

# The Seattle Times

January 3, 2010

## Paul Allen-conceived PBS series looks at human emotions

Even billionaire philanthropists want to know the secret to happiness, and a new documentary conceived by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen aims to shed light on the answer.

By Kristi Heim  
*Seattle Times business reporter*

What is the secret to happiness? Even billionaire philanthropists want to know.

Just in time for the post-holiday doldrums, a new documentary conceived by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen aims to shed light on that question.

Coproduced by Allen's Vulcan Productions and NOVA/WGBH Science Unit, the three-part series, "This Emotional Life," begins tonight on PBS.

The project explores the cutting-edge science that unravels some of the mysteries of human emotion, such as how infants form early attachments that determine lifelong emotional health, and how therapists use eye movement to help people reprocess disturbing memories.

But Allen wanted to go further, pairing scientific knowledge with personal stories and practical resources to help people cope.

The project includes online tools and multimedia and kicks off a two-year outreach to young parents and military families. Parents can connect with others and get information about early learning, and military families can get support and resources to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), for example.

Allen said he was pleased with the results.

"I hope everyone benefits from this series and it provokes new thoughts on how we can improve our lives," he wrote in an e-mail. "Some of the stories the participants tell us are moving examples of how we can all work at finding a better emotional balance in our lives — just like we work to get physically fit."

Hosted by Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert, the series covers the importance of social relationships to humans, ways to confront fear, anxiety and other obstacles, and the pursuit of happiness.



Paul Allen



Richard Hutton



Andrew Meltzoff

It combines personal stories of ordinary people, such as a cancer survivor, and interviews with celebrities about their emotional challenges, including actor Chevy Chase, "Seinfeld" co-creator Larry David and "CBS Evening News" anchor Katie Couric.

For Allen, whose eclectic interests include brain research and extraterrestrial life, it all started with a trip to Harvard about five years ago.

He said he was stunned to learn how many of the brightest college students took prescription drugs for depression and anxiety.

That realization turned a budding idea for a project involving mental health into plans for the documentary, said Richard Hutton, Vulcan senior executive producer.

Allen himself has had a challenging past year. In November, his sister disclosed he had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer similar to one he fought 25 years ago. Earlier in 2009, Charter Communications, the cable company he controls, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. It has since emerged from bankruptcy.

Asked whether making the series helped Allen personally, Hutton said. "In a way, yeah. ... I hope so."

Hutton teamed with Paula Apsell, senior executive producer at NOVA/WGBH Science Unit, the same award-winning team that coproduced "Rx for Survival — A Global Health Challenge," "Evolution" and "Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial."

The hard part was figuring out how to structure the series to break new ground and also provide the most useful information, Hutton said.

"We all have feelings, emotions and relationships of some kind, so we think this should be easy," he said. "Well, it was really, really hard."

Showing well-known personalities discussing their struggles might help overcome the stigmas associated with emotional issues, and help others dealing with the same issues, Hutton said.

"When people hear Chevy Chase talking about depression or [former tennis great] John McEnroe talking about anger, I think in some ways that makes it more acceptable for people to say 'I have that. I can go and look for help,' " Hutton said.

Scientists have begun to understand more about emotions, and new learning can help debunk previous assumptions about trauma and other experiences.

"For many years, people thought you just forget you went through that horrible thing in Vietnam," Hutton said. "Now the theory is to confront it, go through it, meet the experience head-on."

One person involved in cutting-edge work on human emotion is Andrew Meltzoff, professor of psychology and Tamaki Chair at the University of Washington. He codirects the UW Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences (I-LAB) and is featured in the first episode of the series.

"There has been a revolution in our understanding of our early development and its impact on lifelong psychological well-being," he said.

A child's brain develops most in the first two or three years, he said. Babies observe and learn from those around them during that period, long before they can talk.

"They're very active learners, very busy interpreting the emotional and linguistic signals we give them," Meltzoff said. "They are as carefully looking out and trying to make sense of us as we are of them."

Because humans long for attention, children ignored in orphanages can show ill effects throughout their lives. But humans also are emotionally resilient, so bonding with even one person "can help rescue a child and lead to amazing growth," Meltzoff said.

Before the series got off the ground, Meltzoff said one of the first conversations he had with Allen took place at an informal gathering of scientists and educators Allen hosted in a retreat near Seattle.

The group discussed early learning and brain science over several days.

Meltzoff called it "among the most exciting, intellectually vibrant conversations I have had."

"Paul was always jumping in with particular questions about the science and how it could be scaled up to impact society and what big questions it could address."

The series reflects Allen's personal interests; he has made a dozen documentaries, mostly about science, and gets involved in the work directly.

And what does science say about being a billionaire?

According to research on the Web site accompanying the series, money can buy happiness — as long as you give some of it away. Researchers found that happiness did correlate to higher incomes, spending money on others and giving to charity.

*Kristi Heim: 206-464-2718 or [kheim@seattletimes.com](mailto:kheim@seattletimes.com)*

Copyright © The Seattle Times Company

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail [resale@seattletimes.com](mailto:resale@seattletimes.com) with your request.