

## Charlie Brown's Sister: An Interview with Amy Schulz Johnson

By Judy Conder\*

*This article is the first in a series of interviews of people in Utah Valley who have a unique perspective in business and have made a difference in their communities.*



John and Amy Johnson

Cartooning is a business. Amy Johnson knows this well. As the next-to-youngest child of Charles M. Schulz, who as the creator of Charlie Brown "became the, most widely syndicated comic strip artist in history" (CNN, 2000), Amy saw first hand how the creative process worked and has become aware of

how characters and concepts are marketed. She is also aware of how characters and concepts are protected, especially since her father died of complications from colon cancer at age 77 in February, 2000.

Since then, Craig Schulz, Amy's brother, has been the sibling who "is doing the most work on behalf of my dad." Amy acknowledges that "There are thousands and thousands of people working hard, making decisions. . . . I am humbled and grateful each day of my life when I think about how hard everyone works and how my family reaps the benefits." While stating that her involvement in the family business is very limited, Amy wholeheartedly follows her father's philosophy regarding business and life: "Take up a profession that you love." Her chosen profession is motherhood.

### Life in Utah

Amy and her husband, John, have nine children and live in Alpine, Utah, which is a relatively small but growing community nestled against the Wasatch Mountains in Utah County.

In a house surrounded by lots of lawn and filled with sound, motion, and light, Amy's time is occupied by "actively parenting all day long—every second trying to teach."

Amy explains what brought her from California to Utah: "I joined the Church [of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] when I was 22 and served a mission in England. That is where I met my

husband." For twelve years they have enjoyed living in Alpine.

Because she was a professional ice skater, she had hoped to teach all the children to ice skate as well; but without a rink close by, they all "got into the roller blade thing" instead. "Into" is an understatement. Amy says, "Our kids are the only ones in the neighborhood who are allowed to roller blade in their house." This doesn't always make her popular with other parents, whose children skate at the Johnson's then go home to report, "Well, Amy Johnson lets her kids roller blade in the kitchen." It does, however, illustrate her warm, hands-on parenting style and provide insight into how she was raised. She admits, "I see in myself a lot of Dad." For example, "Why would I have nine children if I didn't like driving around, I didn't like cleaning my house, and I didn't like cooking? I'm not that stupid! I would have had one or none. I am like Dad; I do what I do because I love what I do."

### Life in Sebastopol

"In my family, we grew up very loosely structured. . . . The house was for everybody; there were not places where you couldn't be. . . . I even brought a pony in the house once when I was little." She says her parents tried to shelter them (Meredith, Monty, Craig, Amy, and Jill) from all the fame; so they lived on 28 acres in Sebastopol, which is a town about seven miles from Santa Rosa, California. Rather than going places—even on vacations—the family stayed home, and everybody would come to their house. "We just lived a secluded life. . . . It was fun because people would come over and hang out by the swimming pool."

When asked what she remembers best about her father, Amy stated, "That he was always there, and that is what I try to do as a parent. . . . I didn't understand that drawing cartoons could be a job. . . . When you would walk into the room, he would put the pen down, sit back in his chair, and start talking to you. So I just figured he couldn't possibly be doing that for his job." Her brothers remember asking if he could come and play baseball with them. He would say, "Sure," and leave his work to join



them. Amy also recalls, "I don't think he actually did any active disciplining. He didn't like to give advice, tell you what to do, or disappoint you. . . . He never openly taught anything; it was more like the unspoken word." Despite her father's attention to the children, she says he was a "very structured person--extremely structured--who never worked on Saturday or Sunday."

### **Schulz's Perspectives**

A Family Circle article in 1975 contains excerpts from Charles Schulz's book, Charlie Brown and Me. In the article Schulz explains his early years, the source for some of his characters, how his cartoons evolved, and some of his perspectives. On children: "I think it is important for adults to consider what they are doing and what their attitudes were when they were the age that their own children are now. There is no other real way of understanding the problems of children." On bullies: "The initial theme of Peanuts was based on the cruelty that exists among children. I recall all too vividly the struggle which takes place out on the playground. This is a struggle which adults grow away from and seem to forget about. Adults learn to protect themselves." On winning: "Most of us are much more acquainted with losing than we are with winning. Winning is great, but it isn't funny."

Amy is aware that Schulz's work reflected what was going on in his life. For example, in the '50s, when his children were small, the cartoons contained babies, blocks, balls, and things that happen to little kids. In the middle of the '70s, he seemed to focus more on fads and the things he was aware of, such as tennis. As he got older, he started to include grandparent themes.

Amy stated that his work also was somewhat autobiographical. "Yes, I could see Charlie Brown in him my whole life. Although we probably had more happy times when we were little kids, I could see how he just kind of felt like it was hard. He didn't seem really happy unless he was drawing. That always made him happy. You wouldn't see very many fussy sides; but as I got older, I could see the Lucy in him." When asked if he realized how good he was, Amy replied, "He realized how good he was at what he did, but that didn't help him with the rest of his life."

Others certainly recognized how extraordinary he was. In Santa Rosa in the current museum and gift shop, directly east of the Redwood Empire Ice Arena, is an awe-inspiring list of awards,

such as the National Cartoonists Society's Reuben Award, which he had the then unprecedented honor of winning twice. Other honors included the George Foster Peabody Award for "distinguished and meritorious service in broadcasting" and induction into the Cartoonist Hall of Fame--to name but a few. He has been honored by cities and countries and has added terms such as "Happiness is a warm puppy" and "security blanket" to the language. "Snoopy" was even the code name for Apollo 10's command module, which blasted off atop a Saturn V rocket to the moon.

Schulz's strip is in reruns in 2,400 newspapers worldwide (Hubbard and Harrington, 2001). Some, but only a few, of the strips were about his children. Amy remembers an idea that she contributed when she was about five. The family was sitting around the table and she was talking "excessively." He father asked, "Amy, can you please just be quiet for a little while?" Amy relates, "I remember thinking that was kind of rude, but I didn't say anything. . . . I just picked up some bread and started buttering it. As I turned to Dad, I said, 'Am I buttering too loud for you?' I remember feeling very funny." In the Family Circle article (1975), her father recalls another strip Amy influenced. "When my daughter Amy had her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, I gave her a dozen roses and told her that she would soon be a beautiful young lady and that the boys would be calling on her and probably be bringing her presents. This was the inspiration for the Sunday page with Peppermint Patty."

Amy remembers her father saying, "All I do is draw funny little pictures all day." She adds, "I think that perspective is what put him on top; because any time you get too arrogant about anything you do, you are going to lose what you've got."

### **Schulz's Work Ethic**

Schulz loved being a cartoonist. "Even after 25 years, I still enjoy going to work each day, though friends who know me well can testify to the fact that I never actually use the term 'work.' If I have to say that I will not be free to do something on a certain day, I will always put it: 'I have to go to the studio and draw funny pictures.' It could be a superstition, but I guess it is really that I don't want anyone to think that what I do is that much work. It is one of the few situations in my life where I feel totally secure. When I set behind the drawing board I feel that I am in command." (Schulz, 1975).



Amy explains his work ethic as follows: "I think the only way I can explain Dad's work ethic is, he realized that every day he went to work was just as important as the day before. He could never get to the point where, 'I have done this for 30 to 40 years. I am already famous, so I can just rest on my laurels.' He always felt like he had to keep ahead. He was afraid that someone else was going to be better; he was really competitive. He wanted to be the best, and I think he knew he was." He worried, however: "What if I have done all this and it turns out not really all that important after all?" Amy adds that when referring to her children, "He would tell me that the most important job in the world is the job you are doing—being a mother."

When drawing cartoons, Schulz tried to be as authentic as possible. For example, the notes above Schroeder's piano were carefully prepared; and people reading the strips had fun trying to recognize the song. Amy states that this was typical; he always used reference books.

### **Maintaining the Legacy**

The large body of work and the endearing characters created by Schulz are as popular as ever. Therefore, the family feels a real responsibility to maintain many aspects of his legacy.

**Creative.** Amy states that her brother Craig is much more involved with the business, but "I read my e-mails and put in my 2 cents if there is something I am really worried about." For example, United Media, which continues the marketing of the cartoons, met with the children right after Schulz died "so we could kind of get to know them, and they get to know us. They said, 'We would like you to see how many things we turn away because you might think we just approve everything. There are hundreds and hundreds of things that come through that we don't even talk about.'" Amy adds, "I think what says the most for Dad is that we don't have to turn much away. You know that Budweiser isn't going to come and say, 'Can we put Snoopy on a can of beer.' Dad has earned the respect of the public. I think they know the standard. . . ."

According to Amy, Schulz "was always very proud that they used Peanuts for Met [Metropolitan] Life. He said, 'There is no other cartoon character for a life insurance policy to use because they are not serious enough.' He was proud of his characters because he tried to be very serious and respectful of things."

**Monetary.** Along with Schulz's fame came financial success. When asked about the pressures of managing the fortune, Amy stated, "That was a responsibility we have always had—to try to use the money wisely. I feel like the unspoken word—that I got from both parents—was that everything you have is to share with other people." For example, when asked about the ice arena in Santa Rosa, which opened in 1969, Amy offers the following: "Yes, well that was actually my mother's doing, before the divorce. We were friends with a family that had a little ice arena in Santa Rosa, and they had to condemn the ice rink because the roof was caving in. My mom loved to build and create things. . . . My dad's only interest was drawing; so my mom went to my dad and said, 'We need to build an ice rink for the community. . . . It was costly to my dad; he would lose a couple of million dollars a year to keep it open. So when he passed away and left it to Jeannie [his second wife], we were afraid she wouldn't want to keep it. We were the ones that grew up in it, so we wanted it to be a part of our kids' [lives]. We've had to scale down everything that Dad did—hopefully not much—because we can't lose that much money ourselves. We are hoping it will work because the community relies on it and we are all emotionally attached to it."

**Museum.** At first Amy's father didn't like the idea of a museum "because he didn't think that anybody would want to come and see it." Because of the number of items they had—awards, old comic strips, items given to him, etc.—they added a mini museum to the Snoopy gift shop. The new \$8 million Charles M. Schulz Museum in Santa Rosa will house much more.

**Comic Strip.** What will happen to the comic strip now? Amy states, "Back in 1978 all five of us kids decided that no person would draw the strip after Dad died. This is not typical; we could just hire somebody else. . . . We did not want that. . . . There is a possibility of using comic strips for little half-hour shows. His producer, Lee Mendelson, is the person who did the half-hour specials with him. Mendelson spent a lot of time with Dad talking about different things that he wanted to do before he died, so he will be able to put together some half-hour shows."

### **Schulz's Message to Students**

As with any unusually successful businessperson, there is a lesson to be learned. When asked "What message of your father's would



you like to pass on?" and "Are there any qualities that you saw in your father that you think students need to take into the business world?" Amy enthusiastically responded as follows:

"Oh, yes! I feel so strongly about it, I don't even want to say it because I am afraid that no one will take his advice. . . . They need to look at the little kid in Minnesota, the six-year-old that decided that he was going to be a cartoonist. As I have been on the phone to dozens and dozens of cousins and interviewed them for my own personal use, they have all testified, 'Your father said he was going to be a cartoonist, and he was going to be the best cartoonist there was.' From the time he was 12, all he ever did was draw.

"I wish so much that people would quit looking at the business world or building their lives with dollar signs in their eyes and thinking they have got to do this or . . . this profession is more respectful. It just seems that if you say you are going to be a doctor or a lawyer that somehow it is more respectful than saying you are going to repair refrigerators. What difference does it make what you are?

"When Dad left—I say 'left' because it doesn't seem like he died—it really hit me hard. . . . I went to his house and looked around. There was his coat, there was his wallet, and there was the Mercedes in the garage. And you know what, you don't take anything with you! . . . He had accumulated such wealth and fame, but he wasn't into 'things.' All he ever needed was a paper and pencil.

"I wish that people could understand: Take up a profession that you love; do it because you love it; and if you are successful at it, don't stop. . . . Do what you love to do; that is why he went to work every day. . . . The money had nothing to do with it. Now the fame: he wanted the fame only because he wanted to be the best cartoonist. The fame was a by-product, but the money had nothing to do with it because my dad didn't need money for anything. He never went anywhere, he didn't care much about his clothes, and you couldn't give him a present.

"My mother said that Dad would have drawn his comic strip even if no one had ever read it. She was implying that even if he'd lived alone in a little apartment somewhere, he'd be sitting there drawing.

"I've realized how completely focused he was. He was just going to draw a comic strip. He never veered off the path, and that is where people go

wrong. I just think that people do things for the wrong reasons. . . . People would ask him, 'When are you going to retire.' . . . No one could understand that he never wanted to retire; he loved what he did. What was he going to retire from? He used to say, 'I am going to retire Amy,' and I would say, 'No, you're not.' He would say, 'Well, why do you say that?' I'd say, 'Because first of all you can't do anything else, Dad.' He would kind of chuckle. It was life for him; it was literally like breathing. You can't retire from breathing. . . . [When asked about retiring] he would say, 'Why would I work my whole life to do something, just to not do it?'"

Amy states that her father's standards were very high. She recalls at least twice that he said, "You know I never wanted to do anything crude or raunchy. . . because if I ever did, I always felt God would literally strike the fingers off my hand." She adds, "To me, that says it all in a nutshell; he knew that his talent was a gift and he knew where it came from. He was put on this earth with that talent. . . . He could have blown it, but he didn't. He used it wisely every single day when he went to draw."

In the February 1975 edition of Family Circle, Schulz stated, "But it really does not matter what you are called, or where your work is placed, as long as it brings some kind of joy to some person some place. To create something out of nothing is a wonderful experience. To take a blank piece of paper and draw characters that people love and worry about is extremely satisfying. I hope very much that I will be allowed to do it for another 25 years." Schulz "left" on February 12, 2000.

As often illustrated by media reports, being the child of a famous parent can be a tiresome burden or a license to misbehave. For others, such as Amy Johnson, it is an inspiration. Charles M. Schulz's legacy appears to be in very good hands.

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