

New Television Show Teaches ESL Learners Life Lessons

Manhattan Times, July 23, 2009

By Adam Garrett-Clark

It's the first date. Jorge thinks Sophie is rich. Sophie thinks Jorge is rich, but neither is. With help from friends and co-workers, they learn the truth about love and money in a romantic comedy about financial empowerment, saving money and banking in the Big Apple.

This is the synopsis of one of nine 30-minute TV shows currently airing on Channel 25 (NYCTV) Saturday afternoons in a new series called "We Are New York." The show created by the Mayor's Office of Adult Education and targeted toward the city's immigrant community chronicles the immigrant experience across the city.

Mario learns how to deal with a baby with asthma, Erica who doesn't have papers, finds refuge from an abusive husband and Diego learns the reality of life after dropping out of high school.

Through witty storytelling and gritty snippets of city life based on two years of research the show aims to empower its audience with useful information on how to navigate this oceanic city, which can often become a nightmare for even its natives. But the main motive of the series is for it to be used as a tool in English language education.

Actors speak slightly slower and clearer than normal screen actors and every word of dialogue appears in subtitles at the bottom of the screen. The scripts also implement common colloquialism of the language, useful vocabulary and employ repetition throughout a program.

English as a Second Language educators and immigrant leaders of Northern Manhattan gathered Mon., July 20 at Marisco Centro on St. Nicholas Avenue and W. 185th Street to screen previews of the new series, which began airing June 27.

Viewers caught a sneak peak of an upcoming episode, which was shot in Washington Heights. Episode 6 "New Life Café" (which will air Aug. 1) is about a Dominican grandmother whose dreams of opening a café are put on hold when she finds out she has diabetes.

Alianza Dominicana director Milagros Batista said the programs offer a more dynamic way to teach than just chalk on a blackboard. "It's really an innovative way of teaching English," said Batista, who will use the series in her organization's ESL classes.

The programs, like New Life Café, also dispel common myths, such as "you can be deported for seeking medical help" or "it costs money to have an interpreter assist you with a doctor."

Executive producer Andrzej Krakowski said the show not only touches real life issues for immigrants but it introduces viewers to other immigrant groups in the city. On Aug. 15 an episode moves to Brighton Beach, Brooklyn where Sasha, a Russian immigrant and champion swimmer, learns how to quit smoking by calling 311.

Krakowski, who has worked on over 20 films and TV mini-series in his career as a producer and actor, including an appearance in the recent Johnny Depp film "Public Enemies," said working on the We Are New York episodes was the hardest project of his career.

Aside from entertainment value, the series had to include information about how to better use city services, and touch on issues that resonate and are useful to its immigrant audience. Part of the two-year research process was a series of focus groups with advanced ESL students around the city to learn what issues and concerns were on their minds.

A Polish immigrant himself, Krakowski said it helped that the production team was made up of a vast swath of immigrants. Among the crew, 18 different countries were represented, and only one of the six directors was born in the U.S. This added to the emotional value of the work he said. "What comes from the heart goes to the heart," he said.

"We Are New York" can be seen every Saturday on Channel 25 at 4 p.m. with an encore presentation Sundays at 7:30 a.m. through August 22.

For more information on free English classes go to www.nyc.gov/Learn English