

Magazine

Battle of the Bolger

TF Conquers Dyslexia, Multiple Core Areas

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MC Hammer is back. Or as close to back as the balloon-pant pioneer will get, anyway, living it up in the blistering spotlight that is the WB's "The Surreal Life." Yet he's still way below Lamar Alexander on at least one barometer of notoriety—the celebrity photograph page on www.benjaminbolger.com, where Alexander's mug is pictured much higher on the list than Hammer's. Benjamin B. Bolger, the 27-year-old proprietor of this personal webpage and teaching fellow (TF) for several popular courses at Harvard, posts photographs of himself on his website with dozens of notables.

Bolger's mop of blond hair is never mussed, from his poses with an unshaven Al Gore '69 to a Yankee-cap-clad Spike Lee. How he serendipitously managed to be having a good hair day every single time he snared a celebrity photo-op is inexplicable. But serendipity is nothing new for Bolger.

The doctoral student at the Graduate School of Design explains on his webpage—and repeats almost verbatim for anyone who asks—that when he was two years old his family was in a near-fatal car accident, and he feels very lucky to be alive. Since then, he has overcome severe dyslexia to graduate from college at age 19—without knowing how to read—and amassed eight degrees. Now juggling work on his ninth while teaching four sections for three different courses, he shows no signs of slowing down. "When I hit double digits [of degrees] I'll definitely retire," he says.

Bolger was born outside of Flint, Mich., in 1975 to Donald Bolger, an engineer with General Motors, and Loretta, a retired teacher. At age four, his parents enrolled him in a gifted pre-kindergarten program at Michigan State University, but when he could not learn to read, they discovered he was dyslexic. His parents traversed the entire state of Michigan trying to find a suitable program for him in both public and private schools, but he couldn't keep up. "My self-esteem and self-worth were really impacted," he recalls. Finally, after fourth grade, they decided that home schooling was the best option.

Bolger boasts that he had no summers off during the four years when he was exclusively home schooled. "It was intensive, pragmatic and experiential. When we were studying the Civil War, we got into our Ford pickup truck and drove to Gettysburg," he says.

At age 12, however, with his family now living in Grand Haven, Mich., Bolger and his mother decided he should augment their private curriculum with courses at Muskegon Community College. "No matter how skilled one parent is, it is still only one person," he says.

After four years, he earned an associate's degree and moved to Ann Arbor to attend the University of Michigan. So did his mom.

She continued to read his assignments out loud to him because most textbooks weren't available on tape. At Ann Arbor, he took his exams orally and did well enough in school to get into Yale Law School after he graduated from the University of Michigan in December 1994. At that winter's commencement ceremonies, the attorney general addressed the graduates and spoke about Bolger's accomplishments in spite of his dyslexia. After graduation, he interned at the White House before starting at Yale the following September.

But he says he was too young for law school at age 19 and only stayed a couple of months before deciding to go to school abroad. "I was more interested in getting a date than in clerking for the Supreme Court. My maturity level was just not compatible with my peers," he says of Yale. He headed to Oxford and Cambridge next, an experience he calls reminiscent of home schooling because of the one-on-one tutorial system and the long term breaks that allowed for lots of travel.

Oxford was similar to home schooling in another way, as well: his mom came to England, too, continuing to read him his assignments. While his mother had the most hands-on impact on his education, his father, from whom his mother is now separated, also influenced his educational choices. "My father has an MBA, a J.D. and an advanced engineering degree. I definitely modeled his excitement for multi-tasking career interests," Bolger says.

While studying in England, Bolger also began working with Pat Lindamood of the Lindamood-Bell learning processes to combat his dyslexia and slowly gained literacy skills. Now, he says, he is a "sufficient" reader, but still dictates most papers out loud because he has trouble spelling.

Since Oxford, he's bounced from Stanford to summers at Dartmouth and then to Columbia. The total tally, after the associate's degree, is as follows: A.B. from the University of Michigan, 1994; M.Sc. from the University of Oxford (Sociology), 1997; M.Phil. from the University of Cambridge (Politics), 1998; A.M. from Stanford University (Education), 2000; M.S. from Columbia University (Real Estate Development), 2001; M.A. from Teachers College (Politics of Education), 2001; M.Des.S. from Harvard University (Urban Planning & Real Estate), 2002. Now he's working on a doctorate (D.Des.) in Urban Planning and Real Estate at Harvard's Graduate School of Design.

This semester, Bolger is teaching for Government 1300, "The Politics of Congress," Social Analysis 58, "Representation, Equality and Democracy" and Moral Reasoning 28, "Ethics and International Relations."

"Ben, it seems, has been everywhere and done everything," says Assistant Professor of Government Barry C. Burden, who teaches Gov 1300. "That kind of experience is probably helpful in adding to the section discussions."

Bolger hasn't been at Harvard that long relative to all the time he's spent at other institutions of higher learning—only a year and a half at this point—but he's completely indoctrinated in the spirit of the place. He says he spends most weekends in Widener and that he stays two to three weeks ahead of the reading in most of his courses. "I try to sleep as little as possible. I try to be as involved as I can," he says.

His involvement here makes him bizarrely ubiquitous. Last semester, he TF'ed Foreign Cultures and Government courses, and with the additional three courses he's teaching now, six degrees of Ben Bolger is a viable (if not very interesting) party game.

And his Oprah-esque tale and eccentricity stick in his students' minds. He still reads slowly and has to budget ample time for grading student work. Even his movements occasionally give off the same rehearsed quality as his oral autobiography—every time he is about to climb a staircase, he spins around one full revolution. When asked what this accomplishes, Bolger says, "Oh, that. Yeah, I do a lot of funny things."

Bolger says he has always wanted to teach, but also has a "long-standing interest in public service." Public service, he implies, can be read as the White House. "I would love to be governor of Michigan. I wouldn't want to move on to anything bigger unless I knew I could make a difference."

He peppers his sentences with presidential references even more than a typical former American Presidency TF. He says he "tends to take a Jeffersonian approach to life," in terms of his varied interests. When he interned in the White House in 1995 and was able to meet Bill Clinton he felt "a certain sense of inspiration—"He presented himself as someone real," he says. About his mother's secretarial assistance, he reminds an avid history student that Winston Churchill, Nelson Rockefeller and Woodrow Wilson, among other luminaries, all had secretaries. And though his mother is no longer his secretary, she is still supportive. "I could be a poet laureate or president of the United States. She just wants me to pick something and push as hard as I can," he says.

Bolger's life story is remarkable enough—it was featured on "Dateline" and the "Today Show," as well as newspapers in Detroit and Philadelphia. It also caught the eye of Disney, whom he minimizes as "just one of a number of prominent folks who wanted to make a movie of my life."

But the way he tells the story suggests a particular flair for the dramatic—like his story is the first half of the inevitable movie script. In the personal information section of his flashy website, he writes, "When I was twelve years old, I began college," referring to the supplemental work he did at Muskegon.

And his campus-hopping tendencies sometimes outpace even his own encyclopedic self-awareness. In trying to arrange for a photo shoot, he says first that he could meet a photographer at Baker library, a

Dartmouth building that sounds a lot like the Barker Center. He makes several more building-name blunders, but attributes this cloudiness to the late hour of the interview rather than the amalgamation of campus maps in his head.

But Bolger's confidence in the extraordinary nature of his story has enabled him to wax philosophical. "One can never say they're happy to have a devastating experience, but I think you can learn from a bad deck of cards," he says. This colloquial optimism isn't hollow the way Bolger says it. It is certainly practiced—he tells this story a lot—but his sense of luck and his acknowledgement of how that affects his life is genuine.

This deck, he says, "also gives you the power to have empathy. I almost lost my family. I could have easily been orphaned."

<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=291613>
