



Who is Debra McGuire and why does everybody hate her?

Now that I have your attention, I hope to at least answer the question, "Who is Debra McGuire and why you might like to know her?"

Debra McGuire is a mother, a painter, an activist, a volunteer, a polo player, an entrepreneur and a most spiritual person. She's also been a Costume Designer in the neighborhood of 25 years.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, designing was one of Debra's earliest memories. At age 7, she sent a sketch to the comic book *Millie the Model*. They published her design and gave her credit, pretty much sealing the deal. It wasn't until the Vietnam War dominated her consciousness that she realized, 1968 was not the time to focus on what people were wearing. While still in high school, she decided to work with inner-city schools making art to help make sense of the times.

Debra studied art in Boulder, Colorado, where she met a Tibetan Buddhist—former monk, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who became her spiritual teacher. She graduated from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, with a B.F.A. in painting and then moved to Rinpoche's artist community in Mendocino. Debra credits the experience during that time and the formation of her continuing meditation practice to be the most important ingredients to her development as an artist.

Debra lived in New York in the '80s, channeling her art as a studio painter and jewelry designer. When several friends encouraged her to move west and consider Costume Design, she welcomed the idea of an artistic collaborative process. "Stacey Snider gave me the advice that formed my career. 'Work for and with people you like and connect to. Make the work about relationships. Nurture those that mean the most to you so that the work grows organically and with the people you care most about.' My life is like this though, coincidences and blessings abound!"

She took that advice and became extremely prolific in the 1990s, designing countless made-for-television movies and later, multiple TV series simultaneously. Knowing Debra's productivity, I was curious how she manages to work so much, so often, and did I mention so damn much. I was also curious if she knew that her volume of work has many designers up in arms. When we spoke, Debra told me she had no idea that anyone was keeping track of her career and in fact, found it "interesting and sad to think that there are other Designers who might be angry, confused or jealous that I get so much work." Debra went on to explain, "I work mostly for the same people I started with and that first project branched into all the others." Those relationships continued with *Friends* and *Freaks and Geeks*, which is where Debra met Judd Apatow



Friends



Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story

and Jake Kasdan. The work didn't come out of the blue for Debra, it came from successful collaborations, relationships and trust built over time. When the producers of *Friends* were juggling three shows at Warner Bros., they wanted her on board. Debra was very fortunate to be appreciated for her contributions and the producers were thrilled that she thrived on multitasking.

I was surprised to hear her perspective on hiring a crew. "I always hire my moms first" was what she told me when I called for references. As a mother myself (who worries if the next producer is "family-friendly"), that really struck a chord. "One of the reasons why I love hiring parents is because they understand how to prioritize and manage time more efficiently. I hire very talented and creative people. I let them have a voice and they respectfully understand the boundaries. They have a lot of responsibility when I am multitasking and not around all the time.

"As the work increased, so did my crews. I was afraid if I did less work, it might mean losing people. My crews are my extended family, many of them becoming parents themselves. Many of our children were born during shooting ... doggie beds under the desk for babies ... the trailer, an obstacle course of toys. I believed then, as I do now, that real spiritual work takes place in the everyday goings-on and in the way we treat each other so I always encourage 'real life' coming first. Working with me requires a certain-kind-of someone, and it doesn't work for everyone." Let's just say where Debra and her crews are concerned, the loyalty is mutual.

Debra's 16-year-old-daughter Lily was born the day she got the call to start *Friends*. It was a Thursday and she had to start that Monday. As she tells it, "I interviewed Diane Crooke on Saturday and hired her as my supervisor. My mom came along that day to help me with

Lily while my son Gavin (5½ years old) was home with the nanny, Marcela, who is still part of our family today. The director asked me to leave the stage with my baby basket saying that a soundstage was no place for an infant. Ours was not a kid-friendly environment until years later when our executive producer became pregnant, and our prop mistress and our actors. Then there were nurseries and nannies all over the stage. Working while raising children is an incredible challenge. I always had to work and leave my children. In retrospect, I suppose that's why I insist on children being part of our work life whenever possible. A new era has dawned but unfortunately for me, I missed the wave!" The great irony is that Debra's now-21-year-old-son Gavin became a member of Local 705 this year!

We all seem to have the same complaint about the misunderstanding that costumes fall out of the sky. Day or night. As Debra puts it, "I'm working in north Georgia in the middle of nowhere and the director calls at six o'clock to say that it would be fabulous if in the next scene, the actors could be in tuxedos and wildly outrageous costumes. Thankfully, it is close to Halloween and we recall seeing a store with costumes ... somewhere. The troops head out in opposite directions only to find that the store is closed. We go over to the shop next door and beg the owner to give us a contact number for their neighbor. We finally get in touch with him, ransack the place, call ahead to hair and makeup to discuss ideas and get the actors in the works, mix up everything we've got and make it happen. But of course, no one ever asks to see the magic wand." Just another problem solved again, as the cameras continue to roll.

Publicity is good. When I asked Debra if she understands why the costumes on *Friends* were so coveted she feels, "It just means that I was reflect-



Heroes



Anchorman

ing back a heightened reality and helping to create a world that the viewers wanted to be a part of."

The general consensus is that any designer who's getting press helps us all by putting a face to Costume Design and hopefully, promoting a better understanding of our work. However, publicity can be a double-edged sword as Debra found out the hard way. With the success of *Friends*, Debra agreed to a lot of interviews without much discretion until an editor from *Vogue* called wanting to do a feature story. The writer had been interviewing an actor in the courtyard outside of my store and called the next day. She wanted to do an article about me and my atelier. I agreed to do the interview if it could be about me as an artist and designer and not about *Friends* and the actors. She agreed. Three months later, Debra discovers the article in print with a photo of Rachel, Monica and Phoebe splashed across the front!!! To make matters worse Debra says, "There was a picture of Steve Martin from *My Blue Heaven*, with a line saying I had been involved in the design. That was my first project and I was the INTERN!!! Can you imagine? There were numerous quotes ... none of which I had said or implied. I was mortified. Everyone was angry with me. Actors, designers ... everyone!! It was hard for me to imagine that people would believe I had actually said these things to a national publication, but they did. I was threatened with lawsuits and even received a 'hate' letter from a costumer I had worked with. Our union, however, was very supportive! The journalist was fired but the damage to my relationships and reputation were long lasting. I didn't do another interview for almost 10 years."

Debra's been thinking a lot about her peers these days. "I recently wrote a fan letter to Lou Eyrich, who designs *Glee*. I don't get to watch every week but when I do, I am completely blown away by her level of creativity. I know what it's like to design a hit show. You are moving at top speed, dealing with the challenges at hand and the sheer volume of costumes, and then all the additional requests that come with a high-profile show: personal requests, photo shoots, interviews, etc.... In order to stay focused you have to eliminate the perspective of the outside world to get the work done! It's so much more intense than the pace of a film. Most people don't realize how difficult TV can be."

Working in Michigan over the summer, Debra had the good fortune to connect with other CDG Designers and Assistant Designers, all on location in the area. Some she knew personally and some she met for the first time. "With several like-minded artists in one room it was a bit of a love & respect fest. The meeting just reinforced the need to stay united. It appears that our work as Designers in this industry will become even more difficult as the years progress. It is important that we not judge or speak unkindly about our peers but instead, try to share our knowledge with each other and support each other."

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SCRAPBOOK



Courteney Cox and Debra McGuire, *Friends*, 1994-2004.