

The Unlikely Celebrity: Bill Sackters Triumph over Disability



Thomas Walz tells the story of Bill Sackter, a man who spent nearly half a century in a Minnesota mental institution and emerged to blossom into a most unlikely celebrity. Bill Sackter was committed to the Faribault State Hospital at the age of seven, there to remain until he was in his fifties. At the time of his commitment, Bills father had recently died; thus his sole contact with his family came through rare letters from his mother. Some years after his discharge from Faribault as a result of the movement to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill in the 1960s, Bill enjoyed a serendipitous encounter with a young college student and part-time musician, Barry Morrow. Bill became part of the Morrow family and a regular in Morrows music group. When Morrow accepted a job at the School of Social Work at the University of Iowa, Bill followed him to Iowa City and was put in charge of a small coffee service. Bill became an important part of the University of Iowa community, and Wild Bills Coffeeshop developed into an institution. A cheerful man of great good will who was a harmonica virtuoso, Bill began to inspire affectionate legends, and his life as a celebrity began in earnest. He was named Iowas Handicapped Person of the Year in 1977, and two television movies were made about his life Bill, which earned Emmy awards for cowriter Barry Morrow and Mickey Rooney (as Bill) in 1981, and Bill on His Own in 1983. Years later, Morrow would earn an Oscar for his script of Rain Man. Through vignettes ranging from hilarious to near tragic. Walz reveals a remarkable human being. An account of Bills life in an institution is necessarily part of the story, but there is much more: Bills role in helping a young child recover from a coma, his menagerie of friends, his love for a pet parakeet, his late-life Bar Mitzvah, his failure as a woodworker, his success as Santa, and his dignified death at the age of seventy.

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