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PUBLIC LIVES

PUBLIC LIVES; Ellis Island, and Other Backward Glances

By ROBIN FINN

THE brainy type but emphatically not the confessional type, Edwin A. Schlossberg is seated near a drawing table in his loftlike office at 641 Avenue of the Americas, trying and failing to extrapolate a logical progression from his rather charmed -- he'd probably opt for a favorite word and call it cool -- life's journey, which now includes the design of the interactive database on Ellis Island that links Americans to 22 million ancestors.

Why did he end up designing museum exhibits? "I don't know." Did he have any ambivalence about marrying into the Kennedy clan? "Nope." Does he consider himself a lucky man? "Yep." Is his work -- and maybe his life -- all about making improbable connections? "Exactly." Bingo! Call him a Renaissance man, like some relatives do, and he doesn't flinch, though he confesses he doesn't play an instrument. "But I can play the stereo really fantastically," brags Mr. Schlossberg, a fan of jazz and Dylan, and designer of a Chicago Symphony Orchestra initiative, Echo, to broaden its audience.

"It all makes sense when you look at it backwards," Mr. Schlossberg says of his lifeline, and darned if, decades ago, he didn't design a series of layered poems inside plexiglass precisely that way -- the words don't coalesce into a comprehensible whole until you back away. There's one hanging in the hall; it overlooks the gargantuan "pinball man" that, like Frankenstein's monster, can be summoned to motion (the catch is, it requires 125 people for activation).

"That concept's still for sale," notes Mr. Schlossberg. There are, he admits, 15 or 20 projects that Edwin A. Schlossberg Inc. has had to back-burner for lack of discerning patrons. Same goes for the movie script, based on Virginia Woolf's "Waves," wasting away in his desk. "I love the idea of reweaving the threads to make something that was unconnectable connectable," he says of the mandate that's moved him ever since he wrote his (published, of course) dissertation as a conversation between Albert Einstein and Samuel Beckett.

Robust and sunburned at 55, with a neatly clipped head of prematurely gray hair, he wins (apologies to Arnold Schwarzenegger) the award as resident intellectual of the Kennedy in-laws -- when's the last time the action hero quoted John Donne, Wallace Stevens and Gertrude Stein in the space of two hours? Or had a retrospective of conceptual artwork (creations Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg blithely refers to as "stuff") mounted at the National Arts Club. Or, spurred by an ancient Chinese word-poetry exercise, assembled 52 canvases and wrote down everything he knows (Mr. Schlossberg did it in 1996).

AS for his wife's take on his art, Mr. Schlossberg cites Mr. Stevens, the renowned Hartford poet/insurance man: "Wallace Stevens was always talking about how you're never your profession at home. It's good not to be taken seriously; that level of irreverence is refreshing," he says. "It's probably that sense of humor and irreverence that keeps me wanting to make things. As if you could get it right; that would be the funniest thing ever."

He discloses that staring, laughing and, last but not least, thinking, count as pivotal compositional moments in his workday: "Thinking up the methodology of a new project is a hoot," says the designer, whose two latest projects -- the Ellis Island database and the interactive displays at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington, D.C. -- qualify as major hoots. Next on his agenda: a Louisville arboretum, a North Carolina historic site, signs for the Reuters building.

He waited until the Ellis Island project was operational to indulge himself and research his four grandparents, who all left Russia due to religious persecution and disliked discussing the past: "It's like seeing someone you love and haven't seen in a long time," he says. "It's a rush, like finding evidence of your extended self."

He insists his Jewish-ness (he's "happy and proud" of his heritage, though isn't a regular at services like his father, a well-off Upper West Side textiles designer, was) is immaterial to his work on the Catholic museum. His three children are being raised Catholic; 8-year-old Jack's First Holy Communion is imminent. He is, he says, surrounded by "Catholicism with a big C and a little c."

A disciple and employee of the free-thinker Buckminster Fuller, a running mate (and we're not talking politics) of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns on the downtown art frontier in the late '60s ("I've always loved to be with people whose presence and mind is really unfamiliar and interesting, and they are about as interesting and unfamiliar as you can get"), Mr. Schlossberg left Columbia University professionally clueless, with a pair of doctorates (science and literature), in 1971. But he was hardly idle: "Being bored is irresponsible."

He wrote seven books on computer games after a chance encounter with his aunt's futuristic Hewlett-Packard pocket calculator in 1974, and founded his self-named corporation in 1977 after a project-by-happenstance at the Brooklyn Children's Museum prompted a demand for his design skills. He became Mr. Caroline Kennedy -- at least in tabloid parlance -- when he married the former president's only daughter in 1986, but wasn't thrown by the hoopla: "It's amazing we met each other, but life is what it is, and it was clear very early on that it would be a different set of issues than in other circumstances. But we still have plenty of time to be who we are; it's worth preserving that."

Photo: EDWIN A. SCHLOSSBERG (Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times)