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Profile by Kathee Muzin

New Renaissance Man: Bart Mindszenty



Bart Mindszenty

Poet, philosopher, caregiver, composer, artist, parent, author, entrepreneur - oh - and specialist in crisis communications too. Bart Mindszenty (pronounced "min-zen-tea") does it all - with enthusiasm. "I can't tell you how much I just love what I do!" he exclaims.

It was in the late 60's, while majoring in Philosophy at Detroit's Wayne State University that Bart discovered his love of writing. "A professor encouraged me to take a journalism course" he says, which ultimately led to a concurrent degree in the trade, and later a reporting job at a large chain of weekly newspapers. But six months into that assignment, he decided to apply for a job with the Detroit Convention Bureau. And that's when "Dame Crisis" began dogging his heels: a few weeks later, the now-infamous Detroit riots broke out.

Right after that (and probably with a sense of relief), Mindszenty applied for a PR position with the Detroit-Macomb Hospital Association. Quieter scenario, right? Nope - on his first day on the job, one of the association's hospitals lost a body - and Bart was back in crisis mode!

By then, Bart was hooked on PR. While in his last year at university, he and two others decided to launch a PR firm offering communications services for non-profits. "We knew just enough to get in" he recalls.

"Luck: Where opportunity meets preparation"

Not too long after that, Bart visited Toronto and Quebec with a friend, and just for fun, decided to cold-call PIR Communications in Toronto (then Canada's largest PR firm), explain who he was and inquire about jobs. "Just a moment," the operator said. "I'll put you through to Mr. Brown." And Bart found himself talking to the President of PIR - who had coincidentally been expecting a call from Detroit.

The chance connection led to an invitation to interview, a one-month contract and eventually, a full-time position. "At 21, I was the youngest employee there," says Bart. "The next closest to me in age was about 35." He went in planning to stay perhaps two or three years. When he left (14 years later) he was not only a shareholder, but a Vice President of the firm.

"In some ways, being at PIR was like being a kid living at home. You grow up, but you never get a chance to stand on your own two feet," he recalls. "I needed to see if I could stand on my own." So he moved on to become Director of Corporate Public Affairs with C-I-L, the paint and chemical giant.

"Their head hunter threw my name in mainly as a contrast to seven other candidates they were proposing," says Bart. "I knew their Human Resources guy didn't want me because I had no corporate experience. So I asked Jimmy Kay (head of Dylex Corp.) to put in a word for me. What he did was drive his car up on the sidewalk in front of the interviewing Executive Vice President at C-I-L, get out of the car, and bark "Hire Bart." Which they did." And that's how Bart, who claims he "had never really managed anything before", landed a staff of 31 and a multimillion dollar budget.

Just about then, the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal broke, and the CEO began to ask "What is our crisis plan?"

It turned out that everyone in the company had one. "The plan was 'Call Corporate Communications'," says Bart. So his department went to work researching crisis communication plans. "We came up with a lot of anecdotal evidence," he says, "But there wasn't much available. Just the book on Three Mile Island (nuclear power plant incident) and military material."

Ultimately, Bart and his team crafted a crisis plan that won awards and had other companies clamouring to borrow it. Their work also led to a book on crisis communications planning. "We had one of the first structured programs in the country," Bart recalls.

After leaving C-I-L, Bart spent a couple of years as Executive VP with another PR firm. And then - his future came calling.

"In 1988, Gail Roberts and I were asked to help Ben Johnson, and try to get the heat on him turned down." Gail was involved on behalf of the Prime Minister of Jamaica; Bart was asked to help out because his co-authored book **No Surprises** had just appeared.

"Initially, we all believed in Ben," says Bart. "But when, after a couple of weeks it was apparent that we couldn't manage him as we felt we must, we stepped down. Only many months later did we finally learn the truth." In the meantime, Gail and Bart had (a) become friends and (b) gotten tired of "being suits."

By 1990, they had discovered a shared interest in focusing on crisis management and strategic communications, and decided to form Mindszenty & Roberts Communications Counsel. "The timing was perfect," says Bart. "In ten years, we've had perhaps 125 clients, all from word of mouth and referrals. It's been a real adrenaline rush."

Mindszenty & Roberts is perhaps unusual in that its principals have become partners in life as well as business. "We are workmates, soul mates, and life mates," Bart avers. "There is intense trust and a powerful synergy between us, which is what allows us, as a firm of two, to do national work."



Gail Roberts and Bart Mindszenty at their country home. Does working together affect their personal relationship? Bart says not. "The work is so intense that this is the only way it could work."

And they have kept Mindszenty & Roberts small, building ad-hoc, virtual teams as needed. "There's always the temptation to grow the firm, have staff, take the ego trip," says Bart, "But the clients get better value this way because we don't have a 'machine' to feed."

About five years ago, client experiences led Bart and Gail to develop an exciting new direction in their professional life.

"We discovered that many mid-level managers aren't good communicators," Bart notes. So, with the help of an organizational psychologist, they started building a communications program for managers.

Five years of development and testing has moved **The Manager Is The Medium™** program from an 'expert delivery model' (I teach, you learn) to an experiential learning program, earning a terrific response from the business community. "We've licensed it to about 18 organizations, who've put about 2,000 managers through the program," Bart explains, adding that they have since developed two more programs, and ultimately would like to have about five. "This way, we're still doing the work we've become known for and we're moving into developing new products."

Feedback so far has been very positive, Bart says. "People are saying that it really makes a difference, and it's a very exciting change for us."

It's also a chance for Bart to slow down a bit and get to know his three kids. "It's very hard to be a father when you are consumed by what you do and living out of a suitcase. You can't help but feel for the clients who are going through a crisis," he explains. Andrew, 17, Nicole, 20, and Andrea, 23, are each tremendously accomplished in their own right. Bart expresses his appreciation of each of them, and says he has become "close pals" with Andrea, who lives nearby.

Bart's educational work also includes participating in the new Public Relations MBA program at Royal Roads University in Victoria, B.C., and frequent guest appearances in college PR courses. "Talking to a group of 20 year-olds at Humber College, with their relatively uncomplicated questions, or to a group of 40 year-olds at Royal Roads -with their piercing questions- is part of what keeps me fresh," he says.

It's quite a load, but Bart has always been energetic. "My boss at PIR used to say I'd die if I had nothing to do," he laughs. "But PR gives you such a macro view of life - so many things at so many levels. You see something, it's in front of you, and you can't help thinking, Wouldn't it be fun to try?"

It's an outlook that drives the rest of his life too. "I've always wanted to write a musical," he says. But not just "any" musical. "My father and a collaborator wrote one before the war. Beautiful ragtime music. Once you've heard it, you can't forget it. I had it arranged for piano and recorded on a CD. When I heard it, I cried." The work would need modernizing and reworking, he explains, and he'd love to be the one to do it.

Bart is a poet, and an artist too - "I'd love to go back to painting watercolours," he says, and he hasn't forsaken his love of writing either.

His recently published **Leadership@Work: How to be an Effective Team Leader Anywhere, Anytime with Anyone** (to be reviewed in a future issue of PR Canada) is enjoying great success.

"I would love to write fiction too," he adds, but concedes that that may have to wait until his next book, **Parenting Your Parents**, is complete. **Parenting Your Parents**, which Bart is writing in collaboration with a top geriatric specialist (for publication in spring of 2002), will draw on Bart's experiences as the only child of parents who are 86 and 95, and increasingly in need of his assistance.

When he wants to relax, Bart plays tennis and golf, and loves spending time with Gail at their country home.

Does he have any regrets? "None worth mentioning," he replies. "I've always felt good about the way things have come together in my life. I've been so fortunate. How many people can say they love their life and love what they do?"