

# ARE YOU A RENAISSANCE SOUL?

SWARTHMOREANS FIND A WAY TO JUGGLE MANY INTERESTS.

By Ali Crolius '84

Illustrations by Paine Proffitt

Margaret Neisser Lobenstine '65 divides the world into two categories. One includes those highly focused, decisive individuals who come into the world knowing exactly what they want to do when they grow up. These souls she compares to Mozart, whose intelligence and inspiration went wholly into his music. These are the freshmen who know what their major will be, who graduate four years later with a degree in that subject, get advanced degrees in the same, and then go on to make a name for themselves in that field.

This article is not about those people.

Instead, it is about those in the other category, the one comprising people Lobenstine calls "Ben Franklins." Inventor, publisher, writer, philosopher, public citizen, statesman, Francophile, founder of a university and a post office, and all-around Promethean thinker, Franklin was what Lobenstine calls a "Renaissance soul."

Lobenstine pays tribute to people of diverse passions in her unpublished book manuscript, "Secrets of the Renaissance Soul: Making 'Too Many Interests' Work for You." A career and "life design" counselor in the Amherst, Mass., area, Lobenstine wrote the book after realizing that many seeking her help were the proverbial round pegs trying to force themselves into square holes.

They worried that there was something wrong with them. They labeled themselves as hopelessly indecisive, vacillating, restless. They started a million projects but completed few; no sooner did they master a subject than they moved on to something new. When attention-deficit disorder came into vogue, these people were sure they had it. Their friends described them as dilettantes and jacks-of-all-trades, and their families wished they'd "find themselves and settle down."

At midlife and beyond, many of Lobenstine's clients were still casting about for the one thing that would bring all their areas of passion together.

Lobenstine says she's had

clients collapse in tears of relief when she assures them there's nothing wrong with them.

Drinking tea in her living room, where a small sunlit corner doubles as her office and a constant flutter of birds at her feeder provides background entertainment, she runs through a list of her own Renaissance endeavors. At Swarthmore, she had a difficult time picking a major, of course. She settled on political science but backed it up with minors in economics and history. Did she use these directly in her life? No—she worked with blind children at a camp one summer and decided to drop a political science seminar to take two education courses. She writes, "My request was considered so out of the ordinary that it had to be taken up by the entire faculty."

Lobenstine continued the pattern after graduation. Her resumé reads something like this: obtained a master's from Bank Street Teacher's College; worked at the New York University Reading Institute as well as in one of the original Head Start programs. Subsequently, Margaret did political work with the Black Panthers, worked for an alternative press, worked at an eyeglasses factory and at the post office, and started her own errand business. She ran a bed-and-breakfast; coordinated labor groups for First Harvest Brigade for Nicaragua; taught others how to run inns; was regional master trainer for the Massachusetts Literacy Corps; and started her current business, Alternative Approaches.

Now, she responds to questions through her Web site [www.ToGetUnstuck.com](http://www.ToGetUnstuck.com), leads career and Renaissance Soul workshops, is a guest expert for the Staples Inc. small business Web site, does family business consulting at the University of Massachusetts, writes both fiction and newspaper articles, and does professional photography.

Much of this overlapped with raising twin daughters Lori and Heather, now grown and showing their own signs of Lobenstine's Renaissance nature.



Lobenstein believes the pendulum is swinging in favor of Renaissance souls. Hard economic times and destabilizing political forces are forcing people to become more adaptable, more adept at having more than one skill to offer in the job market. "The cradle-to-grave security simply isn't there," neither as a mind-set nor as a reality, she said. "People are re-examining their priorities."

As for myself, I have an interest in pretty much every subject academic, abstract, and practical. I left Swarthmore with a B.A. in

religion and a minor in studio art. My first business card read, "Ali Crolius: Generalist." Later, I became a journalist—a career that enabled me to follow my curiosities to my heart's content. I continued to write fiction and letters to the editor, sell my paintings, and be an outspoken citizen of the republic. Now, I am a teacher as well as a writer, a field that enables—and demands—that my multiple interests find expression. Like the other Renaissance souls, my life would feel diminished if I eliminated any of these joys.

## WHISTLEBLOWER, LAWYER, AND ACTOR: MARK SCHWARTZ '75

WHEN MARK SCHWARTZ WAS DOING CHEKHOV SCENE STUDIES IN HIS JUNIOR YEAR, he never imagined he'd have an encore. "I didn't think acting was the responsible adult thing to do," he said. He majored in political science instead.

To be sure, years in the courtroom as an attorney provided him with ample opportunities for theatrics. The Pittsburgh native's early career choice, law, looked rather "duckish," to use Margaret Lobenstein's language. Schwartz took the drive he'd put to good use in the Honors Program and went to work. Law segued into investment banking, in which he became first vice president of Prudential-Bache Securities' Public Finance Department in Philadelphia.

Schwartz's first brush with drama was self-imposed and unofficial: He became a corporate whistle-blower. As manager of the mid-Atlantic region of Prudential's tax-exempt division, he said he became aware of pressure on employees to contribute to political campaigns. After objecting to the practice and getting fired, he spent two "unpleasant" years pursuing a case against Prudential's practices with the National Association of Securities Dealers. As a result, the Securities and Exchange Commission banned political contributions by underwriters and began keeping a closer eye on political gifts by brokerage firms. Some major houses agreed to curtail political contributions, but an industry panel reviewing the Prudential case threw out a claim that Schwartz had been wrongfully dismissed. He felt only somewhat vindicated by the fact that Prudential was heavily fined by the Federal Elections Commission.

The experience left Schwartz "flat, I mean flat, on my back." Unable to interest other Wall Street firms in hiring him, he set up a private law practice from his Bryn Mawr, Pa., home; burned through his savings, trying to support his wife and two young sons; and came to the edge of bankruptcy. "It's very nice to be outspoken," he reflected, "but it's also nice to pay the mortgage."

The breaking point came when a former investment banking partner died of cancer at age 40. Schwartz says he spiraled into a serious depression but was thrown a lifeline by a generous fellow Swarthmorean who retained him to do some legal work for his family. "He admired my whistle-blowing," said Schwartz, "and he gave



me work at a critical time, which gave me the opportunity to re-evaluate my life." The verdict: Schwartz came to view his years in high finance as an empty, if educational, interlude: "It wasn't allowing me to use my brain the way Swarthmore developed it."

It was after Schwartz had regained traction in his law practice that his early love of theater re-emerged. Representing a literary agent and a filmmaker gave him the urge to try some acting classes. He began auditioning and found himself cast as Truman Capote in *Cruelties*, a play about the writer that won Best New Play for the New York Drama League. To prepare for his role, he dived with characteristic intensity into "reading everything (of Capote's) I could get my hands on," digging up old recordings to get the literary legend's pouting drawl and ordering first editions of his books on eBay. For his six performances in a tiny theater at New York City's Pace University, he was paid a grand total of \$65.

Schwartz concluded that acting, far from not being very adult, demands everything a person's got. "Acting's the hardest profession I've ever seen. If investment bankers are brain dead, and lawyers are a small step up, then acting is the hardest as far as what it takes to be successful."

With a few parts in independent films now on his resumé, Schwartz is casting around for a new role. In the meantime, he hopes his next gig will be as mentor of a new generation of lawyers—starting with Swarthmore's current crop of Renaissance souls, including son Benjamin '06.