



CAREER LIFE STORIES

S1E1

Interview with

Bill Boorman

First released September 2016

Presented and Produced by Nick Price

To watch the full episode, download audio version and view additional content,
please go to careerlifestories.com

A Working Films production
Copyright Working Films 2017. All rights reserved.
workingfilms.co.uk



Interview with Bill Boorman, hosted by Nick Price

Nick: [00:00:00] Today I'm joined by Bill Boorman. Bill is a well-known industry figure having started off in recruitment at the age of 16. He is perhaps best known for the Tru Unconference events which have become a global success story and a regular feature in recruiting calendars around the world.

Nick: [00:00:15] Bill is here today to tell a very personal and honest account of his life and career. He's a man of many hats. Bill Boorman.

Nick: [00:00:33] So Bill thank you very much for coming here for our first Career Life Stories at Bath Spa University studios.

Bill: [00:00:40] It's a great place.

Nick: [00:00:42] So to start, you have another Tru event coming up this month. They've been going a while and seem to be really successful and going really strong. Tell us about Tru. What is it?

Bill: [00:00:57] There was only ever going to be one event. And you came to that. We started out six years ago top of Barclay Tower. And I really love the Unconference concept, where you don't really have agendas and you have a loose agenda of a topic, you have a track leader but not presentations; you don't have PowerPoint. And what we learnt from Unconference was you didn't have to leave with the answers, you leave with the questions. You leave for two things: You leave with the questions which is 'I need to find out a bit more about that OR explore that.' And you leave with the connections to actually do that.

Nick: [00:01:34] A lot of people know you from your Unconference events. They know the Bill they see at those those events. What side of you don't they see?

Bill: [00:01:46] It's kind of a difficult one, because I think it's WYSIWYG really - What You See Is What You Get. Yes I think there is an element of I guess brashness out there and rebelliousness about me in general, and when people ask me what what my job is I often say, My job is being Bill Boorman - it's full time and full on. And there's the whole family thing and family is really important to me and with the kids and what I do. I think sometimes people though are surprised about the serious and quiet nature of going to art galleries. I don't think I necessarily portray a cultural image. If that's the right kind of thing. It's a bit rock and roll.

Bill: [00:02:34] So I think I surprise people sometimes when whenever I'm abroad I'll look for the an art gallery or when away learning Italian cooking in Florence because I wanted to learn how to make pasta and I'm very passionate about making food.

Nick: [00:02:50] So Bill you were born in London.

Bill: [00:02:53] Yeah.



Nick: [00:02:54] The youngest of five children.

Bill: [00:02:55] Yeah.

Nick: [00:02:56] And your your Mum, who's probably shaped a lot of the way you are and your attitude to life, she had quite a tough upbringing herself didn't she?

Bill: [00:03:06] Yes my Mum was... Whole story, she'd been born out of wedlock, brought up as an orphan. She was brought up by an Aunt in service. Kind of Downton Abbey type situation but then when she reached a certain age she ended up joining the Land Army and met by dad. And there's a whole gap of news over that. Met my Dad and had five kids - that kind of thing and then he died in a road accident when I was quite young - it's been 50 years since he died when I was three months old so right at the beginning of my lifetime so that's quite a challenging life for anyone I think. The things I've really learnt from my Mum is the resilience, first of all, to deal with stuff. It happens. You deal with it. You move on. And there's certain things that you do. One is you don't worry about stuff. You don't worry about the 'What If?'. I've become very good about that. I don't whittle about the 'What if this doesn't work?'. I've just been, if it doesn't work, we'll deal with it and then we'll do something else. And it was also the case of she always brought us up with, [00:04:21] 'You can do what you want to do'. Why wouldn't you do that if you want to do that, [3.3] if you want to go and learn that why wouldn't you go and learn than? And you don't want to spend your time thinking about what you haven't got. So my Mum will moan about many things. But I've never heard her complaining that her life has been hard. I never heard her say my life hasn't been anything but wonderful in terms of having a family and lots of grandchildren lots of things to be joyous about. She's never gone, 'I've been a widow for 50 years and my life's so hard in that respect.

Nick: [00:04:56] Has it affected the way you are? The fact your dad died when you're so young.

Bill: [00:05:01] I'd like to say no really. And I think that's really a credit to the way I was brought up because I was three months right? Inevitably there are things that are different and there are things that I've learnt as I went long, but it's not like having something and it's not there. And there were times where I can remember that my Mum made a real effort to kind of get to football matches and do, if you want to call it, 'Dad stuff'. Because you know I never ever felt - I never ever thought of myself as being a one parent family.

Nick: [00:05:33] And at the age of seven you went to boarding school.

Bill: [00:05:35] Yeah.

Nick: [00:05:36] As did your brothers and sister.

Bill: [00:05:38] Yes.

Nick: [00:05:38] What was it like?



Bill: [00:05:40] I think for me, it makes you independent. So I can travel on my own. I can go places, I can get on planes, I can do things. I like being surrounded by people but I don't need company. I don't need close friends in that way - the way that other people do, necessarily.

Nick: [00:06:03] Did you have any idea then what you wanted to do when you left school?

Bill: [00:06:08] I was going to play football and be discovered - still waiting - or I was going to be an actor and go on television and I went to a school that had a big acting tradition. So I wasn't ever going to do anything academic. I went to the local comprehensive for about two weeks when I left boarding school and I actually couldn't survive at that time out of the... I'd been in a boarding school in a structured environment where you just went to lessons and you just did your homework and once I went into a sixth form environment where they went well, 'Come in if you want to...', so I just [thought] I won't come in! I went for a couple of weeks and then dropped out. So then my Mum [would say] if you're not going to school then you're going to work. You need to go and get a job. So I did. I went and got a job in an agency. I worked for an organization for about four weeks. And was told you'll never be a success in this business it's not going to work or anything else. And so I went to the agency next door and got a full time job there and met someone who I worked for three times in my career and is also godparents to my family - she fired me three times I worked for her four times - I left the last time. A big inspiration - a big guiding light in my career in the way I think about things I think.

Nick: [00:07:30] In what way?

Bill: [00:07:30] `You've always got to pick who you go to but I think sometimes what you need more than anything else is people to believe in you. Someone. Doesn't matter if nobody else. You need some people around who actually just believe in what you need even if they think what you are doing is crazy. And I think I learnt that in that job, it was having someone who actually believed in what I was doing. And dealt with people in a very decent way.

Nick: [00:07:57] So when you got sacked three times?

Bill: [00:07:59] Yeah.

Nick: [00:07:59] Was that part of the...?

Bill: [00:08:01] I was sacked three times by that boss.

Nick: [00:08:04] [Laughs] Was that part of the man management on that occasion. Were you being taught a lesson? What were the circumstances?

Bill: [00:08:11] It was the right thing. So I can remember one of the first ones was arrogance. I was managing a whole bunch of people, I was making a whole load of money, we were being really successful. So I felt like I was untouchable you know, I could come in whatever time I wanted, I



could do I want. That's quite a common trait and those lessons stick in your life you can't look back. You go away, you lick your wounds, you smart yourself, and think, you know I'll be fine. I probably would have fired me as well.

Nick: [00:08:36] You had the job in London. You were sacked three times...

Bill: [00:08:39] So how I kind of progressed was I had a whole time in London and at that time there was a recession on and agencies weren't taking new recruits. There was no way in. So I actually launched a training school and people used to pay to come and do three days training with me in how to be a recruitment consultant. And it was really successful. I'm actually at this point where I'm self-employed, I'm earning quite good money, doing stuff. I've never actually worked for a company company, like a big company. Prime Time was a company that was growing at the time was the largest launch of an independent agency and I thought this is somewhere where I can build something and that's what I did for 12 and half years. I went and joined them and grew from there.

Nick: [00:09:18] What were the motivations and the drivers working there? Was it money? Was it success?

Bill: [00:09:22] It was success and recognition. It was set up as a very, very, competitive environment and I was very competitive at that point in my life. I've never been driven by money. I was driven by things for a while. You know materialistic stuff was important it wasn't ever earning the money it was kind of having the houses and doing those kind of things. I think a bit of that comes back to being at boarding school when I was surrounded by lots of people who had money, who came from many backgrounds.

Nick: [00:09:50] And it was quite a corporate environment though wasn't it?

Bill: [00:09:53] It was a very... hard sales environment-factory. Every week we'd have inductions in Northampton. Many people would go and I'd pull people up for their tie not being done up, for wearing white socks, I'd tell them how to clean their shoes, I'd tell them their suits weren't good enough. We did catch people out on the first day and say well if they can't handle that, then they are not going to survive here.

Nick: [00:10:19] Did you feel or do you feel that you were being true to yourself then, or was it kind of this is 'corporate world'?

Bill: [00:10:22] Yes, I was being a hundred percent true to myself. It wasn't like a false persona it was the things that I held important at that time.

Nick: [00:10:32] So then you left?

Bill: [00:10:33] Yeah.



Nick: [00:10:33] What were the circumstances around that?

Bill: [00:10:34] It was out of the blue. It gets to a point in people's lives. It was my 40th birthday. You have a realisation of what you are, of what you've become and you think, 'Do I really like that? No not really. Do I like that as a partner, as a parent, as a friend, as a colleague, whatever it is, do you like where you are at?' I didn't like where I was at. You get to a point where you go, you know what, I feel like I'm becoming a bully, I'm becoming the things that I don't really like and that's what I have to be to survive in this, to be, to do the role that I think. I looked in the mirror and thought, I don't like that person.

Nick: [00:11:09] What was it you saw in the mirror that you didn't like it?

Bill: [00:11:12] Well there was a lot of things. One thing was I think on a family holiday.. I had a boss who when he said: 'Are you available to do this?' It meant pretty much: 'You are doing this next week'. You didn't argue with that kind of thing. So I just did it without even thinking, just missed a family holiday without even thinking.. then I took the kids away and I'd said to them you know you kind of do guilt money, so you say I'll take you anywhere you want. Where do you want to go? Disney, wherever? At that time they were quite young. And they said, 'We want to go to Butlin's, Dad'. And I realized really quickly I have no idea what these kids wanted to eat. They were two and four. I have no idea what they want to eat. I have no idea what they want to do. But there was a whole load of parents. Dads, in particular, they were playing cricket and football and flying kites and doing stuff. Like, you can almost think like an old fashioned nostalgic type. But they were with their kids. You know, and I just thought, you know what, this is like.. I'm nowhere near them in terms of parenting skills, nowhere near them, because I have no idea about my kids. I provide plenty of stuff for them, with plenty of money, but I'm never actually there with them, flying a kite or riding a bike, or doing something like that.

Nick: [00:12:23] Was it because you were so wrapped up in that world that when you went away from it, it was like looking from the outside in almost?

Bill: [00:12:31] It made me think I don't like the person you are. I don't like this arrogance about you, I don't like the fact that you don't know anything about your kids, that you've thought you were a good dad because you bought stuff and you did things and you had foreign holidays and stuff, you thought you were a good dad. But actually when you examine it, there's loads of people around you who aren't doing those things, don't have that stuff, but actually they're far better with their kids than you are. So what do you want to do? Do you want to... I think maybe some of it isn't.... You know I didn't have a Dad, I didn't have any kind of thing in my mind about what a Dad was really. I didn't really know that, you know, I didn't really understand that. So I just didn't like that. And it was also making me stressed and angry about stuff. So I was, you know, short with people and all that kind of thing. And I made the decision in 24 hours. It really was a literal, 'Right, that's not right' It's done.

Nick: [00:13:37] When you had this conversation at home, you said to your wife, this is what I want to do - was that something she saw coming?



Bill: [00:13:44] I think she was really pleased, because we going in separate directions at that point, because we were like, what's the point of being married really? So I don't think it was taken as a thing of saying, oh I'll give up my job so we can all stay together and have happy families. I think it was a case of, I was kind of going, you know, I wouldn't be married to me at this point. So while it wasn't a marriage thing, I think it was a thing of saying I'm actually doing something and I don't think she ever believed that I would ever leave the company or give up the job, because it was totally my, my life. It was my life. It was a hundred percent my life.

Nick: [00:14:19] What was your driver then? Because you'd left a corporate world and now here you are, setting up your own business. What were you expecting to get from it?

Bill: [00:14:27] First of all there's the obvious things, like money and insecurity and work. I want to have an impact on wider businesses. And I was doing lots of different things. I was quite driven by that. I was driven by being personally successful - I was earning a lot more money than I ever had. I was earning sometimes more money in a month than I had in a year and billing more than that, so building a successful business and the last year of the business, we had a very very successful three years. The last year the business was when the recession came along, all my clients were agencies, they didn't have any money to pay us. They were dropping off one after another. In hindsight I kept people working for me a bit longer than I should, but I'd taken them out of good jobs you know, I felt an obligation to have them. And there just wasn't enough value and I went bust and I ran out of money.

Nick: [00:15:19] So you set up your own business..?

Bill: [00:15:19] Yeah.

Nick: [00:15:20] Financial market, everything crashed. What was going through your mind at that time?

Bill: [00:15:28] You go through a whole period. You actually keep going, 'It's going to get better'. Well I think any of us who go through that phase, we didn't anticipate how long - that it was going to be a recession that became a depression - we thought well this is a dip. So I just stayed really positive about it thinking, it's going to be all right next week, or next month or so it's gonna happen and there is going to be more work or so it's going to be different. Obviously that wasn't the case. So you put a lot of energy into standing still at best. Your best outcome is that you are going to stand still and be able to grab together a bit of money and pay some stuff, but mostly moving things about. And so you move to factoring invoices and then invoices don't get paid. So all the things you doing, you are borrowing a bit more from the bank and putting a bit more on the credit card. All those things that you doing, is constantly sucking your energy and your emotion over what's going on. On the day that you go, right that's done: This is the only outcome. This is the only outcome, we are going to have to bust it, we're going to have to bust the company, take personal bankruptcy, get rid of the houses, give back the cars and get rid of all the stuff. And you sit down at that point and go 'What do I actually need?' and you look around you and go, do you know what, do I



really need a car that costs me 45 grand a year, or what are the things I really need doing? You kind of hunker down and go the things I really need around me is, I need to make sure my house is all right. That was a priority. But you need to have the things that provide for your family, not for yourself. So, house, food pipeline, if you like that kind of thing, make sure you get those in place. But rest of it you can forget about it.

Nick: [00:17:12] Was there any emotional conflict though when you're going through something like that? You've got these people who you owe money to, they are not going to get their cash and you've got to press the button on going through the process.

Bill: [00:17:25] Obviously you feel a little bit of guilt about stuff. But all we could do is be honest with people saying this is what's happened, you know and it's not something that I did - It's not a deliberate thing. And I think it's more dishonest and difficult and you feel worse going through a period of saying I might have a check for you next week or I might have a cheque for you in two weeks, or I might be able to pay that in three months, or a month, because there's a bit of work coming up and bit's coming in. Once I've got rid of the business, gone bankrupt, given the funds back. What happens, happens with different people. Didn't owe a lot of money, owed a little bit. A few creditors, who you know, go through some emotional times with them, which I can kind of understand. Once you've unshackled yourself of that kind of real tough time, it's very positive saying you know what, what can I do? My office is in my house. I can do the gardening, put some shelves up, do some stuff, or I can pretend to be busy. What's the best way to pretend to be busy? Twitter was made for that. 'Cos I don't know what I am going to be, so let's just connect with people and I started connecting with people who were just interesting. Nobody else was connecting with people in the U.S. or in Australia because they were going well, we can't really do any business with anyone in the U.S, so why would we?

Nick: [00:18:45] What do you most enjoy about what you're doing now?

Bill: [00:18:48] Actually I want to make recruitment better, is a big statement really. Actually being driven by saying let's just try and make it better because work is a cool thing. My son said to me one day, Frank, which really kind of opened my eyes to it and saying we were talking about something and he was saying about what I did and I said it's not a real job. And he went, yeah, but ultimately you get people work right? People get into work because of things that you do. And I said, well kind of, round about, ultimately it's all focussed on getting people - He said, and getting people into work. And people need jobs don't they? And I went yeah, and he went, how cool is that then? And you kind of go, wow, look I forgot this, actually what we do and what we are all working towards is really cool, it's really important. Really, really, important. You know the work that people do and how they do it, it impacts everything. It impacts how well companies perform, but it impacts people with their quality of life, their relationships, their marriage: everything. So if we focus on say let's try and make things better and in making things better, we'll sometimes make some money, but let the driver be making things better.

Nick: [00:19:57] Well what are the qualities that you value in other people?



Bill: [00:20:01] I think that first of all. People who just will help people not because there's an angle that people who are naturally helpful or useful. It's a sign in all kinds of things whatever it is. What qualities don't I like people in people? I think when, when, people make things personal or when people attack people personally. I don't like bullies. I don't like any of those kind of characteristics in life, but I actually think that those people are really in the minority. Sometimes when you're in social media you can feel like they're in the majority. Actually they're in the minority and that generally people are inherently good and we should adopt that in all of our thinking. I think it makes things a much better place.

Nick: [00:20:46] Are you a sensitive person?

Bill: [00:20:47] I am sensitive about some things. There are some things that I get sensitive and concerned about. I'm not really too worried about criticism if I know where I'm going. I'm more sensitive about the hard time I give myself. If that makes sense? Kind of when I go - You really let yourself down there, or you didn't do that as well as you could or that wasn't quite right.

Nick: [00:21:13] Is there anything you would change about your career?

Bill: [00:21:16] No. No because it wasn't a strategy or it wasn't a plan. There's nothing where I go, oh, I wish I would have done that different. 'Cos, there's loads of stuff with where I wish I had done it that bit better, or I wish I would have saved a bit of money at that time, I wish I would have known... But then if I had known I would have something different I wouldn't have ended up where I am. And I love where I am. As much as you have to deal with stuff, there's no point in wishing I did it different. I think you can learn some lessons sometimes and I've learned a hell of a lot of them! But you know if that happened again I'd think differently. I want my house in Spain and the U.S. again, but I mean there are loads of things I would do differently in different circumstance now if those occasions or challenges arose, you know, but do I wish I'd do anything different? No.

Nick: [00:22:02] Do you get the work life balance that you wanted, doing what you do now?

Bill: [00:22:05] There is only life. There is only life in which work fits in. When you have a job and it's a job when you work a certain number of hours into certain things, you go and do tasks and you approach things that way. That's life and that's work. I don't think there's a difference. I have life - work. Life's work if you want to put it that way, if you want try and put a label around it. I do things that I'm passionate about. I spend six months of the year away from home, six months at home. The six months I spend in my house is more time I ever spent there when I had a job. And I think the most important thing is I'm managing to find time to enjoy more than anything else, is I'm managing to find time now to just spend one on one time with my kids and talk about things. We've actually started working on stuff. You know we started blogging together on stuff, doing things you know and those things are really, really invaluable time. But is that work, is that life? There is only life.

Nick: [00:23:12] What do you want your legacy to be?



Bill: [00:23:16] Well what do I want my legacy to be? I try not to think about legacy too much! No, I genuinely would...The things that drive me so, 'He made recruitment a bit better, that he connected people, he connected people, you know, he did good. Boy done good!' When we talk about what I do, if people thought about me in that way and most important, thought he was actually a good Dad, that would be, you know, that would be, a key thing.

Nick: [00:23:50] So I guess finally then, you are kind of answering this in a way, but what does the future hold for you now?

Bill: [00:23:56] God knows! Because I didn't know what the past was going to hold right, so it'll be I think we'll do more of the same. I think we'll be growing Tru.. what we really want to do with Tru now is make it genuinely... There are certain things when I look at events and communities and what makes things work what that makes things fail. I want to create this thing where anyone can run an event and they don't need to ask my permission, they just need to tell me they're doing it - and we'll give them guidelines but we won't give them rules and a real community makes its own rules. A real community operates like that. And I want to have a real community I don't think they exist, I don't think one exists in recruiting. I think everything is command led, top down, built with the kind of secondary purpose. I want people to connect and share and make things better, mentor and help each other.

Nick: [00:24:44] Bill it's been a real pleasure talking to you today.

Bill: [00:24:50] It's been emotional. Hat's off! It's been great so far. I'll just say the last thing I would add is I am always humbled by people who read my stuff. And people who watch my stuff, and people who respond to things and I'm still humbled by people who come along. So you know it's a massive journey with lots and lots of people involved. And we do it together.

Nick: [00:25:12] That's a good note to end on Bill. Thank you.

Bill: [00:25:12] It's been great talking to you.



About Career Life Stories

Career Life Stories is a series about people, their lives and their work. The format was created and produced by Working Films Ltd, a UK company founded by the producer and host of the series, Nick Price.

To watch the full episodes, view more content and sign up for future updates, please visit careerlifestories.com.