

The Early Years

Alvin Boretz was born June 15th, 1919, in New York City to Samuel and Mollie (Milch) Boretz, Polish-Austrian immigrants who met on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His father died of unknown causes when Alvin was only 3 years of age. With a loan from relatives, his mother started a candy store on DeKalb Avenue in Brooklyn where she worked 7 days a week. Alvin and his older sister, Gertrude helped out and lived in the back of the store. The family struggled but survived the hard depression years. In a nod to that period of his life, he always kept a fully stocked candy closet in his office which delighted his children and grandchildren.

Boretz was proud of his almaters, Boys High in Brooklyn and Brooklyn College. As a first-generation college student, he worked while attending school. He cherished his degree in Psychology which took him 8 years to complete. Boretz shared with amusement that he and his friends signed up for German to fulfill their language requirement thinking their knowledge of Yiddish would make the language easier. Unfortunately, this didn't turn out to be the case. It was harder than any of them imagined.

In a long line of family tragedies, Gertrude tragically passed away from leukemia at the age of 21, shortly after finishing the same college.

Alvin met his wife, Lucille Garson, of Rockaway, NY as a student when she tripped on the steps of a Brooklyn College classroom building and he came to her aid. They always laughed about their first date. Alvin hitched a ride with his cousin, Murray who had a car and they drove out to the Rockaways where Lucille was performing in a Clifford Odet's play, *Awake and Sing*. The car

broke down and he found a way to get there but didn't make it in time see her perform. She was impressed with his commitment and thus began their love affair of almost 70 years.

Lucille was a major source of support in Alvin's work throughout his life. She sat on the couch in his office as he pitched story and character ideas to her. Her notes were honest and encouraging. Most importantly, she kept him emotionally grounded. Lucille is still alive at the age of 103.

Boretz was drawn to writing in his youth. He joined his high school's newspaper team in hopes of shaping a career as a reporter. During college, he worked during the day as a "copy boy" for the *New York Evening Journal*. When he was let go due to the Journal's merger with the *New York American*, he continued his journey by writing and directing a senior class play called *Sounds in the Night*.

During WWII Boretz served in the Army Air Corps in DC (later known as the Air Force) until 1946 as an adjutant to high-ranking officers. He formed a lasting friendship with the famous photographer, Russell Lee, who worked for the Farm Security Administration project during the New Deal Program.

After returning home, Boretz settled in Far Rockaway, NY, near Lucille's family. He called a radio producer to discuss being hired to write scripts. As he humorously and unashamedly admits in an interview, it was through some minor embellishments to his resume and a clear determination to work in the industry that Boretz became a writer for radio.

Radio Days - Honing His Craft

By 1949, he was writing for hit series like CBS's *Big Town* and Mutual Radio's game show *Quick as a Flash*. It was in these early days of radio that Boretz's desire to write stories emerged with challenging topics that began to push conventional media themes. For instance, an episode of the radio show *Exploring the Unknown* titled "Love is the Doctor" premiered in 1947 showcasing a story about a young couple handling the diagnosis of their son with cerebral palsy. While this story worked for the airwaves due to its relatable characters, the research behind the topic revealed the struggles within the medical profession and the hardships families faced. The research on the topic was also a personal one to Boretz since his first child, Stephen, was born with cerebral palsy.

Through radio, Boretz perfected the ability to communicate knowledge to his audiences in a familiar yet poignant manner. He wrote that it helped him to "hone his language skills and develop a flair for penning dialogue."

The Golden Age of Television - Touching Lives

Boretz was a writer in the "The Golden Age of Television," where his live dramas appeared in shows such as *Armstrong Circle Theater*, *Playhouse 90*, and *Kraft Television Theater*.

Kraft Television Theater and *The Big Story* were then and widely considered today to be classic dramas. These shows catapulted many actors like James Dean onto the worldwide stage. He received accolades from well-known figures like comedian Lenny Bruce who sent a telegram

about Boretz's show covering suicide called *The Desperate Season* which read, "THANK YOU FOR THE THRILLING GENIUS AND POETRY THAT EXUDED FROM THE DESPERATE SEASON"

Every day television viewers who felt heard and touched by his stories wrote Boretz thanking him for tackling tough subjects in empathic ways.

Tragedy struck the Boretz family when Alvin and Lucille lost their five-year-old son Stephen to cerebral palsy in 1949 and their two-year-old son Peter to hydrocephalus in 1958. In the years between their two sons, they had two healthy daughters, Jennifer (1950) and Carrie (1953).

These traumatic family losses led to severe contemplation for Boretz regarding topics of medicine, education, and grief. He processed his pain through his work and used his writings to bring awareness to the public. As he worked to support Lucille and his two young daughters, Boretz wrote non-stop and focused most of his energies on the medium of television. While radio "taught him language" and how to love writing, television gave him the freedom to explore a variety of topics that intrigued him.

The business of television presented many challenges, such as network changes, fair wage issues, editing practices, and formulaic templates. Despite these obstacles, Boretz was a productive writer who supported his family and put his unique stamp on popular shows like *Kojak*, *Dr. Kildare*, *the Defenders*, *NYPD*, *Medical Center*, *The Mod Squad*, and *The Nurses* while simultaneously pitching his original series like *The Treasury Men (The T-Men)*, *The M.D.'s*, *Wall Street Women* and many others.

In the 50's, TV production increasingly migrated to Los Angeles. Boretz made many trips from NY to LA for work and even moved his young family there for a year in 1954. However, he and Lucille ultimately decided to stay in NY, despite being several thousand miles away from the heart of the growing industry in Hollywood. He was an active NY based writer and helped found the Writers Guild -East. He was particularly proud of serving on the committee that negotiated health insurance for the union members.

Boretz's films included *Brass Target* (1978) starring Sophia Loren and John Cassavetes and his play, *Made In America*, starring Brian Dennehey which premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles were subject to even more detailed investigations into the settings of each fictional world. His collection boasts research from his trips to mental health facilities, prisons, and even deep-sea submarine docks.

Learning and Libraries

Throughout his years of writing television series and TV films, Boretz kept his love of learning alive by researching each of his stories to provide the maximum amount of accuracy. He was known for his in-depth research and built on his connection to libraries from his youth by making librarians key members of his research teams. He loved to "kibbutz" with the staff who would "light up" on his frequent visits and as they loaded him up with materials for his latest project. He returned his debt to libraries by serving on the board and as president of the Hewlett-Woodmere Library on the south shore of Long Island for many years. As a long-time

feminist, he successfully advocated for a woman director with young children to be hired when the board was against it. The words he wrote, "Where Dreams Endure" are on the plaque installed after the building's renovation that he oversaw.

Outside of work, Boretz also had an insatiable curiosity about life and a myriad of interests such as watching football and playing squash that he pursued with passion and intensity. As an early adopter, he introduced his daughters to the music of Bob Dylan, and in the late 1950's he bought the first foreign car in the neighborhood, a Rover with the unusual feature of seatbelts.

Boretz loved to engage in provocative conversations with all kinds of people but he was also a great listener. His daughters remember hearing long phone interviews with experts and those in the trenches. Dinner table discussions revolved around people and their motivations. It was common for the family to fall silent as they eavesdropped on other families. Boretz said doing this helped him write dialogue. He advised his granddaughter, Jessie Kahnweiler that "to be a writer you have to shut up and listen to the world. "

He had access to the Atlantic Ocean and many bays near his Long Island home and purchased a power boat, naming it the Prologue (with a dinghy named the Epilogue). True to his nature of diving deep, he learned to navigate by the stars and earned the highest rating by the Coast Guard Power Squadron.

Alvin traveled with Lucille to Manhattan often for plays, opera, art exhibits, and recitals. They had adventures all over the 5 boroughs and beyond, spending hours in bookstores for Lucille's rare book business and discovering hole-in-the-wall restaurants. He called NYC "the greatest city in the world" and loved sharing its magic with his family and friends.

His interests were sometimes short term but his enthusiasm was always contagious. Lucille could predict with a smile when a certain hobby or "best friend" would lose their luster and he would be ready to move on to the next adventure.

As Boretz's family grew, he connected deeply with his sons-in-law and granddaughters, relishing his role as teacher and guide. His children's friends often saw him as a mentor and inspiration. He mentored others also by teaching screenwriting classes at Hofstra and CW Post colleges and was very popular with his students.

Though Boretz poured much into his writing, he also believed family was the most important part of one's life. One of his ongoing mantras was "to make a difference" and he led the way in this regard, personally and professionally.

The deep impact of Alvin Boretz's career on the media industry still resonates today and, through this website, will continue into the future.

He passed away in 2010 and is lovingly remembered by his family. He was honored to be included in this collection and his family is equally pleased that his legacy will be preserved. His archive can be viewed in full at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.