

Published July 30th, 2014

Nice Guys Do Finish First

By Nick Marnell



KTVU's Bill Martin with wife Pam, son Bill and daughter Avery. Photo Ohlen Alexander

Not only does KTVU chief meteorologist Bill Martin seem like the kind of guy you could have a beer with, he can pick the hops from his backyard vine in Lamorinda, brew a batch and pour you an iced cold glass from his home tap while he tells his story.

Martin grew up in Paradise, north of Chico. His dad was a veterinarian and he moved his family up to the hills to hunt and fish, so Martin was outside all of the time. "When I was about 7 or 8 I watched the weather guy on KCRA and I thought, I want to do that. It was science and the outdoors and I loved watching the guy use the technology," he said.

While at UC Berkeley, Martin took a dishwasher's job at Charlie Brown's in Emeryville. Another dishwasher came in with a surfboard he'd picked up the night before. "I'd never seen a surfboard before," said Martin. "I thought it was so

cool, and I just had to have it. He sold it to me for 35 bucks. I put it in my car and I thought, Now I've got to figure out how to do this."

Martin figured out that surfing in Northern California is all about conditions, and that weather was a huge component to surfing. After Cal and a graduate degree from San Francisco State University, that connection drove him to land a job as a television meteorologist at KFTY Santa Rosa.

"I lived off the grid for two, three years, easy. I'd sleep at the beach, surf in the morning, go to the junior college in Santa Rosa to clean up and then go to work. Nobody knew any of this," he said.

At KFTY, Martin met his wife, Pam, who was selling ads for the station. "I was living in my van and I kept taking her to Wolf Coffee because they served free coffee. She couldn't figure out why I always took her there. One day we were sitting in my van drinking coffee, and she was saying how clean the van always was and she reached down and pulled a Coleman stove from under the seat. 'You're living in your car?' Yeah. And we both laughed. But she had no problem with it."

They married in 1993 and are the parents of two teenagers, Bill and Avery.

KTVU hired Martin in 1995. He said when he started, he didn't know enough about TV not to be authentic. "I only knew that I really enjoyed what I was doing. What you've got is what you've got, and people seem to respond to it."

Even people like the president. In May, Martin was invited to the White House to interview President Barack Obama on global warming.

"I get this message on my home phone from the White House on Monday and I deleted it. Another one Wednesday. Yeah, sure, the White House. I'm thinking, it's White House Painting, White House Solar. Finally the press secretary, or somebody, called my newsroom and convinced them that it was on the level," he said. "So I went."

Martin attended briefings on a climate study with other scientists before his meeting with the president. "We walked out to the south lawn and it filled up with these guys dressed in black. You could feel the tension. Sure, I was little anxious," said Martin, "not too bad, but when Al Roker got nervous I got nervous."

Security ushered Martin across the lawn to the president. "Nobody else did, but after I shook

his hand I gave him a bro' hug. He totally got it. He's like one of us; he's a very likeable guy." Martin and Obama discussed California climate issues.

"I wanted to ask him about fracking, but I knew he was only going to answer what he wanted to answer."

Martin elaborated about the current dry conditions, noting that there isn't an official meteorological definition of drought. "There should be but there isn't. That's why we struggle with the word. But one thing I do know. It's never been this dry in the recorded history of California."

Which led to his thoughts on climate change: "You can't deny the numbers. Sure there are those who deny it, but denial is part of the scientific process. Scientists are not into covering things up. They would love to poke holes in climate change. They don't have a political agenda. Besides, what's wrong with conserving? What's wrong with being a better steward of the planet?"

Martin still surfs and will sometimes drive to Santa Cruz and make it back to work the same day.

According to the latest Nielsen ratings the KTVU Ten O'Clock News ranks number one, with more than double the audience of the station's closest evening news competitor. Not bad for the surfer who lived in his van 20 years ago.

"If it wasn't for surfing, I wouldn't be here."



Bill Martin in an interview with President Barack Obama Photo provided

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