

Science rules!

Bill Nye advances the cause of scientific literacy

MAYBE YOU'VE NEVER HEARD of him, but your children have. He's Bill Nye: funny and factual, wacky and weird, informative, entertaining and one of the most creative teachers around. Broadcast on more than 185 stations nationwide, his 30-minute weekly syndicated television program, *Disney Presents Bill Nye the Science Guy*, is on the cutting edge of education, too.

Nye's goals are simple: Turn kids on to science. "Making science concepts easy to understand is the most exciting thing we do," he says. The Seattle-based program uses demonstrations, interviews, music videos, segments where kids demonstrate experiments at home for the camera and a section Nye calls "Check It Out."

The whole program has that "guerrilla video" look with lots of hand-held, point-of-view camera work, close-ups, and split-second editing with colorful graphics. "People ask me, every day, how can you do a show that is both educational and entertaining? It's TV; it has to be entertaining!"

A team of science experts review each script for content. "The show's learning objectives are based on fourth-grade curricula," Nye says, "because that's where you decide to be interested in science." According to NSF studies, that's the age kids start to turn toward other subjects.

Combining his gifts as Boeing engineer by day and stand-up comic by night, Nye segued into his "Science Guy" persona on KING TV's late-night ensemble comedy show, *Almost Live!* There followed guest spots on Disney's *Mickey Mouse Club*, *Latentight with*

By Peter Stekel



Wacky and weird, but always informative, Science Guy Bill Nye makes education fun for kids.

David Letterman, and award-winning educational videos broadcast on KCTS in Seattle, where the notion for a television show to advance scientific literacy was born. "The idea isn't to teach people to be space shuttle scientists, but to get them excited about science." The goal is scientific literacy, "even if kids never become scientists."

Nye doesn't shy away from any topic. So far he has examined the naked truth about the largest organ of the human body ("Skin"), lifestyles of the big and extinct ("Dinosaurs") and the force that holds humans on the ground ("Gravity"). There are plans for a special on sex. "Bill Nye the Science Guy talks about sex," he says in a stage chortle. "I don't think there is anything anybody is interested in more than sex."

Though he teaches, Nye also entertains. His antics are goofy, his puns are terrible, and he favors wearing bow ties with his lab coats. Everything is calculated on what Nye and co-producers Erren Gottlieb and Jim McKerna think is fun. "That's our first rule," he stresses.

He's quick to point out why television education works so well: "Do you want me to tell you someone walked on

the moon, do you want to watch a video of someone doing it, or do you want to do it yourself?" TV can help by taking people places they normally can't go.

Looking to the future, Nye would like to do a feature film where scientists look good. He found their portrayal in *E.T.* infuriating, but doesn't blame the filmmakers. "They're just classic examples of a culture that produces people who hate or distrust science."

Meanwhile, Nye is immersed in scripting 13 more episodes and plans two new books to complement the recent release of *Bill Nye the Science Guy's Big Blast of Science*. He's also kept busy developing a school outreach program. The NSF has provided a grant of \$1.5 million in support, and Disney and KCTS have agreed to help distribute 50,000 free science kits to kids at home who respond to a special write-in segment of the show.

With his refreshing passion for science and what it teaches, Nye reflects something he learned from Carl Sagan during an astronomy course at Cornell University. "Don't try to teach technology. Teach pure science; kids resonate in pure science." And so does Bill Nye. ●