

31ST STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

Copyright 1997 Washington Magazine, Inc.
Washingtonian

February, 1997

SECTION: LUNCH WITH DIANA MCLELLAN; Pg. 66

LENGTH: 2870 words

HEADLINE: TALK TO ME;

BARBARA HARRISON HAS BEEN THROUGH A LOT, INCLUDING THE DEATH OF A HUSBAND. BUT SHE'S BOUNCED BACK, AND WHEN NOT ANCHORING, SHE'S VERY GOOD AT GETTING PEOPLE TO TALK.

BYLINE: Diana McLellan; Diana McLellan was the longtime gossip columnist at the late Washington Star and then the Washington Post.

BODY:

EVERYONE LIKES BARBARA Harrison. Even rarer in Washington, everyone trusts her. Hillary Clinton, Colin Powell, Elizabeth Morgan, Suzanne Cooke, Yoko Ono, Barbara Bush, Effi Barry, Len Bias's mom -- they've all opened up like daisies for WRC's sweet-faced morning anchorwoman. And each week, a different local kid who needs foster parents does the same, on her "Wednesday's Child" on the Channel 4 news.

Usually, Barbara opens up right back. When she had good news nine years ago -- pregnancy with her fourth child -- she shared it in an on-air journal designed to help reduce the area's infant-mortality rate. Strangers around town celebrated the birth of daughter Alexandra, and the awards poured in.

But she keeps bad news to herself. Only close friends followed the yearlong illness and death of her husband, Mark Corriea. You'd see her out on assignment in those dark days five years ago looking drawn and troubled. But those pilgrimages to the Mayo Clinic, the combing of medical books to catch what doctors missed, the days that began at 3:30 AM and ended with long vigils at Mark's Georgetown Hospital bedside -- those were her secret.

Today, at fortysomething, she's radiant. "A face-lift," whisper some locals. But when we meet at Goldoni's -- maybe Washington's loveliest restaurant, with its sunwashed hues and Roman sensibility -- it's clear that what she's had is a life-lift. She has the glow of happiness. It's unfakable, unmistakable. Barbara Harrison's life is back on track. Another Mr. Right has come along.

He, too, had four kids and a hole in his life. They've been married since summer 1995.

"I wake up every morning and think I'm the luckiest person in the world," she says, green eyes dancing above her yellow Donna Karan jacket.

TODAY WE'RE LEAVING OUR LUNCH decisions in the hands of chef Fabrizio and Tim, our cheeky Aussie waiter. Triangular pastries stuffed with prosciutto and salsify arrive, along with a carpaccio of venison with shiitake mushrooms and yellow-pepper coulis. Tim pours the wine (he's chosen a Mondaccione 1991 Coppo, a Freisa di Valdivilla), and we dig in.

Washingtonian, February, 1997

Barbara was the third of six children born to Curtis Wood, an African-American professor who established the communications department at Texas A&M in Prairie View, where Barbara grew up. After getting his PhD at Columbia in the early 1940s, her father had applied for a job at the New York Times. He was offered work as a messenger. He went to Texas instead.

Her mother, Lou Lee Williams, was of white and Choctaw-Cherokee-black descent. She was a teacher.

Neither parent dwelt on race. Barbara, their first daughter, was the apple of her father's eye, and he drilled into her two things: "He taught me to care about other people's feelings. And that by working and studying hard you succeed in life."

The world beyond Prairie View was more complicated. So as she majored in English at Vassar, married a Yale student, finished her degree at Briarcliffe, and took her master's at Columbia, she learned to preempt unwary comments with a fleeting reference to her lineage.

She rejoices in all her heritages, but was closest, she says, to her maternal grandmother -- "one of the most beautiful women you've ever seen, those high cheekbones, a lot of wisdom, including the Indian herbal medicine. She insisted that we all 'Walktall, no matter what.' I remember when we went to her funeral, they had bound her hair in braids. Some members of the family pushed them back out of sight -- there wasn't the sense of pride in those days. My mother pulled them out, proudly. My youngest daughter looks like her, dark eyes, poker-straight hair. . . ."

BARBARA MOVED TO NEW YORK when her husband became a banker there. Her first job was at Vogue, helping to run the magazine's college-writer contest, the Prix de Paris. She was tending her first baby and finishing her master's degree when she heard there was an opening at WNET-TV, the educational channel.

"I was told I'd better call quickly. So I phoned Monday morning at nine. I asked for personnel, and when a man answered I asked when I could interview for the job. He said, 'Ten o'clock.'"

"I had no resume, so I rushed to type out something that said, 'Who Am I?' I called a friend and dropped off the baby, then raced to the subway. I got to the personnel office at ten exactly, gave my name, and sat down. I was still sitting there at 1:30 PM. Finally someone asked who my interview was with -- and of course I didn't know. It turned out I'd been talking to the night watchman.

"The woman was very brusque. She said, 'Well, do you have a resume?' I said, just this, and gave her my piece of paper. She went out to Xerox it, and a few minutes later another lady came out holding it up and asking, 'Who wrote this?' And I was hired as a writer. I wrote the copy that ran between the regular programs -- whatever the booth announcer was to say."

TIM HAS WHISKED AWAY OUR APPETIZERS to present exquisite giant scallops, each perched on a nest of angel-hair fried leeks and sun-dried tomatoes, with little dabs of sauce scattered about.

Two more babies came. In 1975, Barbara's husband's work took him -- and her, and little Tracy, Peter, and Emily -- to San Francisco. She got a job at KSFx,

Washingtonian, February, 1997

the ABC affiliate radio station. At first she wrote public-service ads. She heard that a job as a disc jockey, taping the overnight shows, would bounce her salary from \$ 15,000 to \$ 35,000. So she tried out -- and got it. Still in the studying habit, she read up on the artists she presented every day. She became savvy -- and so popular that she was assigned the midday slot, too, from 10 AM to 2 PM.

After a year and a half she moved to an all-talk station, KGO-AM. She was a hit. Her face was on all the billboards; her voice was everywhere. The exposure was maybe too much for her banker husband. The two divorced.

She was working seven days a week when the all-news CBS affiliate offered her a job, from 10 PM to 6 AM. It was tough with three small kids, but she took it. She was getting almost no sleep at all when she heard of a TV opening in Oakland.

"The news director looked at my resume, which I thought was pretty impressive for someone in her late twenties. The only thing he responded to was the line at the bottom which mentioned my three kids. He said, 'What's in your psyche that you have all these kids?'

"I didn't get the job. That taught me not to include my kids on my resume -- even though they were so important in my life, often what held me together."

OUR PLATES VANISH AGAIN -- AND here comes fagottini filled with prosciutto. I mention a friend who felt constrained to conceal four rambunctious kids from male academics while getting her PhD and a teaching job. Even juggling one child as a young journalist was tough, I recall.

"Yes, having your first kid at 21 was hard -- our lives were sort of screwed up, because the woman always ends up carrying the bag, no matter how you try to change it. And even when I started, post-Betty Friedan, most women had begun to postpone having children. But I'm glad I did it early. We had a story the other day about how doctors have found that fertility starts to decline at 30."

Barbara made TV tapes and sent them to stations in other cities. She was offered an anchor job in Dallas. Mark Corriea, a lawyer she had dated in San Francisco, missed her. He flew to Dallas every weekend to woo her. After a year, she agreed to marry him.

Back in San Francisco with her on-air experience behind her, she got a television job at the ABC affiliate, KGO. She was red hot, and WRC-TV in Washington came acourting. In 1981, they moved. Mark opened his law firm in Georgetown, and the family settled here, first in Chevy Chase, then in DC's Forest Hills.

They were a golden couple, busy, well-off, high-profile, cross-cultural. She joined Links, the high-end black women's club. Effi Barry threw a lunch to thank Barbara and Channel 4 for a program that increased awareness of infant mortality. Her interviews made headlines. The family took vacations on the Riviera. Mark opened a London office.

It was when he returned from a couple of weeks over there that she noticed he looked sallow -- "But the doctors kept saying, oh, just a touch of jaundice." He got sicker. It was Barbara, poring over medical books, who diagnosed Crohn's

Washingtonian, February, 1997

disease, a chronic inflammation of the digestive tract. Mark died within a year. Somehow during that year she kept her household afloat, her four kids sane, her work life intact.

"All my life I'd believed I had only to work hard to win. And I couldn't win this one. I was devastated. But people were so incredibly supportive. In that year, Washington really became home -- a small town just like the one I grew up in."

Barbara's bosses summoned her back on-air after Mark's funeral in October of 1992. "They knew just what I needed," she says.

SHE DIDN'T DATE FOR A COUPLE OF years. She busied herself with work, family, charity, friends. Among her friends was the family of Joseph Alioto, the mayor of San Francisco. Barbara had been close to them when daughter Michela Alioto, at age 13, had a skiing accident that left her paralyzed. When Michela later came to Washington to work in the Clinton White House, she stayed with Barbara.

Barbara's fairy-godmother reputation opened the door to Cupid again. The boy with the arrows took the form of Ron Braso, her hairdresser-chum at Ilo. Ron got her teary-eyed with the tale of Felicia Pyles, a young woman who, on her first modeling assignment in Mexico, had a diving accident and was paralyzed. She felt hopeless and worthless. Could Barbara put her in touch with the 26-year-old Michela Alioto? Michela, running for Congress from her wheelchair, would be the ideal friend to prove there was life after paraplegia.

"I talked to Michela, and she said she'd call over there. Later, she called me to say, Look, she doesn't want to see me, because I'm in a wheelchair, and she can't stand to think she's going to be like me. But you helped me -- why don't you call her up and make friends?

"I let it slide, but Michela kept calling me. Finally Michela's mother called and said, 'Listen, you really must call.' I thought, maybe Mark's trying to tell me something. I need to do a good deed."

She finally phoned the house. John Chester Pyles III, Felicia's father, answered. He seemed busy, unwelcoming, and said he was on his way out of the country. She reported back to the Aliotos. They begged her to try again. A couple of weeks later, she had two Kennedy Center tickets, and thought the show might lift Felicia's spirits. She called again.

"I'd have to come too, and I'm busy," said Mr. Pyles III. She knew she did not like him.

"Well, if there's anything I can do, or if she'd like to come and visit me at the station, here's my number."

"Well, maybe we ought to talk."

They agreed to meet "for a quick drink."

YOUNGEST DAUGHTER ALEXANDRA answered the door. From upstairs, Barbara heard her eight-year-old "for the first time in a long time, laughing, giggling, and playing the piano."

Washingtonian, February, 1997

Barbara and John Pyles went to Lavandou restaurant on Connecticut Avenue. Over a table full of appetizers, "I was totally smitten. I thought he was wonderful, and I knew we would be friends. I invited him to come to an opening with me a couple of days later. After that, we saw each other every day. And we got married five-and-a-half months later.

"I told my children: I felt as though Mark had strapped on his wings to fly over the entire earth looking for the perfect person for me -- and for us; and then John came tumbling through the door that February day. I have four children; he has four. I have two children at Dartmouth; he went to Dartmouth. Everything clicked.

"He never watched television, so he didn't know anything about me, but his mother told him, 'I love Barbara Harrison!' She has been so welcoming to my family."

The couple live in Harrison's Forest Hills home, having renovated it to make it wheelchair accessible.

AS ANOTHER DISH APPEARS AND the wine bottle empties down to the confiding stage, she observes that her self-guidance skills got a New Age boost early in her career.

Come on, tell.

"You're going to think I'm gaga."

No, I won't!

"Well, these people came to Boston with this thing called Dimensional Mind Approach, and I interviewed them on radio. The idea is that you gain your goals by visualizing them. . . ." Like Hillary summoning Eleanor Roosevelt, you also call on a spiritual teacher in your imagination.

"Anyway, this guy talked on, and I thought, yeah, a likely story. At the end of the two-hour interview, he said to the listeners, 'Bring us your problems this evening -- call this number and we'll let you know where to meet us.' And after the show they said, 'Where can we have this meeting?' And I said, 'You can have it at my house.'"

"After they left I thought, I can't believe I said that. So I tried and tried to reach them and cancel. By the time I did it was too late; they'd given out the address.

"So all those people came to my house that night. I had them go around the back and straight into the basement, but of course my husband had a fit. Afterward, the guy said to me, 'You know, I'm really sorry, I didn't have anywhere else to go. I just visualized you making that offer to me -- and you did!'

"So I thought, well, that sure worked on me -- I may as well give it a try. For my teacher, I picked my grandmother. Now you're really going to think I'm gaga. I visualized myself driving into a circular drive, parking my car, and walking into a television station to do TV news. As crazy as it may sound, the first time I drove into WRC and walked in past the guard there, I had a really

Washingtonian, February, 1997

strong sense of deja vu. It was only later that I realized why -- it was exactly what I'd visualized so long before! Of course, I don't think I made it happen -- but isn't that an interesting coincidence?"

The phone trills from the depths of her huge tote. As she replaces the phone, a box tumbles out. It contains a new watch from WRC -- marking 15 years of going up that circular driveway.

THAT'S A PRETTY LONG SHELF LIFE for a woman in a field where babehood reigns. Well, yes. Over mandarin sorbet, she allows that she has given that some thought and has even offered to segue into management. But she's too good at what she does to stop. Besides, she loves the on-air life -- her co-anchor, Joe Krebs, a smart and sometimes corny lawyer whose character complements hers nicely; her big boss, Allan Horlick; and the folks out there in TV land.

"I get all kinds of mail -- most seem to like me. The ones who criticize, it's usually for my hair. It amazes me that people take the time to write about your hair. There must be somebody on some channel somewhere who has exactly the right hair -- I wonder who it is?"

Despite her 5:30-to-10-AM airtime, she's ready to roll with the interviews craved by the new news director, Dave Lougee.

"It takes persistence to get those high-profile interviews -- as long as a year sometimes to develop a relationship and build that trust. Sometimes by the time you convince somebody to sit down with a camera, they're no longer newsworthy!"

OVER THE LONG HAUL, SHE FOREsees going into television production.

She once started her own company to make educational videos -- one she made for the National Institutes of Health was a smash. With four children to see through college, she couldn't risk going it alone. But she liked the taste of it.

"In news, you have to give your information as quickly as possible. It's satisfying to take what you've learned and look at it from different angles in a full-length feature."

And then there's the movie bug. She saw the fun side of film when casting directors for Clear and Present Danger needed a quintessential Washington reporter for a couple of scenes. They flew her out to LA, installed her in her own trailer, and dished up meals at the star table with Harrison Ford and Anne Archer.

We touch on how cable has expanded the on-air age range. Could there be a female Walter Cronkite, or are both management and viewer too attuned to the nubile?

"Perhaps we'll learn to love women as they age," she muses. "Personally, I wouldn't want to be 25 or even 35 again, even if it would extend my longevity in the business. I prefer the person I've evolved into over the years."

And so do her fans. They cheered as she ran up Capitol Hill bearing the Olympic torch this year to hand it to Juwan Howard. She was chosen, probably,

Washingtonian, February, 1997

for her work with abused, abandoned, or neglected children on the "Wednesday's Child" project. Aired at around 5:30 each Wednesday, the feature-plus-interview seems to capture the essence of each child.

"Yes," she says, "it quite often leads to adoption. It's the most rewarding thing I do on television."

So when she trotted up to Juwan with that torch, you'd have thought she was the Good Fairy, Mother Teresa, Pocahontas, Coretta King, and Barbara Walters rolled into one.

To some kids, she is.

(PLEASE REFER TO ORIGINAL SOURCE FOR CHART)

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

LOAD-DATE: February 19, 1997