

# BRIGHT LIGHTS OF THE SECOND CITY

## 50 Prominent Chicagoans on Living with Passion and Purpose

BETSY STORM

My book "Bright Lights of the Second City" was published in 2014. It featured interviews with 50 stellar Chicagoans, including Bill Kurtis.



Photo courtesy of Kurtis Productions

### Bill Kurtis

Broadcaster/Documentarian and Entrepreneur

Kansan Renaissance Man advises us to develop the talents we've been given . . . whatever they may be.

*Bill Kurtis's life is characterized by a distinguished career including a thirty-year tenure with CBS Television. He covered many celebrated trials of the '60s and '70s; among them, that of convicted mass murderer Charles Manson. Kansas-educated, Kurtis earned his B.S. in Journalism at the University of Kansas and a J.D. from Washburn University School of Law. He and his partner, Donna La Pietra, divide their time between a downtown home and one in Lake County's Mettawa, a village that is dedicated to preserving open lands and low-density residential development.*

*Kurtis spends as much time as possible on his Red Buffalo Ranch, located in Sedan, Kansas. His business interests include the documentary production company Kurtis Productions; Tall Grass Beef Company, a purveyor of meat from cattle that is 100 percent grass-fed, antibiotic- and hormone-free, and raised on the Kurtis Ranch; and ownership interest in broadcast stations. He is the recipient of numerous humanitarian, journalism, and broadcasting awards.*

My dad was an aviation instructor in the U.S. Marine Corps. When he headed to the Pacific theater during WWII, I was fourteen. My mom and I went to live in Independence, Kansas, with my grandparents and I'd already moved nine times. While it was difficult to be continually uprooted, there were benefits. I learned to make new friends, adapt easily, and read situations quickly.

Kansas is the home of my heart. It's a magical place because of the tallgrass prairie, and it's similar to Africa in that way. You stand on the land, look around, and feel you belong there. I feel better when I'm in Kansas, and the ranch is something I want to protect and preserve. My ranch, Red Buffalo Ranch, takes its name from the Osage Indian term "fire on the prairie." It's there that I've developed my own philosophy, whether you call that animism or something else. [Note: Animism is the philosophical, religious, or spiritual idea that souls or spirits exist not only in humans but also in animals, plants, rocks, and natural phenomena, such as thunder, and in geographic features such as mountains, rivers, or other entities of the natural environment.]

I've had encounters with many religions, and one lesson that arises repeatedly is that we all have both good and bad within us. When I was covering the hostage crisis in Tehran in 1980, an angry mob was chasing my crew and me down the

street yelling anti-American sentiments. Frightened, we entered the shop of a pharmacist. The gang was banging on the door to get in. The pharmacist said, "I am a Muslim, and I don't necessarily like Americans. But my religion dictates that when you are in my home or place of business, I must give you protection and safe passage." He went outside, parted the crowd, and put us in a taxi. We sped away. The one word that comes to mind with Islam is "devout," and my thoughts on the Muslim religion changed after that encounter.

Once we were in the Amazon following an ethnobotanist while making a documentary segment for "The New Explorers" program. He was looking for plants to use as the basis for new medications. Towards the end of our stay, I saw people lined up to receive a little white pill. When I asked what it was, I learned it was aspirin. Think of it: With that one little white pill, we destroyed a culture's entire basis for treating and healing itself. And what did we miss out on as a result?

I hate injustice. I wrote *The Death Penalty on Trial: Crisis in American Justice* to uncover a broken system. There are many reasons why — biased judges, many prosecutors who aren't seeking justice but simply want to win, and defense attorneys who are ill-prepared. That's not the way it's supposed to be. The introduction of DNA into the process uncorked the bad genie; there was a realization that many innocent people had been wrongfully convicted. Fortunately, there are many people within the system that are working to correct some of these problems.

What really moves me is individual talent. This is almost the meaning of life: Experience everything, but perfect those talents you've been given. I have a deep voice, but that wouldn't have done me any good if I'd been a lumberjack. Perhaps someone else has a talent for helping others. Whatever it is, do it.

*Bill Kurtis was interviewed at his office in the River North neighborhood on August 24, 2010. His birthday is September 21, 1940.*

### Favorites

#### MOVIE

*The Searchers* (1956), directed by John Ford. Set during the Texas-Indian Wars, the film is based on a 1954 novel by Alan Le May. John Wayne stars as a middle-aged Civil War veteran who spends years looking for his abducted niece.

#### NONPROFITS

Everything from the Nature Conservancy to the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago.

#### PLACE

A tree house at our home in far north suburban Mettawa. Ten feet by ten feet in size, it's like an observation deck over a watering hole you'd find in Africa.

#### POET

Rudyard Kipling. He's inspirational, especially "If." Here are the closing lines:

"If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it  
And — which is more — you'll be a Man, my son."

#### QUOTATION

"People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I think that what we're really seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our innermost being and reality, so that we can actually feel the rapture of being alive."

— JOSEPH CAMPBELL, AMERICAN MYTHOLOGIST, WRITER, AND LECTURER