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# From the Shadows to the Spotlight

By Jackie Headpohl - 11/19/2020 1:00 PM  20  0



Mort Meisner (Glenn Triest)

**Mort Meisner battled childhood poverty, addiction and loss of faith to become a TV news kingmaker.**

In his recently released memoir and Amazon bestseller *Enough to Be Dangerous*, Mort Meisner, president of a TV news talent agency and PR agency in Royal Oak, dishes about his career as a concert promoter — promoting acts such as Kiss and Bruce Springsteen while attending Oak Park High School — and his TV news career, growing up in an abusive household and overcoming a cocaine addiction.

The book has garnered great reviews — well deserved. It's a fun dive into the experiences of a larger-than-life character who takes the reader on a no-holds-barred and honest ride through his 43-year career in broadcast news, which began at WXYZ-ABC in Detroit, took him to major network stations in Chicago and St. Louis, and concluded at Detroit's WJBK Fox 2 News.



*Mort with his parents while he was at WLS (ABC in Chicago) in 1983.*

*Courtesy of Mort Weisner*

Many faces familiar to Detroit TV viewers were mentored and/or represented by Mort: at Channel 7 (including Glenda Lewis, Jennifer Schanz and Diana Lewis), and at Channel 2 (Taryn Asher). He also helped bring popular anchor Huel Perkins to Fox 2 News.

“One of the reasons I wrote this book is to expose what happens behind closed doors in the media,” he said.

Prior to the book’s release, Mort blogged about many times in his career when he witnessed female co-workers endure sexist behavior from their male colleagues, and Black co-workers were shut out of job opportunities by high-level white men. He said that TV news managers would use offensive labels for black male reporters, calling them “garbagemen” and assigning them the worst stories.

“Unfortunately, the racism and sexism that I witnessed during the ’80s and ’90s are still a problem in some newsrooms,” he added.

He also writes about getting addicted to cocaine along the way. “I pissed away a lot of money and a \$100K a year job. Am I ashamed? No, but I was. Do I have guilt? No, but I did,” he said. “Because of my drug addiction, I met people I otherwise would not have met, including my best friend in Texas and a guy I have coffee with every day.”

#### **A Love Affair with Cocaine**

The first time Mort tried cocaine was with Rod Stewart and Ronnie Wood in a bathroom when he was a concert promoter. He didn’t like it. Five years later, in Chicago, he tried it again and fell in love with the white powder.

For the next eight years, cocaine played a big part in Mort's life. He both loved it and hated it. "I would lie to myself. Lying in bed at 3 a.m. with my heart pounding, I did a lot of foxhole praying. I'd say, 'God, if you don't let me die, I'll start going to synagogue. If you let me live, I'll stop.' And it worked until 5 p.m. the next day and then it didn't work. Again and again for eight years."

On Oct. 19, 1989, Mort thought he was having a heart attack. "But I wasn't," he said. He was admitted in the hospital for observation. His doctor told him he needed long-term treatment. His best friend, who flew up from Texas, said, "He just needs to get honest. And he needs to get God."

"I never did a line since. That was 31 years ago."

Over the years, he's gone to 12-step meetings, many of them Jewish. "I found that addiction is not more common or less common to any religion. I feel if I can quit, anyone can quit. I hope my tale of drug use and abstinence tells someone out there that they can quit, too."

#### **A Bar Mitzvah to Forget**

One thing Mort doesn't write much about in the book is his Jewish journey, so he agreed to sit down with the *JN* to discuss how he feels about his faith.

His story starts in the south part of Oak Park called "Cardboard Village," where he grew up. "Crappy, asbestos-shingled 800-square-foot homes," he said. "Living there took a bad childhood and made it worse."



*Mort's parents, Ella and Morris Meisner, outside their Oak Park home.*

*Courtesy of Mort Meisner*

Jeffrey Seller, producer of the Broadway smash *Hamilton*, also grew up in Cardboard Village. He told *DBusiness* he “was ashamed and humiliated to live there, and to even discuss it now is painful, actually.”

For Mort, it meant being ostracized by many of his peers. “I wasn’t invited to anyone’s bar mitzvah,” he said. “One kid told me I wasn’t invited because his mom and dad said they don’t associate with people from Cardboard Village. I ran into that a lot.”

Mort’s childhood memories are clouded by poverty — his family was evicted numerous times, including Thanksgiving of 1963 — and a dysfunctional family led by a father with anger management issues. Although his mother went to shul, his dad rarely did. “You had to buy tickets, and my father refused,” Mort said. “He said he could barely put food on the table. I remember him saying, ‘I can pray in a goddam latrine. I don’t need to pay to go.’”

Nevertheless, Mort had his bar mitzvah in 1966 at B’nai Moshe, a spiritual home for Hungarian Jews, which was founded by Mort’s great-uncle Adolph Deutch, also founder of American Savings & Loan and a generous man who would go on to finance a lot of local Jews in business.

While Mort has fond memories of Uncle Adolph, his memories of B’nai Moshe’s Rabbi Moses Lehrman aren’t as pleasant. “As I was preparing for my bar mitzvah, Rabbi Lehrman asked my father where my bar mitzvah party was going to be. My father told him we couldn’t afford a party, and he didn’t know what we were going to do,” he said.



Cousin Alfred Deutch with Great-Uncle Adolph Deutch, who put Mort through college.

Courtesy of Mort Meisner

According to Mort, “Rabbi Lehrman lectured my 350-pound, 6-3 father to the point where he reduced him to a mound of tears. He said to him, ‘You’re not a good father. A good father would have saved and have had a proper party for his son. Instead, you’re going to embarrass your son.’”

Young Mort was so angry at the way he felt the rabbi treated his father that he said to himself, “F\*\*\* this religion. I’m done.” Between the ages of 13 and 30, he went to synagogue fewer than five times.



*“Morty”’s bar mitzvah lunch, 1966, with brother Tony and his wife Marian, and cousin Pat Small.*

*Courtesy of Mort Meisner*

Mort was allowed to invite one friend to his bar mitzvah party, a lunch at Darby’s Restaurant in Detroit. “I was probably the only one who ever had a bar mitzvah there. I was mocked by other Jewish kids.”

Mort managed to escape poverty through education and hard work, thanks to his great-uncle Adolph and his son Alfred as well as his mother’s brother George Reinitz, who financed his education.

Mort keeps a photo of them in his office. “Without them, I wouldn’t have gone to college.”

### **Return to Judaism**

It wasn’t until Mort moved back to Metro Detroit in 1988, 22 years after his bar mitzvah, that he returned to a synagogue. “I started going to Beth Shalom because I heard Rabbi Nelson was a nice guy.

“I liked him. I told him my bar mitzvah story. I said having ostentatious bar mitzvah parties is

bullshit, and I think it should change. I told him, 'Rabbi, it's the wrong message. Why don't you do a sermon?' He agreed if I went to service. I did and he did."

Mort's own children's bar and bat mitzvah parties were parties for kids, not adults. No alcohol allowed.

He shared another, more mystical experience that led him back to the faith. When his wife was pregnant with his son Mark (now 27), a prenatal test revealed a potential life-threatening birth defect — a hole in the baby's spine.

"My wife and I went to Rabbi Nelson looking for advice. He put his hands out to us and said, 'We're going to pray.' I'm thinking that's ridiculous. But we did," Mort said. "The next time she got a test, the potential birth defect had resolved itself. The hole closed. It re-instilled my belief in God, a higher power."

Mort is now a member in good standing at Temple Shir Shalom. "Rabbi Moskowitz, Rabbi Schwartz, Cantor Penny Steyer and Rabbi Nelson are everything that's right with our religion," said Mort, who does marketing and PR for the temple.

"I don't go to services as much as I should, but I go more than I used to," Mort said. "I try to sit in the first row. I go looking for nuggets every time."

Today, what he enjoys most are his children, Jason, Nicole and Mark, "wonderful human beings who care about their fellow citizens," and grandsons Bruce and Tony, whom he coaches in baseball. As his grandchildren get older, he plans to share with them stories of their faith and their family.

### **Not an Easy Task**

Writing the book has led to an emotional roller coaster for Mort. "It caused me some sadness, depression. I'm trying my best to fight through it," he said.

"Do I always feel good about myself? No, many times I feel as bad about myself today as I did years ago. It's just how my brain works.

"I've seen a shrink for the last few years and a psychologist and unlocked a lot of repressed memories — emotional, mental and physical abuse that I had forgotten about. Stupid things I did that I'd forgotten about. I used to not believe in those. But they are real."

Mort said he wants people who read the book to come away with the belief that if you're in an addiction, there is help when you want it. Second, he wants people to know it's remarkable what we can live through.

“The first time I went to the psychiatrist, I told him my story. I asked him, ‘What do you think? I’m not all that bad, am I? My life?’

“He told me my story was one of the worst he’d ever heard. He said people who are not as bad off as me commit heinous crimes as a result of their upbringing.”

Mort sits back in his office in Royal Oak and smiles. “In retrospect,” he said, “I wasn’t all that good at being all that bad.”



*Mort Meisner at work.*

*Glenn Triest*