

Alumni Connection



Barry Morrow (RHS '66)

Story provided by Alumni Access E-newsletter

Barry Morrow is an Academy Award-winning screen writer, producer and a 1966 graduate of Robbinsdale High School. He started as a documentary film maker.

He is perhaps best known for two movies. The first was *Bill*, which starred Mickey Rooney and Dennis Quaid. It told the story of Bill Sackter, whom Barry met in Minneapolis and for whom he eventually became a legal guardian. This earned Barry an Emmy in 1981. In 1989 he received an Oscar for best original screenplay for *Rain Man*, which starred Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise. He wrote the story and co-wrote the screenplay based upon his friendship with Kim Peek.

Barry has had a successful career as a writer and as a producer of a variety of films. He has also been a strong advocate for people with disabilities. He continues to be active in both endeavors.

Here is Barry's fascinating account of his influential teachers, early formative experiences, important accomplishments, plans for the future, advocacy for people with disabilities and advice for young people in our schools.

Can you recall any Robbinsdale teachers who had a strong influence on you?

I vividly remember that fall day in tenth grade when I felt my brain change. It was like I grew another lobe, or awakened a sleeping one. I don't know why it happened, but suddenly I became verbal. I was in Tom Kresensky's history class, and for the first time in my life I found myself raising my hand and answering questions. Kresensky was an outrageous teacher who seemed far better suited to a college teaching environment than high school (as did all the memorable teachers), and his gruff, no nonsense style suited me. I liked his strong opinions, and I loved the heated debates he ignited. I could palpably feel that I was "growing up" in his class. I had him again for history in my senior year, but he was killed - murdered, actually - sometime during, I believe, a spring holiday. What I do remember clearly is *The Sound of Silence* played on the radio as I drove to his funeral. Good teachers really care, it's as simple as that, and our drama teacher/director, Frank Plut, was another gem. I guess he thought I had some acting talent (he was wrong), but just being in a few plays and having some success in the declamation competitions opened up my eyes to theater and entertainment, which seem to have laid a foundation for my career. I never took a class from Neal Luebke, but he cast me in his musical and put up with my shenanigans with patience and grace. He was a geek, but a rock star teacher. Like Kresensky and Plut, Neal Luebke was an original thinker and dedicated teacher, and they all had something else in common (I would later come to

realize) that was not spoken of in those days, but likely made me more tolerant and embracing of differences as my mind matured.

Can you describe any early experiences or events that were especially meaningful or formative for you?

I could describe many such events, but one that stands out is the night my dad and I were driving to a father-son banquet at our church in St. Paul. I was maybe twelve. It was dark and raining, and the car in front of ours hit a dog. The car kept going, my dad stopped. A young boy, my age - black, not that it should have mattered, but it did matter to some people then - ran out from a store crying. It was his dog. My dad wrapped the bleeding dog in a blanket and placed both it and the crying boy in our car and drove to their house. The dog died on the way. I stayed in the car while my dad did whatever he did in the house, and then we drove to the father-son banquet, my dad's nice suit covered in blood. I learned everything I needed to know about my father, and life, in one night.

What would you consider your most important accomplishments?

Well, I've given away my Emmy and Oscar awards, so I guess those aren't it. I only have one trophy in my office, which is the baseball I used to pitch a "no-hitter" when I was nine years old and living in Highland Park, St. Paul. My team's name was the Kilties, and we beat the Clans 7-0 in six innings. I was new to baseball, didn't know what a no-hitter was, and was therefore baffled when my teammates mobbed me after the last pitch and carried me off the field on their shoulders. I was nine years old and I tasted perfection. I've never come close again since.

Your career has moved toward producing films. What are your plans for the future?

Actually, I'm still writing, too. I just tell people I'm producing these days, because no one knows what a producer does, and I don't have to answer a lot of follow up questions. Hollywood has vastly changed since I entered the scene in 1979. My favorite movies were always character dramas like *Midnight Cowboy* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. *Rain Man*, of course, was in that same vein. Those days are gone. Studios are part of larger conglomerates now, and the so-called "small" movie has disappeared because their success or failure doesn't "move the needle" one way or another on Wall Street. I wasn't interested in, nor was I capable of, adapting to the big, star-driven mega-pictures of today, so I work on what are known as independent films. That means I function as a studio of one - finding a story, writing a script, putting together the financing from various sources, and then going out and making a movie. It's unbelievably time consuming and fraught with disappointments, but it's how the best movies are made today, so that's my

new territory. While I juggle several projects at once, my labor of love for the past eight years has been a biopic on the legendary Bob Marley. There's a very good chance I'll get that one done in the next couple of years. Beyond that, my future includes playing even more ingenious tricks on my three grandchildren (and the one on the way), and golfing once a week with my 100-year-old hickory golf clubs, which I salvage from thrift stores and restore. As my friends like to ask, "Golf isn't hard enough as it is?"

You have been involved in advocacy for people with disabilities for much of your life. How did that come to be a passion of yours?

I didn't have a choice. I met Bill Sackter just out of college, and he completely altered my life. Bill, who was mentally retarded and institutionalized (in Faribault) for 44 years, had no family or friends left when they finally set him free in the late '60s. He ended up working as a dish washer at the country club where my wife was a waitress, and that's where I ran into him. He asked me if I could give him a ride to buy some toothpaste, and I did. After that, I couldn't get rid of him, and he couldn't get rid of me. When I took a job at the University of Iowa, Bill came with us. I later wrote a story about our friendship, which ended up being made into a TV movie called "Bill," starring Mickey Rooney. Dennis Quaid played me. I won an Emmy for my story, and suddenly I had a career. After Bill died, I continued to work with various disability groups, which eventually led to my meeting Kim Peek, the inspiration for Rain Man. I gave my Oscar to Kim, who died two years ago, and it is now on display in his home state of Utah. The Emmy I received is in the library at the University of Iowa, dedicated to Bill Sackter. I'm glad I had time to get him that toothpaste.

What advice would you have for students currently in our school district, especially those who might be considering a career in writing or film/video production?

My cynical advice would be to become an entertainment lawyer instead; you won't have your heart broken nearly as often. But truthfully, whatever your career - be it a writer, a plumber, or an astrophysicist - simple hard work and persistence are indispensable to success. In other words, total commitment. I've never felt particularly talented. I just took what my family and friends gave me, what my education provided, and the freedom of my American birthright, and I tried to make the most of it. That and a little Irish luck can go a long way.