

SMALL SCREEN MAKES CHARACTERS MORE FAMILIAR THAN FAMOUS

By **PETER HOWELL**

The small screen, too, has provided a profitable showcase for characters with disabilities for many years. Some enjoyed the kind of longevity about which today's TV stars can only dream.

Characters with disabilities appeared on the home screen long before color. For almost a decade and 249 episodes, for example, Chester Goode (Dennis Weaver) limped through Dodge City on *Gunsmoke*. He was nominated for an Emmy in 1958, and took home the statuette the following year.

In 1967, three years after Chester got outta Dodge, television brought us another character with a disability. Just a year after *Perry Mason* folded its tent, Raymond Burr returned to the small screen as the title character in *Ironside*. Wheelchair-bound by a sniper's bullet, Ironside and his three sidekicks spent nine years fighting crime in San Francisco. Between 1967 and 1975, Burr received two Golden Globe nominations and five Emmy nominations.

Blind insurance investigator Mike Longstreet (James Franciscus) was on the air for a year in the early 1970s, but never caught on with audiences or critics.

Disabilities had an especially high profile in the early 1990s. ABC decided, not only to air a series with a main character, but also to cast an actual Down syndrome victim in the role. Chris Burke played Charles "Corky" Thacher, the heart of the Thacher family, in *Life Goes On* from 1989 to 1993. The problems the Thachers faced on a weekly basis tended to be mundane, but they were made more interesting when viewed through the Corky prism. He struggled with schoolwork as he felt the double-edged blade of mainstreaming. He got bullied, went to the Special Olympics, got a babysitting job, and witnessed a crime. And any time no other good idea presented itself, Corky fell in love with some unobtainable teen queen.

People took notice. Burke received a Best Supporting Actor Golden Globe nomination and a Special Award for Inspiration to Youth Young Artist Award in 1990; and a Young Artist Award nomination for Best Actor starring in a TV Series the following year.

Perhaps the most charming character with a disability came to television in the current century. Now in syndication, *Monk*, starring Tony Shalhoub as a multiphobic San Francisco detective with obsessive-compulsive disorder, was on the air from 2002 to 2009. Shalhoub won a Best Actor Emmy in 2003, and has been nominated every year since. He also won Screen Actors Guild Awards in 2004 and 2005, and was nominated five more times. And lest we forget: He also received four Golden Globe nominations.

Most recently, the musical dramedy *Glee* has offered a fresh look at people with disabilities. *Glee* has not one, but two characters with disabilities. Although actor Kevin McHale is able-bodied, his character, Artie Abrams, uses a wheelchair. On the other hand, character Becky Jackson has Down syndrome, played by Lauren Potter who also has Down syndrome.

In addition to winning four Emmys in its first year and four Golden Globes, *Glee* just won the 2011 Image Award from the American Association of Persons with Disabilities for leading the way in how young people with disabilities are perceived in popular culture.

In fact, *Glee* is an equal-opportunity champion of the often marginalized. In just two seasons, the series has also won:

- An Imagen Award nomination for positive portrayal of Latinos in the entertainment industry
- A GLAAD Media Award nomination from the The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation; and
- Three Image Award nominations from the NAACP

Although it might not make characters with disabilities as famous as movies do, television brings them into our homes every week, and makes them even more familiar.