

## Character Alive

As a child of Ukrainian immigrants, my parents sought ways to both acclimate me and help me remember my ancestral roots. My father especially knew I needed a cultural connection to the past generations of my family, so he exposed me to the beauty, love, and dedication of Soviet cartoons. These cartoons were delicately and deliberately pieced together to teach children meaningful lessons. He felt that they were simply a work of art that everyone should admire.

My father wanted me to experience the culture of the country I was living in, so he also used cartoons as a way to teach me about America. We watched the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Though it was completely different in tone and style from the Soviet cartoons, the stories were universal; they addressed themes of character identity, risk taking, and optimism. The more I watched *SpongeBob SquarePants* as I was growing up, the more I noticed the multi-layered messages. With each passing year, I unlocked themes I had never understood before and related to characters I never thought I would. I developed a need to create my own stories.

Once I started drawing characters of my own, the common thread was my desire to tell a good story. I experienced a new level of inspiration when I saw the movie *Rango*. After seeing it for the first time, I was struck by the message as much as the quality of the animation. Due to its rich dialogue and character-driven story, this artistic feature film was unlike anything I had ever seen. The hyper-realistic visual representation, the focus on each individual character, and the overall story tied perfectly to my view of what was possible to accomplish with animation.

Because of *Rango*, I began to respect the dedication of how each element played into creating a successful animated story.

I kept a record of these elements in my sketchbooks. I would flood those pages with characters to later look back on and remember when, where, and why I drew each specific page. These sketchbooks were diaries to me, and I would watch my creations develop more over time. I improved each individual character's personality, the environments they all interacted with, touched up physical features, and finally figured out their tie between each other through interactive stories I created.

In junior year, I joined Freestyle Academy, an art and technology program offered at my high school. At Freestyle, I began to see how my interests intersected. I wrote stories, designed visuals and created my first ever animation. I focused on every aspect of that animated story so that the audience, my peers, would understand the message I was trying to convey. Through this program, I learned to express my own voice, while also collaborating with other artists whose opinions helped me develop my work.

Cartoons have taught me that culture, friendship, relatability and the power of a good story will affect me long after the film is over. My father is the very reason I was introduced to visual storytelling. The education I received as a child has led me to discover how I will now tell my stories. My time spent at Freestyle has led me to think critically and to work beyond what I thought I could. Cartoons have always brought me closer to people, and my goal, as a future animator, is to have my characters make the same lasting impression.