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Interview with Austin MacDonald

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My first interview of 2012 is with talented young Canadian actor Austin MacDonald. American audiences aren't as familiar with Austin yet, but I predict they will be soon.



photo credit: Colin Cregg

Sixteen year old Austin MacDonald has been acting since he was eight, starting in commercials and in a very well-received anti-bullying television campaign for the Concerned Children's Advertisers group. American audiences have seen him in the movie *Kit Kittredge: American Girl*, a bunch of *Roxy Hunter* tv movies on Nickelodeon, and on several episodes of *The Doodlebops*. In Canada, He's currently starring as part of the ensemble on *DEBRA* and appearing as a semi-regular on *LIFE WITH BOYS* (coming to Nickelodeon in the US in 2012). He's also worked as a regular on the drama *LIVING IN YOUR CAR* for TMN/HBO.

ANTHONY: American audiences probably know you best from Nickelodeon's ROXY HUNTER TV movies. How fun were those to film?

AUSTIN: I loved filming the series. There were a lot of really fun moments on set. The cast and I filmed in an old house in the middle of nowhere and did a lot night-shooting. The theme of most of them was spooky stories, so the house fit great and we played tricks on each other. The second two we filmed were during a blizzard so it was quite cold. I remember the crew made an ice luge for all of us to jump off of with tubes. I still see and work with most of the cast on other projects.

ANTHONY: You also had a supporting role (and were nominated for a Young Artist Supporting Actor Award) in KIT KITTREDGE, appearing alongside Abigail Breslin, Zach Mills and Willow Smith. Quite the ensemble, and you're all becoming more well-known. Do you keep in touch with anyone from that cast?

AUSTIN: I keep in touch with Zach Mills as we were the closest in age and our trailers were close together. It's pretty hard to keep in contact with them as they live in the US.

ANTHONY: One more question about the past: I have at least one niece who would be upset if I didn't ask what it was like working with the Doodlebops.

AUSTIN: They were a lot of fun and, before you ask, yes I got to pretend to drive the magic bus! Ha-ha, I did several episodes where I was working on green screen, so for me all I would see when doing the skits, were the props in my hands. I also did an episode where I went to a concert with them and it was incredible to see how excited the kids were to see them.

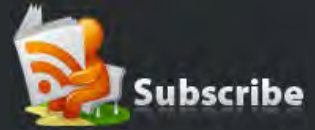
ANTHONY: Alright, on to your current projects. For Canadian television, you've got your starring role on DEBRA! and your recurring role on LIFE WITH BOYS. How different are the characters of Auzzie and Andy?

AUSTIN: Auzzie tries to be a ladies man. Dresses really "hip". He is funny and in love with Dancy. Almost everything he does somehow comes back to trying to get Dancy to go on a date. He is best friends with Debra, Preston and Brud in the show. Auzzie is almost always the comic relief of DEBRA. He plays in a band and is involved with the arts.

Andy is the athlete; he was the team captain of the wrestling team until Tess came along and beat him! I don't think Andy is into the arts though; he is a jock of sorts. I think he is probably part of the more "popular" group at school. Andy is comfortable in team sweats than trendy clothes.

I also am in quite a few adult shows, and in one I play a guy named Scott. The show is TMN/HBO's "Living in Your Car" Scott is a homeless teen who actually lives in his car and eats at soup kitchens and gets food and clothing from charities. It was another eye opening role for me when I was researching for it. I was floored at how much poverty was here in my own neighbourhood, kids in my own school.

ANTHONY: Other than Living In Your Car, do you have any appearances on other adult shows coming up?



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AUSTIN: I have several shows coming up one called Rick Mercer Report, I am a recurring comedian that comes on a bout once a season to do political comedy skits. Mudpit is a new (children's) show starting on Teletoon's here/Nick in US and I play Marvin in an episode. Have a small movie role as a Brian "the Bully" in Jesus Henry Christ with Toni Colette and Michael Sheen (Indie film) Its my second film for Julia Roberts "Redoms" production company.

ANTHONY: What are the main differences in shooting a teen comedy series and an adult drama?

AUSTIN: The difference is that in Adult drama you have to become the character , research what that type of person or role would be like. I don't method act but like to know about what it would be like to be in that situation i.e., hungry, poor, snob, autistic.... In teen comedy the pace is much faster and you have to know timing. Know when to come in when to stop if they are using laugh tracks.... On a teen show there is a little more care put into language used on set, more kids in class together off set. In adult shows a little more swearing may be used, crew smoke around the corner on set, joke a bit more. Usually in school it is just me alone with a teacher. Also producers and director tend to be less tolerant of mistakes and line changes.

ANTHONY: Do you prepare differently for the adult shows?

AUSTIN: No, I need to know my lines equally for both, follow direction and know my marks. Maybe for the kids shows there is a little more distraction from giggling and trying to make each other laugh. Basically need to be professional and know where I am supposed to be on both. On time for set in the chair for hair and makeup and always let the AD know where I am!!

ANTHONY: With LIFE WITH BOYS set to premiere on Nickelodeon in the US in January, have you been approached about appearing more often?

AUSTIN: We have finished filming all of season one and I am in 6 or 7 episodes. Depending on the response to his character and where the story lines go.... I hope Andy is well received and they write him into the story more. I love the cast and crew and am good friends with Nathan who plays Gabe in the show. Feel free to email them and tell them you like my character! lol

ANTHONY: I always have to ask at least a couple of questions about craft. You've been acting for a few years now. Has your approach to preparing for a role changed at all as you've matured as an actor?

AUSTIN: Definitely. As one gets older, the types of characters he/she will do changes as well. The parts become much harder and longer to memorize etc, but it's also more of a challenge, which makes it more fun.

ANTHONY: On your website, you mention taking acting classes with Lewis Baumander alongside some of your DEBRA! Co-stars and folks from shows like Degrassi. What's working with Lewis like? What's the biggest benefit you get from the classes?

AUSTIN: I love my classes! I have worked with several coaches and all have given me wonderful insight and tricks to help me out. With Lewis though I am really enjoying it, as I am in a class with actors from "Really Me", "Degrassi", "Life With Boys", "Debra" and a few from musical theatre. It's great as we can go to each other about problem and get good advice, we work on auditions we may have. An example is I had a self tape for an audition so near the end of class everyone helped me with it and I taped it with all their support. We even have a study group we do once a week outside of class. It's important to have some close friends in the business that you can go to that understand how your feeling or your frustrations. Luckily we are supportive, not competitive, and truly excited for each person's success.

ANTHONY: We also have to take some time to talk about the causes that are important to you. You appeared in an anti-bullying television campaign that aired in Canada. Do you think we've made any headway in combating bullying since those commercials aired?

AUSTIN: I did that PSA when I was 9 or 10, and the emails and letter I got, were so many messages of "help me." It was overwhelming, my mom had to step in and help me manage them and find help line numbers. I think we have brought bullying out into the open, it's not a "dirty secret" but it still is happening and until people truly stand up, and intervene for someone who is being bullied it's going to happen. Now with computers people feel safe and empowered enough to say things to or about someone they would never say to their face. School is where it really has to start, education and intervention right away, let's be honest teachers know right from Grade 1 who the bullies are.... instead of suspending kids put them in programs and make the parents involved.

ANTHONY: Were you bullied when you were younger?

AUSTIN: No, but a family member was and I saw how damaging it was. You can say "It gets better" and all those sayings to someone being bullied but at that moment tomorrow doesn't matter, it is today and how they feel. It is also something I don't think the person in question has really gotten over and has made relationships and trust very difficult for them.

ANTHONY: The long-term effects of bullying are something I think the general public is still uncomfortable discussing, sadly. You've taken a stand against physical bullying and also cyber-bullying. Which one, do you think, is the harder for parents to recognize is going on, and what advice do you have for kids who are being bullied?

AUSTIN: I answered a lot of this above but cyber bullying is the sneakiest one. Lets be honest how many of us are on the computer when we aren't supposed to be, how many belong to site we aren't allowed to be but we are so some kid bullies you online but you cant go to your parents because you will get in trouble for It's a cycle. Privacy is important for kids and teens but my mom knew everything I did and where I went online threw programs they had installed. If you are being bullied



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suck it up with the parents and say something, they love you and care about you and will forgive you, but a bully will never stop!

ANTHONY: You're also instrumental in promoting Blessings in a Backpack; a charity U.S. audiences are familiar with thanks to Hilary Duff. Tell us about Blessings, and about how you became involved with it.

AUSTIN: Blessings in a backpack is in Canada now and I am so excited about this program. I first heard about BIB through a young journalist Angela MacLean. I was looking for a charity I could work with that helped in my own community and was totally non-profit. No big CEO making money from donations. I also loved that the people in the program aren't identified by carrying a big corporate logo backpack; they can keep some dignity by keeping their involvement private. Pick them up full on Friday and then drop them off on Monday empty. Every part of the program is volunteered: lawyers, PR, backpack drives, donations. For myself, I know that I have used my voice in a positive way and do it because the kids in my community that get help may be the ones who would have been bullies if someone hadn't stepped in to help them early on.



some of the backpacks Austin has collected

ANTHONY: What effect do you think programs like Blessings in a Backpack have on bullying?

AUSTIN: Blessings in a backpack is a program that feeds kids on the weekend. Kids can be in breakfast or lunch programs but on the weekend, they go home to nothing. The idea is a kid who is in the program is getting nutrition so they can study and get homework done on the weekend. A lot of kids don't participate in these kinds of programs as they get older as they don't want to be labelled as "one of those" so they can keep their pride by participating in BIB. That's where the backpack comes in. It gives them a chance to bring home the food without being labelled as a "poor kid" or made fun of. A kid who is being fed and doing homework on the weekend and getting good marks is more likely to stay in school, have better attendance, better grades, better behaviour, and more self esteem.

ANTHONY: What's the best way for people to get involved with Blessings in a Backpack?

AUSTIN: Best way to get involved with BIB is by going to www.blessingsinabackpack.org for the US, and www.blessingsinaback.ca for Canada. Alternatively you can visit [my website](#) and click on the Blessings link there. Right now in Canada, the program is present in just over ten schools, we are planning on opening new ones in 2012. It costs approximately \$100.00 to feed a kid for the full year. A typical school has 50-150 kids in a program. 40% of food bank users in Canada are children. You can help get involved by sponsoring a school or donating money at the website, hold a backpack drive. Keep spreading the word about our program, our motto is "Hunger Doesn't Take the Weekend Off."

ANTHONY: After such a serious discussion, let's end on a lighter note with my usual closing question: What is your favorite book, and what would you say to someone who has never read it to convince them that they should?

AUSTIN: If anything, the Bourne Identity because of its splendid detail, plot, and wordplay.

ANTHONY: Thanks, Austin! Good luck this year, and please stop back to visit anytime!

You can follow Austin on Twitter as [@auzzymac](#), Like his [Facebook fan page](#), and check out his [IMDB page](#) as well as his [newly redesigned website](#).

Follow the links to two funny clips of Austin.

First, "[the birdcage scene](#)" from Debra, with Auzzie and Brud.

Then, Andy gets his wrestling feathers clipped in a scene from [Life With Boys](#).