

Decades with Shelby

Discover the personal side of the tattooed jokester.

Goofy. Serious. Spiritual. These are the words Don Shelby uses to describe himself. The once aspiring basketball player and current Minneapolis icon reigns as the leading news anchor at WCCO television. He tallied an impressive list of awards over the course of his career, including three national Emmys. But don't let Shelby's larger-than-life exterior fool you. He makes a mess of things just like the rest of us.

In fact, next time co-host Amelia Santaniello makes a mistake on air, blame Don Shelby. His pre-show ritual includes reading Amelia's script for tricky words. "I'll tell her the wrong pronunciation, try to trip her up," he chuckles. This is a highlight of his night. "Occasionally I'll get her!"

Clearly, Shelby embraces fun. Just ask WCCO reporter Jason DeRusha. "My very first week at work, Don sat in the cubicle on the opposite side of me. All of a sudden, I start hearing the harmonica," DeRusha says. "Turns out it's a legendary TV anchor playing the harmonica in the middle of the newsroom."

A self-professed prankster to anyone within 25 feet of him, Shelby's nerves don't get the best of him. "I've found that the best way to prepare for anything is to loosen up," he says. He explains that nervousness stems from fear of failure. "I *know* I'm going to mess up, so I don't need to get nervous," he laughs.

He handles a mistake with the same candor that has established him as a great journalist. "Keep on talking," he says, explaining that less than one-third of people will even notice the slip.

Shelby's free flowing words are measured, and his smooth voice and flowing meter makes for easy conversation. But he claims 40 years ago, predicting his career success was impossible. "I was bad, ugly, skinny, and taking on things way over my head," he says.

So when did he start getting it right? "After the 50th time of humiliation from stupidity, I thought, 'this is getting tiresome,'" he says. He became a voracious reader, memorizing as many facts as possible. He rattles off favorite authors for various subjects, but has a special fondness for Mark Twain.

Also, finding sources comes easily for Shelby. "I've got a little cop in me," he says. He seems to have a little bit of everything in him. Shelby eats fresh eggs from the chickens he keeps at home. Hobbies include beekeeping and gardening. He anticipates the annual deer hunt and spouts memories of playing in a blues band.

Viewers may also be surprised to discover tattoos. The giant compass on Shelby's back represents a love of mountain climbing and the outdoors. The tattoo also contains a clue. "North, South, East, West," he says. Rearrange that to find the acronym NEWS.

Catch a glimpse of his wrist for his second tattoo, a butterfly scripted with 'Barbara'. "After 35 years it is perfectly acceptable to mark yourself with an indelible name. Any sooner than that, though, is jumping the gun," he jokes.

He and his wife Barbara will celebrate their 35th wedding anniversary on Dec. 6, 2009. The two met during Shelby's stint in the Air Force in the late sixties. "We had an inter-office relationship. But I wasn't her superior," he smiles. He speaks candidly but seriously about protecting his wife's privacy. The media has not snapped a picture of Barbara in 31 years, a feat for the wife of such a public figure. But that is exactly how she wants it. "She does not like to be treated differently as 'Shelby's wife'," he says.

Together they raised three daughters. Always being outnumbered taught Shelby to "accept humiliation and extreme criticism. I was seldom ever right," he says. "It prepared me for my job!"

Shelby's prominence and local status affects family dynamics. "My family doesn't want to go out with me anymore because of the attention," he says. It doesn't personally bother him, however; he understands why people want to shake his hand or say hello. "It sounds boring, but my favorite place to be in Minneapolis on a Friday night is with family. Letting down of the hair happens at home," he says.

Shelby cites Minnesotan's welcoming sense and willingness to forgive errors as reasons for staying in the Twin Cities for over 30 years. But enjoy his presence while you can; retirement looms at the close of 2010. The television veteran hasn't the slightest idea what to do with his time, but promises not to lose touch with WCCO. "I owe a debt to the people of Minnesota. I've passed lots of opportunities in order to stay here," he says. "The only way to repay is to stay."

With ode to Shelby's famous television segment, that is good to know.