BEHIND THE SCENES: Mike Bornhorst Recalls His Career in Hollywood

INTERVIEW BY JESSICA NIKOLICH,
MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST
IN OUR CHICAGO OFFICE

Long before he joined Mayer Brown in 2008, Chicago counsel Mike Bornhorst had a career of a very different sort: writing for television studios and networks, including CBS, Warner Bros., Paramount and 20th Century Fox. A film major as an undergraduate at Northwestern University, Mike applied for two jobs during his senior year: one at Blockbuster Video and the other an internship with the popular 1990s sitcom *Friends*. Blockbuster turned him down, but an offer from *Friends* put him on a fast track to Hollywood, where he spent the next decade working on sound stages—and refusing to rent from Blockbuster ever again.

HOW DID YOU GET YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR IN THE COMPETITIVE WORLD OF TELEVISION?

At Northwestern, I made a student television show and submitted it to a competition that was run through the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (the people that make the Emmy Awards). Based off my submission, I got an internship on the show *Friends*. Two weeks later, I was in Burbank, California, working on Stage 24 at Warner Bros. where they filmed the show. I was then hired as a production assistant where I did everything from feeding the actors to starving the "smelly cat" (you didn't think that animal just walked to Phoebe on command, do you?)—and a whole lot of stuff in between. It was a very fun way to make US$7.25 an hour. Fun fact: [Comedian and TV host] Seth Meyers was on the student television show I worked on at Northwestern. He was very funny, even then.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE MORE MEMORABLE TV JOBS YOU HAD?

I worked on a show filmed in Canada for The Family Channel. They wanted to do *Teen Wolf*, but they didn't want to pay for the rights to [the Michael J. Fox movie] *Teen Wolf*, so they called the show *Big Wolf on Campus*. They shot it in Canada because Canada subsidizes film production, but [they] had to hire writers in Quebec where English was their second language. I was one of the writers brought out there to "Americanize" the scripts because the scripts came in and they made no sense. [My] job was to sort of punch it up and put in American idioms. The show was so low-budget, they could only do two takes of any shot, regardless of whether the actors messed up their lines. So, we had to cover up the many mistakes through voice-overs we made during post-production. I lived in Montreal. Everyone loved Celine Dion.

My last television job—I guess it would arguably be relevant to what I do now—I worked on a [mostly fictitious] daytime court-reporting show called *Eye for an Eye*. I had been admitted to law school, so I knew this was the last hurrah. The hook of that show was that, in lieu of awarding civil damages, you were awarded physical revenge on the other side. The classic case was if a friend borrowed a car and damaged the car, the judge allowed you to do $500 damage to your friend's car. YouTube it. It's terrible. One of my jobs on that show was to gin up disputes. You had to have very scandalous, titillating conflicts because that's the target they were going for: they wanted that daytime TV crowd. I would call the show "Judge Jerry Springer" while on the set. Litigants would come in with mundane stories, and one of my jobs would be to spice up their dispute. Even before law school I knew that your run-of-the-mill breach

of contract claim could be boring. Perhaps the most surreal part of the job was that it was hosted by [actor] Kato Kaelin, [who gained fame] from the O.J. Simpson trial, and, because of this, the show gave me a custom SUV to drive that had Kato Kaelin's face shrink-wrapped over the doors and hood. I got some strange looks using drive-thru in that car. I got to know Kato, and he's great, but now, with years of depositions under my belt, I question the attorney who chose to call him as a witness.

DESCRIBE A TYPICAL DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SCRIPT WRITER. WHAT WAS IT LIKE IN THE WRITERS' ROOM?

The writers' room is a great process; it's a lot of fun. That's probably what I miss the most. The hours are very intense, and you work very closely with the same eight or 12 people, so you get to know them very well because everybody shares their personal life experiences. That's what we draw from to tell our stories.

Your day is basically in two parts. During production, while the actors are on the set doing a rehearsal of the script, you would be working on stories and scripts for the coming weeks. Then there'd be a run-through, typically between 2 and 4 p.m. All the writers would go to the run-through, and based on how the run-through went, you'd spend the night rewriting the script for tomorrow's rehearsal. Following the run-through, the actors would have comments, the director would have comments, the network executives would have comments. Your job as the writer is to take all these comments, synthesize them, and come up with a revised draft that addressed all the feedback without sounding like a Frankenstein draft. Sometimes the comments would be minor, but other times you'd come back from a run-through and basically throw the whole script out and start a new script from the beginning.

IS THERE A SCRIPT YOU'RE PARTICULARLY PROUD OF?

Of my "spec" scripts, probably my favorite was for *The Larry Sanders Show*, and that got me a fair amount of work. It was based on something that had happened to me. I was on a game show in Los Angeles (*Debt with Wink Martindale*). Because of the amount of shows in production, it can be hard to get a live audience. To get around this, the game show brought in inmates to serve as audience members. I'm seeing all these guys in orange jumpsuits, [and] their reward for good behavior is they get to sit and watch a game show they probably have never seen while behind bars. Why would they do this? It was very awkward. They were pretty rowdy—these are all people from L.A. County Jail. So, I used that experience as the starting point for my script. It was a fictional talk show, and the show turned to the prison to fill the audience.

As for scripts that were actually produced, generally, once you turn in a script, it's not yours. Your name's on it, and you get paid for it—and I still get residuals, by the way: a little green envelope every now and then—but, once you turn in your script, it belongs to the writers' room, and everybody rewrites it and makes their changes. There's a giant computer screen on one side of the room, and 10 people start to pick apart what you've written. You learn to develop a thick skin.

DO YOU EVER MISS WORKING IN HOLLYWOOD?

It's a very up-and-down way to make a living. The highs were very high, and the lows were very low. The employment was very mercurial, and my timing, to be perfectly frank, could not have been worse. I left when reality television was at its peak, but the streaming boom had not yet happened, so we didn't have Netflix and Amazon and all these companies making all these shows, so the pool of jobs seemed to be shrinking.

HAS YOUR TV WRITING EXPERIENCE COME INTO PLAY AS A LAWYER?

I like to write and I like to tell stories. In many ways, litigation is a way to do that because you marshal the facts and put them together and tell your story.

Working in Hollywood teaches you to be comfortable working with colorful personalities. Even the craziest plaintiff's counsel or the crankiest judge does not hold a candle to a star that won't come out of their dressing room. If you can deal in that environment where people are volatile and can be caustic and not necessarily professional, you can build a high tolerance and deal with people.

You have to be quick on your feet. You film in front of an audience, and a joke you thought was funny isn't landing with the audience. The cameras are there, the crew's there, and you have five minutes [to come up with] new material. And then the executive producer chooses the bits that he/she likes the best. It does force you to think quickly, which is a skill that very much translates. Whether it's at an argument or a deposition, you can't always predict what the other side is going to say, so you have to be in the moment. It teaches you to listen and react to what's happening rather than blindly stick to the script that you came with when you walked in.

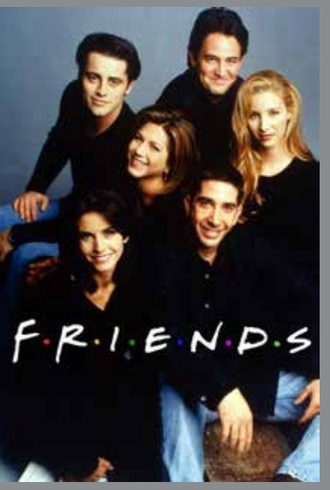
HOW DID YOU COME TO JOIN MAYER BROWN AS A SUMMER ASSOCIATE IN 2008?

I wanted to be at a place where I liked the people; where I feel like I had a sense of "these are people I could get along with." That's what made my decision for Mayer Brown because everybody I met with was great, and I got along very well with them and had great lunches and good conversation.

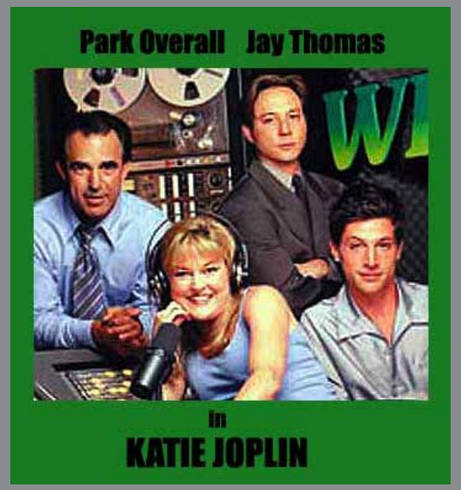
MIKE BORNHORST IS COUNSEL IN THE LITIGATION & DISPUTE RESOLUTION PRACTICE AND A MEMBER OF THE FIRM'S CONSUMER LITIGATION & CLASS ACTIONS GROUP.

MIKE BORNHORST'S TV WRITING POSITIONS

FRIENDS
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT
1995-1996



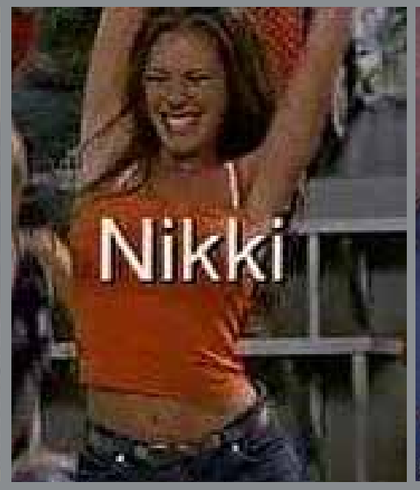
KATIE JOPLIN
STAFF WRITER
1998



BIG WOLF ON CAMPUS
STAFF WRITER
1998-1999

GARY & MIKE
STORY EDITOR
1999-2000

NIKKI
STORY EDITOR
2001-2002



STILL STANDING
WRITER
2003-2004

NATIONAL LAMPOON'S EYE FOR AN EYE
CREATIVE CONSULTANT
2004-2005