

# St. John's

*alumni magazine*



**Donald and Eleanor Taffner made their mark on popular culture.**

**Now they're doing the same for education.**



**Creating  
a Scene**



## SCENE ONE

FADE IN

### INTERIOR – MANHATTAN OFFICE

Donald Taffner, a young, energetic salesman, arrives for a meeting with an advertising executive. He enters an office where the meeting is being held. Also present is the executive's administrative assistant, Eleanor, who gazes up at him as he enters. They sense an immediate connection.

DONALD TO ELEANOR AFTER MEETING:  
Would you like to join me for drinks after work?

Donald ('53C, '89HON) and Eleanor Taffner '94HON are a couple of characters. Not in the pejorative or two-dimensional sense, but rather through their wit, intellect and effusive personalities, they seem like they could have stepped out of a sitcom or television mini-series. Indeed, the analogy is apropos given that they are pioneers of the entertainment industry responsible for such hits as "Three's Company" and "Too Close For Comfort," and for importing the cult classic "The Benny Hill Show" from England. Soul mates who met and married within six months of that fateful business meeting in 1960, they grew to become true partners amidst the backdrop of the changing face of television. Yet, for all of their successes, they are humble and pragmatic about their achievements. "You have to remember where you came from," says Donald. "There is a world of difference between what we are doing now and where I came from."



## SCENE TWO

FADE IN

### EXTERIOR – ST. MARTIN OF TOURS ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BROOKLYN

A neighborhood candy shop owner, William Taffner, approaches the rectory after learning one of the monsignors is also selling candy at the parish school. The shop owner knocks on the door and is greeted by a priest.

WILLIAM:

Monsignor, I won't say Mass if  
you don't sell candy.

A young Donald Taffner learned a great deal from watching his father conduct business in his Brooklyn candy store. There were the early morning hours spent preparing newspapers for sale and the customer service skills he employed to ensure repeat business. "[Being in the store] taught me about getting along with people and being able to talk to people," Donald now recalls. "It gave me a pronounced business attitude." His parents so strongly supported his education that his mother cleaned offices at night to help pay his tuition at St. John's Prep, and later St. John's College, which was right across the way at Lewis Avenue and Willoughby Avenue.

Imbued with that sense of hard work and ambition, Donald took a job as a messenger in the mailroom of the William Morris Agency in 1952. After graduating in 1953, he continued his rise at the agency but not quite in the traditional way. Usually, the mailroom led to a job as a secretary but his poor typing skills destined him to oversee the cassette room where television shows were screened for their salesmen and potential buyers. It was Donald's job to take care of the pilot films, screening room and the studio room and his on-the-job training included more than just technical expertise. "That's where I got a lot of my sales experience, from watching the guys sell a show," Donald reflects. "I would run in and listen while the sales guy made his pitch."

### **SCENE THREE**

FADE IN

INTERIOR – SCREENING ROOM IN  
NEW YORK CITY

Abe Lastfogel, head of the William Morris Agency in New York, sits and watches a screening of Wyatt Earp projected by Donald Taffner. On the screen, Wyatt Earp rides his horse filmed from the ground up making the horse appear huge.

ABE:

What do you think of it Don?

DONALD:  
Isn't that the biggest horse you ever saw?

ABE:  
Yeah, you're right.

DISSOLVE TO NEXT SCENE – SAME  
SCREENING ROOM

Lastfogel is with a group of Campbell's Soup advertising executives who are considering buying the Wyatt Earp show. Donald projects show again ending with the same shot of horse from the ground.

ABE TO EXECUTIVES:  
Wasn't that the biggest  
horse you ever saw?



Donald (l.) shares a laugh in his office with His Royal Highness Prince Andrew (c.) in 1988. Donald holds a picture of Eleanor in costume and makeup as a haranguing wife used as a prop on the American sitcom "Foot in the Door," the adaptation of the UK hit "Tom, Dick and Harriet." Prince Andrew was in town promoting his charity program "Royal Knockout," which Donald sold to the USA Network. At right is Donald Taffner, Jr.

the advertising agency Dancer, Fitzgerald and Sample and the two quickly realized they shared many of the same values. She was fully supportive of her husband when, in 1963, he decided to form his own company. "I thought it was a great idea," she now says. "There's a certain time in your life when you've got to move forward and do something on your own, and that's exactly what he did."

### **SCENE FOUR**

FADE IN

INTERIOR – CONFERENCE ROOM  
IN MANHATTAN

Donald Taffner meets with a group of American television executives while attempting to sell an Australian television show called "Skippy, The Bush Kangaroo."

DONALD TO EXECUTIVES:  
Think Lassie, only the  
animal is a kangaroo.

Donald's influence over Lastfogel led him to believe he could be successful as a salesman, and executives at the agency agreed promoting him to sales agent in 1955. It was the golden era of television and its influence was establishing the cultural core of America. Comedies like "I Love Lucy" and "The Honeymooners" were pervasive in living rooms across the country, and advertisers paid well for the privilege of having their product linked to them with the words "brought to you by..." There were any number of departments Taffner could have gone into since the international theatrical agency handled a variety of entertainment including nightclubs, but he stuck with television because it was fresh and transforming daily. "The overseas market started to come and it paid so little money that they gave it to the young guys, and I was one of the young guys," Donald says. Selling to that market meant building relationships with executives at the BBC in Britain, CBC in Canada and ABC in Australia. In 1959, he followed the head of his department at William Morris to the New York offices of Paramount Studios and worked as a salesman in their newly-created television division. A year later, he met Eleanor while she was an administrative assistant at

Within a few short months, Donald and Eleanor were nurturing both a growing family with the birth of their son, Donald, Jr., and a business with the launch of D. L. Taffner Ltd. in rented space in a suite of Manhattan offices with a mother-in-law keeping the books. Donald leaned on his experience in international television to





*Eleanor and Donald in the offices of DLT Entertainment.*

initially act as a buyer of American programming for an Australian network and stations in Canada. As overseas networks began to produce more and more of their own programming, there was less demand for shows imported from the United States. Forced to rethink the market, Donald focused on representing established programs produced overseas and selling them in America. His first major sale was the popular Australian show “Skippy, The Bush Kangaroo” which ran successfully in the U.S. for several years. With a unique set of skills developed due to the relative newness of this model, he was able to convince executives at stations in Australia, Canada and England to let him represent them stateside. The Taffners worked tirelessly, traveling across the globe as a family, which now included daughter Karen. “I had to do a great deal of socializing,” says Eleanor. “Dinners two, three times a week. It was important to the business at the time because Don had to keep close relationships with these people.” “She was always a part of what we were doing,” her husband adds. “I would listen to her and she would give me ideas.”

Donald would often spot a show airing in an overseas market that he thought might be a good vehicle for a program in America if the premise was tailored for the market. Thus, “Three’s Company” was born from the Thames Television hit “Man About The House.” Donald partnered with former president of the now defunct DuMont Television Network, Ted Bergmann, and the pair pitched

the series to ABC, CBS and NBC, but the honchos simply balked at the-then racy idea of a single man living with two single women. “We showed it nine times to the three different networks, and every time it was turned down,” Donald recalls. “Finally, ABC said yes.” A testament to their negotiating skills since one way they brought ABC around was by none too subtly letting them know that CBS was close to snagging the show. Once the network gave the go ahead, writers were assigned to work on the pilot, casting began and executives weighed in on what they thought would produce a hit. It would take three pilots, several cast changes and one year before the show finally made it to the small screen. At 9:30 p.m. on March 15, 1977, “Three’s Company” premiered and America soon fell in love with the inhabitants of fictitious apartment number 201 – Jack, Janet and Chrissy. So much so that the show launched the spin-offs “The Ropers” and “Three’s A Crowd,” with which D.L. Taffner Ltd. was also involved. “We knew [“Three’s Company”] was going to be fun, but I didn’t think it would be an evergreen,” Donald reveals. “It’s playing all over the place and has had over 20,000 runs in America.”

The same formula worked for “Keep It In The Family,” another British comedy that was Americanized and turned into “Too Close For Comfort” starring venerable actor Ted Knight. “As a producer I think you have to decide who the key element is in your series,” he explains. “In ‘Three’s Company’ it was John Ritter and in ‘Too Close For Comfort’ it was Ted Knight.” When the network canceled the show in 1983, Donald took the unheard of risk of taking over production himself. According to author Hal Erickson in the book *Syndicated Television: The First Forty Years, 1947-1987* (McFarland & Company Inc., 1989), “the resulting excellent ratings [of the D. L. Taffner Ltd. revived show] opened new doors for the long-moribund syndicated sitcom market.”

**SCENE FIVE**

FADE IN

INTERIOR – OFFICES AT A TELEVISION STUDIO

Donald Taffner strides confidently into a meeting with the head of CBS programming holding the script for a new show called “Three Up, Two Down” about a couple and their child who live upstairs from her mother in one apartment and his father in another. Neither get along but want to be close to their grandchild.

CBS EXECUTIVE:

You know, I always wanted to do a show with triplets.

DONALD:

Ok, “Five Up, Two Down.”

Now named DLT Entertainment, the company is synonymous with quality productions including the comedy sketch series “The Benny Hill Show,” which still elicits a devoted following from fans almost 30 years after Donald distilled it from its British version by taking what was a variety show with guests to the sketch show which he introduced to American viewers. His formula was simple – he either found good shows in other countries that he thought audiences would enjoy in the states or he looked for impressive scripts that were rejected for some reason or another. “I would just listen to it all, find out what the buyer liked and talk about my show in terms of what he wanted,” Donald says. The Taffners have slowed down a bit as their son handles more of the day-to-day activities of the business, but the halls of their midtown Manhattan offices are still ringing with success. In addition to sitcoms, public and cable television is a focus for the company. This spring, it was announced that a deal was signed with PBS to show two, 45-minute specials of the company’s hit British show “As Time Goes By” starring Academy Award-winner Dame Judi Dench.

The couple keep busy going to the theater and dinner with friends or just relaxing in their 1820 Greenwich Village home. They also keep an apartment in London where they have long been involved with the arts and are landlords of the 1,400-seat, turn-of-the-century restored Shaftesbury Theatre located in London’s West End. Long-time art collectors and proponents of the Glasgow School of Art, they were named “Icons of Scotland” by *Scotland Magazine* and received the American Scottish Federation’s Wallace Award given to American Scots in recognition of their contributions to society, even though neither believes they have a bit of Scottish blood in them. Eleanor is credited with revitalizing an interest in the work of Scottish architect, designer and artist, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, through her personal collection and founded the American Friends of the Glasgow School of Art to assist with fundraising and awareness. Among his many accolades for global contributions over the years, Donald received a Founders Award Emmy from The International Council of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences “for setting new levels of creativity in the worldwide exchange of television programs” and the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, an insignia awarded by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II of England, for his exceptional contribution to British film and television in the United States.



Donald (l.) poses with British novelist and television writer John Mortimer in the window of his Manhattan offices in 1984 behind the engraving “Eleanor’s Building – She Who Must Be Obeyed.” The engraving paid homage to Eleanor for finding the building and to Mortimer’s television show, “Rumpole of the Bailey,” where the main character often referred to his wife using this phrase.

The pair also remain involved with *alma mater* where Eleanor serves as a trustee. “I believe in the mission,” she says. “The most important thing is that many of these young people today would not receive educations were it not for St. John’s.” Donald lends his expertise to students in a course titled “The Business of Film and Television” where he speaks twice a year and encourages other prestigious people in the industry to give of their time and experience to the class. “He has been responsible for attracting agents, producers, syndicators and many other professionals to come and speak,” says Frank Brady, chairman of the communications, journalism and media studies department. “He’s really a giant in the television industry and he’s been very helpful to our department.”

And the pioneers of the American sitcom aren’t as into TV these days as you would imagine. Eleanor admits a fondness for her TiVO digital recorder which she sets to capture BBC programming and Donald enjoys “Law & Order” and as many sporting events, especially college basketball, as he can watch. As for some of the other primetime viewing, the Taffners are not that impressed with this millennium’s offerings. “Most of the reality shows are like looking at wrestling,” Donald says laughing. “They are trying to get you to think that it’s really happening. That isn’t to say that if the networks came to me tomorrow and said they wanted one that I wouldn’t do it.”

FADE IN  
 SCROLL ACROSS SCREEN – TO BE CONTINUED  
 FADE TO BLACK