

SB PEOPLE

Cass Warner Sperling **Dream Keeper**

AS A YOUNG GIRL, Cass would accompany her father, Oscar-nominated writer/producer Milton Sperling, to the Warner Bros. studio lot each Saturday. As long as she avoided any door with a flashing red light, she was given free reign of the lot and all its mesmerizing magic. >



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Primo keeps watch at Cass's rustic abode; 5-year-old Cass snuggles up with her grandfather, Harry Warner; family mementos remind the historian of her social legacy: "My grandfather transmitted a type of kindness and belief in me that gave me the strength to persist until what I envisioned I could accomplish was a reality." PREVIOUS PAGE: The filmmaker at her Painted Cave home.

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"It was better than going to Disneyland," she remembers. A love of the art of filmmaking was inevitable.

Her grandfather, Harry M. Warner, cofounder and president of Warner Bros., provided the studio's inspirational motto: "To educate, entertain, and enlighten." Cass keeps this message alive through Warner Sisters Productions, her own entertainment production company, and an inspirational film library for her nonprofit, the Dream Factory. "Recognizing the power films have to set trends, influence social issues, and bring about understanding of our fellow man was something my family was very aware of," she says.

Thirty years ago, she began the family research that led to her 1994 book *The Brothers Warner* (Prima Pub) and 2008 documentary of the same name. Written by Cass with Jack Warner Jr. and Santa Barbaran Cork Millner, the story details the birth

of Hollywood, the invention of talkies, and breakthroughs in the use of film as a medium to inspire and educate, especially with regard to World War II and social causes.

After fleeing the pogroms in Russia and eventually opening a grocery store in Baltimore, the family risked the jump into the movie business in 1906 when the four young Warner brothers—

Harry, Albert, Samuel, and Jack—bought a used nickelodeon projector with their father's pawned gold watch and a work horse. At first screening borrowed copies of movie reels in a makeshift theater, they then began their own distribution company when faced with a monopoly and later bet everything on talking pictures. The extraordinary effort and stress killed brother Sam, who died from a brain hemorrhage just before *The Jazz Singer* opened.

As a Polish-Jewish family, the Warners faced rampant anti-Semitism, made the first movie about Hitler's atrocities, and survived the McCarthy hearings. But finally a betrayal brought them down: The more volatile Jack enticed the other brothers to sell, and then bought the company back the next day. Cass's personal recollection of her family's sordid past shares a variety of perspectives and the cathartic process to acceptance and forgiveness.

The long, steadfast road to turn the project into a feature film became a reality when it was shown at the 2009 Santa Barbara International Film Festival and all

over the world, including the Festival de Cannes, where it was finally announced that it would hit the silver screen in partnership with Alain Goldman, producer of *La Vie en Rose*. "I always envisioned it as a feature film, a story brought to life by actors," explains Cass, coproducer of the film, slated for release in a year.

In her youth, Cass studied acting and was mentored in screenwriting by her father and Howard Koch (of *Casablanca* fame), whose archive she now represents. Cass first came to Santa Barbara to attend high school in 1964 when her stepfather, Stanley K. Sheinbaum,

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worked at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Montecito. Cass eventually raised four children here—Cole, Tao, Vanessa, and Jesse.

Her eldest son, Cole Hauser, who followed in the steps of the family business with a successful acting career, was born at Laurel Springs Ranch, the 160-acre hillside spread later sold to fellow Hollywood legacy Jane Fonda. More recently, Cass has settled in a small, rustic cottage near Painted Cave filled with antiques and memorabilia with her life partner, Ted Adams.

Now that her nest is empty, she devotes herself to producing, writing, and directing entertainment that fulfills an unspoken promise to her grandfather. "By using my family's story as an example to inspire others toward their goals and dreams is a wonderful honor and responsibility," she muses. "And Santa Barbara gives me the quiet needed to renew my thoughts, to be creative, and to know where home is." ■

PHOTOGRAPH: MIDDLE, COURTESY OF CASS WARNER