



THE STORY BEHIND

ADD & Loving

Ava and Rick Green talk with Gina Pera about the making of the smash that is waking millions to the sometimes challenging, sometimes funny

ADD & LOVING IT?! reached out to millions of PBS viewers this past year with a powerful message: First, that adults can have ADHD. Second, that it can explain their lifelong challenges. And third, that despite its challenges, adults with ADHD can have wonderful lives.



Who is the dynamic duo behind this Adult ADHD awareness juggernaut? Meet Rick and Ava Green, married only three years but artistic collaborators eighteen years ago on a project that proved eerily prophetic.

At that time, Rick was a writer and co-star on *The Red Green Show*, a comedy series still seen on the CBC and PBS that remains one of the longest-running primetime series in North America. Rick played Bill, described as “an outdoorsman with a difference—he’s a walking disaster area, a complete physical klutz. His weekly Adventure films are like Road Runner cartoons, only in black and white. And

slower music. And not quite as believable.” Ava Green was called in to be video editor, and her first assignment was working with Rick on the *Adventures with Bill* segments. Years later, with Rick finally diagnosed with ADHD and the couple having founded Big Brain Productions, that character Bill inspired the *ADDventures with Bill* videos featured on TotallyADD.com, the company website.

Canadian writer, director, and actor Rick Green has performed on stage, record albums, radio, and television, picking up impressive awards in every arena. Most recently, for his work as the creator and director of *ADD & Loving It?!*, Rick was honored with the prestigious Celebrity Transforming Lives award from the Canadian Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Ava Green is a veteran video editor and producer who has worked on many television productions, including *History Bites* and *The Red Green Show*.

Married on the eve of New Year’s Eve 2008, Rick and Ava created Big Brain Productions in 2008 and wasted no time

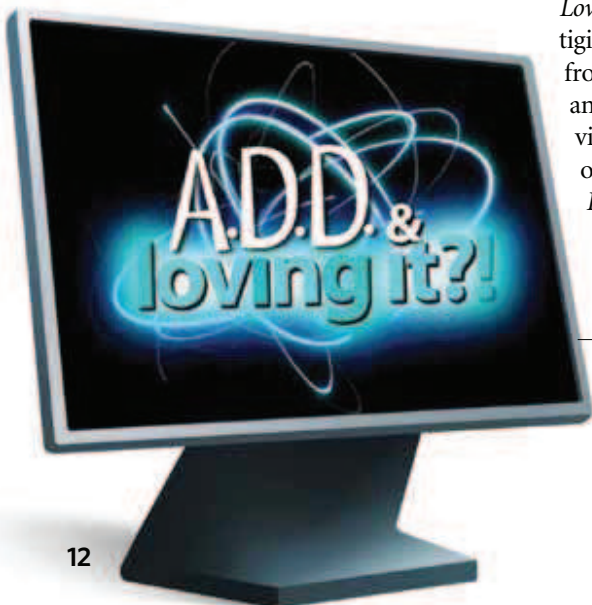
in producing the Global TV documentary-comedy *ADD & Loving It?!*, featuring Canadian actor Patrick McKenna. Close friends in real life and co-stars on *The Red Green Show*, both McKenna and Rick Green have been diagnosed with ADHD. In this entertaining but educational film, the pair (along with Patrick’s wife, Janis) share candid stories of life while untreated and undiagnosed, and how they’re successfully coping now. Along the way, they interview many top ADHD experts, including Canadian psychiatrists Margaret Weiss, Umesh Jain, and Annick Vincent.

Author and longtime ADHD advocate Gina Pera sat down with Ava and Rick Green to learn about their professional backgrounds and motivation for creating *ADD & Loving It?!*

Many years after meeting on *The Red Green Show*, you worked together again on the show Rick developed for Canada’s history channel, *History Bites*. Describe the creative process you shared on that show.

Ava: Rick was writing, producing, and hosting, so he was calling the shots for the show. I was editing. Sometimes we’d put the show together the way it was scripted, and think it was awful. Then we put our heads together in the editing suite and love the final product.

When it comes to working with Rick, it was very different experience than I was accustomed to. His background working in comedy was that there are no bad ideas; you brainstorm ideas and play them out a bit before choosing which to pursue. You let all



Award-winning journalist **Gina Pera** is the author of *Is It You, Me, or Adult A.D.D.? Stopping the Roller Coaster When Someone You Love Has Attention Deficit Disorder*. A 2006 CHADD Volunteer of the Year, she is the longtime coordinator of the Silicon Valley CHADD chapter and writes a monthly blog for CHADD on adult ADHD and relationships at <http://www.YouMeADD.org>.

It!?

-hit documentary
reality of adult ADHD

the ideas flow freely without judging them, and only later do you start choosing from among them. By contrast, in my previous work with others, brainstorming ideas would be cut a little shorter—more snap judgments would be made earlier in the process. With Rick, I learned to listen to *all* the ideas before choosing.

Rick: When you're writing the first draft, it's all genius. Very often stuff I think is good doesn't make sense later, or it's an old joke retold. There's the writing process and the trimming process. I'm not necessarily a good editor, because what I typically see is new things to add. It works for me to have someone else editing.

Inset: Rick and Ava Green at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Foundation awards ceremony in 2009, where Rick was honored with a prestigious Celebrity Transforming Lives Award. **Right,** Rick at work on the set of *History Bites*.



Ava, many partners of adults with ADHD will want to know how you field Rick's ideas when they come fast and furiously.

Where do you two draw the line and decide it's time to stop brainstorming and move forward with best, concrete ideas?

Ava: You mean when hare-brained ideas come up, what do you do? You let them bubble up and not react. You sit back a bit, not rushing in, not trying to control everything all the time. And for me as an editor, that was a real learning curve to not do that anymore. Sometimes I regress, because it does take more energy to entertain the possibilities of so many ideas. It can drain you in a heartbeat. Sometimes I realize that I've "taken my foot off the brakes" for so long that I forget I need to put on the brakes at all.

Mostly, the way it works is this. Rick is as creative as he wants to be. And he runs ideas by me all the time. But I don't always have to actively pursue them or put a lot of mental energy with each of them. He is very productive with his ideas. But he absolutely trusts my judgment about which to pursue and which to let go.

Speaking of productive ideas, let's talk about how the idea for *ADD & Loving It?!* came about. Rick's motivation seems to be explained, at least in part, in his bio on the TotallyADD.com website: "Everything I used to know about ADHD was wrong."

Ava: Yes, Rick had this idea ever since he was diagnosed, and wanted to share it with people. In spring 2009, we pitched the idea to Global Television (a Canadian national network). The person we pitched it to had worked with Rick at the *History Bites* show. Canada funds documentaries that meet certain qualifications. So he asked Rick if we could do this as a documentary. Rick said, "Sure," without missing a beat. Then we walked out the door, looked at each other and said, "We've never done a documentary!"

Rick: I knew a few documentary makers, and I knew there were resources we could turn to if we got lost. But a true documentary is

where you sit back and let the camera record what is happening. What we did was quasi-educational and entertainment—we could even call it a comedy special. That was all intentional and deliberate, because we were competing against the Kardashian sisters and I was not going to show my cleavage. I wanted people who were dismissive of ADHD to tune in.

And so you came up with a provocative title: *ADD & Loving It?!* How did you come to decide upon that title, and what exactly does it mean to each of you?

Ava: The original title was *ADD & Loving It*—no exclamation and question mark. The idea just came to me one morning: "You can have ADD and still love life." That's the possibility we wanted to convey. Not that you love ADHD, but that you love life. That title was bothering some of the experts we'd asked to interview, however, and some people affected by ADHD in test audiences were enraged by it, because they felt we were minimizing their challenges. That's when we added the exclamation point and question mark.

Rick: In the end, the title was meant to be both ambiguous and provocative—so you could come from either extreme ("ADHD is awful" and "ADHD is a gift") and expect that you will see a show that you agree with.



Rick and Ava at their wedding on the eve of New Year's Eve 2008.

Did the initial, unambiguous title, without a question mark, also reflect your perspective of ADHD, that all everyone who has ADHD is like Rick and Patrick McKenna (who co-stars in the show)—that is, successful, funny, and creative people?

Ava: When we started, we sort of did have the idea that all people with ADHD were like Rick and Patrick—successful, funny, and creative people. As we got further into the project, however, we learned that many people with ADHD have a very tough time. Moreover, not everyone has access to experts. And, not everyone has support at home, especially if the parents also had unrecognized ADHD.

Rick: I certainly saw in the comedy community that there is a lot of ADHD. What I

didn't see until we started creating the documentary was all the other aspects of ADHD. Especially the downside. I don't think I really appreciated how hard some people were struggling. Before then, I hadn't heard or encountered people who were openly ADHD and struggling severely.

Rick, you've spoken about medication helping you. Yet many people assume that medication dampens creativity, which your work surely depends upon. Can you talk about your experience?

Rick: I take a stimulant, and took one for the first time ten years ago. I'll tell you about that first week I tried it.

I was so nervous, because I had never taken drugs. I'd had maybe three glasses of beer in my life! The doc said the ADHD medication was safer than the caffeine (which I was consuming in great quantities). The first day, I broke the pill in half, and it was already the lowest dose. I felt nothing. Next day, I took the whole pill. Still no difference. There I am waiting to hear Jefferson Airplane playing *White Rabbit*. But no psychedelic effects kicked in. By the fourth day, I thought, I don't know if the medication is doing anything. So, I decided to put it to the test.

As a business owner in Canada, we have to submit a tax called the GST (goods and service tax). I was fifteen months behind. I figured, this will be the perfect test. I took the medication, and then I dragged out my heaps of GST paperwork. By the end of the day I was only *three* months behind. In one day! Literally, the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I thought, *What did I just do?* The next day, I continued with the same dosage, but this time I was writing comedy. I wasn't zombied out. The writing was funny. In fact, I was more productive than usual. I got lots more done than I normally might have.

It's hard to believe now, Ava, but just a few short years ago you had no familiarity with ADHD when you started seeing each other. In fact, it seems you were quite concerned not only in Rick accepting the diagnosis but also in his taking the medication. What can you two remember about that time in your life together?

Rick: For Ava, I think it was kind of like being a vegetarian and living with someone who only eats burgers. That's the best way to describe it. That person might not knock

the burger out of your hand but somewhere there is an unspoken “HE’S A KILLER!” in the room. Underneath that, however, was her concern for me. Even now, people will show their concern for me with skepticism about ADHD, saying they’re worried that I might become a pawn of big pharmaceutical companies or that I’m diminishing my accomplishments by talking about my ADHD. I used to get defensive. Now I remind myself they are showing concern for me. Once they know more about ADHD, they relax.

Ava: It’s true. I certainly didn’t understand anything about ADHD back then, or why you would take medication for it. I thought ADHD was overdiagnosed, I thought Ritalin was scary, and I hated that Rick took medication. No, it had nothing to do with how the medication affected him. It was simply my prejudice.

For most of my adult life, I was very ignorant when it came to any mental-health conditions—depression, ADHD, or anything else. I had the same thoughts that many other people have when they don’t understand the nature of these challenges: “Straighten up. Pull up your bootstraps. What’s your problem?”

I didn’t start to truly understand ADHD medications until I started working on the documentary. By that time, though, I was a different person, one who no longer thought she knew everything. I had never thought I’d get a divorce, but my marriage had ended a few years before. Many things shifted, and so I had to reassess. I was depressed when I left my marriage, and I started to understand what that feels like, and why you can’t just pull yourself up by your bootstraps. I became a lot more empathic and able to put myself in other people’s shoes.

Finally, I realized that Rick taking ADHD medication really wasn’t about me at all; it was about his experience of his day. His moment-to-moment experience. I trusted him to convey his experience, and I honored that. I did notice that he was not frittering away time. He was more productive. He would actually be able to focus on what needed to be done.

Before you started out, what was your vision for the documentary?

Rick: Everyone says, when they experience certain tragic or painful events in life, “Some day we’ll laugh at this.” I say, “Why wait?”

When I get heavy or significant and dramatic about how something’s gone wrong and it’s not fair, it is a lifesaver to



Rick directing an episode of *History Bites*; Ava on the set; Rick with the cast.

be able to laugh, to get perspective, to see that this too shall pass and it’s not the end of the world. Doing this documentary and then the website and the various videos has been a journey fraught with potholes, wrong turns, flat tires and even a couple of head-on collisions. So we made sure we had a big enough goal—a destination if you will—that was going to make the journey worthwhile.

So before we started we created a goal: “Thanks to this documentary ten thousand children will not lie in bed tonight, staring at the ceiling with wet eyes, wondering ‘what’s

wrong with me?’ And the parents won’t be down the hall in their bedroom arguing and confused.” With that purpose, it was much easier to get over any speed bumps. When we were tired or frustrated or upset, well, ten thousand children were waiting for us.

Ava: That was our touchstone throughout the project. Whenever we hit snags, we kept this bigger context in mind. Our goal was to end suffering, provide encouragement, and lighten the load. Yes, there is ADHD and, armed with the right tools, you can have the life you love. **A**

See Rick and Patrick perform live! CHADD is partnering with Rick Green and Patrick McKenna to bring you a live show on ADHD, *Now What?!* on June 12 at the University of Maryland’s Dekelbourn Concert Hall in College Park. If you liked *ADD and Loving It?!* then you will love *Now What?!* Check out CHADD’s website for more information.