

**“ I went to my own
custody hearing...
and nobody showed up. ”**

The Don White Story

From going “unclaimed” by both parents and humble beginnings, to successful husband, father, brother and interior designer whose imprint is on some of New York City’s most iconic buildings, the Don White Story.

By Dave Yarin

Don White comes across as a guy who’s always had everything. The semi-retired New York City interior designer, founder of two successful architectural firms, has a warm smile. His white hair and beard brings Santa Claus to mind (albeit a thin, Jewish one). He talks easily about topics ranging from business and the theatre to his wife of 50 years and their three lovely daughters. It’s easy to imagine that he had an idyllic childhood, too, growing up in a green leafy suburb behind a white picket fence, with 1.3 siblings and the requisite dog. What makes White’s success all the more remarkable is that none of that is true. In reality, Don White was cast out by his parents when he was still in preschool. He overcame ridiculous odds, and, despite decades of the good life, he never forgot his roots.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

White was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1939 to parents who couldn't have been more polar opposite. While White's father was conservative, religious, and as White described him - "*milque toast*" - his mother was a party lover and gregarious joke teller. She eventually became a compulsive gambler, which White thinks was an escape from her marriage and suburban boredom. As White looks back, he realizes that his flamboyant mother was not meant to be a Brooklyn housewife married to a somber husband, so when White was four years old, his parents separated and White's mother left the family altogether and moved to Florida. Four year-old White and his older brother



WHITE'S FATHER, IRVING



WHITE'S MOTHER, HELEN

Arthur were left with an uninvolved and uninterested father, who without the help of his family, turned to the cleaning woman to temporarily take care of his kids. White and his brother stayed briefly with their grandparents until their father, unable to raise his children, took them to Jewish services, which sent them to live with a foster family in Elmont, New York. White's brother Arthur, who was eleven years old at the time, pleaded to go to his grandmother's home, leaving White temporarily alone for the next year "in a strange place" as White put it, particularly when his lasting Elmont memory is being taken to a wake and seeing a dead body for the first time at such a young age.

LIFE ON THE FARM

White's childhood took a more dramatic turn at age 6 when his father decided to send the boys to live with strangers; an older and childless couple - Sam and Bessie - in the Catskills on what can best be described as a community farm or bungalow colony (also known as a "*kokh-aleyn*" if your Yiddish is up to par). Back in the day, this area of the Catskills was known as "the Borscht Belt" due to the number of Jews who lived there, but it was no "Dirty Dancing" lifestyle for White and his brother for the next four years, with few kids around and no social activities to speak of. A picture of White's bedroom that he shared with his brother was just that; a room with two beds and little else. White and his brother were assigned chores on the farm. As White explained, "*You did as much work on the farm as they could get you to do. In that regard, it was a little harder on my older brother Arthur because they could get him to do more. We raised chickens, cows and horses, and we cleaned up after them too if you know what I mean.*" The typical lunch included applesauce sandwiches, made from apples grown on the farm, between two slices of bread.



THE HOUSE IN THE CATSKILLS



THE BEDROOM THAT
WHITE SHARED WITH
HIS BROTHER

White and his brother were required to use the toilet at school each day so the cesspool wouldn't have to be maintained as frequently at home. The catch to this instruction was that the school was a half-mile walk to the bus for the 5-mile daily drive to and from the school. Farm work began the moment the boys returned home from school, and continued over the weekend. White and his brother were only allowed to bathe once a week with one towel to be shared by the two boys. As White put it, "*It was a bohemian lifestyle and minimalistic conditions.*" Winter scenery was so bleak that even a color photograph of the farm looked black and white. Although White looks back and realizes that he became an adult far earlier in life than most of us do, he believes that process began on the farm.

White also saw something on the farm that would peek his interest in what would eventually become a successful career. He watched Sam put up a building and was fascinated by the process. To this day, he remembers the smell of saw dust in the air. White may not have realized it at the time, but he was making the best he could of a challenging situation; making lemonade out of lemons. In talking to White however, the worst memories for him don't seem to be the hard work and sparse living conditions on the farm; but rather the memory that neither of his parents wanted to "claim" White and his brother. What is so hard for most of us to imagine is how it must have felt to be rejected and "unclaimed" by both parents and sent away to live with strangers...coming from the suburbs of New York City to a farm no less.

During his time on the farm, White's mother moved back from Florida to New York City, and she and White's father would separately visit White and his brother once or twice a year. White recalls one evening when he was ten years old sitting on a swing the night before his father's visit, looking up at the brightest star in the sky and praying for his father to take him home. His prayer was answered as White's father agreed, although when White's father arrived that day, it was with his new wife (neither White or his brother were aware that their father had remarried).



THE SWINGS WHERE WHITE PRAYED
FOR HIS FATHER TO BRING HIM HOME

White moved back to Brooklyn with his Dad and new stepmother, packing his few possessions into a paper bag for the move. White's stepmother pampered White, and for the next two years, White enjoyed a glimpse of a "regular" childhood with a suburban neighborhood and friends around, but White didn't enjoy living with his insensitive and uninvolved father and stepmother who evolved from pampering to overbearing. In a moment that White believes would be life-changing at age 12, he talked his mother into allowing him to move in with her in the city. White's mother had remarried and was now willing to have White live with her and her new husband.

LIFE IN THE CITY

White relocated to his mom's one-bedroom efficiency apartment in the Broadmoor Hotel in New York City, sleeping in the living room on a pullout bed since his mom and new husband occupied the bedroom. White shared the bed with his brother Arthur, who had moved from the farm to his Mom's apartment as well. Goodbye suburbs, goodbye neighborhood friends, and hello to new chores such as picking up money from his grandmother to cover his mother's gambling debts, or delivering liquor for a grocery store (White humorously shared this with the understanding that the statute of limitations had expired on this obvious child labor and liquor law violation). White estimated that by age 14, he had attended 5-6 different schools, and Booker T. Washington Junior High School would be the next stop for White. Coming from a school with mostly Jewish white students in Brooklyn, White called his time at Booker T. Washington High "a slice of West Side Story." With few kids living in or near the city hotel, White recalls spending most summer days going to the movies, or walking down to the Hudson River to fish next to "a bunch of old guys". It's funny however when people say, "*Things happen for a reason.*" An older boy in the hotel was studying architecture, and White would watch him draw and loved what he was doing. With little social life to speak of in the hotel, White passed an entry test and attended Brooklyn Tech High School to study architecture.



DON WHITE THE
YOUNG BUSINESSMAN

But it's during this period of time that White truly learned his ability to both survive and adapt. These skills were probably developed back on the farm in the Catskills, but White was ordered to be there and told what to do. Now, White started figuring it out for himself, since his mother was, as White put it, more of a roommate and not really a parent in the true sense. If White was going to have some money in his pocket, he'd have to earn it; working as a busboy at age 14, or toiling in a packing and shipping department in the garment center. Eventually, White's uncle steered him towards becoming a door-to-door brush salesman, and after a few lessons, White was off knocking on doors on Wall Street as an independent "businessman" at the age of 15. White learned what it was like to have a door shut on his face (literally) in business, how to overcome failure and rejection and move on to the next door (it's an interesting theme that White will feel differently about in his personal life).

A LIFE PARTNER

It's around this time that White met his eventual wife of over 50 years, Rhoda, when they were both 15 years old. While White shared with laughter that he was afraid to kiss Rhoda for their first 6 dates, he continued with a more serious tone and confirmed what I'd been thinking; he

feared rejection if one of his “advances” was denied. The door could be shut on him in the business world and White would easily move on, but as the son of two parents who rejected him as a child, it would not be as easy for White to overcome the fear of personal rejection from someone whom he wished to befriend. It’s a feeling that White still struggles with to this day. Rhoda recalled that White acted much older than he was when she first met him, but after she said that she didn’t want to date an older boy, White quickly fessed up that he was only 15.

White’s mother had divorced her husband by this time, and she and White moved to an apartment. White recalls how impressed Rhoda was when he cooked dinner the first time she came over to his apartment. Cooking was another survival skill that White learned at a young age, and still enjoys to this day (I have it on good word that White is an excellent cook). Rhoda also recalls that upon meeting White’s mother, she thought that White’s mother was his sister. White and Rhoda married when they were 20 years old, knowing that they both wanted to escape from their respective environments. They also realized that they didn’t want to have children for at least five years so they could further their education. With little money and a small apartment in the Bronx, White continued as a brush salesman to earn money, but with encouragement from Rhoda; White began to follow his interest, architecture, and took a job as an “office boy” in the mailroom of an engineering company. From earning \$300 per week as a brush salesman, White now earned only \$40 per week, but whether he knew it or not at the time, he was on the path to a successful career.

As a young man, White developed incredible vision for what he wanted, and didn’t want in life. He wanted a family of his own, but he didn’t want important decisions made for him in other aspects of his life. As a child, the key decisions in White’s life were made for him, and by and large they were decisions that he didn’t like, so White was determined not to allow that to happen in his adult life. White identified some important life goals: to own a business by age 30; and if he had to serve in the military, he’d do so in the Coast Guard rather than the armed forces. In one of his first architecture jobs, White recalled looking to the other end of the drafting room at an old silver-haired man drawing while huddled over his drafting table, and White said to himself, “*That’s not going to be me.*” The image of this older man, toiling over a drawing table, subject to the orders from someone else just as White had been subjected to in his childhood, was not what White wanted for his life.

But it was also in his first architectural job in the mid 1960s at the famed firm Emery Roth and Sons that White worked on one of the most iconic buildings in New York City. His assignment as a junior draftsman was to draw the first floor plates of a yet-to-be approved skyscraper. While then Governor Rockefeller secured the approval of this groundbreaking project, White continued his work on this significant undertaking, the World Trade Center, before the building went up. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, before the World Trade Center opened, White started his own business and went on to assist some of the first tenants who moved into the Twin Towers by designing their floor plans and space.

White furthered his education in his field by becoming a construction superintendent. He could see the entire process of a building going up, interior and exterior. This is the essence of White; not just surviving, but adapting, taking control of his life. White said he always knew what he had to do, even at a young age, to get ahead, *“Even on the farm, when I realized that Bessie enjoyed it when I sang, I’d always sing when she was around to get in her good graces.”* Eventually, White formed his own architectural firm with a business partner, true to his goal, by age 30. With three young daughters, White worked hard and continued to build his reputation in his field. The Democratic National Committee came calling and asked White’s firm to redesign the floor plan and interior of Madison Square Garden to accommodate the 1976 Democratic National Convention.

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DON WHITE

But the following year White’s partner died at a young age. The stress of running the firm on his own, along with White’s hard work and merger with another firm eventually caught up to him, and in the mid-1980s, he had quadruple-bypass surgery, followed by a difficult period in his and Rhoda’s marriage. White looks back and realizes that the strengths he developed from his challenging childhood - survivability, adaptability, independence – could also be his greatest vulnerability, *“I didn’t know how to let others help me. I was still trying to go it alone, even though I no longer had to.”* But as White put it, he saw a light at the end of the tunnel for his marriage, so he and Rhoda “made that light blaze.” Again, White had a vision; he looked forward, adapted and thrived.

TAKING THE BETTER FORK IN THE ROAD

White’s interior architectural firm continued to grow, adapting and surviving as only White could do through the economic downturn of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and even managing to start a real estate technology and service organization that developed a software application for the real estate industry. But White always stayed grounded and was ready to lend a helping hand to others in need. After 9/11, feeling a personal and professional connection to the Twin Towers, White offered his firm’s services pro bono to businesses whose offices were impacted by the terrible events of that day. Peter Boritz, White’s son-in-law who runs the second company that Don started (RDM), says that White has a practical, level-headed approach to business and life, “One of Don’s favorite expressions is *“at the end of the day.”* It’s fitting for him because he boils the issues down to what really matters most. His reputation as an honest, talented and really good guy has made long-lasting impressions in the New York real estate and architectural arena.”

Today, White looks back on his life contently. There is not one ounce of bitterness in White from a childhood that honestly, I’d allow him some bitterness now and then if he wished. He has a 55-year marriage and raised three daughters (although tragically White’s middle daughter passed away from diabetes at age 33), and has a close relationship with his older brother Arthur, with whom he’s enjoyed a 30-year tradition of outings to the Philharmonic and Metropolitan Operas. Arthur

realizes that given their childhood, their sibling relationship is special, “My brother and I had to deal with what was happening around us [on the farm]. I always looked at him as though I was a father because I took care of him when we got on the farm. I admired that he wanted to become someone important in the architectural field and think he’s one of the great thinkers of our time in how he put together all of the little elements to make his success.” Don’s wife Rhoda also sees the special relationship between White and Arthur, “I don’t know of any two brothers who are closer.”

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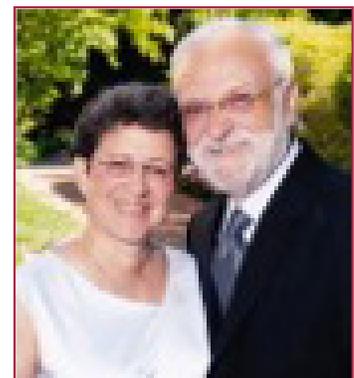
HILLARI WHITE BORITZ

White is proud of where he came from and what he’s been able to accomplish, but never in a bragging or “look at me” manner. He’s comfortably retired, but White doesn’t worry about showing off financially or “keeping up with the Jones”. He is far more interested in spending time with his family and friends, gardening (White said the interest in gardening must have come from growing up on a farm), photography and going to the theatre. Hillari White Boritz, White’s daughter, says that she is amazed at the father that White is, “He had no role model as a father, but he’s always evolving and growing as a dad and as a person. Doing things together as a family was and continues to be very important to him.” In their 50th wedding anniversary photo album, White wrote a touching note to his family and friends for joining the celebration party. In that note, White thanks his mother

“...who made all of this possible. You see my mother had to sign my marriage license because I was underage. So here we are 50 years later and my Mother was right. As a professional gambler her long shot paid off.” White said that he always felt sympathy and empathy for his mother’s pain that she must have felt living an unwanted life when she was married to White’s father, and believed it took a lot of strength for her to leave, even though it hurt White and his brother. It took a lot of strength and courage for White to look back on his life and his mother’s actions in such a balanced way.

YOU’RE NEVER TOO OLD TO HAVE A HAPPY CHILDHOOD

What makes one person who grew up in challenging circumstances find a good path for their life like White did, while another person in equally challenging circumstances may succumb to any number of life’s pitfalls and go down the wrong road? How easy would it have been for White, the son of two parents who cast him out at a young age, to follow too closely in his mother’s footsteps and become a compulsive gambler, or an alcoholic or drug addict, or somber like his father? There is no single “magic bullet” answer to this question, or foolproof way to figure out precisely what makes a person tick, but from White’s life story, we can find the multiple answers or “spokes on the wheel”. First, we can survive, adapt and prosper, even in the most challenging circumstances. Second, while



DON AND HIS WIFE, RHODA

White's independence at an early age fostered his eventual success, we can and should lean on others close to us for assistance at times, such as White accepting his Uncle's help to become an enterprising brush salesman at the age of 15, or Rhoda's encouragement to enter the architectural industry.

Third, even in a challenging childhood, with parents who struggled in their roles as mother or father, there are pieces of their personality that we can acknowledge and use to make a better life for ourselves (i.e. "use the good parts; leave behind the bad ones"), such as White finding a way to incorporate his mother's risk taking into becoming a successful entrepreneur. Fourth, White firmly believes that it helped him to play to his strengths, while acknowledging and improving his weaknesses. Further, make lemonade out of lemons by soaking up what you can that is taking place around you, such as White's interest in watching a building going up on the farm, or shadowing the architecture student who lived in the same hotel that White grew up in. Last but certainly not least, recognize that the strengths developed from a challenging childhood, such as the ability to take care of oneself, can also be a vulnerability, such as the inability to allow others to help in times of need.

Like all lives, White's is a journey, as he faced the enormous challenge of being cast out by both parents, sent to a farm to live in minimal conditions, but learning to survive, adapt and succeed both personally and professionally in spite of these circumstances. White's story is more than the tale of a young boy who toiled on a farm however. It's a New York Story. It's a survival story. It's a story about the human spirit, the ability to overcome life's challenges and take control of one's life. It's about setting goals and having a vision for what you want to achieve, and how you're going to get there. It's about eternal optimism that gives us light when so much around us can look dark at times. The son of a mother who was a compulsive gambler and an uninvolved father, White looks back on his life with candor and honesty when describing the good times and the bad times, but something tells me that White has plenty more living to do. As much as he's accomplished, White still talks about the things he wants to do, and in that same note to commemorate his 50th wedding anniversary, White wrote, *"I read or recall that good Jews can live to be 120."* So no matter what challenges White faces in the next 46 years, he will figure out how to survive and adapt, stronger from his life experiences and the lessons he's learned from them. As White looks back on a challenging upbringing with no trace of bitterness, but rather identifies what he learned from his experience, it's no coincidence that one of White's favorite quotes is from author Tom Robbins, *"You're never too old to have a happy childhood."*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Hillari White Boritz and Peter Boritz, White's daughter and son-in-law, for introducing me to Don and his inspiring story. Thank you to Don's wife Rhoda and brother Arthur for their unique insights into Don and his life. Thank you to the good people at RDM who helped to organize and scan White's photographs. Thank you to my children Jennifer and Michael who tell me to never give up and keep writing, and to my fiancée Beth who is always willing to read what I've written and provide invaluable advice. But most of all, thank you to Don White for his willingness to share his story honestly and openly. Your story and your words have and will continue to inspire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Yarin is a management consultant and author of the soon to be published book *Fair Warning – The Information Within*. Dave is interested in writing about inspiring stories of persons who overcame significant challenges to lead happy and successful lives. He also follows news stories regarding ignored warnings that lead to bad personal and professional outcomes, along with the social psychology theories that explain why these warnings were ignored. Dave lives near Boston, Massachusetts with his fiancée and two children. He can be contacted at dyarin@daveyarin.com; follow him on Twitter at [@DaveYarin](https://twitter.com/DaveYarin), or subscribe to his FlipBoard magazine – *Fair Warning*.