

Washington Post
Interview with Rona Barrett by Robert Samuels

Robert Samuels: So let me tell you a little bit about what we're doing and how I think you can help. As you might have heard, *The Post*, we're writing this biography, a head to toe biography on Donald Trump. I'm responsible for putting together a chapter that examines the sort of maturation of his political instincts. I thought that interview David sent me, the unaired version, I just thought it was fascinating and so revelatory into his character. And so, you know, I'm primarily a feature writer. It's just hoping you could just tell me some stories about how you went about securing the interview, what it was for, where it was, and what stood out to you at the time.

Rona Barrett: My production company was involved with NBC at this time, and I was looking to do my very first special under my contractual obligation with NBC and I wanted to do something different. I've always felt that money, power, and sex is all that anybody really cares about; not necessarily in that order, but that it was of importance. People are just fascinated by people who have a lot of money. So I decided for my first special, I was going to do the self-made rich in America and I was looking for four or five people who might fit that bill. At that time, Donald Trump was just making news out of New York and I thought he would be a good subject.

We had somebody call him and he said, yes, he would love to do an interview. To the best of my knowledge, this was going to be the first network interview that he had ever done. He had done local television and lots of written print things but he had never done a nationwide national network interview. I knew very little about him other than that which I had been able to discover and ask questions about from people in New York City that I knew who knew him. He was very willing to do this interview. I don't think he knew exactly what I was going to ask him except he knew that this is a story about, he was one of the youngest people who really made a fortune by himself, so to speak, and was a millionaire in which he then said to me, "No. I'm a billionaire at 34."

Interviewer: Really?

Rona Barrett: Yeah. Well, I mean, if you looked at the even -- I don't know what part that David sent you. He just fitted into this entire special. I asked all the people that I interviewed a lot of the same questions because I was just curious to know why they did what they did and how did they really do it. And so when I sat down with Donald, first of all, I wanted to have some background on him so I began asking him about his life, his childhood, did he have anything special happened to him. He sat there and he answered every question. Every once in a while, I would throw something else out at him

and he would come back with an answer. In my recent reviewing of that portion of the interview, I realized that he is saying today exactly what he said back in 1980.

Interviewer: That's one of the things that I found really fascinating about it. Where was the interview taped?

Rona Barrett: Pardon me?

Interviewer: Where was he interviewed? Where was it?

Rona Barrett: The interview took place at his apartment in -- I don't know if it was the Trump Towers yet but it was a beautiful apartment that he had on a high floor in a very beautiful building in Manhattan.

Interviewer: Was that the first time you had met him?

Rona Barrett: Yes.

Interviewer: When you were doing your research, what were you hearing about him as a person?

Rona Barrett: I for the start was hearing that he was all about, you know, all around the town even though he was married. His wife Ivana, his first wife, was always around also. I also thought it was very interesting that while we were doing this interview, he never once really introduced me to her but she stood in the doorway behind me, and I always thought that was very interesting. He never said to me, would you like to meet my wife? Would you like to meet my first child? My baby?

At some point during this interview, I think I asked him about, "You're 34 years old now. At 34, what would you like your son to be? How do you imagine your son will behave? What kind of a career would he want," et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It all came back out. I would hope that he would want to come into the real estate business but if he doesn't, that's perfectly okay. He can do whatever he wants, whatever pleases him, whatever makes him happy. That's all that I want from him. And it was on a very even tone. It was almost like there was no overwhelming emotion that I saw was coming forth and he was very nice to me.

I mean, you have to look at the interview. I'm really not doing it justice because there were times that I would then turn around and say something that would just sort of knock him on his backside even though he was already seated. And then he would go ahead and he would answer it or he would stop and he would think for a moment. I thought he was very charming but very careful about what he was saying. There was no showing of the Donald that we have seen over the last several months. I think that's what makes it so interesting looking back at this interview.

But in this interview, there are a lot of questions about his early life and his background, and what kind of relationship he had with his father. There were some stories that had come

out. He wants to prove that he is much better than daddy. In his own way, he sort of infers that, but he learned everything from daddy. There was a moment when I believed -- I don't know if they took it out of the interview at the time, but I remember him telling me that he was definitely a millionaire. But, when I went back and looked at the interview just the other day, he said, "You know, I am a billionaire," with a B. And that was really basically -- yes, I asked him around his love life and his marriage and he --

Interviewer: Sorry. One of the interesting things I thought was when you asked him about his best friend and he couldn't, you know he --

Rona Barrett: He didn't have a best friend. He had a number of people who he considered close friends that he believed in. Until his father died, I think his best friend may have been his father but I'm not sure.

Interviewer: Yeah. Is that an unusual thing for someone of his status to say during an interview?

Rona Barrett: To say what?

Interviewer: That he didn't really have a best friend. He was sort of thrown off by that question. I just thought it was really interesting.

Rona Barrett: Well, the interesting thing is that you are not familiar with the kind of interviews that I did. They were

basically very psychological in my opinion about what makes a person tick, if you don't know something about their relationship with their parents, their friends, blah, blah, and school. I was looking also for when a person is so very wealthy and they made this money all by themselves in terms of the fact that he could make a deal to buy the airspace over Bonwit Teller and Tiffany's. I thought that had to be one of the most unusual things I'd ever heard. I don't think too many other people in real estate did anything like that and especially in Manhattan and on 5th Avenue. I mean, I've never heard of anybody buying airspace. I know about the airline industry having to get permission to use air space but I never knew of anyone buying air space.

I wanted to know how did somebody like this and what made him think about it. I asked him lots of questions about how he thought, and what did he think, and how was this, and what was his relationship with his brothers. You know, all kinds of things like that that tells me that he had really a very kind of well-to-do life. He went to the best schools. Even when he was a kid, he never went to public school. He went to private schools and then went on to various colleges, et cetera, all very good schools.

And then, he talked about his mother and then we got into something that occurred. We got to talking about the world and

where we were at this time and all the terrible things that were going on during the '80s. He said, "Isn't it terrible how bad this country really is at this time when it could still be great?" I said, "Well, the real problem is that the great men and women who would like to serve as the president of the United States won't even run anymore." And he said, "Isn't that a tragedy?" I said, "By the way, why would you want to be the president of the United States?" He said he has no desire to be the president of the United States. I said, "Why not? That would give you more power than what you have right now." He said, because it's an ugly job, it's terrible, people are mean and they're rotten, and so forth and so on, you know, I wouldn't want. "Well, who would you want to be the president?" He said, "Well, I'm not going to give you the names of the people who would I think could be great presidents but this is a great country and I just don't want to be the president."

He went on in that vein, and so I asked him a number of other questions about that. I said, "Well, what would happen, you know, something about your own son, what if he ever wanted to run for the presidency of the United States, or something like that. I don't know his answer; I don't remember what he's saying."

Interviewer: Why did you decide to proceed to that line of questioning? I mean, it's one thing to -- you know, what I thought was interesting. You really drilled him on it.

Rona Barrett: I did.

Interviewer: Yeah. Why?

Rona Barrett: Well, if you had that piece, those are my answers to you. It was because my thought has always been you don't have a list of questions that you ask people. You have an outline, maybe, but you listen and I became a very good listener. When somebody says something and you don't ask of a follow-up question that should be the natural question to ask them, that was not me. I mean, my role was to explore underneath the surface of why he would say something like that. And so that's why I did that line of questioning.

Interviewer: Yeah. One thing I love in the tape that David sent, at the end he says to you, "You're really good." Did you ever talk to him after that?

Rona Barrett: Oh, yes, on the phone. Actually, I called to ask a favor for a friend of mine who had a brother who was in the restaurant business and who wanted to know if he could get a job in one of his New Jersey gambling places. So he took the telephone call and he was very nice. He got the guy who was in charge and my friend's brother went to see him and I don't know what happened after that.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. Did you keep up with his life afterwards?

Rona Barrett: No.

Interviewer: No?

Rona Barrett: Not a lot. I don't remember doing a lot, no.

Interviewer: Do you think you saw any shades of the persona that he's now presenting in that interview or do they seem like two completely different people to you?

Rona Barrett: They seemed to me like he said exactly what he's saying today what he said to me but in a different tone.

Interviewer: I think in some sense, that's what a lot of the reporting that I've done shows. Your interview seems to be sort of the earliest that I've been able to find that really interrogate him in this manner. It almost seems like there's kind of this maturation of an idea over time that when he talks to you, he says someone great could turn the country around. Over time, he believes he's that man.

Rona Barrett: I think that's when I asked him the question, "Do you want to be the president of the United States?" He says, "I have no desire to be the president of the United States."

Interviewer: You thought he was telling the truth?

Rona Barrett: At the time, yes. But at another point, I would say that there was always that possibility that he would because especially -- but that didn't happen at that moment. It happened when he decided to run back - when it was it - in 2008 or -- when was it? Before Obama. He's already president.

Interviewer: In 2000. Yeah.

Rona Barrett: In 2012 or whatever it was. And then, I said, isn't that interesting? Because that's when I started remembering that I had asked him a question about whether he ever wanted to be the president of the United States. But in my interview, he ended -- I don't know. I think they sent you pieces of this interview. In an interview that I just saw two days ago that I did, it's the same interview, when I said, "Well, thank you very much and I wish you lots of luck," and he said, "Who knows? Maybe I will become the president of the United States." Did you see that part?

Interviewer: I did.

Rona Barrett: Okay. Then it's in there. That was his response to me. He also said, which I don't think is on this piece, at some point he said, "What I really hoped to do is I'd like to buy your network."

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. That's not on there.

Rona Barrett: No, it's not on there but that's what he said to me, "I would like to buy your network." And if you

think about it, indirectly, he did become the number one person at NBC and he did bring them the biggest ratings they'd had in a long time.

Interviewer: Why do you think he wanted to do that? Why was that important to him? He was in the building business then.

Rona Barrett: Because I think he was looking to build empires of all kinds and the entertainment industry gave him that opportunity, now that I think about it. Luck had made him a personality that was known around the country and what he did with it with his own PR people, et cetera, or whether he did it on his own. Of course, I believe he was the instigator of everything he wanted out. But he didn't know what I was going to ask him and I was sticking to what I was looking for.

I also asked him the questions, "I'm quite sure as a billionaire, you will now have enough money to take care of yourself, your family, your family's family. Why do you do it?" I don't remember what the answer was. Most of the people that I asked that question said it's a game. They all said it's a game. I don't remember what Donald said but all the other people had always said when I asked them that, Rona, it's a game. Once you have it, you just want to get into the game. It's like the series *Billionaire* that's on HBO.

Interviewer: What stood out to you about him compared with all the other people you interviewed in that series at the time?

Rona Barrett: You mean in that special that I did?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Rona Barrett: Well, first of all, all the other ones were except for -- let's see. I'm looking for a woman and I went to Diane von Furstenberg. So, all the other men in this were either in the insurance business or other places where they made -- and the publishing business. They were all older. They all came from a single parent, except for Diane and Donald. They all came from single parent homes. Whoever it was, whether it was the father or the mother, they had instilled in their sons the ability that they could do whatever they wanted to do and no one should ever stop them. I believe that underneath that, I think those are the messages that Donald's father gave him. He gave him the knowledge and Donald liked what he saw. He liked that power. He liked the money. The money gave him the power.

I think underneath it all, it probably was a telltale sign that maybe one day he would want to achieve something bigger than that of being just a great world class builder, et cetera, and have the tallest buildings in the world. But how about now running the country? That would mean it enables him to run the world. Maybe. It's just my looking back on it and thinking perhaps that really was the motivation.

Usually, there's somebody in the family, for most of the other people in this piece were very, very poor. Donald was the only one who came, I believe, from a very well-to-do family and so there was a difference. He started out with a million dollars to play with.

Interviewer: Yeah. This is all really helpful.

Rona Barrett: Is it?

Interviewer: It is. What was the name --?

Rona Barrett: You're making me go back, what? Forty years?

Interviewer: I'm sorry. Your memory is quite good though. It's a lot better than some people who knew him 20 or 30 years ago, I have to tell you. What was the name of this series?

Rona Barrett: No, it wasn't a series. It's a special. It was a special called *Rona Looks at the Self-Made Rich in America* or *Rona Looks at the Rich in America*. I don't remember exactly what name they used or what we named it in the end. David would have that because it's on all the reels that he has.

Interviewer: Do you remember when you stepped out of there, what were your impressions? Was this something that you could use a lot of during the television special or not?

Rona Barrett: Well, it depended on how he answered certain things. When we were editing, we were looking to build a story on who these people were, how they lived their life, and what

was different about them, and what made them different. And to me, the one thing that stood out, like a big black mark was the fact that the majority of them didn't have two parents, and Donald did and so did Diane. But Diane came from a very, very different background because she came out of Europe where I guess it was -- I don't want to even say it because I can't remember everything. I know that I think her parents had a hard time because of the fact that there were religious problems. I think she may be of the Jewish faith but I'm not sure.

Interviewer: You never probed into his life after that?

Rona Barrett: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Rona Barrett: That's a good question. I guess because everyone expected me to continue. I don't know. I mean, I interviewed authors. I interviewed Teddy Kennedy. I interviewed a number of politicians and a number of other people in other industries but somehow, I never went back to Donald Trump. I even had a newsletter at one time. It was the first newsletter that was ever conceived for Hollywood. We were way ahead of our time. So now we have the internet that's doing all the things that I used to do 40 years ago.

Interviewer: What are you doing now?

Rona Barrett: I spent the last 20 some odd years of my life being an advocate for seniors who are in need and

recognizing that we were going through and are about to go through another period in this country where there was going to be a shift and a change and it certainly has happened. I'm the one who used to word, we're faced with a tsunami of aging people and we don't have any homes for them. We don't know how to take care of them. We don't know how to house them. We don't know what kind of care services to give them. I started advocating for all of these changes to come about.

I realized one day that somehow, you have to build bricks and mortar in order to show people how you think a senior who is now in financial trouble and is living in a tent or is living on the couch of a child that they have who's now basically taking care of them, how I would want them to live. I had ten years' experience of taking care of my father. That is basically what brought me to this moment and learning what I had to learn, and then got involved with this vision that I had about wanting to show these people that there is such a thing as the golden years and that I was going to build a facility where they would never have to leave if they aged with some kind of illness or need, that we'd be able to take care of them in one place. I called it the Golden Inn & Village.

Interviewer: Oh, wow. That's quite --

Rona Barrett: That's what I've been doing. Now, the buildings are almost finished. We should have an opening some

time at the end of the summer, the first beginning of fall. There's still a lot more to do and I'm busy from morning until night. I have partners in this but the vision really was the campus that I presented to all of them and they all thought that, you know, we were getting ahead of our time and are in desperate need for this.

I don't have to tell you that well over the country, there isn't a state that doesn't have some senior living in poverty, or near poverty, or suffering from the terrible recession we went through in 2008 where whatever monies they saved are all gone. They don't know where to go or what to do, and they don't know where the next meal is coming from. There are so many people around this country now who have to make choices about whether they'd eat their cat's food or have enough money to buy medicine, or whether to turn on their electric lights or have no electricity whatsoever. Therefore, the refrigerators won't work and therefore they can't put food in the refrigerator. Some of them don't have money for food.

It's a very bad situation and I call it a tsunami instead. No one is still basically recognizing the fact that we are in such terrible trouble in how to take care of all these people who are baby boomers who are turning 65 this year. Many of them have lost their homes for [sounds like] in this case and lots of other things of that nature. So I go and advocate and I've been

talking and getting as much publicity as I can using my celebrity from the past to at least get me in the door. Most of the people I speak to maybe are 35 years and older so they know who I am. That's how I'm doing what I'm doing.

And as far as I'm concerned, though I was in the industry 35 or 40 years and hosted on television, this is the best thing I've ever done. So you have my story. And again, I thank my father. My mother died and I knew one day I'd have to take care of one of them and it turned out to be my dad and he wound up with Alzheimer's.

I mean, I've been all over the place with learning how one takes care of people and what needs. And the truth of the matter is we need money and it's money for everything. Money is the root of all evil and yet in many ways, money can do a great deal of good. And so, very rich people feel like they want to help us. It's not just building for what I'm building; it's helping build something in another area so you never know where your money is really being used and it's being used for a good purpose.

Interviewer: Do you think Donald would ever donate?

Rona Barrett: Pardon me?

Interviewer: Do you think Donald would ever donate?

Rona Barrett: You can ask him.

Interviewer: Have you asked him?

Rona Barrett: The truth of the matter, I haven't gone to Donald or I haven't gone to a lot of the very, very wealthy people in Beverly Hills or all the other places. But I'm on the path right now of trying to continue to build our foundation. We're writing letters to all kinds of people from Coca-Cola to Pepsi Cola, to Procter & Gamble. You name them. Because I believe all of these major corporations have the money. I hope Donald will one day feel -- I mean, he certainly expresses he doesn't want to leave anybody crippled on the street. So that certainly doesn't go hand in hand with sort of some right-wing philosophy. I don't know. All I could say is for a guy that I was once knew who was a Democrat, I just don't know how he turned.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's really interesting. In a lot of sense, it seems that some parts of the country turned with him.

Rona Barrett: Absolutely. There's no denying that. We're split - and you don't have to quote me on this - but I've been predicting that we could wind up with some kind of a revolution and so I hope not. I was around for 1967. I followed the riots in Chicago and blah, blah, blah. Half my life has been in politics but I never really became anybody notable in that area but I followed it very carefully. I see again a great big chasm, a great big opening in this country that I am praying doesn't happen.

Interviewer: Yeah. All right. Well, those are all the questions that I have for you. Is there anything --?

Rona Barrett: I know that 90 percent of it, you're not going to use it because you have all the answers to the interview which tells you a lot more about Donald Trump and probably a lot of other people. I watched Megyn's interview with Donald last night and I don't think she got that much out of him.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness. I've seen more than a few, and I'm not saying this because I'm talking with you right now, but you by far got the most out of him.

Rona Barrett: I did.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Rona Barrett: I really did when I saw last night's interview. I mean, I was just sitting there saying, huh?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Rona Barrett: Donald made a deal and that's all I have to say. He made a deal and I saw the other Donald a little bit softer than when I interviewed him. Because when I interviewed him, you just have to look at his face. You just have to look at his face and you could see from when he was 34 to now, it's a different face.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Rona Barrett: Well, it's just different. I mean, not only has he gained a little weight or a lot more of weight, but he's soft-spoken and he isn't right now soft-spoken all the time and he sort of knows. I mean, I think from being on television, he knows that moment when you have to strike and he does. And so I don't know. I don't really know. I think underneath it all, he may be that same person but he's doing this as somewhat of an act. I'm not sure. I'm just not sure. I'm not his doctor and I don't want to pretend that I am a psychiatrist or a psychologist. It's just lots of years of watching people and that's all I can say. I could have told you more back in 1980, and '81 and '82 but I can't tell you anything today. I'm not in his company and I left television in 1991. And so since then, I can tell you a lot about aging.

Interviewer: Oh, goodness. Well, this is a pleasure. Thanks so much for chatting with me. I really appreciate it.

Rona Barrett: Well, I hope you got something out of it and I think you'll find better answers from the interview that I did and from what I said to you during this conversation but I'll leave it to you.

Interviewer: Okay, then. All right. Thanks a lot, Rona. I appreciate it.

Rona Barrett: Thank you so much for calling.

Interviewer: Bye now.

Rona Barrett: Bye-bye.

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