

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

QUINN BRADLEE INTERVIEW  
*THE NEWSPAPERMAN: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BEN BRADLEE*  
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## **QUINN BRADLEE**

### **Author and Filmmaker**

Interviewed by: John Maggio

**Total Running Time: 32 minutes and 38 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Newspaperman

Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Quinn Bradlee

Author and Filmmaker

### **Ben Bradlee as a father**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

My dad was a working man and by the time he became my dad, a father to me, I never really knew him as Ben Bradlee per se. I knew him simply as Dad. And I had an idea of what he did and I think I started to ... I remember getting cab rides as a kid and just going around and saying, "My dad is Ben Bradlee, and do you know who he was and what he did?" And people would be like, "Oh yeah." They'd be like, "That was your dad? Wow, I can't believe that." I

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don't think it was me bragging necessarily, even though it sounded like it. Maybe I was a little bit, but I think part of it was also me trying to find out more about who my dad was as Ben Bradlee. Because like I said, all I knew my dad was as Dad.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I do understand that when I was born my dad had not just a child, a new responsibility to take on, but a completely different responsibility. And people have come up to me before when I ask questions about my dad and they say, "You know, your dad used to be a real hard ass, and you really turned him into a softie." That's why I never really knew my dad as Ben Bradlee. As a family historian and a family member, I knew him as Benjamin Crowninshield Bradlee, as well, but I just simply knew him as Dad, and that's really what he was to me.

## **Father and son in the great outdoors**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

We had a close relationship as father and son and then we had a close relationship as father and son in the woods. And that was probably ... I remember working out in the woods in West Virginia, which I loved that log cabin. I remember the TV maybe getting one channel, almost no electricity at all, and I loved every minute of that. And then we bought Porto Bello and we

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upgraded a little bit to electricity after that. That was great for me, because it gave me the side of city life but of country life at the same time. I just think if you can't really travel, you don't have that affordability, if you will, those are two great lifestyles to have, cause it makes you appreciate both lifestyles and it educates you more.

## **Tracing the Bradlee family history**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I wanted to know more about the family that I came from. And it first started off by knowing more about the type of family that he came from as well, like you said. And then it really ... I started... I used to ask him questions so much about his family. In a way, I guess that was the journalist coming out in me. Just finding out about me, who I am, who we are and why we're here. I was 14 and I finally asked him so many questions that one day he just gave me the family Bible and said, "Have fun with it." And my grandfather traced their family back to 1631 in Boston. And not only is it an old family, but you know what I also found out about that is, that he comes from a family of doing the right thing.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

The Bradlees really first made their mark going all the way back to the Boston Tea Party, when they actually boarded the ships like Mohawk Indians

and actually dumped barrels of tea in the water. And we're the only family of the Boston Tea Party, that I know of in my research, that actually has five members. The Bradlee men were on the ships and their sister, Sarah Bradlee, her husband, was on the ship. The Bradlee house became a meeting place. I think even Sam Adams popped in one time just to say hi or just to check out what's going on. She became known as the mother of the Boston Tea Party after that and she earned that nickname, because she not only painted the men, but then she unpainted them, and she did it ... They had to be quick too. So that's really when the Bradlees made their first mark in history in this country.

**Living with a learning disability**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I was born with a syndrome called velo-cardio-facial syndrome, and it's known by four other names: VCFS, which are those initials, DiGeorge syndrome, and then Shprintzen syndrome, three other names. But a lot of people get them confused but they're all one. For the longest time, well for a while, they actually thought I had Williams syndrome, which I guess has some similarities. But it's because of my syndrome that I have dyslexia, ADD. It really did ... I would say I was a bird that never left the nest, in a way. I did. I just moved over to another tree or a branch. So I didn't really move that far.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

And that's something that I know ... You know, everybody has to leave the nest and go off on their own. And I know that, and I think as long as I know that and I'm modest about it ... And I think I get my modesty obviously from my father, as he is probably the most modest person I've ever met, and I think a lot of people would say that about him. And that was the other gift that my dad gave me, that helped me with my troubles that I had, you know, because he was so modest and he taught me to tell the truth. I wasn't afraid to tell the truth about my syndrome or to talk about it. I wouldn't over-exaggerate it or under-exaggerate it, I would just tell it for the way it is. And then I would... You know, if I got in a problem, I'd get a problem, would figure out how to solve it and then move on.

## **Lessons from the Bradlee family**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I think my dad and I have that connection, where our fathers seem to help us by healing us almost by taking us into the woods. And there's a... I never really knew how young I was when I started going in the woods. I thought I was maybe about nine or so, but there's a picture of me, I guess I was maybe four or something, and my dad was burning. And I'm holding on to this huge rake that just towers over me, it's twice my size. And I'm holding onto it like I've been raking my whole life. Then when I was 14 I got into chainsaws and

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stuff like that. And my grandfather, I always wish I had always met ... My dad would tell me stories of when he and my dad had to go up and down the stairs, and this guy, this huge football character, probably 200 pounds or something when nobody was working out yet back then, really shy. And was just lifting my 16-year-old dad or so at the time up three or four flights of stairs just constantly.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

And at his age that must have been backbreaking work. But he would do anything to help my father. The other thing amazing about my grandfather, which I think my dad clearly inherited, which is why he was so kind to people, is that his brother and my uncle, Frederick Josiah Bradlee III, simply called him Freddy, was gay. And back in those days you just ... You didn't even ask about it, let alone talk about it. And my grandfather was supposedly an angel about that. And I think my dad saw that from my grandfather and my dad realized, this is how you treat people, and you treat people... you respect people no matter what type of life they're living.

## **Working in the woods**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I think, you know, we realized that working in the woods really kind of helped us heal, and so we kind of continued working in the woods. By the way, it

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started with my dad and my grandfather. The way he got involved with it is that ... you know, I was actually doing some research online and I found some records, actually on ancestry.com., and it actually said that my grandfather was a logger in Maine and Canada. And so, you know, that's obviously how he got started working in the woods and got a love of the woods. And I think this was during when he was "golden boy banker," as my dad would say, had everything, had all the money in the world. And then he lost it all, and he had a number of just probably 50 odd jobs, and one of those jobs was being a logger.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

And I've seen that, I've watched it on TV. I haven't seen it in person, but that just looks like ... You think it looks tough now when you're watching it on TV with all the technology they have. I mean, they just send these logs down the rivers and these logs would be moving at five, ten miles per hour. They probably just let some of them go because they just didn't have the manpower to stop them. But you know, while ... I guess the point is that no matter how hard it is, you know, working out in the woods is hard sometimes but it's like life. Life gets hard, but if you love it you're going to keep doing it. When we were out there we never really talked. It was more body language and we talked with body motion. And when we did talk it was stories about my dad's family and how my dad came to working out in the woods. And he

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would tell stories of his dad, how his dad taught him about caring for the woods and being a woodsman and what it was all about.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

He told me the story of how he bought their house in Beverly, which is the other way of how my grandfather came to love the woods. His mom ... His wife, my grandmother, bought it for \$10,000, to make a long story short, which was a family ... We had family connections to the family who owned it. They were the Putnam family of the old Salem witch trials. And they were probably cousins of ours or something like that. And my dad told a story that said, you know, one day my parents were out on the porch and they saw this car, people came out of them and offered ... My grandmother apparently said to my grandfather, "I want to buy the house." And my grandfather said, "You can't do that." This is in the depression and you don't have the money. My grandmother had more money than my grandfather did because she came from the fancy de Gersdorff family in New York. They were a big time lawyer family, had tons of money for the time.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

My grandmother went down there to the Putnams and said, "Here's \$10,000," and bought the house. And what they were doing is, they were ... Before that though my grandfather was keeping it up, keeping the grounds up. He's basically the groundskeeper of the house, and that's how the Putnams let

them have the house free of charge. And that's how he really got into ... I'd say that's a step above gardening, per se, but that's how he kind of really learned about the woods and really loved it.

### **Understanding privilege**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I say to people, especially when they kind of give me a hard time for being born into the family that I was born into, you know, and about having money, coming from money and stuff like that. I say to them that I know my place in the world. I know where I stand because of my disabilities, which almost don't affect me anymore, and that's something that you don't ever overcome, but you learn how to cope with it. And, you know, I told them ... I've even heard Ivanka Trump say this in an interview she did called, "Born Rich." That when you're born into a family like that it doesn't mean that you don't know hardship or pain. And I'm not making comparisons, but just because you're born into a family that has a little bit more money than most people do, as long as you're aware of it and you understand what's going on, how your family is different. And you understand that you have a little bit more than most people and you're not greedy about it. I don't really see a problem with it. It's the people who are the exact opposite of the latter that ... You know, they're the ones that get into trouble and people start to dislike. And that's another thing that my dad always taught me, is that he always said just

because ... I mean, he said it in his book and he said it to me numerous times, "Money doesn't grow on trees." And he learned that from the depression. And he made sure that I learned that.

### **Ben Bradlee's battle with polio**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

It's very interesting that he had polio. You know, that was his first real battle that he fought. Somebody coming from privilege, and then after polio then he fights a great war, World War II, and then the Pentagon Papers and then Watergate, and so his whole life he's been in these battles. I think he learned from ... I actually think him experiencing polio really helped him get through the rest of his life; is that he figured if he could get through being paralyzed and feeling like you had the flu, and feeling hopeless and that you're never going to be able to be a part of society ever again ... And if you can go through that, then, you know, he could take on anything. I think that really was a key to his success, was experiencing that.

### **The Bradlee's good sense**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I think it was the Navy. I think it was the family that he came from. I think it was his father. One thing that my dad did tell me about my grandfather was

that people were always ... And these were people who had tons of more money than my grandfather did. My dad always said we were Boston Brahmins, but we were on a very low end of the Boston Brahmin totem pole, nowhere near close to the Lowells or the Cabots. Again, so these were people who had tons of money, but they had no common sense. A lot of them didn't, so they would always come to my grandfather, you know, asking if they got bound... wound up in marital issues or relationships or business issues, they would all come to my grandfather and ask him what to do. And I think that's where my dad got a lot of that from. And that's why he was so good at his job. And I think a lot of it is ... It's kind of like being born a great athlete too. You're either just born with it or you're not.

***All The President's Men***

00:18:29:00

QUINN BRADLEE:

I think the first time I saw that I was mandatorily made to watch it, and I was about 14 years old, and being dyslexic and ADD, didn't understand one word of it and thought it was the most boring movie I've ever seen in my life. But I remember giving it another try and the more and more I tried to watch it, the more and more I actually liked it. And I think I've seen the movie about 200 times now, just because if you have something like that, if you have a parent who is an actor and they're not here anymore, you're always going to have

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that, you know, to see your parent on screen. And I think that's why people make home videos, home movies, it's all about memories.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

When I was old enough to realize who he was I couldn't believe it. You know, the story is that apparently Robards spent a day with my dad and just nailed it. I mean, Robards was... he just had the swagger, the sex appeal. And when I watch his character you fall in love with him. And even when he gets upset in the movie ... A lot of the times when you're watching characters like these the movie theater goes quiet, it goes silent, especially on Broadway. You don't know if you should breathe or not. And there's an awkwardness, but you're just ... You don't feel bad, you just know that you screwed up and you need to go back and try it again, and Robards played that perfectly.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

And that was another thing actually that I wanted to say. I think a lot of people get my dad's seriousness confused with his bad-assery, and seriousness and bad-assery, if you will, are completely different than just being an asshole and saying, "Fuck you, get out of my life, or out of my eyes, I don't want to see you." It's like being a privateer and piracy. There's a very, very fine line there, but there is a difference.

## **Ben Bradlee's swagger**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I think it's ... The only way I can compare it to is if you saw *Good Will Hunting* (1997). That movie took place in Southie or South Boston. And that's the only way I can say if you want to know how my dad got that swagger, go look at *Good Will Hunting*, because it's the exact same swagger. And the reason why those guys could pull it off in that movie is because they're from Boston. I think it's really just a Boston culture that you were born with. And I think every generation is different. My dad's generation was even a little bit more, not so anti- government, but every new generation is a little bit more anti-government than the other one is. They think they can change the world. And, um, I think what a lot of people think is they have the swagger and they think they can change the world, and a lot of people maybe who think that can, could, but they don't act on it. And the difference is that my dad acted on it. And he did something about it.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

But I really think it's also just a Boston thing too, in the end. Cause when you go to Boston ... And there's also guys, big guys. I remember going to camp as a kid and being in the men's locker, and even at 14, 16 you're just swearing your head off like a sailor. You don't even stop to think, "How am I talking like this? I'm only 14 years old!" But I think it's just masculinity in the end, and being from Boston.

**The Bradlee family motto**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

Yeah. It's almost a family motto, in a way. I got ... One of my godmothers gave me for Christmas a few years ago a frame saying, "Non illegitimus carborundum." I think I said that right, I probably got it wrong a little bit. But in Latin it basically means, "Don't let the bastards get you down." And that's also another saying that, my dad and I... that was a big thing that my dad used to say, is "Don't let the bastards get you down." Which comes from, you know, "Nose down, ass up." And it all started with my grandfather being a football player, because no matter how tired you are or how hot it is outside, how many men are in front of you, you just gotta keep on going until you get to the end of the field goal, till you make a touchdown. And it served this family great.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I mean, you know, sometimes I wonder if maybe he would have been a little bit more, I guess ... Not lovey-dovey or anything like that, more emotionally open. Now that I think about it, I'm not sure I would really want that, because my dad would be a different dad. And I love my parents the way he was, the way they were. And I wouldn't really change a single thing about my parents.

**Ben Bradlee's passing**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I think, in a way, I almost became the father right away. At first, you know, the first couple days I was still me because I was still thinking about it, still in shock. And it doesn't matter how a loved parent dies, if it's tragic or not, it's still going to be hard. But then one morning I just woke up and I just felt like, "All right, now I need to take life a little more seriously and step up to the plate a little bit." And I think that was my dad, really, just kind of talking to me. And he... I could tell he was thinking about me. I really felt like I was almost becoming him.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

There is a story that after he died I went to the farm in southern Maryland. I went down there with a friend for five days, and we stayed in my cottage. And this red cardinal would come, appear every morning. He would be outside my kitchen window, almost just on the window, holding on with his claws on the screen window. And sometimes he would be frantically trying to come in. He would always show up when I would go into my kitchen to get coffee. And my bedroom is right here and my kitchen/dining room is right there. And so this went on for about three days or so. Then I started to start playing around with this, see what would happen, when I would see the bird on the glass, on

the window. So then I would go back into my office. The bird would fly around into my ... sorry ... my bedroom, and he'd be there.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

All right, now I'm going to go back to the kitchen, fly around, and he'd be back in the kitchen window. And then I tested it out even more. I'd go over to the main house and the bird would actually follow me over to the main house. And then after a while it started to die down, and right when I forgot, you know, I thought it was over, I was walking to my truck and the bird would be following me to the truck. And there's a tree right where we'd park our truck, and the bird would be right above the tree on the branch just waiting for me. And I still see the bird every once in a while to this day.

### **Ben Bradlee's funeral**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I remember I was a little bit in my own world. I had no idea, Biden or Kerry, whether they'd be there; the former vice president and former secretary of state. I had no idea they were there at all, even when I was speaking. The one thing I do remember talking about was how I have nobody to help clear the fields anymore. I said, "He always loved to ... He lived, laughed and loved." And what I forgot to say was, "He lived, laughed, loved, and learned," and

that's what my dad... that was who my dad was. He lived, loved, laughed, and learned.

**Learning more about Ben Bradlee**

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QUINN BRADLEE:

The equivalent that I can compare it to, is when people go and trace their Irish roots to Ireland, or they'll go and trace their grandfather's or father's roots in a war, or something like that. And for me, because of who my dad was I wanted to ... And because of the old footage I have already found on YouTube and on the Internet, I knew there was so much more, and I wanted to know more about who my dad was as the man, if you will. I wanted to know about his professional life and what his friends thought about him. And what the people whom he hired thought about him.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I was really doing that ... I mean, it was actually a selfish reason. Being a family historian, I was really just mostly thinking about me at first, so I'll always have that. And then, you know, to share it to my kids one day and stuff like that. And then I realized, well maybe the rest of the family would like to see this. And the more people I talked about it to, you know, people just said it would be a great documentary. I think people just seem to be naturally interested in it, to make a movie about my dad. Again, I just wanted to know

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more about him, in the end, and just to see what else was out there about my dad.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

I don't want to say I started it by having the idea to do a documentary now that we're actually doing a documentary. People are becoming naturally interested in it. I think people are ... If somebody's naturally interested in somebody, they're going to write a book about it, do a documentary about it, write a paper on it. And in my way, the easiest way for me to do, was do a documentary instead of writing a ... I would love to write a book about it, but that's a little harder for me. So the easier way for me to do it was to do a documentary.

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QUINN BRADLEE:

But we know some people in Hollywood, we have some friends out there, and I had no idea that they were going to be making a movie on my dad. Let alone it being Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. I mean, that's top of the line right there. I wish my dad was alive to see this film, more so than ... Not more so than the movie, but I wish my dad was around to see Tom Hanks play my dad, and I would love to see what he thought, who was better, Robards or Hanks. I know they'll do a good job ... I mean, if Steven can make a movie like Abraham Lincoln, about Abraham Lincoln like that, then I can only imagine what his movie about my dad and the Pentagon Papers will be like. I'm not

even going to question that. And I'm truly not going to question Hanks' acting either, because I don't think I could act like that.

**Ben Bradlee's lasting legacy**

00:31:46:10

QUINN BRADLEE:

He was good at what he did. And he wasn't the publisher of the *Washington Post*, he was editor in chief. And then he eventually became the vice president at large of the *Washington Post*. People do get that confused I think sometimes, my dad being the publisher of the *Washington Post*. And I think if somebody said that to him, if he could, he'd probably go right to Don Graham and tell him about it and talk about it, and they'd probably figure out a way to stop it. But he was good at what he did, professionally, and as a father.

END TC: 00:32:38:00