

Start At The Top
Paying Dues is for Other
People
Stories To Help you Succeed
By Mark Simon

Mark Simon started at the top – over and over again. As a freelancer in the entertainment industry, working on over 5,000 projects ranging from *The Walking Dead* to *Woody Woodpecker* to Nickelodeon shows, he has discovered how to jump directly into the role he wants.

Mark has landed deals with the largest realty company in the world, a job with Steven Spielberg, producing animation for Disney, closed a book deal without trying and more. He has also completely fucked up and lost amazing deals. It's all on the page for good and for bad.

This book features a series of true stories written for Mark's college-aged sons, to help inspire them...and hopefully you to advance your career.

Praise for the author's, Mark Simon, other books:

"I'll bet that if I had this book in high school, I would have finished animating a film or two. I suggest that you read this book, get to work, and do what Mark says – go make films."

- Linda S. - previously Senior VP Original Animation, Cartoon Network. Currently Senior Director of Programming, PBS Kids.

"You really can't afford to miss Mark Simon's brilliant new title Producing Independent 2D Character Animation. Simon's tome should be a constant on any aspiring animator's workstation."

- Ramin Z. - Editor, Animation Magazine.

"I just wanted to thank you for not only the terrific books you have produced, but for the amazing motivation they have instilled in me. I have many books on storyboarding, but none have provided the necessary context as your book has."

-Ben Bullock

"I have reading your book "Storyboards: Motion in Art". This is an amazing book. Congratulations. I am an artist like you. I believe you can understand me because all artists need the success, the clap of public."

-Angel Mediavilla

"I wanted to take a moment and thank you for creating such wonderful books, most specifically your Facial Expression reference series.

I am a professional Costume Designer and often teach Stage Make-Up courses at the University level-- a class in which I have often used your books as one of the primary course texts.

Thank you once again for your endless contributions and ravenous art-making. My last Stage Make-Up class has heartily sent you 34 "thumbs up."

-Mallory Prucha Rishoi

"I cannot thank you enough for writing "Producing Independent 2D Character Animation"...it has pulled me out of my depression."

- Rick S.

“Your book is here, it’s a wonderful, wonderful, book. Thanks.”

-Ignacio Sardiñas (Panky)

“Thanks for the great stuff! Inspirational resources!”

– Mel M.

“Mark Simon’s rock-solid resume building technique was a complete eye-opening experience for me. The common sense of it all will definitely have you wondering why you didn’t think of it before. Whether you’re the kid fresh out of school or the veteran business executive, this book is undeniably a must-have for today’s working man!”

- Christopher B.

“I purchased the book and there was a wealth of material to work with. Thank you for the time and effort into making the book. Thank you.”

-Victor Claudio

“This is the most concise and comprehensive book I’ve seen on the subject of producing a 2D animated cartoon.”

- Robert M. - Ithica, NY.

“This is by far the best book on storyboarding (Storyboards: Motion in Art) available.”

- Max M.

“Your book is so informative! I can barely put it down. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you how much your book has helped so far in making my life a complete turn-around from what it was.”

- Amilee H.

“Mark’s presentation is the kind that makes you snap your fingers and say ‘That’s so obvious, why didn’t I think of that?’”

-Mary Beason

Start at the Top

Paying Dues is for Other People

By Mark Simon

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Disclaimer: This book is written with the sole intent of expressing ideas on how to jump start your career. The stories provided are not 'the way' to advance, but are examples of what worked for the author. Luck, talent, work history and more will affect your ability to succeed. The author makes no representations, warranties or guarantees about your potential success. Come on, every situation is different, so just get inspired by these stories and then create your own.

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Forward

I started my first business when I was 12. I worked with Steven Spielberg on the biggest show on TV. I produced animation for Disney. I landed a publisher without looking for a publisher.

I did it all without working my way up through the ranks. I did it all without ever working a day in retail or ever asking “Do you want fries with that?”

But I did have a goal and a desire for each and every job or deal I went after. Passion sells.

I’ve been very lucky in my life. I’ve got a great family. I’ve got my health. I do what I love for a living and I make good money at it.

I work in Hollywood. I’ve been lucky enough to work with the best in the industry and I’ve worked on over 5,000 productions of everything from feature films, to TV series and commercials.

Well, maybe it’s not so much luck. I work like hell to be prepared for when opportunities show themselves.

You know the old saying, “Luck is when preparation meets opportunity”. I’m always ready to meet more opportunity.

What the saying leaves out is attitude. Attitude can make a huge difference in success in anything you do, whether it’s managing people, looking for a job or asking for a date. Confidence is contagious. If you have a passion for something and complete confidence in yourself, others will also have confidence in you.

There’s a fine line between complete confidence and being egotistical and I’m sure I’ve crossed that line many times. But I don’t really care. When I know something, or how to do something, I know it, share it, do it and I don’t couch my knowledge in pleasantries. Life’s too short and I have too much to do.

My confidence has been a huge factor in my success in various areas of my life. The greatest gift my parents gave

me was the feeling that I could do anything. I have no fear of failure. Luckily, they also trained me to try and excel at everything I approach and trained me well enough to do better than most.

Starting at the top, which I'll explain in a minute, leads to quick success, at least the way success is often described.

But that same confidence, as it can often be misplaced, can also be a hindrance to learning new things. More than once I've caught myself NOT learning something I needed to know because I had assumed I knew enough already. Those moments hurt.

There's also a problem with being really good at a lot of things. It can make you think you would do it better than someone else and thus may tend not to delegate and take on too much yourself. I am VERY guilty of that. It's a problem. It's best to surround yourself with people better than you and let them do their job...but you must keep control.

In various businesses and projects I've worked in, I almost always start at the top. I seem to run businesses, events and crew within hours, regardless of what I was hired to do. In this book, I will describe a number of these instances. I will try to explain why I believe I was given each opportunity and, where relevant, how this could have hurt my chances at long-term success to a greater degree.

So, what do I mean by 'Start at the Top'?

There's a number of sayings on how to succeed in business;

“Pay your dues.”

“Work your way up.”

“There are no shortcuts to any place worth going.”

– [Beverly Sills](#)

For the most part, all of these quotes can be true, I just don't live by them.

Start at the Top means not having to work your way up from a lower position to the top position. It means not always paying your dues. It means there can be a shortcut to the job you desire.

Start at the Top means being prepared and jumping on new opportunities.

And, Start at the Top can also mean that you only approach the top person at a company for a job. Why interview with four people who can say 'No', when you really want to speak with the only person who can say 'Yes'?

Start at the Top means you take control at all times.

You want me to start in the mail room and work my way up? No way. Looking back at my life, even if I tried it, I'd be advanced to management within hours. This isn't a comment of a delusional and self-important man, it's a story I will tell through this book of how I've always jumped right into running things. I'll also share with you the time I took control of a work environment, only to be reminded quickly that it wasn't mine to take. Oh well.

Has starting at the top always benefited me? Nope. There have been a number of times where it kicked my ass, either quickly or after I realized that it had limited my potential growth.

Does that mean I'm going to go back and start at the bottom from now on?

Hell NO!

I've had a great life and it continues to get even better.

Sure, there are times when I created my own way of doing things that has varied from industry standards. At times this slowed me down, but then again, sometimes my ways are better and I've helped change the status quo. I don't care how things have always been done if it's not the best way.

When a new way is a better way, I do it the new way.

Should you start at the top? That depends on you. It works for me.

Hopefully you will be inspired by this book to either reach for the top, or at least understand the ramifications of it.

Either way, I hope you enjoy the trip. Or don't. Your choice.

Mark Simon

Preface

Start at the top, (phrase) [yoo-ar-da-**bos**]

1. Begin at a top position without working your way up through the ranks.
2. Speaking only with the owner of a potential employment company.
3. Attitude is great if you can back it up.

pro· mo· tion

[pruh-**moh**-shuh n] Show IPA

noun

1. advancement in rank or position.
2. furtherance or encouragement.
3. the act of promoting.
4. the state of being promoted.
5. something devised to publicize or advertise a product, cause, institution, etc., as a brochure, f reesample, poster, television or radio commercialo r personal appearance.

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Section 1

I Did It My Way

Do you ever look at something and say, “I could do better than that,”?

But have you ever tried ‘to do better than that’?

Have you ever thought, “That’s not the right way to do something”?

But have you ever tried to fix it?

Have you ever been told to do something a certain way when you knew that way was wrong?

Did you stand firm and do it your way instead?

I have. When I think I can do better, I try it. Like when I worked for an advertising agency and realized I could do a better job providing for my clients than the agency was doing.

When I’ve seen something I didn’t think was the best process, I’ve created a better process. Like when I saw my father’s training and selling materials at Keller Williams Realty and I created a better selling process for him.

When I was told by one of my art teachers that I needed to create a portfolio her way and I disagreed, I did it my way. She even threatened my grade to make me listen. I didn’t listen.

These stories and more are on the following pages of how I did things my way when I was certain my way was the best way.

Chapter 1

Landing My Dream Job With Steven Spielberg In Just 15 Minutes

One way to start at the top is to show up in person. Emails seldom make an impression. It may not always be possible to get the right person on the phone. I landed my dream job on a Steven Spielberg TV series in 15 minutes by meeting the right people in person.

I was working for Nickelodeon at Universal Studios Orlando in 1993 when I heard that Spielberg's NBC series *seaQuest DSV* had just moved onto the Universal lot for the second season. I was a fan of a first season, which was shot in Los Angeles.

I was the second designer at Nickelodeon when we opened up the network stages on the backlot at Universal. I had been working at Nickelodeon for a number of years and was ready for a new challenge.

seaQuest coming to Orlando opened up a grand opportunity for me.

Of course I wanted to work on the series. Steven Spielberg; science fiction; biggest show on TV. What's not to love, right?

The production of *seaQuest DSV* set up in what's called Building 22A on the Universal backlot in Orlando. 22A is the central office building with rental offices for productions. My office was on the far side of the lot in the Nickelodeon building. Nickelodeon had two sound stages which were attached to the Nickelodeon offices. I was lucky I was on the same lot as Spielberg's show.

Email didn't exist then. And I didn't want to simply call and be told to mail in my resume. I had tried that before. Didn't work. I wanted on that show and I knew I had to meet the right people in person.

I figured everyone in Orlando wanted to work on the show and I needed to beat them to the punch. I had to work fast.

Like many artists and designers, I always carried my portfolio with me. (This was long before the internet, tablets or smart phones. We had to carry large printed portfolios which looked like a someone ran over a briefcase with a steamroller.)

In order to meet someone, I needed a way in. I thought about who I knew in Building 22A. Hopefully someone who might have met anyone on Spielberg's show.

Patty! She had a small office in 22A. Patty is that friend we all seem to have. The one who talks way too much to everybody. Nice enough, but a bit of a busybody.

I knew Patty probably met someone on the crew because, well, she's Patty.

So I called her up and said: "Patty. It's Mark."

"Hey Mark. How are you doing?" she replied.

"Great!" I had no time for small talk. I was on a mission. "Hey look, who do you know on the *seaQuest* crew?"

She replied, "Not really...But, you know two days ago I had lunch with the construction coordinator, Mike something."

"Great!" I exclaimed. "I started in the industry as a construction coordinator! I speak his language. Look, I want you to introduce me. I'll be in your office in 5 minutes."

Then I hung up quickly because I didn't want to give her a chance to say "No."

I ran across the lot and up to her office, portfolio in hand.

I was at Patty's office within about 45 seconds. She looked up at me and said, "How you doin' Mark?"

"Great, great, great, great! Let's see if we can find Mike." I said cutting her off with a smile. I was anxious.

"Um, ok," she replied hesitantly. We walked out of Building 22A between a couple of the sound stages and sure enough, there was Mike walking out of a sound stage. "Hi, Mike," she called out.

"Hi Patty. How are you doing? Blah.. blah.. " I didn't really listen to what he said to her.

Patty replied, “Hey Mike. I want you to meet a friend of mine, Mark,” at which point I forgot Patty existed.

I launched into an excited conversation with my new best friend on *seaQuest*. “Mike. Hey, I heard you’re the construction coordinator. I started as a construction coordinator back in LA at Roger Corman’s studio.”

I wanted to build a bridge with Mike as quickly as possible. “I’d love to see the sets up close. It looks like there’s great stuff you’re doing.”

He said “Sure.” We walked around one of the stages as I exclaimed how cool the sets were. I looked at Mike and said, “I’d love to get on this crew.”

Mike asked me, “So what do you do?”

I told him I was currently art directing at Nickelodeon, but I figured the production would have brought the art director out from Los Angeles. I added, “But I also do storyboarding and set design. I would do anything to work on this project.”



Figure 1 - Standing on a set of Spielberg's NBC series, seaQuest DSV.

I plopped my portfolio onto a pile of lumber and quickly showed him a few samples to prove I knew what I was talking about.

Mike nodded and said, “I think we need both, but I don’t make those decisions.”

“Great! Who does? Who should I talk to?” I asked.

“Probably Vaughn Edwards, our production designer.”

The easiest way to meet people is to be introduced. I asked, “Great. Is he around?”

Mike didn’t hesitate. “Um, I think so. He might be on his office.”

I didn’t hesitate either. “Cool. Can you introduce me?”

Now Mike paused for a moment. “Um. Sure,” guy he’d never seen before.

Mike led me out of the stage and upstairs in Building 22A to Vaughn’s office. Luckily Vaughn was sitting at his drafting table.

Mike walked me in and said, “Hey Vaughn. I want you to meet this great local designer and artist Mark Simon.” Mike had only glanced at my work and he had just met me. But attitude is everything and my attitude obviously made an impression. As soon as Mike introduced me to Vaughn, all my attention stayed on Vaughn.

Vaughn smiled at me and said, “So what do you do?”

“I’m a set designer and I do storyboarding.

“Well, we have need for both. I’d love to see your stuff.”

Once again I laid out my portfolio. Vaughn looked everything and said, “This all looks great! But I’m not the one who makes final decision!”

Do you want to guess what I said next? “Who does?”

“That would be Oscar Costo, our supervising producer.”

“Cool! Is he around?” (Sound familiar?)

“He’s usually in his office.”

“Can you introduce me?”

Luckily he answered, “Sure.”

Vaughn walked me down to Oscar’s corner office.

Oscar was in his large office. I mean a really massive office! Vaughn knocked on the open door and said, “Oscar? This is Mark Simon. He’s a great local set designer and story

artist. I looked at all his stuff and either one would work great for me.”

Oscar looked at us for a moment and said, “OK. Thanks, Vaughn. Come on in, Mark.” He waved me in as Vaughn left.

I walked in and I handed my open portfolio to Oscar. He literally just flipped through my work in a few seconds and then closed it.

Oscar looked up at me and stated very directly, “I’ve met a lot of people here Orlando who can design sets just like you.”

That was not the way I had hoped this conversation would start.

Oscar continued, “But you are the only one around here who understands storyboarding. You’re our new storyboard artist.”

And just like that I was working on a Steven Spielberg series.

Within 15 minutes of deciding I wanted to work on *seaQuest DSV*, I had the job. I was then the storyboard artist on the best project I had ever worked on!

I landed the gig quickly because I approached them in person and found a way to get inside. I didn’t limit myself to the standard approach of phone calls or letters. I met them in person and I demonstrated my passion. They quickly got an idea of who I was.

Any time you want to land a job, show up in person. It shows tenacity and people get to know you faster in person than any other way.



Figure 2 - Sitting in my seaQuest office with the alien creature I illustrated for Mark Hamill to play.

Chapter 2

How I Landed My Job On The Walking Dead

You have to be willing to ask for help to move ahead.

Once my kids graduated from high school, I decided to move to Atlanta to take advantage of all the great productions in Georgia. I always set goals for myself and one of my goals was to storyboard on one of my favorite shows, *The Walking Dead*.

Luckily I have worked in the industry a very long time, over 30 years. As of this writing I have over 4,500 production credits. But I still ask for help from people I've worked with.

I knew one person on *The Walking Dead*, director of photography Stephen Campbell. He and I had worked on dozens of projects together over the last 20+ years. I called Steve prior to moving to Atlanta and asked him to introduce me to the producer who hires the crew of *The Walking Dead*. I just needed an intro.

Steve suggested we wait until the series started pre-production early in the Spring of 2018. Once the production offices opened up that Spring, I planned a trip to Atlanta to both look for a home and to hopefully meet with the producers.

Once the offices opened up for the new season, Steve spoke with series executive producer Tom Luse about me and forwarded Tom's contact info to me. I immediately reached out to Tom to set up a face-to-face meeting. I spoke with Tom briefly on the phone, explained my background and the benefits of working with me. I shared with him the days I planned to be in town and we set up a time to meet.

Without Steve's help, I wouldn't have even known that Tom was the producer I needed to speak with. Without that personal endorsement, I may not have landed that meeting even if I had called Tom.



*Figure 3 - The first thing I saw when I entered
The Walking Dead studios, were the famous doors
from the first episode.*

When I arrived in town, I drove directly to the studio in Senoia, south of Atlanta, and arrived 15 minutes early. You never want being late to be their first impression.

When I sat with Tom, I pulled out my computer and explained my process of digital storyboarding and showed him examples of my work and how my Storyboard Pro software allowed me to offer more to productions.

Tom explained that they were not quite ready to hire a story artist, but he liked what he saw. He asked me to check back with him in two weeks. The way he asked me to call back in two weeks sounded like a test. I've done the same thing at my studio with applicants to see if they can follow through.

Exactly two weeks later I called Tom. He thanked me for following up and told me that one of the other producers would be in touch for me to start on the show. Later that day I got a call from another producer and was officially hired. I had passed the test.

I started storyboarding *The Walking Dead* before I finished my move to Atlanta.

There are a few morals to this story. One, be willing to ask for help. Two, meeting people face-to-face is always best. Three, try to meet with the person who can say 'Yes' so you don't give other people the opportunity to say 'No'. And four, when you are asked to do something, follow through.

You may know lots of people who are willing to help you. But unless you ask for help, they won't know you need any.

Chapter 3

How I Lost and Regained My Book Deal

You know the old saying, “Lightning never strikes twice?” I don't agree.

I've been known to strike more than one time for any number of things. An old saying I do agree with is, “Don't take no for answer.” I've done that, too.

I'm going to share with you how I lost a deal for one of my books, and then regained it.

Back in 1993 I had been working with Steven Spielberg on his NBC series *seaQuest DSV*. I was also teaching storyboarding at a couple of universities and I had started lecturing about storyboarding at various events.

I self-published a paperback, spiral bound book on storyboarding, *Storyboards: Motion In Art*. The text went along with the slides I put together for my presentation and the second half of the book was simply a reproduction of my slides. It was very simple and not very professional. It was a back-table sales product, something that I could sell after I spoke. Looking at it now, it's a piece of shit book, but it's amazing what people will buy from the speaker they just saw.

During the *seaQuest* production, I reached out to *Starlog Magazine* to see if they would be interested in running a feature about my storyboarding work. The magazine was selling a million copies per issue, so I was thrilled when they decided to run a six page article about my storyboarding. I mentioned to the editor about the storyboard book I had created and we made a deal to promote my book in the back of their magazine. They sold it, collected the money, mailed out the books and sent me a commission. I sold thousands of copies that way.

After I had worked on *seaQuest*, I wanted to write a better version of my storyboarding book, so I wrote an entirely new book.

The new version did not feature any references to my slides. The new one covered storyboarding unlike any other book on the subject. It was a thorough and proper text book on the subject.

I called the new book *Storyboards: Motion In Art, Second Edition*. Even though it was an entirely new book, I liked the original title and I thought *Second Edition* sounded good.

I researched various potential publishers and the biggest publisher of entertainment industry books at the time was Focal Press. I found a Focal Press editor who was doing books in the same realm as storyboarding, so I contacted her. She liked what I had to say on the phone and sent me their the book proposal forms to fill out. I put together a huge proposal for them and included info on my *Starlog* book sales to prove interest in the market.

I mailed her in my new book and the proposal. About two weeks later I received a written response saying, “Thank you for your book proposal. It looks good. We see that you have an earlier version of your book. Could you please send that to us so we may review that as part of your proposal.”

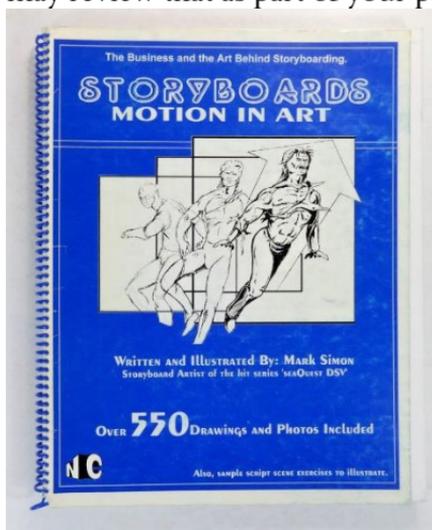


Figure 4 - The first edition of my book, which tanked my first pitch to my publisher.

That made sense to me, so I mailed the first edition of my book to them.

After about two weeks, I got a letter from Focal Press which stated, "Thank you very much, Mr. Simon, for your submission. However, after reviewing the first edition of your book we've determined that the quality is not high enough for Focal Press production. Thank you very much and good luck with your book elsewhere."

I knew the first book wasn't very good. That's why I rewrote it.

I called the publisher to argue for my new book, but they kept telling me the same thing, "Sorry this isn't high enough quality for us."

I thought about it and realized that people can't see beyond what they have in their hands. All they saw was the crappy first edition. No matter how much better the second one was written, it wasn't yet designed, so all they could see was the crappy first edition.

I was crushed. My new storyboard book was really good. I wanted to get it published, but that first edition killed my chances.

After I'd calmed down for a few days, I thought, wait a minute, they're the biggest publisher in the field. I bet they get a lot of proposals. They probably won't remember one failed proposal from the next.

I waited about two months and then I sent them the exact same proposal for my book. I didn't even change the name. It was still *Storyboards: Motion In Art, Second Edition*.

Once again, I received a letter from them, "Dear Mr. Simon, thank you for your book proposal. It looks good. We see that you have an earlier version of your book. Could you please send that to us so we may review that as part of your proposal."

Unlike my previous response, this time I called them up and I said, "No. I'm not going to send the first edition to you. The first edition is not representative of the second edition. I don't want it to skew your view. I want you to judge the second edition on its own merits."

They argued with me for a few minutes, but I wouldn't budge. They finally replied, "Fine. We will."

Two weeks later I received a publishing contract in the mail.

I learned from my first mistake. Just because someone asks for something, doesn't mean you have to supply it.

I also learned that you can go back and pitch something as long as you have something new to show. I didn't change my book, but I did change the presentation. I removed the problem.

Any time you run into an obstacle, find a way around it. It's amazing what can happen when you don't take 'No' for an answer.

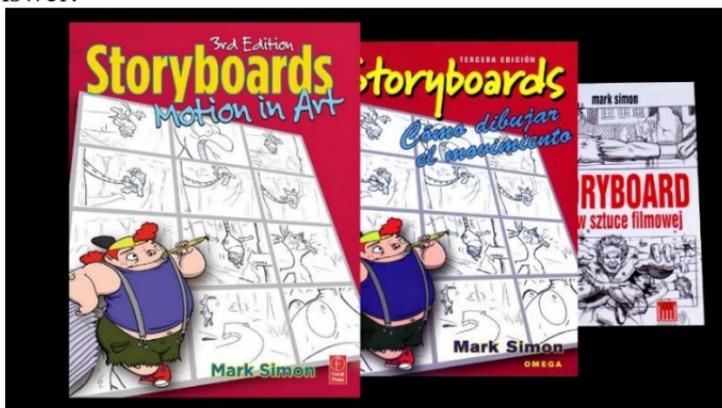


Figure 5 - My storyboard book is now in its 3rd edition and in multiple languages.

About the Author – Mark Simon

Pitch Expert & Godfather of Storyboards



Everything in Mark's life revolves around telling stories. As a pitch expert and co-owner of Sell Your TV Concept Now, Inc., he works with content creators to craft pitches which will enthrall potential buyers. Mark has been hired by Disney, Nickelodeon, The Golf Channel, HSN and other networks to help pitch in-house productions. He has also developed and pitched IP created with Jeanne Simon and inked 40+ production and distribution deals.

As a storyboard artist and owner of Storyboards & Animatics, Inc, he teams up with film and TV directors to bring their visions and scripts to life. He is best known for his work as the storyboard artist on *The Walking Dead*, *Dynasty*, *Miracle Workers*, *Cipher*, and dozens of feature films for Universal, Fox, Warner Bros. and most recently Jon Favreau.

Mark is a 30-year veteran producer and director for live-action and animation and has piled up an impressive 5,000 production credits.

As much as Mark pushes his storytelling, he also pushes himself to excel in digital storyboarding. He won a 2012 Prime Time Engineering Emmy for his work with the Toon Boom software team behind Storyboard Pro. He was also inducted into the DAVE School (Digital Animation & Visual Effects School) Hall of Fame.

Mark is not only a storyboard artist, he is an in-demand instructor and has produced multiple training courses for LinkedIn Learning, formerly known as Lynda.com.

Books are another chapter in Mark's story. He has penned eleven industry texts on storyboarding, animation, and several photographic artist reference books.

He has traveled the world telling stories and sharing his expertise as a lecturer at major pitch conferences, entertainment industry trade schools, and universities.

As the father of identical twin young men, he has filled their hearts and minds with stories about how to live a life doing what you love.

The answer to the question you have right now is NO... he doesn't get much sleep.

His storyboard and animation clients include: The Walking Dead, Disney, Universal, Viacom, Sony, HBO, Nickelodeon, FOX, Starz, Steven Spielberg, USA Networks, ABC Television and many others. He was the animation producer of Universal's *How High 2*, Fox's *Tooth Fairy 2* starring Larry the Cable Guy and Universal's 2014 release of *Little Rascals*.

You can reach Mark at MarkSimonBooks@yahoo.com