

CELEBRATING THE LIFE OF

Robert Williams

Friend
Artist
Soul Warrior



Tribute to Robert L. Williams by Alexandra Anderson Bower – July 14, 2013

I met Robby in my freshman year at Millsaps College in Jackson Mississippi in 1982. He asked his friend Carol to introduce us because he saw me sunbathing on the campus golf course with some friends and was attracted to me because I was using Bain de Soleil tanning gel. We talked about how the stuff smelled reminded us of summers on the Coast, where we both had grown up. I had gone to junior and high school in Jackson, so that is why we weren't friends before that, although he says he has a distinct memory of me from my fourth grade stint at Bayou View Elementary as the supply cart girl, an honor bestowed upon me that allowed me to roam the halls at the beginning of school pushing a cart of erasers, notebooks and pencils to each homeroom so kids could buy whatever they forgot to bring to school that day.

I have a distinct image in my mind of him standing in the doorway of my dorm room at Franklin Hall holding a bag of Burger King, cigarettes, and candy – everything I loved at the time. The fact that he was a junior to my freshman status made him a fountain of knowledge and experience about everything – he knew all the cool music and trends, and he was a prolific artist, writer, photographer, and actor. We were immediately bonded as friends – in fact, I probably chose Theatre as my major because he made it look so fun. I was the lead of his student directed senior project play – I was horrible, but he still made a decent grade because there was NO ONE in the theater who really knew everything he knew and had read other than our artistic director. He always followed creative muses when they called, taking risks that others were not brave enough to take, never bowing to insecurity, never worrying that he wasn't talented enough. He was not going to do anything but act, and he was going to do what it took to make that happen.

After a brief but valuable period of experience in New York, Robby returned to Gulfport and was hired as a programming director for the new FOX affiliate, so he in turn hired me as the promotions director. It should be noted that we had absolutely no idea what either of these jobs entail, but neither did the management, so it made for a really interesting summer – we learned how to barter ad time for promotional parties in the hot spots along the Coast, and drank bartered cocktails at every promotional until 5 am at every one of them. We worked by day amongst redneck ad salesmen who thought we were communists. I saw Robby do one of his best improvs EVER at a celebrity lookalike contest we had arranged at a TGI Fridays – he was a surprise entrant as ...MADONNA. He writhed and wiggled his then cherubic body just like her all over the dance floor, including tearing his tee shirt, using a chair prop and employing a

busboy to throw a glass of water on him. Our friend Gerald is the only person I know who witnessed it, and we both say that it was the funniest thing we have ever seen.

Obviously our careers in television couldn't last forever – he was told to fire me, and then he was fired shortly after. WE spent a torporous month or so in Flo and Bob's living room watching movies, eating Chinese takeout and candy. I think those two months were a huge education for me in film – we loved talking about movies and the fact that he read Pauline Kael religiously opened up great dialogue for us. I particularly remember that he shared “Auntie Mame” with me that summer and I shared “Imitation of Life” with him – both still my favorites to this day. Torpor eventually became action and I moved back to Jackson to work on a film, then for an ad agency, and ultimately suffer in retail hell, engaged to the wrong guy.

Robby went to Alabama Shakespeare Festival. His acceptance at this institution was a real eye opener to those who doubted his drive and his talent, as this place was no B.S. He thrived there, being with people who understood and loved the bard the way he did and he learned every technique, every practice, every line. Once he completed his MA, having decided that New York was not really what he wanted, he moved on to Los Angeles. He stayed with me in Tucson where I was continuing my hell on earth with retail hell for a night on his way to LA. I have some terrific photos of us standing by a cross on a hill with nothing for miles around. Those photos are fantastic time capsules – I look at them now and see them as the beginning of both our futures.

LA had become the place for most of my closest friends to call home, so I visited sometimes as often as once a month to escape my prison term at the El Con mall in Tucson. Robby always had something really fun going on for me to do or see on these visits, as he made tons of friends immediately, and learned how to work the perks of being a Disney employee to maximum benefit.

I moved to New Orleans in 1994, shed the bad job and fiancée, and in 1996 began my ultimate creative journey by going to design school. I didn't get to visit LA as often as before, but I talked on the phone to everyone constantly and began making plans. It was during this time that I first met Sean. They came for a couple of nights and stayed with me in my apartment in the Garden District. I knew he would be a permanent addition to the family, as he fit right in to the silly conversations and speculations and interests that we had. Like Robby, Sean had talents and was doing what it took to survive a creative's life in the City of Angels with style.

When it became time for me to start looking for a job in interior design, Robby and my gay besties set me up with great interviews that ultimately led to my moving to Beverly Hills, where I live to this day. Robby and Sean made sure I had everything I needed when it came time to move, and made sure I had tons of social contacts as well. I attended more great shows and performances and parties than I can remember. Although he made it possible for me to see shows and enjoy days on end at Disneyland, we still had our stupid favorite things to do that we would do whether we were on the Coast, or Jackson, or Beverly Hills. One of these activities was eating lunch in a window booth at the Hamburger Hamlet on Hollywood Boulevard. We would look out the window and people watch, playing our game “guess who’s Southern”, as we could always spot our kind. Another favorite activity was to go to the 7-11 for Slurpees and candy and to simply cruise around town chatting.

When I was invited to see Robby and Sean in their first show as producers AND actors called “Compleat Works of Shakespeare Abridged” I was more nervous than I can say – as a person with a theatre degree who doesn’t really love theatre, I really was worried – “what if it’s not any good? What will I say?” When the lights came up, and the first lines were spoken, I relaxed and even cried a little, because here was my sweet friend REALLY getting to do what he LOVED and he was AMAZING! The show was stupendous, sold out every night it ran, and was even held over. Robert Williams was bona fide. He and Sean went on to adapt “Twelfth Night” set in the Appalachian coal mines, which was, to this day, one of the best plays I have ever seen. The original music and lilt of the language was a perfect fit, pure poetry, and director Susan Lambert got the best from the entire cast. It was a jewel.

I met Marty Bower in 2005 and after dating him for two months, I left to spend a week in Gulfport helping my mother decorate her new beach house which was to become her retirement home. As it turned out, this was to be the weekend Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast, and while she was doing her damage, Mom and I took shelter with Robby’s family. We were in constant contact with Robby and weathered the storm together. After finally making it back to LA, I took Marty to see Sean play at Genghis Cohen, and afterwards dinner with he and Robby. This was their first time to meet Marty, and apparently when I went to the ladies’ room, Robby gave Marty a polite talk like a big brother or father would give. The gist of the talk was “treat her well. She has people.” Marty says that he really liked the fact that I had “people” to make sure that he knew he had better be nice to me. Robby never had done that to any other guy I dated before and he later said that he knew Marty would be a keeper. A year later Robby and Sean along with Robby’s sister Michelle would meet us in Mississippi for our wedding reception. Seven months after that they would host our baby shower, along with other very close friends.

In May of 2007 Anderson Bower was born and Robby was a great “guncleg”, doing anything to make my baby laugh, and we both loved all the funny stuff that kids do. He and Sean gave wonderful gifts of Mississippi artist Walter Anderson and Winnie the Pooh. Most recently they were godsend at Anderson’s 6th birthday with a pirate theme, handing out pirate names that they made up to the kids and helping me manage all the details. I was always able to relax, knowing Robby was there.

On June 13th for an early birthday present to himself Robby bought us tickets to see Cyndi Lauper at the Greek. I gifted him by arranging VIP passes which enabled us to meet her and have a photo with her. We were so excited, because, as I told him that night, in 1983 when we were dancing around our dorm rooms to “She’s So Unusual”, I never in my wildest dreams would have thought that we would live happily ever after in this amazing city and get to actually meet the diva who made unusual okay. As we waited we had a really great visit, talking about how we were in a really great place in our lives now – we both now had true love, true friends, respect in our professions, and that we turned out pretty well for two unusual kids from Mississippi. I went home that night feeling especially warm, planning to get together with him next week to help him with some social media for his coaching business.

After all that has happened since that night a month ago, I think that conversation is really important for those who knew and love him to know, because at the end, he really was happy. I am so grateful to have had this time with him and to be able to tell you that his colorful life was full, and to celebrate him and his generous creative spirit with laughter than tears. Thank you for being here with us and sharing his love.