

Combine skills learned on *Video Diaries* and on *As Seen on TV*, and you're just about ready to put 100 children through their paces behind the camera. Rob Buckley reports on Nickelodeon's *Kid Nation*

# Little voices, big noise

Imagine the reactions the day Eric Rowan announced to his production team what his company's first commission would be. "You're going to do what? Give 100 children some basic training and a camcorder for two days to make their own video diaries? Are you mad?"

Wrong. After 25 years at the BBC, former *Newsround*-editor and executive producer Rowan says he had "absolutely no qualms" about the project - and neither did his staff. That's because he had already pioneered children's access programming with *As Seen on TV*; and his producer and former colleague Doug Woodroff had done time on *Video Diaries* (though this is his first time as a series producer). Practically plain sailing then - provided midnight cheese raids and "why I hate apple crumble" make good kids' television, of course.

The commission for 100x2-minute slots came

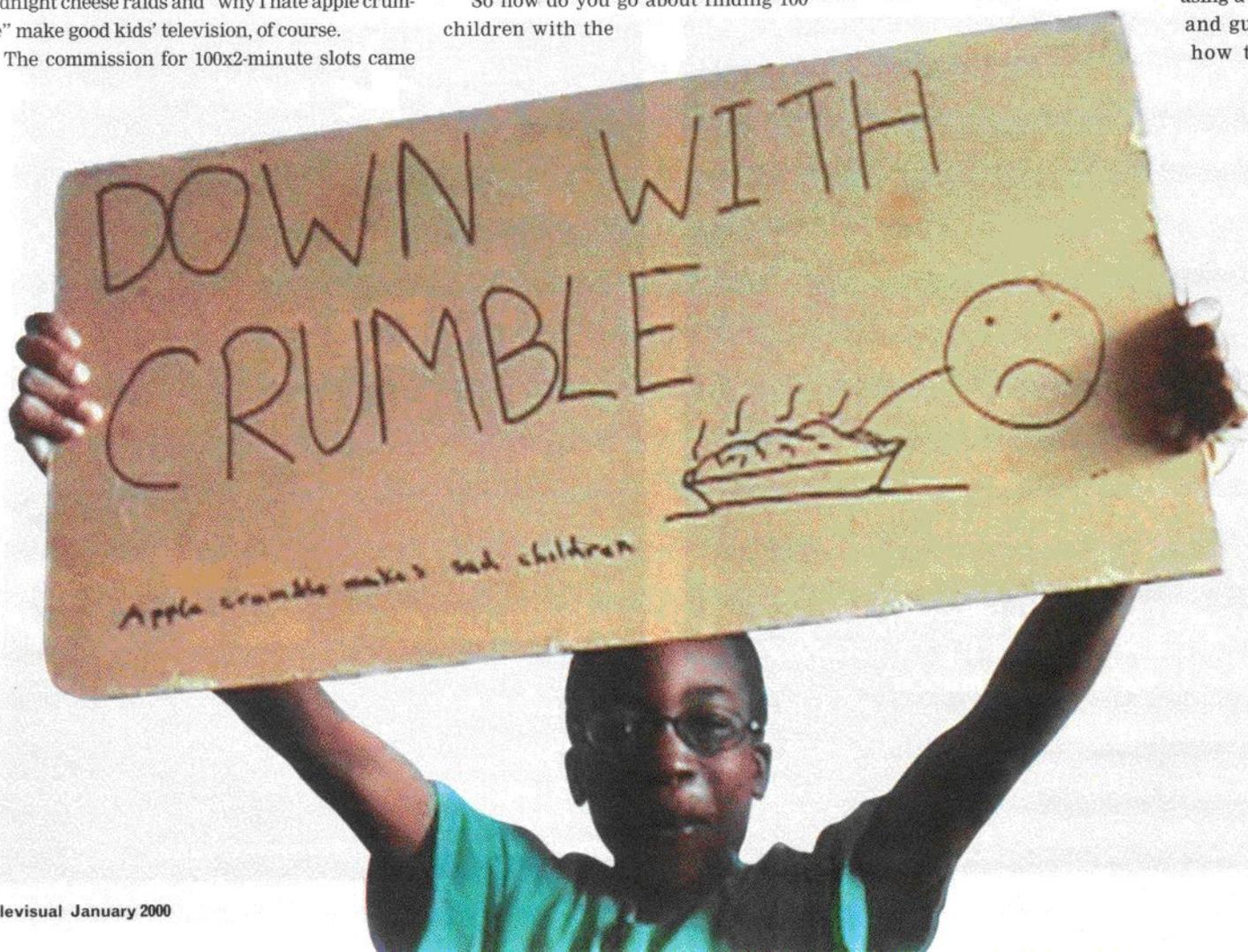
from Janie Grace, Nickelodeon UK's md, who had heard Rowan was leaving the BBC to go it alone. Rowan started talks with Grace in the spring and, discussing ideas for projects, the two eventually came up with the idea for *Kid Nation*. "It's an exciting and a worthwhile thing to do," he believes. "Not only is the technology becoming simpler to use, but it's also producing better-quality images, which is what makes this possible. It's a great idea to put children at the centre of the action in children's programmes - and what better way than to make them part of the production process?" Within a month, the company had already started filming, even though the official commission was not forthcoming till September.

So how do you go about finding 100 children with the

potential to make a short film? Rowan and Woodroff hired a team of researchers around the country (and mainly outside London and the south east) to search for suitable children and gave them a simple briefing. "They're meeting thousands of children and their job is to find 100 who have ideas, who want to make video diaries - and who also have the energy, imagination and wherewithall to see it through. But they need have no qualifications other than that they're twelve years old or under."

The researchers, most of whom have had experience on other children's productions, were recruited because of their eye for stories and their liking for children. They gave the selected kids a

two-hour course in using a camcorder, and guidance on how to shoot a ▶



## IN PRODUCTION

short film. Tips included thinking about whether they should shoot pictures, sound or both at any one time and how to stop relatives helping.

"There are lots of willing brothers and sisters and lots of very willing mothers and fathers who could potentially overshadow a child," points out Woodroff. "You have to explain politely to them it's the child making the film, not them. Older brothers and sisters *mustn't* say 'no, that's not what you do - I'm older than you so you have to listen to me.'"

Woodroff drew on his *Video Diaries* experience to choose Sony TRV8 Mini-DV domestic camcorders for the shoots in preference to the usual Sony 1000, since they are lighter, smaller and simpler to use and more suitable for children. A series of technical tests confirmed it could be made broadcast-quality, with a clip-mike helping to boost the audio to a tolerable level.

To make sure the kids were on track, the researchers reviewed the rushes at the end of the first day. If the kids had let their enthusiasm take them on tangents, they were reminded what film they'd agreed to make in the first place.

"We're not looking for your conventional bright child or member of an organisation," says Rowan. "One girl did a film about synchronised swimming

and there's a lot of material in praise of synchronised swimming, and lots of shots of legs sticking out of swimming pools." Another did a "fantastic film about 'I hate cheese,'" Woodroff recalls. "Most kids can probably whinge a bit about 'I hate cabbage,' but this is a very imaginative film about why she hates cheese, with nice pieces to camera and even shots of her leading a raid on the fridge with her little brother to get this stinky, smelly cheese out of it."

Typically, Woodroff gets about two or three hours of footage from each child to edit down on an Avid. "That's why we insisted on a simple story - so that we wouldn't have too much material to work with." After the edit, he then has to get permission from the parents to show the final cut - on top of the permission he needed for their cooperation in the first place.

All the films have a different feel to them, says Woodroff. "That's part of the beauty of it. It's a celebration of the diversity of kids and whereas there are always certain manacles on the makers of children's television, you have the chance for a child to make a film about some relatively unconventional things."

With up to 300 hours of footage to work with, it's

no surprise that the edit is still in progress, even with the first films due to air this month. Rowan believes that children will want to watch the shorts; in any case - given the films' brevity - he doesn't think they'll have time to think about changing channel, despite their notoriously short attention span.

Which is a clue about the likely budget. Nickelodeon is cagey about money, saying (of course) that it's more concerned with quality than cash. But the editing investment alone isn't small. Given the channel's known concerns with branding and keeping its viewers attention in a competitive market, its motivation is likely to go beyond simply producing quality programming.

But to Rowan and Woodroff, *Kid Nation* is simply a way for people to hear the authentic voice of children today. "I know that's the sort of thing you always hear whenever there's a 'world summit' on children's programming: programme-makers, strategists and planners all get together and someone says it.

"But it's actually quite rare that the child's voice is authentically heard on television," says Rowan. "I think that's because people are too busy to listen most of the time." ■