



*Portraits
of
Success*

*Candid Conversations
with
60 Over-Achievers*

~

by Burt Prelutsky

ronald kessler

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The last time I met with Ron Kessler was many years ago. A producer and I were trying to work out a deal to adapt one of his early books into a TV movie. Unfortunately, we could not persuade any of the network executives that a movie about real-life spies would attract an audience. They were more interested in fictional wives being threatened by equally fictional husbands. Fortunately, Mr. Kessler had better things to do than wait around for those *lunkheads* to come to their senses. Instead, he went on to write a number of other books dealing with everything from the Secret Service to Laura Bush, establishing himself as one of America's finest investigative reporters.

Q. What did your father do for a living?

A. My father, Dr. Ernest Borek, was a microbiologist and professor at Columbia University; my stepfather, Dr. Myer M. Kessler, was a physicist at MIT.

Q. Did you consider following in either of their footsteps?

A. I was always interested in science but became hooked on journalism on my school paper at Belmont High School in Belmont, Massachusetts.

Q. Once you decided to pursue a career in journalism, did your parents encourage you?

A. Yes.

Q. What is your educational background?

A. I attended Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, for two years. I spent most of my time in the school paper and did an exposé of discrimination against black Clark students in rental housing. They started state investigations and got a lot of attention, leading to a part-time job as a reporter at the *Worcester Telegram*. I decided I would rather learn on my own by interviewing people and went full time with the paper in 1966. I went on to become a reporter at the *Boston Herald*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. I left the *Post* in 1985 to write books.

Q. What is the best advice you ever got, and were you smart enough to take it?

A. My mother, Minuetta Kessler, a concert pianist and composer who played at Carnegie Hall and Town Hall, always encouraged me to grab every opportunity I could and to believe I could do anything. I think I followed her advice.

Q. What is the worst advice you ever received, and were you dumb enough to take it?

A. I don't know.

Q. What book has had the greatest influence on you?

A. John Hohenberg's *The Pulitzer Prize Story*, which provides examples of excellence in journalism and the impact it can have.

Q. On the chance it's not the same book, what is your all-time favorite? And why?

A. *The People's Chronology: A Year-by-Year Record of Human Events from Prehistory to the Present* by James Trager tells you more about the world and particularly America than any book I have read.

Q. Have you any hobbies?

A. I enjoy country music and vacations in Palm Beach and Europe.

Q. You have made a career out of exposés, including *The FBI*, which led to the dismissal of its director, William Sessions. Of which exposé are you proudest?

A. At the *Washington Post*, I exposed the fact that the Daughters of the American Revolution (the DAR) had rejected Lena Ferguson, a black woman, for membership because she was African American. The stories led to her acceptance by the DAR and widespread changes in its policies to increase membership of blacks.

- Q.** In your book, *In the President's Secret Service*, you pretty much predicted that budget cuts would lead to glitches in the protection of the president and his family. Twice this past December, we saw people breaching the security of the White House. To what do you attribute these potentially lethal glitches?
- A.** The deliberate decision by uniformed Secret Service officers to ignore the fact that Tareq and Michael Salahi were not on the guest list at a state dinner is an expected outcome of security deficiencies outlined in the book. Since it was absorbed into the Department of Homeland Security in 2003, the Secret Service has been cutting corners, including by not passing people through magnetometers or shutting the devices down early, cutting back on the size of counter-assault teams, and not allowing agents time for regular firearms requalification or physical training.
- Q.** But why are these things happening or being allowed to happen?
- A.** In part, the corner cutting stems from a refusal by Secret Service management to demand more funds. Because the agency is understaffed, the workload overwhelms officers and agents. Within the Uniformed Division alone, the attrition rate is as high as 12 percent a year. In addition, the agency bows to political pressure. When Dick Cheney's daughter Mary insisted that her detail drive her friends to restaurants and the agents refused, she got her detail leader removed. The fact that Secret Service management does not back personnel when they are doing their job properly no doubt led the officers to think twice about turning away the glamorous couple at a state dinner and face possible repercussions.
- Q.** You are currently the chief Washington, D.C., correspondent for the conservative magazine and website, *Newsmax.com*. Were you always a conservative, or did you have an epiphany?
- A.** While I was always interested in the FBI and CIA, I considered myself a centrist until 9/11, when I became openly conservative on national security issues as well as on fiscal policy.
- Q.** What is your favorite movie, and why does it resonate with?
- A.** *In the Line of Fire* is my current favorite because it portrays with deadly accuracy what can result from Secret Service laxness.
- Q.** Who or what makes you laugh?
- A.** My wife Pam has a great sense of humor.
- Q.** Is there anyone you envy? If so, who and why?

- A. While I admire successful people, I am content to be myself.
- Q. How important is money to you?
- A. It is important to me not to be without money.
- Q. What has been the most traumatic event of your life, and what did you learn from it?
- A. My Dell stock took a big dive during the dot-com bust, and I learned to be more diversified.
- Q. What would you say are the one or two most important traits in the makeup of an investigative reporter?
- A. Tenacity.
- Q. What is your favorite memory?
- A. My concert pianist mother playing the piano at Lake O'Hara in the Canadian Rockies.
- Q. What is your single greatest personal or professional regret?
- A. A week or two after the Watergate break-in, I resisted two requests by my *Washington Post* editors to replace Carl Bernstein, whom I sat next to, and work with Bob Woodward on the story. I was working on my own investigative stories and of course did not understand the significance of the break-in. However, while most would say this was a mistake, I am happy with the way my life has turned out, and I have no regrets. Woodward was later best man when I married Pam, who had been the executive assistant to Howard Simons, the *Washington Post* managing editor who dubbed Woodward's Watergate source "Deep Throat." She later became a *Washington Post* reporter and more recently wrote *Undercover Washington*, about the spy sites of Washington.
- Q. In a sense, though, you got the final word on the subject.
- A. I take it you're referring to my 2002 book, *The Bureau: The Secret History of the FBI*, in which I presented the first credible evidence that Deep Throat was FBI official W. Mark Felt. In the book, I wrote that Woodward had recently paid a secret visit to Felt in California and had his limousine park ten blocks away from Felt's home so as not to attract attention.
- Q. What role, if any, does religion play in your life?
- A. I believe in God but am not an observant Jew.
- Q. If, with a snap of your fingers, you could change anything about America, what would it be?
- A. I would like to see a more fair, honest press so Americans could make more informed decisions.

- Q.** If, just as easily, you could change anything about yourself, what would it be?
- A.** I would like to be a better storyteller in conversation.
- Q.** If you could sit down with any eight people who have ever lived, and for that one night they could all speak English, who would they be?
- A.** Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, John F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, Peter Maas, Ronald Reagan, Donald Trump, and William Webster.
- Q.** What was your all-time favorite interview?
- A.** For my book, *The Season: Inside Palm Beach and America's Richest Society*, my wife Pam and I flew with Donald Trump on his Boeing 727-100 from New York to Palm Beach and spent the weekend with him at Mar-a-Lago, his Palm Beach home and club. It was hard work, but someone had to do it!