

The Globe And Mail

DON'T I KNOW YOU?; From light-sabre celebrity to public official: Star Wars Kid shows you can never quite escape your past

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Have you ever wondered what happened to the Star Wars Kid? Nearly eight years ago, private footage of Ghyslain Raza, a chubby, faux-light-sabre-wielding Quebec teenager, hit the Internet and quickly became one of the most popular viral videos of all time, viewed by more than 900 million people.

Now in his 20s, Mr. Raza has made headlines again, this time for his appointment as the new president of the Patrimoine Trois-Rivières conservation society in Quebec. An article published earlier this year by Le Nouvelliste outlined his vision for the organization, accompanied by a photo of a slimmer, professional-looking Mr. Raza in a suit and tie.

Readers might not have made the connection were it not for three words, in bold lettering at the bottom of the online version of the article: "Star Wars Kid."

Reputations gained in youth die hard - whether you were a nerd, a prodigy or a delinquent - career experts say. And reinventing yourself for the working world can be all the more difficult in an age when information about your past can be dredged up with a quick Internet search.

"It's much tougher now because I think social media has reduced the degrees of separation between people," says Cheryl Stein, a Montreal career coach. "With a few clicks I can learn everything I want to about them."

Perhaps few people experience the extent of the burden more than those who found fame at a young age. For example, actress Danica McKellar is now the author of two bestselling books that promote mathematics for girls. But to many, she's still recognized for her childhood role as Winnie Cooper in the TV series *The Wonder Years*.

Ms. McKellar declined to be interviewed for this article. "We don't look back," her publicist explained.

And Canadian actress Amanda Stepto of the popular *DegrassiTV* series says that although she's since had other parts, she's struggled to shed her public persona as Christine "Spike" Nelson, famous for wild hair and teen pregnancy.

"After the original show ended, I went on many auditions and it seemed like I was never able to break free from Spike. I guess it was hard to envision me as another character," Ms. Stepto says in an e-mail. She is often introduced to people as the-actress-who-played-Spike. "It still happens quite a bit."

Child actors aside, one might consider the challenges Falcon Heene may one day face in getting employers and co-workers to take him seriously when the world knows him best as six-year-old "Balloon Boy," whose parents fooled authorities into thinking he had floated off in a homemade balloon.

At a lower-profile level, Ms. Stein says she encounters everyday scenarios in which clients wish to break free from the labels they've earned in youth, whether they're former party animals wanting to establish a career in finance or previously shy wallflowers trying to gain confidence in public speaking. "I think that happens to everybody."

While moving away to reinvent yourself in college is one of the best ways to start anew, Ms. Stein says, it is ill-advised - and nearly impossible - to hide your past entirely.

"The more you try to hide things, the more it catches up with you. There's an inauthenticity to the way you present yourself when you're trying to bury a skeleton in the closet."

The key, Ms. Stein says, is to have a personal marketing plan. That means acknowledging your former reputation and managing the information in such a way that "when people picture you, they picture you as the thing now, not the thing then."

For example, she says: "If you're kind of humorous about [your former reputation], and you make a self-deprecating joke, [like] 'Yeah, yeah, I know, I'm the Balloon Boy,' then you're meeting the reputation on your own terms."

Career mentor Patricia Barbato, author of *Inspire Your Career: Strategies for Success in Your First Years at Work*, adds that it is possible to use your childhood reputation to your advantage.

"I've known of people - colleagues of mine who are hugely successful - that have had horrific childhood upbringings and they keep it a total secret, and on some level I think, 'Wow, if you could speak to that, how you were able to change your life, that would be so empowering to others,'" she says.

Individuals who have made their childhood reputations work for them don't view their past in a detrimental way, she says. Rather, they see it as having opened up opportunities and have learned to feel comfortable in their own skin. She points to Canadians Craig and Marc Kielburger, who were child activists, as examples.

The brothers started the globally recognized anti-child-poverty charity Free the Children in their early teens. To this day, some people still think of them as children and are surprised to see how much they've grown, says Craig Kielburger, 27.

"I do get people who say, 'I didn't think you were that tall.' "

Acknowledging he has always been "a total geek," Mr. Kielburger says he hopes to one day become a university professor, which will allow him to draw upon his experience to relate to students. He says he has never felt the need to break from his past.

Ms. Stepto says she's also comfortable with her childhood identity and being introduced as Spike.

"I can't say it bothers me horrendously as it is somewhat an honour to be still recognized, and most individuals I have met have been very complimentary," she says. "But my good friends know better not to do so or they might receive a kick in the shin!"

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