

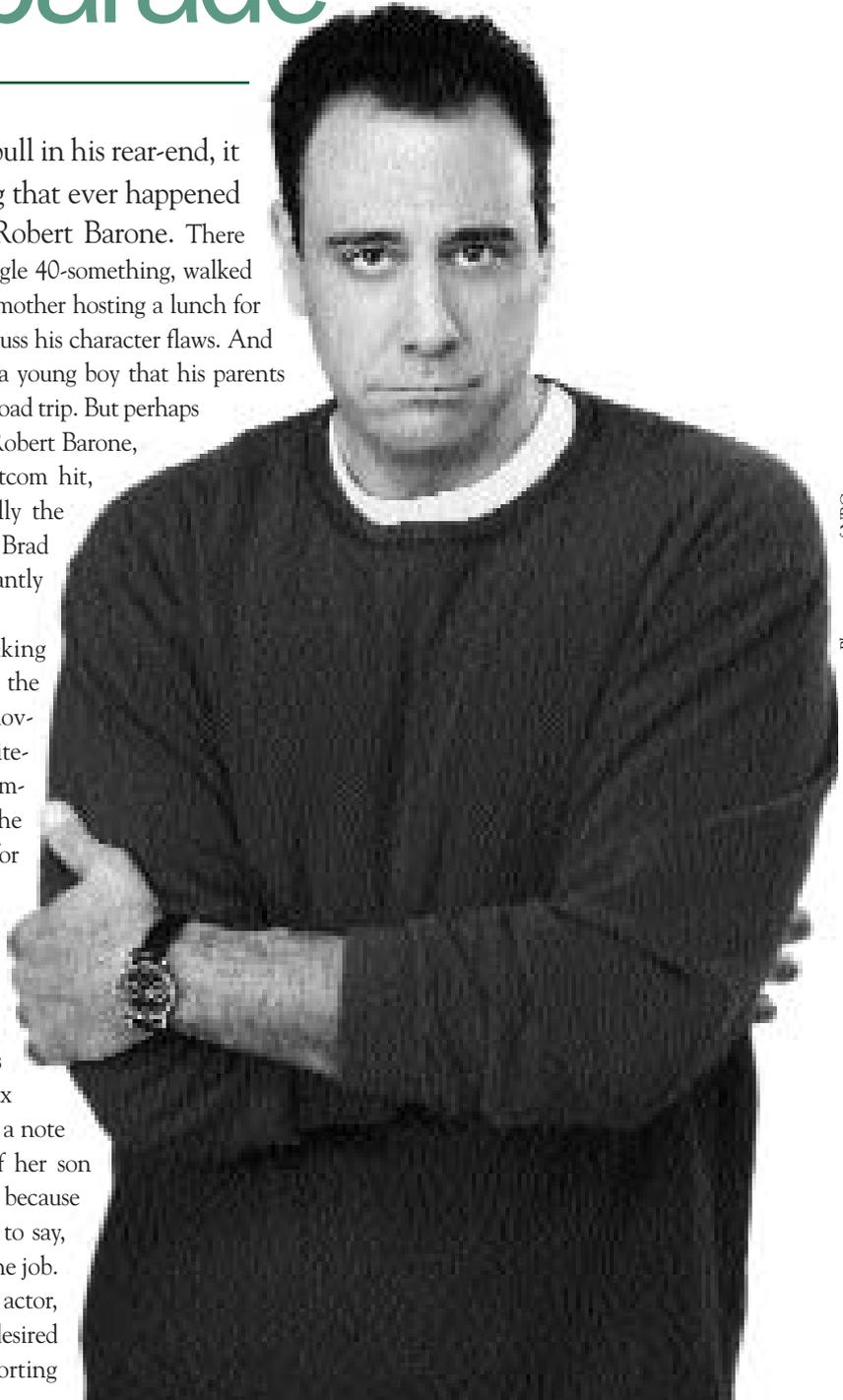
# Brad Garrett

## don't ray on his parade

by Aliza Davidovitz

When he was gored by a bull in his rear-end, it was not the worst thing that ever happened to NYPD Lieutenant Robert Barone. There was also the time when Barone, the single 40-something, walked into his parents' home only to find his mother hosting a lunch for three of his peeved ex-girlfriends to discuss his character flaws. And then there was the time when he was a young boy that his parents forgot him at a rest stop during a family road trip. But perhaps the worst thing that ever happened to Robert Barone, the fictional character on the CBS sitcom hit, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, was ironically the best thing that ever happened to Brad Garrett, the actor/comedian who brilliantly plays the part.

In a hilarious, yet heartbreaking episode, life was finally looking up for the browbeaten Robert. The pathetic, but lovable character finds out, with great excitement and delight, that he has been recommended for a job at the FBI. Typically, he pins his obsessive-compulsive hopes for success at the FBI interview on his "lucky" suit. But his meddlesome mother accidentally ruins the garment forcing him to go to the big interview without it. Nonetheless, his interview was going quite well, when it was abruptly interrupted by an urgent fax rushed in to the FBI interviewer. It was a note faxed by his mother explaining that if her son didn't fair well on the interview, it was because she had ruined his lucky suit. Needless to say, Robert Barone did not walk away with the job. But, it was for that episode that real life actor, Brad Garrett, walked away with a long-desired Emmy award for Outstanding Supporting



Photos courtesy of NBC

Actor in a Comedy Series.

It turns out that part of the reason most people love *Everybody Loves Raymond* is Brad Garrett. But Garrett wasn't always so adept at earning people's affections. In fact, as a young man Garrett wasn't especially popular. When he was just 15 years old he was 6'5" and never quite fit in with the "in" crowd. But, he found a more accommodating crowd comprised of the shy, the overweight and the red heads. Garrett likes to call that peripheral crowd the goon squad. And though he would have liked to use his height to become a popular jock, he reveals how he was a big disappointment to many a basketball coach who thought the tall white boy had come to save the team, only to discover that 'Jews can't jump.' Garrett jokingly told one reporter, "I hate it when people ask me if I play basketball just because of my height. You wouldn't go up to a midget and ask if they play miniature golf."

But Garrett tells *Lifestyles* that it was indeed his height that helped him find his niche in life. "It was through making fun of myself that I found humor," Garrett explains. With self-deprecating humor he'd say, "I was so big, I was born on April 5th, 6th and 7th." By age 15, although he couldn't do a lay-up, he was already doing stand-up, performing comedy routines in junior high at school assemblies. By 1978, while studying theater arts at UCLA, he began performing at comedy clubs. During one gig at an LA club, he had to follow the acts of then up-and-comers Robin Williams, Jay Leno and David Letterman. His own act died miserably, he told a reporter, but then he thought, "I can't wait to do this again because it was still less painful than junior high."

Garrett says that he loved the rush he felt while performing. "It was an immediate gratifying thrill," he says. "Comedy was my first love and that is what really kept me going." But even to this day, with an Emmy on his mantle, Garrett says

that to some degree he still hides behind his jokes. "We all hide behind different things," the comedian philosophizes. "Some people hide behind booze, some behind humor."

While the handsome Garrett was



The cast of "Everybody Loves Raymond".

hiding, his humor was finding him lots of laughs. It also earned him \$100,000 in 1984 when he was the first comedian to win the grand championship on Ed McMahon's *Star Search*. That success led to his first appearance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. At age 24, he was one of the youngest comedians to appear on that legendary show.

His career gathered momentum. He was opening for big names such as Diana Ross, Liza Minnelli, Crystal Gale, Sammy Davis Jr., and many others. He has headlined at Bally's Park Place and co-headlined with the Temptations at Trump Plaza. In 1989 the *Las Vegas Review Journal* named him the "Best Comedian on the Strip." For Garrett the most memorable of his opening acts was touring

with Frank Sinatra. For starters, Garrett never knew how long to make his routine because Frank would come out on stage when ever he wanted to, often in the middle of Garrett's act. Also, Sinatra never remembered the young comedian's name and kept calling him Greg Barrett. "There I was like a shmuck taking a bow to someone else's name," Garrett tells.

Although his years working as a DJ and waiter were well behind him, Garrett was still working hard to make his name into one that wouldn't be soon forgotten. In 1988, he was delighted to be cast in a CBS sitcom. But the adventure only lasted six weeks before the show was cancelled. He returned to standup, while his acting career, for many years, consisted of small guest parts in sitcoms such as the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Roseanne*, *Mad About You* and *Seinfeld*, to name a few. His height was also an impediment to getting acting jobs because directors felt it would entail accommodating the sets and lighting. It was not until many years after the cancellation of the CBS sitcom that Garrett's next big break came and he was cast as a gay lawyer in the NBC series, *The Pursuit of*

*Happiness*. That, too, came to a quick and decisive end and Garrett was once again in pursuit of his next break. It eventually came.

In 1995, CBS was working on a pilot for a new show called *Everybody Loves Raymond*. They had yet to cast the part of Robert Barone, the quirky, divorced, police-officer brother of the sitcom's main character, Ray Barone, played by Ray Romano. The sitcom is based on the true life story of Ray Romano whose own real life brother was also a police officer who lived with his parents. At first, Romano and the show's executive producer were apprehensive about casting the very tall comedian, but after Garrett read two lines during auditions, he had everyone cracking up and he hooked the part.

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Thus, the winning team of *Everybody Loves Raymond* was cast: Ray Romano, Peter Boyle, Doris Roberts, Patricia Heaton and Brad Garrett. By the fall of 1996, the sitcom hit the air with its time slot on Friday nights at 8:30 pm—the most competitive night of the week. The ratings bombed. They had no viewers.

In a last effort to save their investment, the CBS executives moved the show to Monday nights. It was there, on miserable Monday’s, that the show rose to success and became one of the networks highest rated shows. Since its inception, *Everybody Loves Raymond* has won seven Emmy awards and has been nominated 33 times. Garrett was elated to contribute to those statistics with his win at the 2002 Awards. “I was thrilled just to be nominated and was honored to be considered amongst a group of actors I respect so much,” Garrett shares. “Even now, when I pass by the office and see my Emmy there, I just can’t believe it.”

Garrett’s golden winged Emmy statuette stands as a decisive rebuttal to a *USA Today* review written in the mid-’80s, which deemed him “instantly forgettable.” A framed copy of it reportedly hangs in his dressing room. Though Garrett himself doesn’t forget, he does forgive, and says that he has no ill will toward those who gave him a hard time on the way up. “I understand if people didn’t want to give me a shot or didn’t get what I do, that’s okay,” he says. “All that helped me build the armor that got me here. The rejections never discouraged me, they just motivated me, because that’s the way I’m wired.”

Garrett’s success hasn’t rewired him either. He is still the down-to-earth mensch he has always been. He also kept his word and granted *Lifestyles* an exclu-

sive interview even after he won his Emmy and the entire press corps was banging down his door. Garrett says that what keeps him grounded is the prospect that it could all end tomorrow. The greatest compliment friends can give him is to note that he hasn’t changed a bit and is still the same guy they knew. Even at the height of his career, with his rhino plasticized-name, Garrett didn’t forget who he was—a very funny Jew. Upon accepting the prestigious award with tongue-in-cheek, Garrett said: “I just hope this award breaks down the door for Jewish people who are trying to get into show business.”

**B**rad Garrett was born Brad Gerstenfeld on April 14, 1960, in Woodland Hills, California. His father had been a hearing-aid salesman and his mother a homemaker. When Garrett was just a young boy his parents divorced, but remained very close for the well-being of their three boys, Brad being the youngest. Even then Garrett always kept his family laughing. He says that he was raised in a very Jewish home and is proud of his Judaism, which is also fodder for his humor. He told one reporter, “You know every Thanksgiving my *Zayde* would be seated at the head of the table and lead us in thanks for everything we don’t have: ‘Thank God we don’t have polio. Thank God we’re not out on the street.’ Then he’d say, ‘Pass the cranberries.’”

Garrett says that he is very ethnically Jewish, and has the traditional trait of worrying excessively. “I evaluate every mole on my body [as a looming death threat] and contemplate having them lanced and then my wife says ‘honey that’s just an eyebrow,’” Garrett kibitzes.

Although Garrett loves most things about Judaism, there are some things he

finds very upsetting. One year, during the High Holiday season, Garrett was performing in Cleveland with another Jewish comedian. Both he, just 19 at the time, and his friend who was an observant Jew, wanted to attend services at a local synagogue. The two young Jewish boys, who hardly earned a living, were turned away at the door because they could not afford the price of the tickets. Garrett says the incident left him extremely embarrassed because it took place in front of an accompanying friend who was a gentile. “I was extremely hurt by that event,” Garrett expresses. “I have never forgotten it and I never will.”

Today, Garrett and his stunning wife of five years, Jill Diven, who is Catholic, raise their two children, to have a love of God but most importantly for them, to have respect for mankind. “I believe there is one God,” Garrett philosophizes. “But he’s not up there worrying about whether you’re a Jew or a Catholic, but rather how you live your life and how you give back.” And indeed he is teaching his kids, Max, age 4, and Hope, age 3, just how to do that. Unlike his *Zayde* who spoke of what they didn’t have, each Thanksgiving Garrett and his kids go through their toys and the many things they do have, and decide which ones they will send to missions, children’s hospitals and needy families. “Whether we pay tuition for synagogue or not, is not important, it’s how you’re brought up at home,” Garrett feels.

The warm, ingratiating Garrett also has strong feelings about the State of Israel. He is truly pained by the horror Israelis have to live through day after day. He remembers how devastated and queasy he was the time his own son broke his arm and can’t imagine what suffering parents go through during terrorist attacks in

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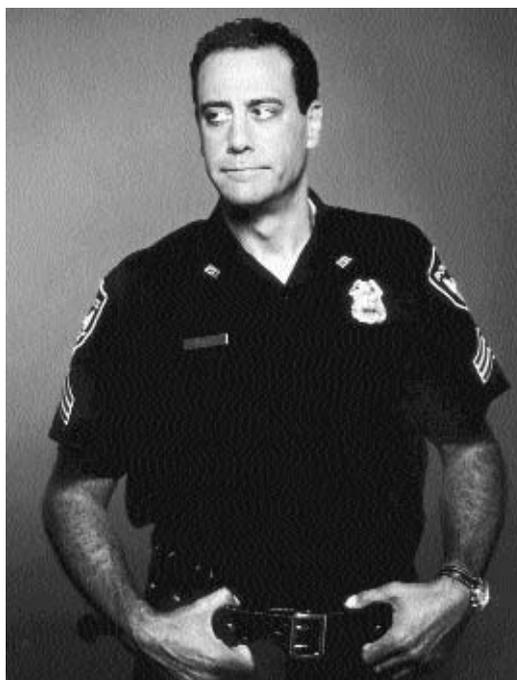
Israel. He was also deeply troubled by a first hand account of his dear friend who told him that in the Jewish hospitals in the West Bank territories, each time a Palestinian kid would be brought in, the Israelis would give them medical treatment, but when a wounded Israeli child was brought in, the Palestinian patients would applaud. Although he admits to not being courageous enough to visit Israel himself during the turmoil, Garrett says, “Every time I meet an Israeli, I always walk away very impressed at how brave and dignified they are and what amazing people they are.”

But it takes one to know one, and indeed Brad Garrett himself is really amazing. Yet, it took achieving some degree of success for him to know that about himself. He admits that winning the Emmy helped him validate his instincts and taught him to trust himself more. He explains that stand-up comedians are used to hearing a laugh at least every 40 seconds, but when one becomes a comedic actor, one has to learn to trust the silence.

Perhaps a more difficult task for Garrett, was to convince CBS execs to trust him with a part in a made-for-TV movie production about Jackie Gleason’s life. Garrett had been a fan of Gleason since his days in stand-up when he would retreat to his hotel late at night and watch *The Honeymooners*. Garrett had sent a demo clip reel to Les Moonves, CBS president, with a bottle of champagne and note reading, “Please drink champagne; I’m better if you’re drunk.” Yet, even with all his success on *Raymond*, he knew he had little chance of getting the part when they had asked him which role he had in mind for himself. He was highly dismayed

when another actor got the part. Lucky for Garrett, the other actor turned it down, and Garrett was chosen in his stead.

When he first got the script in his hand, Garrett was very disappointed.



Photos courtesy of NBC

Gleason was portrayed as a fun-loving jovial guy, which was simply not true. He was known to be a troubled soul, a womanizer, a boozier and a control freak. Garrett insisted on playing the darker side of Gleason and convinced CBS to let him re-write the script.

The film was shot in Montreal, Canada. The set had to be specially designed to offset the 6’8” Garrett. His fellow actors had to wear 7 inch lifts, and thus the film contains few shots of anyone’s feet. In addition, Garrett, and director, Howie Deutch, personally hired and paid for the best make-up artist to help transform him into the more corpulent Gleason.

When the movie aired in October of 2002, it may not have stolen the ratings, but it showed everyone what Garrett was made of. His performance was outstanding and truly displayed the range of his abilities. He was nothing like the Robert Barone he plays on the sitcom. He not only recreated Jackie Gleason, he also succeeded in recreating Brad Garrett. His uncanny rendition of Gleason earned him rave reviews as well as a Screen Actors Guild Award nomination for Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Television Movie or Miniseries. Garrett, who shares some facial features with Gleason, really identified with him. When he won the Emmy, Garrett told the press backstage, “I dedicate this to Jackie,” an award the legend himself had never won.

Garrett’s unique voice has also starred in numerous animated productions. His was the voice of Fred in the Disney production of *The Country Bears* and of Dim in *A Bug’s Life*. He voiced Fatso the ghost, in the Universal Pictures production of *Casper* and Phil in Spielberg’s *Toonsylvania*, to name a few of dozens. In addition, he will be one of the starring voices in the upcoming Pixar animated feature, *Finding Nemo*.

Garrett says that now is the happiest time in his life. Quoting a line from Romano’s book, Garrett says, “Even if I lose it all, I’ll have it all.” He feels blessed to have an amazing home life and a wife who is extremely supportive and “gets” what he does. And though the entertainment world hasn’t always been easy for Brad Garrett, he loves it nonetheless. “It may be the hardest business,” he says. “But it is the only business.”

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