



Barbara Walters receiving the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Daytime Emmy Awards in 2000

EDITORS' NOTE Barbara Walters is one of the most highly acclaimed television personalities. She has hosted the morning television shows *Today* and *The View*, the television news magazine *20/20*, and has co-anchored the ABC Evening News. She was also a contributor to ABC News. Walters first became known in television as a writer and segment producer on *The Today Show*, when she began working with host Hugh Downs in 1962. In 1974, she became the show's Co-Host, the first woman with that title for any network news or public affairs program. Two years later, she became the first female Co-Anchor of any network evening news program, working with Harry Reasoner on the ABC Evening News. From 1979 to 2004, Walters was also Co-Host and Producer for *20/20*, again appearing with Hugh Downs. From 1976 to 2010, she contributed as an anchor, reporter, and correspondent for ABC News, as well as producing and hosting her own interview programs several times yearly. Beginning in 1997, she created and appeared as Co-Host on *The View*. Walters retired from ABC News and as Co-Host of *The View* in May 2014.

In the early years of your career, could you have envisioned the possibility of such an outstanding run?

I never took success for granted. I started out in television writing for other people. That's what I did for Hugh Downs and others on *The Today Show*. I never thought I would also be on the air.

In those early days, if you were going to be on the air, you were referred to as the Today Girl, and you were either a model or an actress, or a singer. I was the first one taken from a backstage position. I wasn't an actress or a model. I didn't have that type of talent. At one point, they had Maureen O'Sullivan as the Today Girl, because they had seen her in a play in which she was wonderful.

The Interviewer

An Interview with Barbara Walters

That caused them to make the mistake of thinking that she could be an interviewer because she was a great actress.

At the convention in Atlantic City where Lyndon Johnson was nominated, they had to replace her. They needed someone quickly who they could hire and I was already there as a writer. So they hired me for no additional money for 13 weeks and I stayed on for 13 years.

When you reflect on the progress made by women in television, do you see opportunities improving?

I think so. One thing I'm most proud of is that after me, there were no more Today Girls. I insisted that I wouldn't do that and, in any event, it led up to my becoming equal with the men. I see that as my legacy and, today, there is nothing in TV that women cannot do.

When you talk of your progress as a woman on TV, it sounds like an easy transition, but clearly it was not. Would you discuss this further?

Frank McGee was then on-air at NBC and didn't want me on with him. There was a point where he wasn't going to let me participate at all. After he died, network management were looking for another host. I said, no; the individual you select will be co-host, because it was in my contract that, if anything happened to Frank McGee, I would become the co-host. Nobody was focused on this but there it was. Although it was accidental and not planned, or necessarily wanted, it was contractually to be.

When that happened, was it accepted pretty quickly when the network powers saw the talent you had for interviewing?

No, I later learned there were people at NBC who did not want that to happen and didn't think it should happen. They were not happy when it did and the sentiment was more like, "How did we get stuck with her?" Obviously, things worked out well.

What is your secret in conducting such interesting interviews?

It's curiosity. You have to be curious and probing; you can't just go to the second question in your notes without digesting the response to question one. You have to listen. Your second question may need to be simply, Why? Why did you say that? Why do you feel that way? You can't just go through a litany of questions. You must make it a conversation.

How do you prepare for your interviews?

I am a big proponent of doing homework. Today, you have Google, which provides wonderful

material for an interview, but this is recent. Over the years, I would see if the interviewee had done television talk shows and, if so, I would look at those interviews. You have to do homework. There is no substitute for preparing well.



Do you enjoy interviews with people from all walks of life?

In the past, there was the feeling that you should not mix celebrity interviews with hard news interviews. But, for my first special, I had Barbra Streisand with her then-boyfriend Jon Peters, and also President Elect and Mrs. Jimmy Carter. That was considered to be almost impossible. But now we don't question the broad range of content. If you watch morning programs, you will note that the first 20 minutes is news; then it may be interviews or cooking, and so-forth. That has been a great breakthrough and has allowed for a wide mix of celebrity interviews.

I also feel that knowing what someone's values are, what makes them tick and what made them the way they are today is very important.

I have interviewed President and Mrs. Obama four or five times, and we usually divide the material into two sections. I talk with him about whatever major events are going on in the world and



Barbara Walters interviews Katharine Hepburn for ABC News' "20/20" in 1981 (left page); President and Mrs. Obama will sit together for a Thanksgiving visit in a joint one-hour special with Barbara Walters. "A Barbara Walters Special: A Thanksgiving Visit with President and Mrs. Obama" airs in November (above); Barbara Walters conducting the first interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin following the terrorist attacks on the U.S. in 2001 (center); Barbara Walters on the set of *The View* (bottom)

then I talk with both of them about their personal values. It's important to know someone's core beliefs and how they were developed. This wasn't done in the past because it was considered "asking personal questions," and that was a terrible thing to do. Today, we know that much about the way people make decisions is based on their personal lives and their personal values, so questioning in this regard is not only accepted but encouraged.

You have always been interested in bringing one's life partner in to show the relationship dynamic. How important is that?

It depends. If you're doing a hard news interview, it really doesn't matter who their partner is. Where we do specials and there is substantial time, it is important to also pursue the personal side. Today, there is limited time. If you do an interview, you might have only four-and-a-half minutes on a morning show so it is a different type of interview.

Does the public's obsession with celebrities today surprise you?

No, it doesn't surprise me. There has always been great interest in celebrities. We also now have more outlets from which to access that information. If you want news, it's more limited. You can still go



to CNN or MSNBC, as well as look up what you want on your iPad. Fewer people are watching television. They don't tune in for the 6:30 PM news, as used to be the case. Being the anchor of the evening news show was as high as you could get. It's not anymore.

Are we missing something now that the business has changed?

There is some concern that people are not watching serious news, but if you want to find it, you can. In many ways, it's probably easier and more accessible than before because of the iPad or iPhone.

You have created great interest around your television special, *Ten Most Fascinating People of the Year*.

I don't have many more years; actually, this may be the last year.

I have a feeling you have said that before.

No, I haven't. I said I would retire from *The View* but I never said I was leaving television completely. I'm still a part of ABC News.

How did the concept for *Ten Most Fascinating People* come about?

I was doing *20/20* and wanted to have more variety. This is how we began to do *Ten Most Fascinating People*. As years went on and I was no longer doing *20/20*, it enabled us to do not just celebrity interviews but also very serious and important interviews. It's something I wanted to keep doing.

You have had an outstanding 18-year run with *The View*. Early on, did you think it would be so successful?

No, we didn't. We sort of snuck it on in August with a concern that it might not make it. My original concept was to present women with different backgrounds and ages. We have stayed true to that, but not so much generationally speaking. Early on, I don't think the network was terribly certain of this show. I had to make phone calls to our Boston and Philadelphia affiliates. We were on at 11 AM, which was a difficult time period when many of the affiliates were carrying their own local programming

and making money with it. They didn't want to run *The View*. It was only when the program began to be successful that they agreed to carry it. In the early years, when a station would pick us up, we thought it was a big enough deal that we would announce it on the show.

You've interviewed many heads of state who were compelling leaders with strong personalities. Do you feel that such leaders are a thing of the past?

I don't know if that is in the past. I do know that Fidel Castro was an amazing character and Anwar Sadat changed the course of history as well. Menachem Begin was also one such leader. We don't seem to have that kind of leadership now that the people recognize, with the possible exception of Vladimir Putin.

The question is, are these kinds of leaders still being created? I believe that the circumstances create the leaders, and I would cite Margaret Thatcher in that regard. We don't seem to have that kind of huge personality anymore.

When one watches a Barbara Walters interview, the final product is seamless. What happens if you are conducting an interview that does not seem to be going as you had expected?



This does happen and it's why very often I get into one's childhood. It helps develop a picture of who they are. It can be emotional, but it can set the whole scene. Regardless of what you do, some interviews just don't go well – they are boring and I suffer through them. However, there are often pleasant surprises; things that are new and original.

It's hard to imagine you ever slowing down.

I have. I wasn't even sure I was going to do *Ten Most Fascinating People* this year. I no longer do *The View*. I don't do *20/20*. You rarely see me on television now and I'm okay with that.

Do you at times reflect on all that you have accomplished?

I really don't. However, there was a television special done this year that reviewed my career. I was not involved with creating this special. In fact, it included some events that I did not remember.

Another thing that touched me greatly was a special that presented many women from all over the country and from different walks of life who talked about how their careers had been helped by mine. I consider this a huge tribute and for that I am most honored. That's my legacy. ●