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Animation Odyssey: Charlotte Rinderknecht wants to build a state-of-the-art film studio in Virginia. Can her debut short help take this dream beyond fantasy?

By Stephanie Booth
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The two dozen adults who entered Little Airplane Productions one morning last February looked as excited (and nervous) as Cinderella walking into the castle to attend the ball. Inside the 300-year-old building, a converted dry goods warehouse in New York's historic South Street Seaport, they climbed a narrow staircase to a large, sunny room where comfortable chairs and sofas had been arranged in a circle. A row of Emmy awards glittered on the mantel above a fireplace. On another wall hung an oversized photograph of a baby whose eyes were wide with astonishment.

Once seats were claimed, 20-somethings in skinny jeans sipped coffee and checked their cellphones. A white-haired grandfather clasped and unclasped his hands in his lap. A pregnant woman attempted to find a comfortable position. Everyone had pens and notebooks at the ready.

The anticipation in the room was understandable. For the past decade, Little Airplane has been producing children's TV shows that are as welcomed by critics as they are the young viewers they're meant for. (Its biggest hit is Nickelodeon's "Wonder Pets!" which follows Turtle Tuck, Linnny the Guinea Pig and Ming-Ming Duckling as they travel the world to rescue animals in trouble.) Last Valentine's Day weekend, Little Airplane founder Josh Selig was opening his company's doors for three days. He and other notable names in the children's TV industry would be teaching participants, who had shelled out \$1,500 apiece and traveled from across the United States and Canada, the secrets of creating a successful preschool series.

Settling into a chair with a cup of hot chai tea, Charlotte Rinderknecht, 54, confided that she had never seen "Wonder Pets!" But she is an ardent fan of children's animation. During yesterday's four-hour train ride from her home in Fairfax, she watched "The Little Mermaid" and "Iron Giant" on her laptop. She brought her "Cinderella" DVD along, too. With her wide blue eyes and frequent, bubbly laugh, Rinderknecht could easily have stepped out of any of the 50-odd Disney DVDs and videos she owns. She doesn't smile so much as beam, especially when describing the ambitious enterprise she has undertaken: Rinderknecht is determined to establish a state-of-the-art 2-D animation studio in Northern Virginia.

In 2008, she acquired her first project: "Pete's Odyssey," a songbird's coming-of-age tale. The film was the brainchild of Larry Lauria, former director of the Disney Institute and now a consulting animation instructor at Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia. Lauria had unsuccessfully pitched "Pete" to Disney

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years ago as part of a feature film called "Birdland." When Rinderknecht was searching for her studio's inaugural project, a friend introduced them. Lauria suggested making "Pete" as a five-minute musical sequence that could be entered in film festivals and act as the studio's calling card.

But the serendipity of this opportunity came with a gamble. Rinderknecht had decided to quit her full-time job of 18 years as manager of the now-closed George Mason University Media Lab and invest tens of thousands of dollars to concentrate on bringing "Pete," a timid, young robin, to life. Little Airplane Academy, as the weekend's workshop was officially called, would be her crash course in executive producing.

"I'm an oma," she announced to the other academy participants, using the German word for granny, when it was her turn to be introduced. "And I am president of the first animation studio to be built in Virginia." Then, with a loud laugh, she added, "Pixar, look out in 10 years!"

"People often approach me and ask, 'Why open your doors?' " Josh Selig said by way of a welcome. A "Sesame Street" writer for 10 years, Selig founded Little Airplane Productions in 1999 and has been offering this workshop biannually for the past three years. Dressed in a button-down shirt, jeans and brown leather boots, Selig talked earnestly about his successes and failures in the entertainment business. Participants leaned forward in their chairs, eager to catch each word.

The world of children's television "can use more people throwing their hat into the ring," he explained. "It's good for everyone. It's good for the kids." For all the big companies that dominate the preschool entertainment industry, "their big staffs have trouble creating something organic," Selig said. "I can't emphasize enough how much broadcasters need people to create original shows. Without it," he looked around the room and shrugged, "they've got nothing."

Rinderknecht nodded. The focus of her studio, she said later, would be "community, not corporate," with the animators she hired also mentoring up-and-coming artists. "I want to give young people the chance I didn't have as a young woman."

She's hoping "Pete" will open the door to animation success. Although she and Lauria had yet to find artists to work on the film, they had agreed on how Pete would be drawn and that the film would be set to a folksy pop song written and performed by Michelle Armstrong, Lauria's daughter-in-law and a Los Angeles-based singer-songwriter. The plot would focus on a young robin who seeks the courage to overcome her fear of the unknown. The premise of "Pete" "is everyone's story," Rinderknecht explained after the workshop. "In order to become better, we all have to venture out into the world."

It's a theme that emerges from Rinderknecht's earliest experiences. Growing up on an 80-acre dairy farm in Washington state, "every Sunday night, I would escape into 'The Wonderful World of Disney,' " she said. "I desperately wanted to be Walt Disney's daughter."

A difficult family life left her without the confidence to articulate that dream. "I always wanted to work in the film industry but didn't understand how I could," she said. After becoming a single mother at 19, Rinderknecht trained as a hairstylist, worked in a boat-building factory and eventually earned a bookkeeping degree. She moved to Northern Virginia in 1993 when her husband took a military job at the Pentagon. She took college classes here and there but didn't graduate from GMU with a multimedia degree

until her daughter, Tonya Nelson, now 35, was celebrating her 16th birthday. For the past 18 years, Rinderknecht has served as art director and producer for GMU students' projects, but not her own.

Then, in the autumn of 2008, a talented animation student grateful for Rinderknecht's help on a project said: "Char, I would work for you in a heartbeat. You should have your own studio."

That comment flipped a switch for Rinderknecht. "I started thinking, You know what? I could!" she said.

Bill, her husband of 22 years and a senior systems analyst at Science Applications International, has always trusted his wife's instincts. When she shared her idea -- and her research on startup costs -- he offered to take out a \$50,000 loan against his 401(k). "It was an investment to me, not a gamble," he said.

After she and Lauria began making plans for "Pete," Rinderknecht typed up a resignation letter and presented it to her boss. Students at GMU helped her come up with the name, [Studio Kinate](#) (pronounced "KEN-eight"). " 'Kin' means family," Rinderknecht explained, "and we are a family that creates and animates for family." A staff member at GMU's Enterprise Center, which offers business counseling, wasn't as enthusiastic about Rinderknecht's drastic career shift. "She said: 'Just focus on small projects and get known in the industry. If this is such a great idea, how come no one else thought of it?'" Rinderknecht recalled. But her own gut and Bill's encouragement kept her focused. Rinderknecht purchased a new laptop and a stack of animation and business software. She started a Studio Kinate blog and Facebook page and began Twittering.

Quality kids' TV only looks "easy-peasy," in the words of "Charlie and Lola." During the academy's tutorial on character design, Jennifer Oxley, Little Airplane's creative director, recounted how she and Selig combed city pet stores and drove to a farm in Upstate New York to find the perfect trio of animals to photograph, animate and "cute-ify" for "Wonder Pets!" (Those muses have since gone on to become beloved pets or, in the case of the duck, to go to an animal rehab center.)

Oxley was tall and full of cheery energy, her hands in constant motion as she spoke. "Characters can't just be cute and cuddly," she warned. "They have to have a personality." Her PowerPoint pageant of successful kids' TV characters included SpongeBob SquarePants, Charlie and Lola, Snoopy and Hello Kitty. "Good character design," she said, echoing Selig's advice, "comes from a very personal place."

Listening to Oxley speak, Rinderknecht was struck with why Lauria's concept drawing of Pete seemed to connect with everyone who saw it. "I realized that he modeled Pete after his daughter-in-law, Michelle," she said.

That mantra to make a project personal was repeated again in the late afternoon, when Susan Kim, a writer for a litany of children's TV shows, including "Arthur" and "Martha Speaks," explained how to craft a story for preschoolers. Her thick sheaf of handouts included an example of a story premise ("Pocoyo finds a hole in a pocket and quickly finds that there are all sorts of uses a hole is good for.") and a "beat," or step-by-step outline, of a "Handy Manny" episode. But what Rinderknecht homed in on was Kim's advice to be honest, not condescending, when creating a narrative. "You don't want to have an agenda, because kids will see right through it," Rinderknecht agreed. "Just because they're 3, 4 or 5 doesn't mean they're stupid." Rinderknecht said that she was reassured by Kim's advice and that she believed Pete's internal conflict -- wanting to grow, yet being afraid of venturing out on her own -- would resonate with even very young viewers.

On the back of Rinderknecht's business cards is the Walt Disney quote, "It's kind of fun to do the impossible." But, unlike Disney, Rinderknecht cannot draw, not really.

"It's all up here," she pointed to her head. "I just can't get my hands to do what I want."

Rinderknecht decided that her talent lay in mentoring others. She became actively involved in a half-dozen professional groups, such as the D.C. chapter of Women in Film. She gathered a group of GMU students and alumni eager to help (all but one without pay) get Studio Kinate off the ground.

As executive producer on "Pete," Rinderknecht's responsibility would be "to get it done," said Tom Brown, head of production at Little Airplane, during the academy's production workshop. Tone Thyne, Little Airplane's supervising producer, interjected a more specific job description. "A producer," he said, only half-joking, "is a fire-eater and herder of cats."

Rinderknecht wasn't intimidated. "I understand creatives, and I think like a creative," she said later. "Plus, I'm German," she laughed. "Hell-o!"

"Charlotte's enthusiasm is hard to ignore," Lauria said. "When she begins to talk about what she wants to accomplish ... I'm there."

But getting "there" is risky.

"Not everything is going to be the next 'Sesame Street,' 'Dora the Explorer' or 'Teletubbies,'" David Jacobs, a licensing expert, told academy participants before they broke for lunch. "These are one-in-a-million properties. They came at a different time; they hit for different reasons. People are more negative now."

No one in the group appeared deflated by this. Like Rinderknecht, many had personal reasons for wanting to break into the business. After working for years in an appearance-obsessed industry, Michelle Fix, director of North American sales at Christian Lacroix, said she felt obligated to create a show for girls (working title: "Glamour Bees") to promote healthy body images. Ellen Wrona, a producer of recruiting videos in a rural California town, had fashioned a bright-pink, dreadlocked puppet to help underprivileged children learn to read. Dan Flannery, one-half of the kid-rock duo the Flannery Brothers, grew up in a tightknit musical family and has fond memories of working on a farm. Many of the songs on his kid CD are about vegetables, and he wanted to learn how to parlay that theme into a TV show.

Sunday afternoon, Jeffrey Lesser, Little Airplane's music director and a Grammy award-winning producer, gave a tour of Little Airplane's audio editing booths and recording room. Once a week, a full orchestra comes in to perform music for "Wonder Pets!" The three tween girls who voice the main characters record here several weekdays after school. (They're allowed sushi or Goldfish for a snack, but no milk, Lesser explained, because dairy products make their mouths too sticky to speak clearly.)

"Oh, my God!" Rinderknecht said, gesturing at the state-of-the-art equipment and pretending to gasp for breath. "I want this now!"

"It's like Josh said at the beginning," Rinderknecht recalled of Selig's opening remarks. "You have to have

fire in your belly to keep you warm through the long haul."

Rinderknecht was working out of a small downstairs office in her split-level home, a cozy, cluttered space where one could hear the clicking toenails of her three large dogs as they traipsed across the kitchen floor. On the shelves beside her computer and high-definition, wide-screen monitor, books about movie editing and becoming a successful "free agent" crowded beside the Harry Potter and Narnia series. Photos of her three grandchildren also sat on the shelves. She takes her 9-year-old grandson, who lives in the area, to see the latest animated movies. "It's fun to watch it from a boy's perspective," she said.

Last year, Rinderknecht had a custom log homebuilder draft plans for her dream animation studio. She wants geothermal solar panels and a greenhouse where she can grow herbs and vegetables for animators' meals. All this will cost several million dollars, but to Rinderknecht, it's not a matter of if it will be built, but when. On Studio Kinate's blog, her vision for her future is in present tense. "Situated on a sprawling campus in the rolling hills of Northern Virginia, Studio Kinate is an entertainment production studio quite unlike any other. ..."

Rinderknecht thought that attending Little Airplane Academy would make her a better producer, "but I didn't expect it to change me as much as it did," she marveled several months later. "There was a level of confidence I needed, and it gave me that," she said. It was time to put her new knowledge to work.

After the academy, Lauria finished the storyboards for "Pete" to correspond with the details he and Rinderknecht had fleshed out. Crucial help came from an "incubator studio" Lauria had arranged at Bloomfield College, a small liberal arts school in New Jersey. Students there and from nearby public high schools auditioned to participate, and 20 were selected to help produce the 7,000 drawings needed to complete "Pete." Lauria carried the brunt of the work -- as layout artist for the backgrounds, director, producer, key animator, animation supervisor, instructor and provider of many pizzas and doughnuts to sustain students through long days in the studio.

Still, "it was the smoothest production I've ever worked on," Lauria said, "and I've been in this business for 35 years." Rinderknecht, he said, "rolled up her sleeves and got involved. She scanned artwork, encouraged the students, helped with the editing. ... I think Little Airplane Academy helped her see a 'bigger picture.' "

"She just has this gravitational pull," said Kimberly Merritt, who works as a TV production assistant at GMU and occasionally volunteers as Rinderknecht's assistant. "She makes people want to be part of what she's doing."

Although Lauria worked for a small fraction of his normal fee and even withdrew money from his savings to cover some expenses, by the time "Pete's" production was completed in the fall, it had ultimately cost \$60,000, requiring Rinderknecht to dip into her own 401(k). She felt that it was worth every penny. "The kids who worked on this were busting down the door at 8 a.m., even when Larry wouldn't get there until 10!" she said. "They were so passionate about it."

In the end, Rinderknecht and Lauria used the gentle style of Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" as inspiration. Pete became a pale pink bird with expressive, long-lashed eyes and a tuft of feathers crowning her head. There was no dialogue; the lyrics of Armstrong's song "Unafraid to Find" told the story. At the beginning, Pete is dissatisfied with her hollow but fearful to make changes. At its conclusion, she has literally and emotionally put her life in order -- in some ways mimicking Rinderknecht's own self-discovery.

Once Rinderknecht and Lauria finished editing the short, they submitted the final cut to film festivals across the country. As of this month, "Pete" was named Best Animated Short Film at the Ava Gardner Indie Film Festival, won an Award of Merit from the online international Indie Fest, was a finalist at the Beaufort film festival and had been selected by at least two other festivals. They also submitted "Pete" to the Sundance Film Festival, which declined to select it.

But it was back in October that the months of frenzied work, the encouragement from Little Airplane Academy and the excitement that had fed the entire pursuit came together when "Pete's Odyssey" premiered at Bloomfield College's small Van Fossen Theatre.

A ruby-colored wrap around her shoulders, her hair brushed to a shine and her makeup polished, Rinderknecht looked as nervous and thrilled as if she were attending the Oscars. With an image of Pete, holding a bouquet of daisies in her yellow beak, displayed on the large screen behind her, Rinderknecht stepped onto the stage and spoke about the project.

The crowd of nearly 100, mostly students and their families, cheered and clapped as the lights dimmed, and, to more applause, the name Studio Kinate flashed onto the screen.

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