



## Habla Llama?

Nick Jr.'s Diego gives Latino kids a familiar face — and a roadmap for fun.

WITH A SNAPPY LATIN BEAT, A YEN FOR ADVENTURE AND A BAG FULL OF TRICKS, the charmingly animated and bilingual Diego easily holds his own against his popular cousin, Dora the Explorer, while adding another face to the cultural mix that Nickelodeon aims to foster.

*Go, Diego, Go!*, which premiered on Nick Jr. in September, is a natural spinoff for the network, says Brown Johnson, executive creative director, Nickelodeon Preschool Television. “We make a real effort on a consistent basis to find new voices,” says Johnson, who joined Nickelodeon in 1987 and has launched such shows as *Eureeka’s Castle*, *Gullah Gullah Island*, *Allegra’s Window*, *Maurice Sendak’s Little Bear* and more. “Our creative assignment every year is to work with people we’ve never met before, to learn about all kinds of other experiences.”

That might mean sending Diego’s creators to climb Peru’s Machu Picchu, kiss a llama or sleep in the jungle. Or it might mean a day-long seminar about Islam in America, where, Johnson reports, “we ate the food, listened to the music, heard people speak, saw a fashion show.”

Diego (voiced by ten-year-old Jake Toranzo-Szymanski, who is of Puerto Rican descent), is an eight-year-old animal rescuer and nature expert who was introduced to young viewers about two years ago in Nick Jr.’s popular *Dora the Explorer*. He works with his sister, Alicia (Constanza Sperakis, fourteen, born in Colombia), and is aided by Click the Camera (Rosie Perez). His

adventures feature animals indigenous to Latin America, and the show is peppered with Spanish words and Latin American music, folktales and traditions.

Johnson says she attended a conference six years ago where there was a lot of discussion about minority children not seeing themselves in leading roles. Since then, it’s been a Nick goal to change that.

“America is a very diverse place, and we need to reflect the way the kids around the country look,” Johnson says. “Also, Nick is seen around the world and we need to reflect that.”

And it’s not just Hispanic parents who love Dora and Diego, she says. “Middle Eastern, Pakistani, Filipino parents and others say their children love to see a dark-haired child with brown eyes, someone who looks like them.”

Johnson also likes to bring diversity below the line, with writers such as Ligiah Villalobos, Nancy De Los Santos and Rosemary Contreras. “It’s a rule that we have to interview a wide variety of candidates for any job,” Johnson explains. “We look for the best person, but also the person who can give us the freshest point of view.”

In the case of Diego, spinning off his own series was a natural. “He was so appealing — he was really easy to write for,” Johnson says. “We wanted a boy who is an adventurer with a heart. He was a hit right away.”

—Roberta G. Wax