

[We Are Family](#) Season 2, Episode 16: Chris Nee

Chris Nee:

My name is Chris Nee and to me family is a social structure and a chosen group of people who show up in your life for good and for bad.

Julia:

Hello and welcome to *We Are Family*. I am here with the children's TV writer and producer Chris Nee. She is known as the creator of *Doc McStuffins*, but she's also the person behind such hit kids TV shows as *Ridley Jones*, *Vampirina*, *We the People*, and now *Ada Twist, Scientist*, both of which those last ones were produced with the Obama's. She's also mom to son Theo. Chris, thanks so much for coming on *We Are Family*.

Chris Nee:

I am so excited to be here.

Julia:

Oh my goodness, so first off we were just talking about this before we hit record, but I have to start by saying I was a Brown Ledger. And Chris knows what that means, it's a beautiful camp on Lake Champlain up in Vermont...

Chris Nee:

It's a camp that might be a cult, we're not really sure.

Julia:

Haha! So all of my friends know about Brown Ledge because I won't shut up about it since, I mean like my entire adult life. It's my happy place; it's my favorite place; it's a camp for girls. And so for everyone's listening and doesn't know about Brown Ledge, at its heart it's really empowering girls to choose what they want to do. And it really felt like it kind of set me up for life in that way. So clearly I've been following your career for a really long time and super excited to have you here because I've been like, I knew Chris Nee when she was at Brown Ledge. But Chris, I'd love to kind of hear you talk just about how Brown Ledge was a part of your life and also how that set your career path or influenced you in any way?

Chris Nee:

Oh, it absolutely did it. For me, I think of it as the place that kept me going during the summer so that I could get through the years, and get to the point where I had grown up and could go find my people in the world. I started there in 1979, I graduated from high school in 1987, and I knew there was something different about me and it was a place that was insanely accepting. And it was a place where I didn't have to name what it was that felt like I didn't fit in in other spaces, because I was so incredibly accepted. And the other thing, which being a parent now, it was a place that expected a lot of you. And I struggle as a parent in the world of kind of progressive education and sometimes wanting someone to just be like, do better, learn this stuff, practice for hours, get there. Because I have both sides in my little heart.

I do find there are a lot of people with just real focus and drive that come out of that space. Because I think that freedom allows you to find out that you can be obsessed with things and go down rabbit holes, and work really, really hard even during your summer, and the joy of achieving after putting in so much work.

Julia:

Totally. And listen, I could talk about Brown Ledge forever. And my friends listening will be laughing and rolling their eyes because they're going to be like, Julia, here we go again.

Chris Nee:

We won't sing any camp songs, that's the important thing.

Julia:

Or will we? No. But we're here, obviously also, to talk about your new show, which is so exciting. Can you tell me a little bit about *Ada Twist, Scientist*, and the character, and your inspiration for it?

Chris Nee:

Yeah, I mean it's such an exciting project and it looks so gorgeous. This was a project that when I came to Netflix, I was aware of the book series; this is obviously based on a book series by Andrea Beatty, and you can't not see those books and have them have an impact. They're visually so stunning. What I love is that there's a tone to them that has this really precocious girl who is not afraid to be the smartest girl in the room but it also shows, like the very first book shows the parents being a little exasperated with her. And I love that because there's the hint of what is real which is always what I'm going after. That having a kid who says "why" all the time can drive you a little nuts and then you figure out how to encourage your kid and explore the things that they're excited about. So there was something about the book that had always stuck out to me. When I got to Netflix, I had the very sort of pinch yourself experience of having the Obamas ask me if I would take on this project. And what's funny is I actually kind of said no for a little while because-

Julia:

What? You said no to the Obamas?

Chris Nee:

I know.

But I didn't want to take on a project that I didn't think I could bring something special to. And my worry at the beginning was that with it being a science show that it was going to end up being one of those shows that was like two tablespoons of this, one teaspoon of this, and you've made a volcano. And I was like, I'm not interested in that stuff. If you watch my work it's very emotionally-based. I am trying to figure out the world. I mean really if I'm honest I'm trying to figure out my world from 30 years ago.

I'm still, I have a great facility to remember the feelings of childhood, and loneliness, and confusion that I think most kids actually do feel. But a lot of adults I think forget that, they remember it in a sort of separated way. And I think the great children's writers actually can remember and touch those feelings.

So the pure science show didn't, I just was like sure, I get it. I think it's a great show, but if I don't think I can bring something to it, I don't know if I'm the right person. And in having discussions we started to talk about the emotions of science, and that science is one of the only disciplines that really talks about grit, which I think is so important for kids. And the idea that failure, it's one of the only disciplines that failure is an absolutely essential part. And it is not considered failure, it's considered the step that is on the path to whatever will be success because you have learned so much during that. And most disciplines do not deal with failure that way. And for me, that became a way to look at this show in which I could see so many life lessons through the lens of scientific thinking. And then I was like, okay, I'm in, I get this show. So I finally said yes to Mrs. Obama. (both laugh)

Julia:

That is so awesome. And I feel like so many of your shows and your characters from Ada, to Doc McStuffins, and Ridley Jones, they feature such fantastically diverse characters, like ethnically diverse, gender diverse, queer characters. It feels like that's really at the heart, it's so important to what you do. And I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about your upbringing and your childhood, and how becoming the adult that you are today potentially influenced that.

Chris Nee:

Yeah. I mean, again, I was a queer kid in the '70s and '80s, but there was no language for that then. I came out in 1988. Elton John wasn't out yet. Liberace wasn't out yet. Like there was no path, you were a distinct and clear outsider by sort of saying your truth. And I did at the age of, I was either 18 or 19, it might have been right into my 19th year. And so I had a real chip on my shoulder. I did not fit in. I had divorced parents, and it was not a happy divorce. And my mom, who loved the arts and I will say introduced me to high art, she loves opera and the ballet. And I went into the city and saw pretty much every show on Broadway for years and years and years—exposed me. Like the only thing I wasn't allowed to see was *Nine* because there was actual nudity on stage. But other than that I saw everything. I saw every performer, every play, not just the musicals. So I'm so grateful for her for that.

I also, like many kids, my mom was working a full-time job supporting us and getting a master's at night. I did not understand the incredible load that she was lifting. But I was a latchkey kid who felt very, very on the outside. And I would say that the recurring theme in my work is I'm really writing about communities, and what it is to be accepted when you are not the same. And it's interesting for animation when you're talking about toys; you actually want all the toys to look the same. And so I'm always coming in and going, "Yeah, but I want the plastic squeaky toys next to the soft plush toy." I want all of these things to be really different because that's the thing I'm representing. And I'm definitely trying to write the world as I want it to be.

That said, and I've said this many times before but it's really true: People tend to ask, like who are you writing for? And you're kind of supposed to say like, "I'm writing for the children. I'm writing for the child on the street out in front of me right now walking the dog." But I'm not, I'm 100 percent writing my own pain. And I carry open wounds from having felt very, very on the outside and uncomfortable with myself. So I certainly know what it is to not see myself. To be honest, we're just at the point where who I am is showing up at all in kids programming, and it's still not easy. So I know what that is. And if I'm really honest, the reason that I became so focused on racial diversity so early, I could make those changes. I couldn't represent my own family, but I knew that there were so many other groups that were not seeing

themselves on screen, and I had the opportunity to make choices to change that. And it just became baked into my mission.

Julia:

What was your kind of journey? Did you ever feel like you were pressured to kind of fit in with certain stereotypes, gender stereotypes, or feeling like getting into Hollywood, and into acting, and writing, there must have been sometimes where you just felt like, "hey, I want to be myself but I'm getting pressured not to be."

Chris Nee:

For sure. That said, I definitely was not, like I did not really have a conformist soul in me. And I will say that I was very ostracized from mainstream life. When I came out, my parents were worried that I wouldn't get a job, I wouldn't *be able* to get a job.

It certainly meant, and I was aware of this from very early on, I wasn't going to be the person who got invited to the brunches, and that's how you're going to get somewhere in your career. Sort of being the, I'm so like everyone else, I'm going to kind of get enveloped into all of those things that happen outside of the business side of things, that is how people sort of naturally move up through their career. So I did feel like I have to be so good at what I do that it doesn't matter that I'm not going to be at the baby shower, because I'm not going to get invited to those things. Now the world has changed in many, many ways but yeah, I didn't see a lot of people like myself. To be honest, in animation you also didn't see a lot of women when I sort of came into this business. But there certainly were not a lot of people who I was looking at in terms of my peers and saying like, "Well that person has definitely been on a similar road to me."

Yeah, and to a certain extent a lot of that stuff I had to mask for many years in this business. And I think it's always a surprise that I'm the person behind these very big, far reaching shows. And I believe that in the local long run I can continue to make substantive changes that will help expand people's perspectives. So I do think the work that I do is incredibly important, but it's been hard waiting to get to talk about my own family.

Julia:

Right, totally. So you talked at the top of the show about the concept of found family, or family not necessarily always being biological. And that's something we talk about a lot on the show. Who would you consider part of your family over the years and how has that changed? And growing up did you feel like you had to find that kind of non-biological found family when your own family wasn't necessarily meeting your needs?

Chris Nee:

Absolutely, which I think is a very classic kind of queer experience. You know, my biological family has very much come around, has gone through the journey that many people in our country have come through. And that's a beautiful thing, but I think there is a very clear sense in many people who live sometimes on the fringes of what is mainstream society, where it's your friends who, they don't function just as friends.

And we live in a country where a lot of people also move very far away from their families. I'm a New Yorker who lives in LA because that's where the work is. I didn't intend to stay here for 20 years, but you have to then build that community around you who are going to act in the way that our villages used to.

Julia:

So now your son Theo, he's a teenager, right?

Chris Nee:

He turns 15 in a couple of weeks.

Julia:

Oh my goodness. So can you talk a bit about your journey to motherhood? So his moms are you and your ex-wife Lisa, is that right?

Chris Nee:

Yes. Yeah, I think for us we were both kind of on the older side, my ex is 10 years older than I am, and I think we were both sort of starting to see that space where parenthood could disappear. And I will say that around the time that we had Theo, all of the gays were having kids, but I remember even 10 years before that it was sort of not, that was not what people's goals were because it didn't feel all that accessible. But I always wanted to be a mom, just always clearly. Even sort of my hardcore days in the East Village with my head shaved I would be like, but I want to be a mom. People would be like, "what are you talking about?" So I was glad that the world kind of caught up with all of that.

And Theo is, he's a delight. And it's a beautiful thing that we're actually in a place where, and not that I have any sense that there isn't a lot of danger out there in the world and a lot of people who want to roll certain clocks back, but for the most part he lives a life that is not couched in the idea of the struggle, because actually he goes to school with so many kids with same-sex parents. The world has just drastically changed. And it's funny when you get to the age where you start to be like, "Oh, I think I'm a little behind." I told this story of being in a car, this was when my Theo was probably, I think he was in fourth grade, maybe fifth grade. And it was like the four boys in the back of the car and you just shut up and try to listen to what the heck they're talking about.

And at some point I realized that they were talking about another kid in their class, and they had repeatedly called him gay. But there was nothing bad about what they were saying, it was sort of a supportive use of the word. And I will say that he was a kid who I would guess probably there was a very good chance at some point he was going to come out. So I was sitting in the front and thinking like, there's a teaching moment here but also they're not saying anything bad and I don't know if I should get...And finally I was like, no, I'm going to jump in. And I said, "Guys, I'm going to jump in for a second. I want to commend you because I can hear that there's nothing bad to you about the word gay." So I'm like, "That's so great to hear. It's such a supportive group back there. This is going to be a little bit of a nuanced idea," and I'm thinking I'm doing great parenting. I said, "You have to kind of wait until someone declares themselves as gay before you use that label for them."

And so there's just kind of this silence in the back and I'm like, man, I just made a really good, nuanced point. And then finally someone said, "Well we're calling him gay because he said he's gay. He came out." And I was like, "Oh, carry on." It just hadn't occurred to me we're in the world where they're calling him gay because he's gay because he's out. But just like, oh right, sorry, nevermind. The '80s are calling, you guys carry on. I'm just not up to speed exactly.

Julia:

Oh my God. You know what, their generation is giving me so much hope. I feel like they are so with it and they are so ahead of us in so many ways. And I think they are going to hopefully be our saviors. But yeah, I was laughing because Tan France from *Queer Eye* was on an episode of this podcast earlier and he joked that he would have to teach his son about straight relationships, like in terms of what books to read. He's like, I need to find the books that are like, there are other families out there that aren't like me and my husband. It's interesting that it's like the reversal, and it's encouraging I guess. But I guess, so then did you have any conversations with Theo about sexuality and gender and what those looked like or did you kind of let him take the lead on that? How did you approach that?

Chris Nee:

No, we actually talked very openly about it. And to be honest, there was sort of a funny time, like he just would not name who and what he was. Except it was a constant, like hilarious conversation. And he just recently kind of came out as straight. And it's beautiful to have those conversations and also kind of an amazing thing that that was the viewpoint that he had, it felt like he had needed to like-

Julia:

Come out as straight.

Chris Nee:

Yeah. But yeah, we have very open conversations. And obviously the last four years he's aware, I mean he's aware. We have traveled around the world and for the most part we've had really good interactions in this world, but he doesn't not know that his moms can be targeted at times. So I think his life in LA is very, very normal, and he's got incredible groups of extended family for whom we are no different than anyone else. At this point we're no different as a divorced family than anyone else. But I think any kids growing up in any sort of other viewpoint BIPOC, indigenous, LGBTQ, it's been hard to go through the Trump years and hear the vitriol.

Chris Nee:

These kids have had a lot of trauma.

Julia:

Absolutely. That on top of the pandemic. And the fact that you see them having these great conversations and being so mature about it, and being such strong representatives of their generation and activists, it's just really impressive. And I feel like we don't give that generation enough credit for everything they're doing.

Chris Nee:

Well again this may be my old upbringing, and it really sounds like sort of my upbringing from the 80s, but I do believe adversity can be a great catalyst for change, and focus, and purpose, and greatness. And I think one of the things that I actually am the most hopeful about is that this generation has gone not unscathed at all. And I believe those are the sort of flames out of which greatness comes.

Julia:

Yeah, no, I think that's a beautiful thought. So I wanted to just talk real quick about your family, does your partner have kids or do you have a blended family? Do you co co-parent with your ex-wife Lisa? What does that look like? I'm a divorced mom too, so I co-parent with my daughter and she goes back and forth between two homes. So just wondered how it looks like for you.

Chris Nee:

Yeah, we have 50/50 custody. We're not necessarily co-parenting, but we're coexisting. But he's amazing, and he has a really full and rich life in both places. Because the complications of life, my partner also has kids and lives in Chicago. We're waiting for all of our kids to graduate so that we can be in the same place, but we are back and forth to both spaces. And during a pandemic, don't add a pandemic to all of that.

Julia:

Oh my God. But you know what, that's a side effect of co-parenting no one talks about enough. The fact that you're kind of, wherever your kid's in school or whatever the other parent is, you kind of have to sort of stay put. And if you meet somebody who lives somewhere else you're kind of shit out of luck. Other than having to do this like long-distance thing.

Chris Nee:

Yeah, I mean 100 percent we are. And by the way, nobody wants to be in a fricking long-distance relationship in their 50s. But it is hard, I mean.... the modern parenting structure. I mean on *Ada Twist* one of the things that I really wanted to do was have one of the main characters have a beautiful representation of co-parenting, divorced parents. Because I think there's so many kids who are living in that back and forth between two houses, and I don't see a ton of representation of it. Iggy's parents, he lives in two places and he talks about it. It's often just a throwaway line of like, "Oh, I left that at the other house, or this is..." Which is so the reality for these kids.

And one of the very first main episodes that we sort of meet the parents, we actually realize that Iggy's mom does not have a green thumb. And the garden that she loved that clearly the dad had been taking care of has kind of fallen apart. And the kids decide to use science to make it work. But what they do is—they're having trouble and they go to the dad and he said, "Oh my God, I want to help your mom do this." And he helps them figure it out. And you see this really loving, really functional co-parenting relationship. And I think about all the kids who are living in this family structure who are not seeing it represented. I think we much more often see a single parent than see this structure. And so those are places where just as a creator I'm always looking for what's the choice I can make that's different, and that lets somebody who has not been seeing themselves on screen feel seen.

Julia:

Oh my God, all the snaps. This is making me so emotional right now because it's so true. I can't wait.

Chris Nee:

It's so true.

Julia:

And I cannot wait for my daughter to watch it, because I've been thinking about that for a long time that she just doesn't have enough representation out there of family setups like we have, where she has two

houses and she's always leaving things behind. But I have a good relationship with her dad so he comes and helps me. So oh my goodness, I cannot wait for her to watch, I'm so excited.

Julia:

So the last thing we always ask everybody, and just to leave on the note of looking to the future, what kind of hopes do you have for your family over the next few years? I know that probably to be in one place for starters.

Chris Nee:

I was going to say, that's just easy. I would like to stitch Chicago, too. And look, one of the things we talk a lot about is not being in the rush to get there because we also, I mean the thing that is central to us is we both adore our kids, it's not a question. And I look back at the old version of divorce where dads would just leave and maybe see their kids...Like I don't even understand that. And so it's not a question for us, and we don't want to feel like we're rushing to get through the beauty of our kids in high school. As hard as it is to sort of be separated from each other as much as we are, I mean we go back and forth quite a bit. So yes, that would be my grand hope for the family.

But I also just, I do actually hope that the world continues to represent all of the different family structures, all of the diversity that exists in our world, and represents it in ways that call to action for us to act like community again. I briefly alluded to the idea of the village, and I don't know how we as a country ever get back to that sense of what it is to really take care of the people on your block, the people in your township. And to actually have cares outside of who your family unit is because you think the larger society around you benefits, and that you benefit from being invested in groups of social structures that are around you.

But that's definitely a lot of what my shows and work are doing, that *Ridley Jones* is 100 percent about a space where characters have actually different wants and needs, and how do they negotiate those wants and needs and yet still act as a unified whole in this museum? With *Ada* I just want to empower girls and empower people who are not used to seeing the dream of themselves in certain places to say, go achieve what you want to achieve, because anyone can get there. And those things are just hugely important to me.

Julia:

That's so great. Chris, it's been so great to chat. This has just been so wonderful.

Chris Nee:

Fantastic. I so appreciate it.

Julia:

Thanks so much for listening to my conversation with writer and producer Chris Nee

Next time you'll hear from actor and comedian Aasif Mandvi about being raised away from his parents until he was 3 and how that has impacted his own parenting, especially as an older dad.

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We are Family is presented by me, Julia Dennison, and produced by Sam Walker. Editing is by Vincent Cacchione, and thanks also to the rest of our production team at Pod People, Rachel King, Matt Sav, and Danielle Roth.

We'll see you back here next week for more *We Are Family!*