



ENTERTAINMENT

## Hello Kitty Turns 45! Here's Why the World's Most Famous Cat Means So Much to Me

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By **PATTI WOODS**

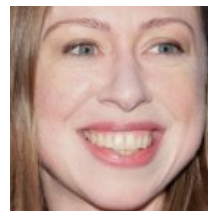


(iStock)

**W**hen I was in kindergarten, my mother was called into school for a conference. “We think there may be an issue,” the teacher said. “Patti never talks.”

Had that meeting been today, it might have resulted in all sorts of testing and evaluations, but back then my mother simply explained, “No, she’s just [shy](#).”

I was the quiet one in the class, the one who sat with her hands folded and eyes on the board. While the other girls ran off in groups at recess to hang upside down from the monkey bars, I’d find a shady spot under a tree and read a book alone.



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tiny paper with little envelopes and a mini pencil—decorated with an adorable cartoon cat wearing a big red bow. This, of course, was [Hello Kitty](#).

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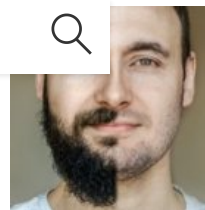
Yuko Shimizu, a Japanese graphic designer, first created Hello Kitty in 1974 and two years later, the merchandise first appeared in the U.S. The rest is history—in fact, Hello Kitty celebrated her 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019 with a Hello Kitty Friends Around the World Pop Up Tour.

“Since her debut, Hello Kitty has inspired friendship and kindness around the world by spreading positive messages from her heart,” Susan Tran, director of brand marketing for Sanrio, the company that designs Hello Kitty merchandise, told me.

When I brought my stationery set to school, my classmates flocked to take a look. Ultimately, I bonded with a boy over Hello Kitty. Together, Sean and I sat drawing pictures of her, writing notes to each other with Hello Kitty markers and comparing our stickers. When a Sanrio store opened at the local mall, we both decided to buy each other Christmas gifts from there. His mother brought him to my house (such a big deal!) and he presented me with a treasure trove: rubber stamps, a mirror, erasers and even candy emblazoned with Hello Kitty.

I recently reconnected with Sean and asked him why he thought we loved Hello Kitty so much. “There was a fantasy quality to her where everything was positive, easy and fun,” he said. “And the fact that she didn’t have a mouth, lent her a zen quality. She was always calm and unruffled.”

He’s right. It wasn’t until adulthood—my 30<sup>th</sup> [birthday](#) specifically, when my friends showered me with Hello Kitty [gifts](#)—that I realized why I was so enchanted by this little cat: Hello Kitty has no mouth. She never spoke a word, yet could somehow convey emotion. Despite the fact that she didn’t speak, she was always surrounded by friends: Patty & Jimmy, Little Twin Stars, My Melody, Tuxedo Sam and Chococat. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I had found a role model in a simple little drawing of a kitty.



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necessarily stepping out of my quiet comfort zone. Even though she was a [cartoon](#) character, I gained a sense of security and comfort from her. Just because she was quiet didn't mean she had to be a shrinking violet. In fact, she was just the opposite—she was the leader in her group of friends. Seeing that confirmed for me that it was OK to be quiet.

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“Kids tend to find characters that they can identify with,” [Barbara Greenberg](#), Ph.D., a teen, adolescent, child and [family](#) psychologist, explains.

A child who gravitates toward Hello Kitty, she speculates, could be trying to find their voice. And they could view Hello Kitty's lack of a mouth to mean that she is trying to find her voice, too, which would be comforting to them. It's a toy that doesn't come packaged with the pressure to be loud and proud—not that a Hello Kitty enthusiast couldn't be loud and proud as well.

Dr. Greenberg believes unlike some toys, Hello Kitty wasn't telling me how to feel or who to be. In fact, it may have been more of the opposite; her unclear expressions allowed me to project my own emotions onto her, which provided comfort that could really benefit many children unsure of their place in the world.

It turns out that wasn't coincidental. According to Sanrio, Hello Kitty was drawn without a mouth because they wanted people to “project their feelings onto the character” and “be happy or sad together with Hello Kitty.” In a pilot cartoon series, Hello Kitty was given a mouth, but hardcore fans revolted. I guess I wasn't the only one who liked her face the way it was—open to interpretation.

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Today, Hello Kitty is depicted as she was from the very beginning—without a mouth.

“Hello Kitty is an ambassador for Sanrio's ‘small gift, big smile,’ philosophy—that a small gift can bring happiness and smiles to people of all ages,” said Tran.

Now, I choose not to label myself as shy (not that there's anything wrong with it); I consider myself a good listener and I love being with people.

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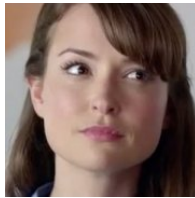
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