

Tom Brokaw

Author's note: This article was authored on December 1, 2004 when Tom Brokaw retired from his anchor chair on the NBC Nightly News.

Tom Brokaw looks like the All-American success story. And he is. But did you know that he struggled to get where he was? Life didn't just hand him the breaks. It never does. Persistence and tenacity have led him to the pinnacle of the field in his industry. Just like Fred Astaire who was told he couldn't act and didn't dance well and Louisa May Alcott and Erma Bombeck who were told they should give up writing, Tom faced rejection early in his career. Discouragement came to him when someone who was asked for a reference on him said, "He can't type, is slow to work and frankly, we're disappointed with his output." But Tom was determined to make it in his chosen field.

Tom Brokaw was born February 6, 1940 in Webster, South Dakota. Raised in a poor family along with his two brothers, young Tom was interested in broadcasting in his days in high school. This led him to study Political Science at the University of South Dakota. While working at a radio station as a student, Brokaw professed his love for his high school sweetheart, Miss South Dakota, on the air. They were married upon graduation and had four daughters. After college, Tom moved from radio to television stations in Omaha, Nebraska (for a \$100 salary) and Atlanta, Georgia. He once said, "TV is a fickle business. I'm only good for the length of my contract."

After college, Tom moved from radio to television stations in Omaha, Nebraska (for a \$100 salary) and Atlanta, Georgia. Tom joined NBC working as a correspondent in California in 1966 and became a White House correspondent in 1973--the height of the Watergate scandal. In an early foreshadowing of competition with another anchor, Tom was pursued by CBS to join their staff and replace Dan Rather at the White House, but when word leaked to the press the deal fell through. In 1976 Brokaw became anchor of the Today on NBC news and gained a national reputation for an optimistic and easygoing delivery of the news. When John Chancellor retired in 1981 Tom co-anchored the *NBC Nightly News* with Roger Mudd until he was chosen in 1983 to be the sole anchor for the prestigious position.

Tom's fame was just beginning. In 1987 he held the first one-on-one American TV interview with Mikhail Gorbachev and won an A. I. DuPont-Columbia University Award. That same year he scored an interview with President Ronald Reagan in the White House. He also moderated the debates among all declared presidential candidates of both parties the next year. Brokaw was reportedly the inspiration for William Hurt's Tom Grunick, the character in James L. Brooks' 1987 film *Broadcast News*.

Brokaw has been one of the most well-recognized participants in the trend toward expanding the role of the news reader into a prominent position of creative control and celebrity. He wasn't afraid of leaving the comfort of his anchor chair. He reported from the Berlin Wall in 1989 when it came down. In fact he was the only American News Anchor to personally witness the wall's collapse. He has interviewed the Dalai Lama and

reported on Human Rights abuses in Tibet. He took the *NBC Nightly News* on the road to Beirut, Kuwait during the Gulf War, Somalia and Kosovo during the Balkan conflict.

Adding to his Nightly News responsibilities, he hosted several news magazines for which he earned many prestigious broadcasting awards. To add to the many articles he has written in publications like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and *Life*, Brokaw became a best-selling author in 1998 with the release of his second book, *The Greatest Generation*, dedicated to the Americans who were raised during the Great Depression, fought in WWII and built the infrastructure for the America of today. After the success of the first book, Tom decided to publish a follow-up in 1999, entitled *The Greatest Generation Speaks*.

Tom left his anchor chair in December, 2004 having crafted it into a new model for television news. Brokaw he has shared his wealth, as he volunteered for Habitat for Humanity and donated \$250,000 toward a hiking and biking trail in Yankton, South Dakota, his former hometown. An avid outdoorsman, he doesn't consider himself a star; just a regular guy that a lot of people happen to recognize as the face of *NBC News* for the past 20 years. It is that relaxed image that has helped make NBC the ratings winner among evening news watchers during his tenure. He has shown spirited determination in going for his life-long goal. His life is an inspiration of success in overcoming the detractors.

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