**Walt Disney:**

**Sculpting the American Dream**

Can the dreams of one person effect how you live your life? The American Dream is an individual’s idea of prosperity in reference to hard work and resulting success. The life and success of Walt Disney embodies my idea of the American Dream because he created an empire that revolved around the amusement of himself and of others. The American Dream has many versions, but most ending at one place: success, fortune, and the pursuit of happiness. Walt Disney’s American Dream involved creating his own path using animation. He did not care about the money or the fame, but his happiness included making everyone else happy. You don’t find many people like Walt: creator of parks, the mind behind educational animations, a legend beyond comprehension that will always be remembered. Disney’s attitude toward innovation pushed himself and others past what they believed they could achieve. Walt Disney’s realization of his own American Dream has affected the dreams of many others and the continuation of this empire in his absence still molds the American Dreams of customers today. It is important that we study the effects that one singular entrepreneur can have on the lives of many others in the hopes that we can continue to motivate other leaders to follow suit. Although Walt Disney started from adversity to create an entertainment empire: beginning with an imagination for greatness, continuing with a vision of his own idea of the American Dream, and concluding with his method of bringing this vision to reality for himself, his employees and billions of customers, yet he was never able to see most of his dreams come to life or realize what a lasting effect he would have on the American Dreams of countless others.

Walt Disney started out from very simple means, but with an extraordinary imagination for what would become the most recognized ideal for customer service, entertainment and values. Walt was born in Chicago, Illinois on December 5, 1901 to a pair of Irish immigrants. Walt’s father moved the family around quite frequently looking for construction work and jobs in the railroad industry. After moving to Marceline, Missouri at the age of four, Disney found himself enjoying his new found love of trains and for drawing. “For Christmas their presents were practical items like shoes and underwear. It was Roy Disney, Walt’s older brother working odd jobs, who supplied Walt and his sister with an occasional toy. Roy even shared his profits with Walt from his job washing the local hearse, even though Walt spent most of the time playing dead inside the vehicle”. (Schickel 48-49) It does not surprise me that Walt had a giant imagination, even in the early years. I enjoy the idea that this larger-than-life Entrepreneur started with getting basic undergarments for Christmas and ended his career providing a safe, fun playground for children to grow up. Clearly, he was no stranger to failure and hardship, but many Americans believe him to be an Icon for making such an empire out of a few silly animated characters.

Walt made friends in school whose parents had ties to the motion picture industry, fueling a new passion for the future. He was never seen as a standout student, doodling and losing focus during most of his classes. Finding school somewhat dull, Walt dropped out at the age of sixteen in attempt to join the Army. To his disappointment, he was rejected from the Army due to his young age. Disney became an ambulance driver to fill his need for helping others before centering his efforts on becoming a newspaper artist. All of these early influences helped sculpt Walt’s imagination when his career as a newspaper artist morphed into a cartooning atmosphere. A childlike Disney was quoted in *Time* as saying, “It was always my ambition to own a swell camera . . . and now, goddammit, I got one. I get a kick just watching the boys operate it, and remembering how I used to have to make ‘em out of baling wire”. (Sammond 119) This quote shows that Walt, even in older age, still appreciated the humble means he came from and was happy to recognize how far he had come with his achievements.

I liked to see that Walt Disney never forgot his roots, even after becoming an American Icon. The city fathers of Marceline, Missouri had named a park and swimming pool after their well-known native son. Even though he was invited to the opening ceremony of the new park, no one believed that Disney would actually take time to make an appearance. The townspeople were shocked when the entire Disney family and many of his staff showed up to speak at the dedication ceremony. (Watts 3) Walt did not like to flaunt his fame, but respected his hometown enough to return and pay tribute to where he got his humble start. This humble behavior continued throughout his life. He was known to still appreciate humble home-cooked meals and a pretty routine home life. His daughters grew up knowing only a Father. Diane Disney-Miller, his oldest daughter, asked him once, “Daddy, are you *the* Walt Disney? The one all my school friends talk about?” (Miller and Martin 2)
In February 1953, McCall’s carried an article entitled “I Live with a Genius” by Lillian Disney, Walt’s wife. The wife of the famous filmmaker had never been fond of publicity, but as her husband’s popularity surged, she stepped forward with a fascinating account of their private life together.
“She described her mate’s everyday, self-effacing manner and chuckled about his quirks- the miniature train hobby, which the family tolerated because it helped relieve his nervous stress, his obsession with work, his good-natured grumbling about female domination. Lillian admitted that Walt’s willfulness and dizzying flights of imagination frequently overwhelmed her.” (Watts 351)
We can see by this article segment that the Disney household was not all fun and games. Mrs. Disney was adamant about keeping their girls out of the public spotlight and maintained a relatively normal home schedule for herself, her husband and the girls.

Walt Disney had a dramatic vision. He knew most of what he wanted to create years before he had the means to make it happen. Disney wanted to create a world where the American Dream of success following hard work and persistence could be upheld and where improper behavior was not tolerated. “From early financial struggles emerged a flexible and creative business plan that paralleled and enhanced Walt’s genius for creating not only cartoons but also a wide variety of promotional efforts”. (Grover 7) These products and cartoons were filled with ideas about the proper behavior of children.
Media producers in particular infused their products with their own morals, beliefs, and behaviors and parents (particularly mothers) were ultimately responsible for regulating the consumption of those products. In this invention, children who consumed Walt Disney products were consuming the embodied life of Walt Disney, and in doing so, were increasing the odds that their lives might follow a trajectory similar to his. (Sammond 79)
We see from this standpoint that parents are more willing to let their children watch Disney films and television shows so that they learn Walt’s ideals and morals through cartoons. These parents had hope that their children would act accordingly by watching this Father figure, of sorts. After reviewing many examples of Disney movies and television shows, we witness that well-behaved individuals get the prize and badly behaved individuals are met with the consequences as a lesson for improving their behavior the next time around. What do you think of first when you hear the word Disney? Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck are good answers, but most Americans think of the Man behind the ears, Walt Disney himself. I think of the man who had a vision to create how the everyday American child should act, the good boy or good girl who works hard to find success and can fail if taking a shortcut or doing bad things.

Even in the early days of this major company, Walt Disney put certain procedures in place to ensure that he always got the results he was looking for. “Disney University, which Walt had created to train new workers to deliver his own brand of service to the parks’ guests, turned out fresh-faced, eager workers for the parks”. (Grover 57) This training model provided instruction from Walt’s exact specifications. “Disney possessed a remarkable skill for drawing the best from those who worked with him. Many of them were astonished at what they could accomplish under his prodding; Disney never was”. (Thomas 15)

Even after Walt’s early departure, the Disney Corporation still upholds his vision as the main mission statement. Disney’s moral beliefs were rubbing off on others through his cartoons, influencing others to follow the rules and ideals that Walt lived by. After affecting many generations of children, the success of this company has now almost become a given. The children that grew up with Disney, like myself, now uphold these same ideals in our own lives. As these children grow up to have families of their own, we believe that taking our own kids on a trip to a Disney theme park has become a measure of success in our own American Dream. In their most recent television advertising campaign, the Disney Company uses a newer song by the band One Republic. The lyrics of this song repeatedly say, “This has got to be the good life”. Anyone seeing this commercial now concludes that the “good life” must include a trip to a Disney park. Successful marketing of this nature continues to ensure that we are upholding Walt Disney’s vision in our own homes.

Many may argue that Walt Disney was a difficult person to work with. Known to be a micromanager, he demanded the best possible work from an employee and never settled for bare minimum. “Disney had an uncanny capacity for reaching the human heart, hence causing nervousness and distrust amongst intellectuals. They exulted in the Disney failures- and he had some. No one could attempt so much and not fail”. (Thomas 15) His family has been heard to say that he was a stickler for routine at home and did not care for variation from this lifestyle. (Miller and Martin 4) I enjoy hearing stories about his personal home life because it gives us a glimpse into the character this Father had at home and proves to the American public that Walt Disney was not perfect. On the other hand, it is possible that this routine and determination combined with a touch of failure are exactly the traits needed to build an expansive empire that demands the best for its customers.

Some may say that this behavior seems controlling and that Walt Disney was not really adaptable to new outside ideas. “At all times Disney remained remarkably unwilling to release scripts or storyboards to the production people. He liked to huddle over them as long as possible, hoping they might be improved in some way that was not entirely clear, even to him”. (Schickel 175) This controlling behavior must have been difficult for the production team to deal with. Frequently, deadlines were pushed to the very last minute and schedules rearranged to accommodate the extra time Walt needed to take on a project. “By today’s corporate standards, Walt Disney should have failed. He had little sense for numbers, and even less of how to stick to a budget”. (Grover 5) Disney utilized his resources where needed, making sure Roy Disney managed most of the monetary expenditures.

From humble beginnings to an entertainment Empire, Walt Disney had the power to sculpt the American Dreams of countless others by using his own imagination combined with his own vision of the American Dream. Studying the influence of Americans like Walt Disney is vastly important in recognizing how other powerful individuals could improve the lives of countless others. We see from this research how one man and his stubborn vision changed his own life, as well as the lives of his family, employees and billions of happy Disney fans.

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