



Art Imitating Life, Self Storage Style

By John Dunlap

Self storage has always been a bit player in the world of film and television. On occasion it shows up in a sitcom like *Seinfeld* or in a police show dealing with terrorists. But self storage has rarely been the focal point of a regular TV presentation—until now. If Cindy Vannoy has her way, a situation comedy about the life of owner/operators of a self storage facility and their customers will be coming to your TV screen soon.

Vannoy, who lives in Sharon, Connecticut, is a former New York City resident who worked for ABC-TV for 20 years in its marketing department. She has won three Emmy Awards for her efforts and knows the television industry inside-out. She also is friends with the Riva family (Brian, Michael, et. al.), who own self storage facilities in New England. It is because of them that she came to realize that there may be possibilities (as well as endless story concepts) for a comedy based around their industry. So she is developing the show *Stuff* and is in the midst of pitching it to TV networks.

In his recent stand-up comedy tour, Jerry Seinfeld did a bit on self storage as part of his routine. In it, he pokes fun at people's obsession with their belongings, saying, "Once an item goes from the house to the garage, it basically is never coming back. And once it is in self storage, it is held captive. I sometimes go to my self storage unit and whisper to all the items in there, 'I'm going to bust you guys out of here some day.'"

Vannoy says that other than Seinfeld, her only other memory of an entertainer talking about self storage was the late George Carlin, talking about people and their love of "stuff." It was that memory, along with a kitchen table discussion with the Rivas about the viability of a TV show about self storage, that set things in motion.

"I had heard through mutual friends that Tonya Riva had always wanted to write a book about self storage stories," said Vannoy. "So I asked if we could get together to talk about the possibility of a sitcom about self storage, whether it could work or not; and after talking with the Rivas I was quite sure it was a good idea. I heard so many good stories from them about people in self storage and their customers."

"I've been to conferences (like the recent SSA gathering in Colorado Springs) to talk to people and I'm always surprised how everyone seems to have great stories about their self storage businesses," Vannoy adds. "I'm also surprised how touched people are about the business—how much they love it. I think there is plenty of humor and pathos to be found in these stories; thus, the ability to have a TV show about it."

Cheers

Vannoy envisions a sitcom that resembles the great TV show *Cheers* in that a core group of characters holds down the fort while periphery characters come and go. Thus, the show will revolve around the staff that runs the facility while new customers bring their own stories to the show every week.

"Like the bar in *Cheers*, self storage can often just serve as a backdrop to the people themselves who run the facility," Vannoy says. "The idea is to develop characters and to get to know and love them. But the customers can also bring a great deal of humor and touching qualities as well. The good news is that really good ideas and stories keep coming in to me from self storage owner/operators and managers all around the country."

So how far has Vannoy progressed in her attempt to turn *Stuff* into reality? A great deal, as it turns out. She already has written and filmed a pilot and is pitching six 30-minute episodes. She has her location and characters in place. It happens in the town of Torrington, Connecticut. A self storage facility has just changed hands and its new owner runs up against the Lewis sisters, no-nonsense Gwen and all-nonsense Maddy, who run the show. Walter, the security guard, is a sort of modern-day Barney Fife, while the original owner Tom just can't seem to pull away from the facility. And narrating it all is Zelda, who knows all and sees all and just happens to be a basset hound. Throw in an ever-changing bunch of customers, and you have the basis for *Stuff*.

Vannoy not only has a pilot episode completed to show to TV execs, but also has created a website for *Stuff* (www.stuff.com).

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stufftheshow.com) and she encourages everyone in self storage to contribute story ideas of their own to the site. Whether it is a strange occurrence, a funny customer or just the behind-the-scenes doings of the business, Vannoy welcomes thoughts from self storage professionals and points out they could always end up on the show.

Work to Do

That said, she still has work to do to make *Stuff* a reality. Getting the right people to open doors so she can make her pitch is one thing, but explaining the benefits of a program surrounding self storage is another.

“This is a process that could take a couple of years,” Vannoy adds. “The challenge is getting your foot in the door with the right people. I’ve just started contacting people I know in the industry to see about setting up meetings. It always seems to be about knowing someone who knows someone. Networks are usually reluctant about picking up unsolicited ideas, so you have to team up with someone who has some connections.”



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~ Cindy Vannoy
Producer of *Stuff*

Vannoy hopes that her work in marketing for ABC could help the cause, especially since there could be so many marketing opportunities involving self storage.

“Advertisers are always looking for great sponsorships, and in self storage you have the companies themselves who are in the industry, as well as those people who make the boxes, packaging and locks. Then there are the truck rental companies. I would think there are many opportunities to get solid advertising behind a show about self storage.”

Vannoy remains entirely optimistic that *Stuff* will happen. She has gone through all the right processes to set it up—studying the industry, talking with individuals in self storage, gathering great stories, writing a treatment for the show, filming the pilot and setting up the website.

“There was an article in the *New York Times* recently about the growth of self storage and Americans’ obsession with their stuff,” Vannoy concludes. “This is an industry that touches everyone. I think it would make a great TV show, one with an endless supply of stories.”

No doubt, those in the self storage industry would agree. Hopefully, *Stuff* will huff and puff its way into prime-time television. ❖