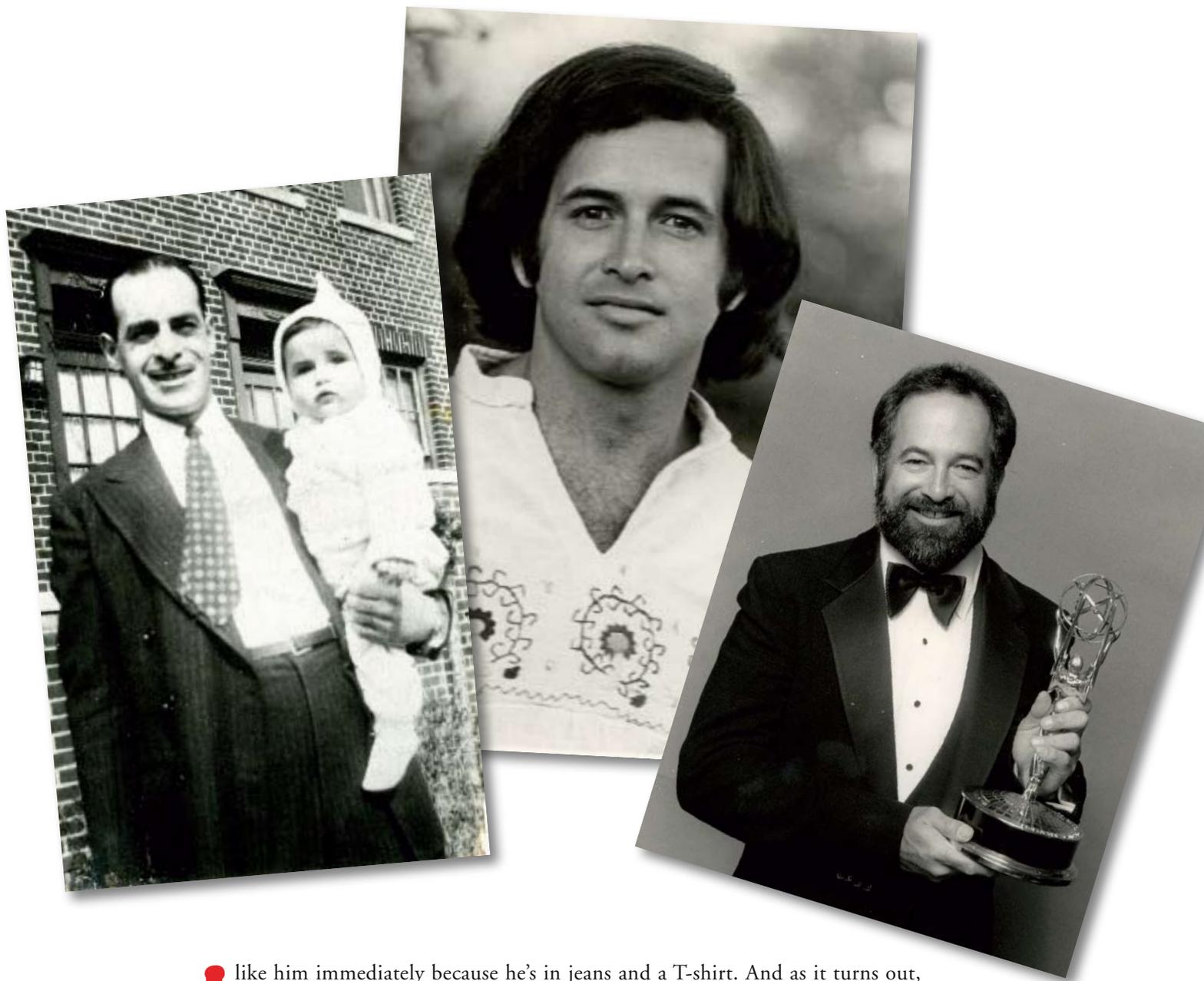


The Kid from Brooklyn

TV legend Gary David Goldberg talks about his recent book, 'Sit, Ubu, Sit,' and his own family ties

by Dave Korzon





I like him immediately because he's in jeans and a T-shirt. And as it turns out, my talk today with Gary David Goldberg, the television mogul who created UBU Productions and its flagship hit show, *Family Ties*, is pretty much going to be a jeans and T-shirt type of discussion with a jeans and T-shirt type of guy. Who would have thought?

Gary, a fit-looking sixty-four years old, has just greeted me with a welcoming smile and handshake at his front door. He's glad to see me. We're thirteen floors up, overlooking Central Park on a warm spring day—the kind of day that shows New York City off at its best. The surroundings are indeed sumptuous, but the man standing before me is all Brooklyn, a postal worker's son who grew up to become one of the most famous television writers and producers in the industry. If there's such a thing as a “regular guy-mogul” I think I've just found him.

Today Gary and I will look back and talk about *Family Ties*, his highly successful situation comedy that ran for seven years on NBC (1982–1989) and introduced us to a young, and at the time largely unknown, actor named Michael J. Fox. We'll also talk about the present, specifically his recent book, *Sit, Ubu, Sit: How I Went from Brooklyn to Hollywood with the Same Woman, the Same Dog, and a Lot Less Hair*. The book is a joyous, funny chronicle of Gary's life in television. It's also a look at the many influences outside of television that kept him grounded, focused, and intact as his career blossomed.

But where to begin? My first impulse around Gary is to try to be funny. If I take that route, however, I fear that this will be the shortest interview *The Rambler* will ever do. Everyone I'm sure wants to know about *Family Ties*, I could start there. At its zenith, in the mid-eighties, the show was watched by one-third of all households in this country with a television set—numbers that could never be duplicated today. *Family Ties*, of course, spawned UBU Productions, Gary's production company that produced nine shows and grew into a television empire. Then there's Gary's critically acclaimed show—and some would argue his true masterpiece—*Brooklyn Bridge* (1991–1993 on CBS). This beloved comedy (although canceled by CBS after only thirty-four episodes) was inspired by Gary's Brooklyn childhood and his grandmother, Jenny, the matriarch of his family. And let's not forget the smart, funny look at New York City politics, *Spin City* (1996–2002 on ABC), which saw Gary reunite with Michael J. Fox.

Gary has won almost too many awards to mention. There are Emmys, Golden Globes, Writer's Guild kudos. We could actually spend the whole afternoon talking about nothing but awards, honors, and accolades. And surprisingly, Gary points us in that very direction: "I was chosen third team All-City in basketball in high school, in 1962 by the *New York Post*," he tells me. "I was actually a really good basketball player. I don't have the clippings here, but I could get them for you. For the article." He laughs, obviously knowing that I didn't come here today to talk basketball. But there is an almost serious tone and a real Brooklyn kid's pride coming from Gary when he talks about his background in sports. His childhood life revolved around ball fields and basketball courts in a neighborhood where you were judged among your peers by achievement in athletics, end of story. "Growing up I was only interested in sports," Gary says. "That was all I cared about—my only view of myself. The only thing that had any value to me."

But what about comedy and show business, the things that would ultimately be his life's work? Where did they fit in?

"I wasn't focused on funny at all back then," Gary tells me. "If someone was funny, they were considered odd. Because they weren't playing ball; they were being funny."

I must admit it's surprising to hear this from a man whose early television-writing career included a stint at MTM Enterprises, famous for producing shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Rhoda*, and *The Bob Newhart Show*. I thought that to keep this kind of company, you had to work at "funny" from a very early age. Not so for Gary David Goldberg. But then again, Gary's entire pre-television life was anything but a focused, planned-out career track.

His college transcript resembles a tossed salad of semesters and partial semesters at schools from coast to coast, encompassing the years 1962 to 1975(!). The late sixties found Gary waiting tables at the Village Gate on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village—enjoying the scene, taking acting lessons, and, at twenty-five, having very little idea of what to do with his life. The fallback plan then was to be a physical education teacher. That's when he met Pan Am flight attendant Diana Meehan at a house party in Brooklyn. His universe shifted.

"Diana gave me great courage," Gary tells me succinctly. "I'd have no career if I hadn't met Diana. I'm not kidding. You can't understand how simple and uncomplicated I was back then. I knew what I knew, which was sports, and then drugs, and a little bit of jazz. But Diana, and our dog, Ubu, they changed my life. Each looked at me in a way that was basically saying, C'mon, you can do anything! You can do better, you can be more. You have more depth. So I'm a totally different person because of my wife."

As if on cue, the phone rings and it's Diana on the other end. It crosses my mind to grab the receiver from Gary and ask him to take a walk around the block while Diana and I chat. But I'm a guest, so I sit quietly and study the objects on Gary's desk. There is a typed script, which (try as I might) I cannot read upside down. There is also a miniature sculpture of a United States mailbox. A bit of family lore? A tribute to his father?

Gary and Diana finish up their conversation, and now it's up to me to start a new one with this guy I'm going to try to get a handle on. Just how do you go from the playing fields of Brooklyn to the role of Greenwich Village bohemian to television legend? Gary? A little help?

DAVID KORZON: Gary, is there a certain kind of sense of humor that lends itself to making good television situation comedy? In other words, your sensibilities and your brand of humor are obviously tailor-made for TV. What is distinct about them?

GARY DAVID GOLDBERG: The kind of comedy that I've always responded to the most, which is the hallmark of great writers in the business like Jim Brooks, Allan Burns—is what I would call laughs of recognition, which I think are very deep and meaningful. I think it's the easiest thing in the world, actually, to make the audience laugh. It's not that hard. But it's all about what *kind* of laugh it is. And there's a quality of laughter that I believe brings an audience back. This was in my era, anyway. This may have all changed by now. Actually, in this new generation it may be completely invalid by now. But I don't think it really is.

So what I would always look for in creating situation comedy is this laugh of recognition where you have a situation that is just a situation, and with just this little turn, you expose some element of human behavior that people can then relate to and laugh at.

KORZON: I'm sure that these moments—a lot of them, anyway—are coming from personal experience.

GOLDBERG: I'll give you an example from an episode of *Family Ties* we did. And this was actually from my own life. It's based on the only time my brother betrayed me. I was very emotional as a kid. I would cry all the time, especially about anything having to do with animals. So there was this song, "Old Shep," about this boy and his dog who dies. I would cry every time I heard it. I would cry *now* if you put it on. So my brother, if it was a slow day, would bring his friends up, and he would hold me down, put on "Old Shep," and I would cry.

So in this episode of *Family Ties* that we did, the father, Steve, played by Michael Gross, has a brother who comes back

to visit, and the brother says, “You’re not still mad at me for the ‘Old Shep’ stuff, are you?” And Steve says, “No, I completely forgot about that.” And they hug and the brother leaves. Then Michael Gross turns and looks at the record collection in the living room, and the audience just starts to laugh. And then he puts the “Old Shep” record on, and he sits and starts to listen to it, and then Alex, played by Michael J. Fox, comes in and he says, “What are you listening to?” And he sees his dad is tearing up a little bit, and he says, “I can’t believe you’re going to fall for this!” And then in the song it gets to the part where they shoot Old Shep, and Alex’s line is, “They shot him?” And that was the whole moment right there. But we could do that kind of joke. That’s the kind of joke that I like. It’s not ba-boom. And it’s not even a joke if it’s not perfectly acted. And we had two perfect actors there.

Those are the kinds of laughs I found to be the most meaningful. And don’t forget, to be a successful show on television you have to be *asked back* into someone’s home. We’ve all had guests who, when they leave, you say, Good, I don’t want to see them again. So you have to get asked back, which is a subtle thing.

KORZON: That’s the old TV adage—you *are* invited into people’s homes every time they turn your show on. And it used to be that you had to be nice. Today there’s a lot of mean humor, a lot of put-down humor, in shows that are wildly successful.

GOLDBERG: I don’t know if these shows are wildly successful, if you look at numbers. Take any of the hit shows today. It would take three hit shows to make up *half* of the *Family Ties* audience. It’s not possible to have that kind of audience again. But I think television served a different function back then in society. It was a national campfire back then. Now it’s not.

KORZON: I hear that you don’t watch TV now.

GOLDBERG: I really don’t. I have two daughters in the business, Shana and Cailin. And they’re funny about it; they tell me what shows I like. They’ll say, “Dad, if anyone asks you, here’s what you like—*The Office*, *30 Rock*, and *Scrubs*.” So that’s what I say [laughs].

KORZON: *Family Ties* was a show about a family, the Keatons, and how the parents, who were flower children in the sixties, raised their children during the Reagan era in the eighties. When you started out, did you have a set idea as to what kind of show you wanted *Family Ties* to be? The tone of it? The kind of experience you wanted the audience to have?

GOLDBERG: I wanted it to be a more natural show than the shows I had been seeing on television. One of my main intentions with *Family Ties* was that I didn’t want seven jokes on a page—I wanted one joke that *couldn’t* be on another show.

That was important. And if you were pitching a story idea to me for an episode of *Family Ties*, I would ask you, “What’s the last scene? What’s the last scene about?” Because if there was no last scene, there was no show. And what I mean by that is, the show had to be grounded in some reality.

What made me feel very good back then is when people would write in and say, “In our house your show *starts* after we turn your show *off*. Because that’s when we talk about what we saw and how it relates to our life.”

KORZON: That must have gotten a little heavy. I mean, for *Family Ties* to have that kind of impact across the country where families are comparing their own real-life situations to your television show.

GOLDBERG: It was very heavy.

But your number-one responsibility was to get people to laugh. In *TV Guide* it said, “*Family Ties*, comedy.”

KORZON: Beyond that, though, did you feel a responsibility to put on shows that addressed “big topics” centering on serious family issues?

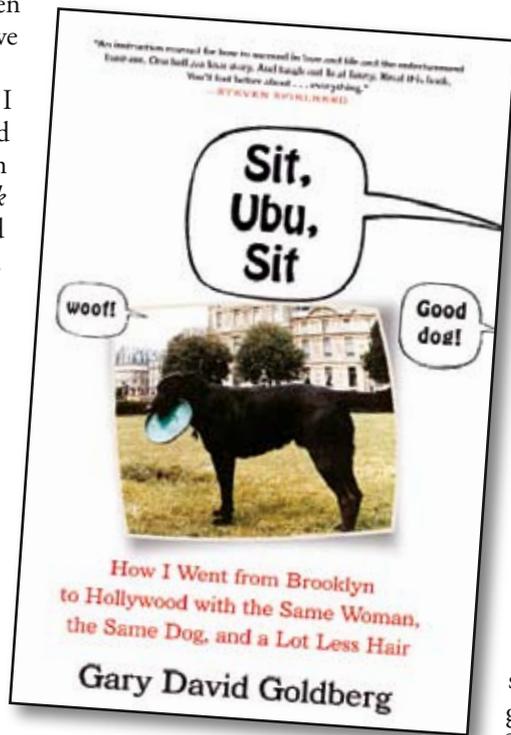
GOLDBERG: Yes, but addressing those topics fit very naturally into our mandate in doing *Family Ties*. What we *couldn’t* do was a didactic, *boring* version of that kind of show. If we couldn’t find a way to legitimately get laughs into a story, then we didn’t want to do it.

Here’s a good example. There was a show we did where Mallory [the older daughter] thinks she’s been groped by this friend of the family, this guy she used to call Uncle Arthur. And she goes to Alex of all people because the research we did showed that a girl of Mallory’s age wouldn’t go to her parents with this kind of problem. So she goes to her brother. And this is a good example of the kind of joke we needed

for this kind of situation. Mallory says to Alex, “I think Uncle Arthur touched me inappropriately.” And Alex says, “Are you kidding? Uncle Arthur? He used to bathe you when you were a kid.” And Mallory says, “Yeah, I think he wants his old job back.” Now that’s a legitimate laugh in that situation. But we got a lot of help with these kinds of storylines. We reached out to counselors to make sure we were being accurate and responsible. And, as a show, you do inherit that position of responsibility. I don’t think we could have ignored it. And we didn’t want to do any inadvertent harm. So I felt that by talking to people who were professionals, I kept us from doing inadvertent harm. Because kids don’t process information the same way as adults.

I also felt we just couldn’t leave stories too unresolved on these moral issues where kids would sometimes be watching by themselves. But again, we never lost sight of our mission, our main goal: make people laugh. That’s why they’re tuning in.

KORZON: Gary, I’ve never been to a live taping of a TV show. *Family Ties* taped live in front of an audience on Friday



nights. What was that like?

GOLDBERG: It was spectacular. There's almost no other word for it. It was thrilling.

KORZON: How many audience members are we talking about?

GOLDBERG: About two hundred and fifty I would say, in bleachers. And when they got rolling . . . that sound is one of the greatest sounds you can elicit. It's hard to explain what that atmosphere is. It's so exciting. And to see the actors get that energy back from the audience, it means they're playing better, everything is working, and it's just this great circle of energy. We tried to tape the show as fast as we could, to keep that energy up. I actually had a stopwatch that I used between scenes. I would carry it around, and if we were getting too long in getting the next scene underway, I would start telling people, "Get 'em out, get 'em out, let's go!" We didn't want fancy hair changes and things like that between scenes. We wanted to keep that audience hot.

KORZON: As *Family Ties* went from TV sitcom to national phenomenon, expectations from the audience must have been high.

GOLDBERG: I would tell the pages at NBC, when we got them together, that the audience members are the most important people in your life. From the minute they step onto stage 24 they can't hear the word "no." These are the most important people in the *world* to us. They have to feel great. I want them going home saying, "This is the best time I've ever had—the *Family Ties* taping." Because back then people would plan their trip to California around when they could get tickets to *Family Ties*. So you had an expectant audience—people who weren't casual about coming in that door. And after the show they couldn't bring themselves to leave! They would just stand up and come down to the railing. And of course our actors were so generous, and Mike [Michael J. Fox] and everyone would come up and sign autographs and kibitz with people.

KORZON: It all sounds like a rock concert [laughs].

GOLDBERG: That was the intensity of it. The downside of it was that the show was all you were doing. All you were doing was *Family Ties*. So even when I was at home during this time, I really wasn't. Half of me was somewhere else. Because you're always thinking about material, and wondering, Can I use this? Your pockets are full of napkins when you're out walking around and suddenly you're thinking, Oh, I've got to be writing this down. And then I would see Diana look at me with that look that says, Don't go there. *Do not* go there. This situation you're observing is off limits. But it's too late,

because your mind is already going in that direction. So it was a kind of obsession.

KORZON: Your life's work is comedy. Does your humor come from any kind of hurt place, or are you just funny?



Gary David Goldberg taking a time-out on the set of 'Family Ties.'

GOLDBERG: No, I don't believe it's coming from a hurt place. I was never the class clown by any means. This is just how life comes to me, how I see things. Growing up, I was only interested in sports.

KORZON: That's so Brooklyn [laughs]. At least I think it is.

GOLDBERG: It is! And it never goes away. Never goes away. Our family knew a guy named Alan Greenberg, who went to Dartmouth and played ball, and then went on to become a doctor. Because of this choice, he didn't play ball his last two years at school. And I remember we were sitting at the kitchen table at our house one time and I said, "Whatever happened to Alan Greenberg?" And my father said, in all seriousness, "He doesn't play ball anymore, he 'drifted' into medicine." [Laughs.] So if you weren't playing sports, you weren't that interesting to our family.

KORZON: Who were the funny people in your life when you were growing up in Brooklyn?

GOLDBERG: I wasn't focused on "funny" at all. I would say the guy that we knew of who we thought was funny was Jackie Gleason. Because *The Honeymooners* was set in Bensonhurst, in our neighborhood. And Phil Silvers, who played Sergeant Bilko, had a cousin who lived on 65th Street. You know, we were so far removed from show business, that we used to go look at Phil Silvers's cousin's apartment house, and say, "Wow, we're in show business now! Because Phil Silvers's cousin lives here!" [Laughs.] That's how crazy it was. To conceive of ever being in show business—it was beyond anything. Our family

went to New York once a year. You would go for Christmas, see the lights, and that was it.

KORZON: But your house must have been funny.

GOLDBERG: No, no. And no funny friends.

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KORZON: I picture Brooklyn, the fifties, a loud house—who can make Dad laugh. That kind of thing.

GOLDBERG: Never, never. I never saw my father. He was always working. I'd see him on the weekends sometimes, Sunday. There was none of that verbal sparring you're talking about. All we talked about was sports. You couldn't bring up another topic. I mean, what would you talk about? Sure, we saw *The Steve Allen Show* and we thought that was very funny, with all those great characters. But it was not a big neighborhood for that kind of dialogue. And we never told jokes. Never stood around and told jokes or tried to be funny.

KORZON: Yet you made an empire out of it. I'm going to stay with this. There must have been forces early on that shaped your outlook on the world and made you feel you could accomplish something outside of sandlot baseball.

GOLDBERG: That view of the universe you're talking about comes from my grandmother and my mother.

KORZON: The women in your family.

GOLDBERG: Absolutely. It's really interesting because my show *Brooklyn Bridge* is based on my family from when I was growing up. And when I look at the show now I realize that the male characters are always making nice, they are always trying to make sure everyone's comfortable. That was my father, that was my grandfather, that was my brother—still is my brother. My mother and my grandmother were more about achievement. They led me to believe that I was special. That I was *really* special [laughs]. We were so ludicrously overloved that you just couldn't even conceive of it. It was wild. And it was a little confusing, because you couldn't actually do anything wrong. No matter what happened, it wasn't your fault.

But that kind of cossetting love did not understand exploration of the outer world. It didn't extend beyond the framework that existed. So this welcoming, wonderful Brooklyn neighborhood was not so welcoming and wonderful when I decided to explore outside possibilities of what to do with my life. The neighborhood was unable to contain thoughts of different lifestyles. So after the sixties it turned against me. Not in an

actual, physical way, but it wasn't as understanding or welcoming. And looking back now, as a father myself, I realize it would have been impossible for my parents to have any understanding of what it was I was trying to do. I couldn't have articulated it myself! I was on a path to be a Phys Ed teacher; that's where I was heading. But for some reason I just didn't want to go there yet. But at the same time, I didn't know where I was going.

KORZON: But it felt okay, right? This not knowing, this drifting, was an okay place for you. I guess we're getting into your Greenwich Village, in-and-out-of-college years here.

GOLDBERG: It felt a little okay. I was a little panicky [laughs]. But I was starting to see some opportunity for myself when I left school [Brandeis] and began working in the Village. I liked the people I met there. I liked that life.

And I was so competent compared to the people I was dealing with—I was like Agamemnon [laughs]. Guys who I waited tables with could barely get out of bed and make the eighteen-foot walk over to the Village Gate [laughs]. But there was a sweetness there that I really loved. And this idea of being an artist, this idea of being someone who interpreted the world, was powerful to me at this time. I didn't know if I was going to succeed, but I knew I could go back and teach Phys Ed if I had to. I just didn't want to try that first.

KORZON: So much of *Sit, Ubu, Sit* describes your relationship with Diana, and how important she was to your evolving as a man. Things really seemed to come into focus for you when you met her around this time. From this point on it seems that there was a confidence in you that just kept growing and a sense that the universe would provide and that things would work out as long as she was in your life.

GOLDBERG: A lot of my outlook on life comes from Diana. Once we started to be together, we wanted to collect adventures, you know, the way other couples wanted to collect furniture or money. We kind of set out to push that envelope just a little bit. Diana gave me great courage, and Ubu gave me great courage to step forward in that way. I have always believed that things would work out, that's true. That's the way I've always felt about the world.

KORZON: I can't think of a better example of what you're talking about than what's taking place at the beginning of *Sit, Ubu, Sit*. It's 1972 and you and Diana and Ubu, your beloved black lab, are hitchhiking around Greece with no money and Diana is pregnant. You are donating blood to earn a few bucks just to make ends meet and also to get Diana the complimentary orange juice they're giving out. Yet there is this sense of joy and adventure. There's this sense of fearlessness no matter what the circumstance. It was an interesting way to start the book, I thought, because it seemed to be a metaphor for you navigating the TV industry later on in your life.

GOLDBERG: Going back to those early days and that trip to Europe I describe in the book, all I can say is, we were

so young. When I look back on it now, I'm amazed at what we did. I mean I was walking down Telegraph Avenue, or wherever it was, and there was a sign that said, "Go to Europe for \$85." And I walked in and bought two tickets. Then Diana and I had to focus that summer on making enough money to be able to afford to go. We were saving our money in a little jar. Every dollar. We both worked as waiters. And I think we went away with thirteen hundred dollars, and I'm thinking, Wow, we could stay away for six years! We did trust in the universe at that point, yeah. But it wasn't as conscious as that. And we couldn't leave Ubu behind. We were just too close. There was no way we were going to leave him.

KORZON: Taking Ubu with you was unbelievable. I mean, Europe, hitchhiking, a pregnant Diana, very little money—why not take the dog? [*Laughs.*]

GOLDBERG: Yeah. It turned out to be the best thing we ever did in terms of making that trip different and special. There were a lot of people we met because we had Ubu with us. That was an interesting time. I was in my mid-twenties, I had no money, I hadn't graduated college—I was really floundering as my father would say—but I was very happy. I think the most important thing to own is your time. If you own your time you're a wealthy person. And we owned our time then. We got up when we wanted; we did what we wanted that day. Every day was, what do you want to do today? And even when we were hitchhiking, sometimes we didn't even know where we were going. We'd just put our thumb out and the first ride that came, wherever they were going, well, we would go there too. We didn't have any schedule to keep or anything like that. And that was very satisfying.

Diana—if you're going to be with somebody for twenty-four hours a day—is a great companion. And Ubu too.

KORZON: A few years later, in 1974, you met the man who for all intents and purposes started your writing career—your first writing instructor, Nate Monaster.

GOLDBERG: This was at San Diego State where Diana was getting her master's in communications and I was kind of just tagging along, taking some courses. And Nate was this compassionate, wonderful guy. He was a gambler, you know, everything I thought a writer should be. He was a guy who just enjoyed everything. A big cigar-smoking, hearty-laughing guy.

KORZON: This is interesting, because most people who are relating their success stories gloss over the details of why they became successful. I'm talking about the nuts-and-bolts reasons for their success. What exactly did Nate Monaster see in Gary David Goldberg's writing that excited him? What made you so special?

GOLDBERG: What I think Nate responded to was that I had an ear for dialogue. Because back then I didn't have story sense or anything like that. So when I wrote characters, they sounded real. And also, as a writer I was not afraid to reveal something of myself in my writing. Later in my career when I would read scripts sent to me I would never have to read more than the first five pages to know if it was going to work for me or not. Sometimes I'd only have to read the first stage direction. To me, the question to the writer was, Are you going

to show me something of who you are? Is that what writing means to you? Because *then* I'm interested. If not, then forget it. I'm only interested in something that only *you* have. And I want you to show it to me.

So that's what I was always looking for. And I think Nate must have seen this with me. And he was really generous. Maybe he had been reading all these really bad scripts, and suddenly here was someone coming along who could actually get through a scene [*laughs*]. But what was interesting to me was discovering that I could hear it. I could hear the dialogue in my head. When I would sit down to write, I could hear the way people talked. I could do that. My two daughters are incapable of writing a bad scene. Marc Lawrence, who I worked with on *Family Ties*, is incapable of writing a bad scene. You will never look at a scene that Marc Lawrence wrote, or Michael Weithorn [*Family Ties*, *The King of Queens*] or Brad Hall wrote and say, Those aren't real people talking. There's an authenticity that they deliver as writers that's powerful.

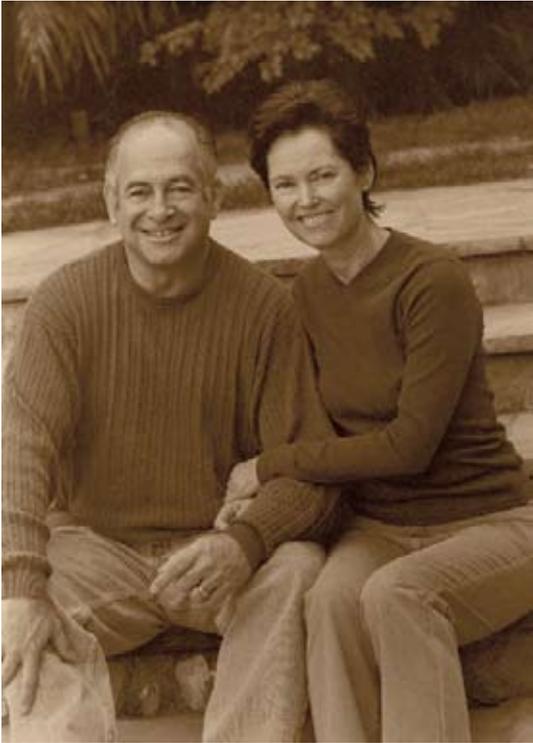
KORZON: You have a specific set of values you've maintained throughout your involvement with TV. You haven't gone down that slippery slope.

GOLDBERG: That's true. But I don't think TV challenges you in that way any more than any other industry. I would think selling life insurance might have similar fault lines. I think television and show business are over-demonized. They really are. But the temptations are there. I think what makes people so susceptible to losing sight of their values is the amount of money that's involved.

When I first got involved in it, I was older. So once I arrived, it was like, Okay, I've arrived. What does that mean? At the beginning of my career, Diana and I were still hippies. And because my career took off so quickly, I'd be getting offered a new job every day. I'd come home and say to Diana, "Ed. Weinberger [MTM writer] called and they want me to go over there and write." So Diana and I would take a little walk around the block and discuss the pros and the cons. And there was always that question: Are we still the people we set out to be? But you lose sense of that very quickly, that large question. Because all of a sudden you're working!

Things changed so much for us then because Diana and I had never been separated. The hardest thing for us at the beginning of my career was getting used to me being the one who was going off to work. I'd never done that! Diana had worked, which, by the way, I was fine with [*laughs*]. Ubu and I both loved it when Diana worked. We would walk her to the door, wave her good-bye, and then we'd both get back into bed [*laughs*]. Ubu and I were very happy being kept guys. But then all of a sudden *I'm* the guy going out and working. And suddenly you find yourself making so much money that there's nothing your partner can do to get into the game. Your partner's work is going to have no financial impact. That's an interesting thing to deal with. But I don't think it was as hard as you might think to hang onto your values. Maybe you're trying to give me too much credit.

KORZON: Television just seems to be a bottom line environment. It frightens me to realize that someone who has accomplished what you have, with *Family Ties* and the UBU



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Productions empire, can still have a critically acclaimed show like *Brooklyn Bridge* unceremoniously canceled. Ultimately, you're not in control, no matter who you are.

GOLDBERG: If you don't know that, you can't go into the business. If you can't have your heart broken, you can't do it.

KORZON: Was that your big heartbreak? *Brooklyn Bridge's* cancellation?

GOLDBERG: That was the big heartbreak.

KORZON: Did it give you pause? Did it make you ask yourself, What am I doing in this medium?

GOLDBERG: Well, your initial reaction is that way. But now I think of it in this way: I was lucky to get to do thirty-four episodes. That was a miracle. Because it was an unusual show to have on back then. You'd actually have a much easier time succeeding with it now. On cable, it could definitely find its place in the world. And it was a very expensive show to do. That was a big negative.

KORZON: How close was it to your family situation growing up in Brooklyn?

GOLDBERG: It's a documentary.

KORZON: So when CBS canceled it, that must have been a double rejection of sorts.

GOLDBERG: That's what I said to the actors. I said to them, "You had a show canceled. I had my childhood canceled." It *was* very personal. And a lot of the viewers who were tuning in were older, Jewish people that I felt particularly protective of. They felt like they had lost this show that was so important to them. They would say to me, "Why did you take it off?" And I'd say, "I didn't, it wasn't my decision." And they'd say, "Why did you do this to us!" So for those people I felt really badly because there weren't a lot of other shows they were watching. But people at the network are making deci-

sions based on different things. And people do what's best for them. We all do.

KORZON: Successes dominate your biography. I'm interested in what happens when you do suffer a setback. How do you handle it?

GOLDBERG: I don't respond well.

KORZON: You don't.

GOLDBERG: No.

KORZON: Do you mope?

GOLDBERG: First I'm really angry and I want some resolution to that anger. It becomes important to me for those people I'm angry at to know how much I hate them and what I think about what they've done. I remember [this guy from] CBS calling me up, and he tells me they're canceling *Brooklyn Bridge*. Then he says, "So what else do you want to do?" And I say, "What do you mean what else do I want to do?" And he says, "What other shows do you want to do? We still want to be in business with you." And I say, "Are you crazy? I want to kill you. That's what I want to do. I don't want to do anything else. Here's the thing. You write my name down in a book. And I'll write your name down in a book and let's swear we'll never work together again. And let's see who suffers." I remember sending a note to CBS where I said, "I'm sending you a red-hot poker to keep in your office. Shove it up my ass if I ever come in to speak to you again." I wanted a complete burning of bridges, an old shtetl-style, old-world rupture. I was not happy.

KORZON: Shtetl?

GOLDBERG: What's a shtetl? It's Yiddish—an old village. There was that part of me that did have that old-world notion of needing to get back at people. Diana was always trying to get me to give that up. And I used to say to her, "I'm afraid I'll lose something if I give up that revenge thing."

KORZON: I'm surprised you're saying this because temper never seems to be an issue for you in the book. It doesn't seem to be part of the way you operate.

GOLDBERG: In seven years of doing *Family Ties*, I only got mad twice.

KORZON: On the same night? [*Laughs.*]

GOLDBERG: [*Laughs.*] No. Years apart. But no one will forget those two nights. Because what took place was a

violation of my basic worldview. It involved rudeness and it involved making fun of somebody else. And we didn't put up with any of that. It's very bad in a creative situation to have any kind of judgments like that about others. You just can't have it. The work you're doing is hard enough.

KORZON: Is this old-world temper you're describing a necessary thing for you to be able to make use of?

GOLDBERG: Probably not, and it's probably not good for anybody. But in terms of *Brooklyn Bridge* being canceled, these feelings came from my feeling that I had let everybody down. I felt it was my responsibility to keep the show on, keep the show going for everybody, and I failed. And I was embarrassed. And I think out of that embarrassment and this feeling that I had made everyone suffer, there came some days of bad behavior where I would have to scream out some of my anger. I wouldn't say that it got me anywhere, however. For whatever reason, I can now look at *Brooklyn Bridge* and have a much more positive feeling about the whole situation. And the fact is I did get to do the show exactly as I wanted to do it.

KORZON: Do you have a spiritual basis to your life? Are you a practicing Jew?

GOLDBERG: No.

KORZON: That surprises me because I hear so much of your old neighborhood in you now.

GOLDBERG: It is, it is. And it especially comes out when I come back to New York. But Diana is Irish and that's been a nice blend for us. We just aren't religious. Our little girl, Cailin, when she was about six years old, said to me once, "I'm half Jewish?" And I said, "Yeah, what did you think you were?" And she said, "Well, I thought I was half Irish and half Brooklyn." [Laughs.] So culturally I like the spirit of Judaism. It's about fighting for the underdog, social justice, taking care of others. It's about learning and it's about family. And it's about respect, and I like that very much. But other than that I'm not involved. Where we grew up in our neighborhood, it was half Italian, half Jewish. My grandparents were Orthodox Jews. My grandpa prayed every day downstairs. Downstairs was Romania, upstairs was America, you know?

KORZON: Are you into any sort of belief or practice that gives you a sense of something larger?

GOLDBERG: Yes. At the end of the night I will meditate and just give thanks. To who I don't know. And it doesn't go beyond that. But I always say this: "Thank you for this life, and I hope that I'm living up to what you wanted me to be." And I give thanks to my ancestors and my parents and my grandmother, and I hope they are happy in what they're seeing. And you know what I ask for? Aside from health, which is obvious. I say, "Don't let me be small, just please don't let me be small." I don't want to be petty; I want to be someone who helps. That's my goal in life right now: to not be small.

KORZON: To have a goal like that you must know something about yourself that is not apparent to the rest of us.

GOLDBERG: You mean that I could be small? [Laughs.] I do have the ability to revert. When I was a ballplayer, they would say, "Gary Goldberg would run through a brick wall if you asked him to." If you think about it, that's not a smart thing. First, you should see if you can go around it, or maybe

you can go over it, or maybe say to the next guy, "Why don't you run through it if you think it's so easy." [Laughs.] But then you think, I gotta get through the wall, I gotta get the star on my helmet. And I do have the tendency to get back to that kind of thinking. It's not a good thing. At sixty-four it's not a good thing. There are places I can still get to that aren't good. And they're physical places. But that's rare. I can't even remember the last time I lost my temper. Or was a schmuck. Others might be able to. But at this point in my life I want to—repay is not the right word, but I want to honor these blessings I've been given.

KORZON: Does it ever cross your mind to get back into television in an active role?

GOLDBERG: I'm not sure if I'm going to work any more. It's funny coming back to New York. People are coming up to me, people who I've worked with in the past, and they ask, "Where've you been?" Understand I've been living in Vermont, so I haven't seen anybody. But people are coming up to me and asking, "How come you're not working?" They're saying, "Come on, come back to television." I'm always looking for signs. I do look for signs. And I think to myself when someone says these things, Is this a sign? Am I supposed to work again? Could I? The environment's so different now.

Here's one theory I have. Life is about distribution. The key is to be in the right distribution system for your life. My good fortune has been that I've always been in the proper distribution system. I have always been in the right place and in the position to be able to do what I've always wanted to do. I was lucky. In the fifties I was the right guy in the right neighborhood. In the sixties, seventies, eighties I was in the right places. I don't know my place right now. Maybe it's in the book world, which I find to be really satisfying from a creative standpoint. But then I was thinking just last night, God, I miss actors! I miss that hugging and all that group success. I miss the team.

Family Ties was exactly like a good team. We did the show live in front of an audience. And after a successful scene I would go and hug the person who did the setup. Not necessarily the person who got the laugh, because sometimes that's the easiest thing. You know if Magic Johnson gives you a pass, you're going to make the shot. He's going to get the ball to you in exactly the right spot and it's going to be impossible for you to miss it. But I was blessed with those actors at that time. They were unselfish people.

Also, I miss that writing room where you sit around with these incredibly talented people and you're in the role of the coach. With *Family Ties*, or *Spin City* especially, I'd be just sitting there with a pen—and I insist on a pen—writing long-hand. When I was working with young writers they'd wanted to bring a computer in and I said, "I can't. I can't actually work that way." So I'd sit with a pen and paper and decide what went in and what didn't. It was like being an orchestra leader. I didn't have to play the instrument myself, but I was orchestrating. I'm the architect rather than the builder. And I like that role. So the question now is, can I craft a role like that for myself again? I don't know. I just don't know.

But I'm getting a sense that the universe wants me to open

some doors to see if there's anything that would interest me.

KORZON: What's filling your time creatively right now?

GOLDBERG: I'm writing my second book. In this drawer here [gently taps bottom desk drawer]. I've got about fifty pages in there and I like it. It's interesting. It's called *Now That I'm a Man*. And it's about a lot of stuff we've been talking about. Questions like, Did I ever really become a man? [Laughs.] I thought I would be a grown-up man one day. I'm sixty-four, you know? And I'm thinking, When is this going to happen, that I start to feel like a grown-up? My father was a grown-up guy. I know certain guys even younger than me and I say, *That's a grown-up guy*. I don't feel that way about myself. So when is that coming? When am I going to be a grown-up?

KORZON: And your father was a grown-up because he left for work every morning at seven a.m. with a lunch bucket.

GOLDBERG: Right. And that's a man. That's a man because if you said to him, "Are you happy? Are you satisfied?" He'd go, "What are you talking about? I go to work. You have to eat. I pay the rent. I do what a man does. I'm working." But here's the interesting thing about the neighborhood I grew up in. My father worked in the post office. His friends worked in the navy yard, or they were truck drivers, taxi drivers, grocery clerks—men of no impact on the national scene. But if you were in the schoolyard, and someone's father walked in, you would stop playing. And if anyone was sitting, they would stand up. Because it was someone's father. It was a big deal. I've seen big captains of industry who today can't get their kids to behave. Back then, the feeling among us kids was, this was a guy's father. Someone who was to be respected. And he was *Mr.* whoever he was. It wasn't Jerry, or Paulie. It was *Mr. Berkowitz*. And you stopped until he finished whatever business he had come there to do. So that was an interesting starting point for this new book for me.

You know, Diana will say to me, "I always wonder when we meet people, how long it will be before you'll say, 'My father worked for the post office.'" And she's right. And it's because that's who I want to be. I mean other things have happened for me, but that's who I really want to be. Look, I have a mailbox here [picks up small figure on desk]. And on my desk in Vermont I have another mailbox. I keep the mailboxes nearby.

KORZON: Gary, with all the professional success you've had, does it ever get a little daunting for you to figure out what to do next?

GOLDBERG: No. Because Diana and I consciously want to make our life smaller now. We want to fall off the grid of American culture a little bit more. I mean, we are pretty much off of it now. We want to just get simpler in our life. We live in a small town. I like small towns. We don't have a stoplight.

We have one cell phone because when we travel our kids insist we have a cell phone so they can reach us. We still don't have a computer and don't watch much TV. I just want to be quiet. I've been quiet for a while now. I like it. I don't like too many artificial sounds. It's jarring when I come to New York and people look at you and they have a reference for you. You were the person that gave them that job or whatever.

KORZON: In terms of your success in television, what was more fun, the journey to making it big or the moment of making it big?

GOLDBERG: The best moment I think is when you realize you're going to make it. You're right on the edge and you're thinking, This could work [laughs]. You can never get that again. Like you can never have your first hit again. You're lucky if you have a first hit. I remember with *Family*

Ties, when I realized that it was going to be big. We were on the Paramount lot and Mike [Michael J. Fox] and I were just going to step outside and take a leak. And when we turned the corner on the way to the bathroom, a big group of people saw him and started screaming. And I thought, Okay, this could work [laughs]. As for the early days? I started at MTM and what was so great about that was you had time to learn your craft in a very low-pressure situation. I was so unimportant in the scheme of MTM and the shows that were there like *The Bob Newhart Show*. I could just watch what was happening. But at the same time my parking spot got moved a little bit closer to the building each year. It was a great environment for me.

But the success of *Family Ties* was really interesting. There were two phases. At first we were so unimportant that it really didn't matter. No one paid attention to us. Then we became so important that it really didn't matter. We could do things pretty much the way we wanted. But what was interesting was the closeness of the staff of people that we had and the actors that we had. We all just lived in that world together. There was nothing we needed from the outside world. Whenever we would go out into the outside world, like to an Emmy party, it was a little surprising. We defined ourselves in our world, where we worked, period. We were professionals and all we wanted was the respect of the other professionals. We didn't need the respect of the network or the studio. We knew who was good and what was good. And we had the same directors, same crew, the same camera operators, the same sound guys, which was vital to our success—everyone the same.

KORZON: It sounds like you had created another neighborhood for yourself.

GOLDBERG: Yes. And going to work every day felt like you were walking into your family. •

