the Mission Control

patch itself. Then I designed the mission logo for the most recent Hubble telescope repair mission. When NASA announced Project Constellation I e-mailed Rear Admiral Craig Steidle and told him I would love to design an emblem for the program. I ended up doing several designs for that. When they launched the Ares I-X rocket, usually rockets will only have the American flag and the NASA logo on them but the Ares also had three logos that I designed." The Okudas watched the launch of the Ares I-X. "It was a quite a thrill to see Mike's work on a rocket as it was being launched."

Almost 45 years later, *Star Trek* is as popular as ever. J.J. Abrams' "re-booted" *Star Trek* (2009) scored record audiences for the franchise. The Okudas did not work on this film but they had the opportunity to meet its production designer, Scott Chambliss, who asked Mike what he thought about its design.

"I very much like what he did. He needed to freshen up the *Enterprise*. Is it what we would have done? Probably not. But does it work? Absolutely! He did a great job."

Michael and Denise Okuda are two of the very few people who can say they have worked on almost every incarnation of *Star Trek*. As kids, they grew up watching and loving re-runs of *The Original Series* and as adults they were fortunate and talented enough to bring that passion to their work on the franchise that changed their lives. *Star Trek* brought them together (well, *Star Trek* and Max Headroom) and they continue to live a great love story in the final frontier.

