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## Our Neighbor

Bronxville's Michael Gates Gill pens a memoir about his life as a Starbucks barista.

BY: SUSAN HODORA PUBLISHED DECEMBER 18, 2007 AT 12:00 AM

### Our Neighbor

#### Making the 'Bucks

Bronxville resident Michael Gates Gill trades corporate life for cappuccinos.

By Susan Hodara



If you happen into the Starbucks in downtown Bronxville, you might be served your decaf skim cappuccino or your caramel macchiato by a burly gray-haired man with an affable smile and vivid blue eyes. He'll strike up a conversation as he hands you your drink, and if you show up a few more times, he'll probably remember your name.

Your barista is Michael Gates Gill, a man whose past holds surprises and whose present inspires. Gill

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recounts his story in his recently released memoir, *How Starbucks Saved My Life: A Son of Privilege Learns to Live Like Everyone Else* (Gotham Books).

That story began in March, 2004, in an Upper East Side Starbucks, where Gill had sought comfort in a latte. He was unemployed and nearly destitute, divorced and living alone, uninsured and recently diagnosed with a brain tumor. He was 63 years old. “I thought my life was over,” he says.

The son of celebrated New Yorker writer, the late Brendan Gill, Michael Gill was born into a pocket of success and society. He grew up in a 25-room Victorian in Bronxville (it was known as “the owl house” because of the 25-foot-tall bronze owl that sat atop it), where he encountered such luminaries as Brooke Astor, Jackie Kennedy, Ezra Pound, John Updike, and E.B. White. “My father was more interested in them, in the grownups, than he was in me,” he confides. “I was unhappy and lonely in our house.” He attended Yale University, where he studied art history. “I never wanted to follow in my father’s somewhat intimidating footsteps,” he says. Upon graduating, he was ushered into a job at a top advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, and was soon earning six figures as a creative director. He lived with his wife and four children in a farmhouse in Norfolk, Connecticut.

Then the bottom fell out.

After 25 years at J. Walter Thompson, Gill was fired by a younger woman he had hired himself. “I was completely shocked. I had done good work and had given my all to the company for so many years. The corporate world is a bit like musical chairs: the music stops and someone ends up on his butt.”

He then began a doomed romance that produced a son and destroyed his marriage. “An inappropriate affair” is all Gill will say. The consulting business he attempted to build never got off the ground. And so, one day in Starbucks, when he’d unknowingly wandered into a hiring event and a young African American woman named Crystal asked, “Would you like a job?”, it didn’t take long for Gill to realize that he very much would.

What followed opened Gill’s eyes and heart. He was hired to work at the Starbucks on 93rd Street and Broadway where he quickly recognized that he was, he says, “a visible member of a true minority. I was surrounded by people with entirely different backgrounds, educational levels, ages, and races.” He worried about keeping up with his co-workers, about handling money, and, because he had lost hearing in one ear due to his brain tumor, about mastering the “language of Starbucks Speak” amid the din of the crowded shop. But over a period of months, he acquired the requisite skills, including cleaning the bathroom and working the register, not to mention preparing the variety of Starbucks drinks his customers requested. “I am still struggling to master the complex art of preparing a double tall, sugar-free, extra hot, no-foam latte within a few precious seconds.”

He also developed relationships with his co-workers. As he got to know Crystal and the others, he gained respect for the challenges each faced. “They could all write books with more interesting stories than mine.”

“Looking back, I had blinders,” Gill says. “Everyone around me came from a similar background. Diversity was only talked about, and the word ‘respect’ was literally never mentioned. At Starbucks, there is true diversity; respect for the individual is more important than race, age, or religion.”

All this led to an unexpected sense of fulfillment. “After a few months at Starbucks, I had to physically touch my heart and say aloud how happy I was.”

As a copywriter, Gill worked long hours, traveled often, and had little time for his family and personal life. In contrast, he describes his job at Starbucks as “finite—when you finish your shift, you don’t have to think about it or over-analyze it. You have some enjoyable moments, some tricky moments, and then you leave it behind. This job,” he says, “was a gift to me. It gave me back my life.”

Much of that life takes place in Bronxville, where Gill lives in the renovated attic of a white clapboard

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house, a far cry—though only blocks away—from his childhood mansion. His apartment is within walking distance of the Bronxville Starbucks, where he began working in 2005 and continues to maintain a 20- to 40-hour week. It is there that he returns at the end of a shift, to enjoy the silence and free time he never knew in the corporate world. And it is there that he began to write his book.

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How Starbucks Saved My Life was adapted from a journal he began when he was unemployed. “I was having trouble sleeping. My daughter Annie suggested I write about my feelings before I went to bed.”

He met his agent, Gillian MacKenzie, through an old friend. “My friend told me he’d mention my idea to his agent. I didn’t think he actually would.” But that afternoon, MacKenzie called Gill, and they met at—where else?—Starbucks.

In March 2006, Gill received a number of other significant calls. The first was from Erin Moore, an editor at Gotham Books, to say she was interested in publishing his book. A few days later, it was Tom Hanks’s office, announcing the actor’s interest in playing the role of Gill onscreen. Then, Gus Van Sant, the director of Good Will Hunting, one of Gill’s favorite movies, called. “Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that Tom Hanks would be playing me in a movie that Gus Van Sant was directing.”

He has no intention of leaving his job. “The rule is: don’t quit your day job. I don’t want to mess around with what I’ve found.”

Gill says he feels relief that he is no longer part of society’s upper crust. “All my life, I carried the superstructure of phony entitlement. I was in a magical world with the most famous people having done nothing to get there. It was as if I’d been given entrée into a party, and all I could feel was, ‘What am I doing in this room?’” His message for his own children? “I tell them, ‘Lead a life you will love, not a life you think someone else will love.’”

“At J. Walter Thompson,” he says, “I was a creative director, but in a way I’m more creative now. I create enjoyable experiences for people. I help them have a better day.”

As for his brain tumor, four years later, he still does not need surgery. “It is growing slowly,” he says. “My life is healthier now, so maybe I’m healthier inside, too.”

*Susan Hodara is a freelance journalist living in Mount Kisco, who now has high regard for the people who serve her at Starbucks.*

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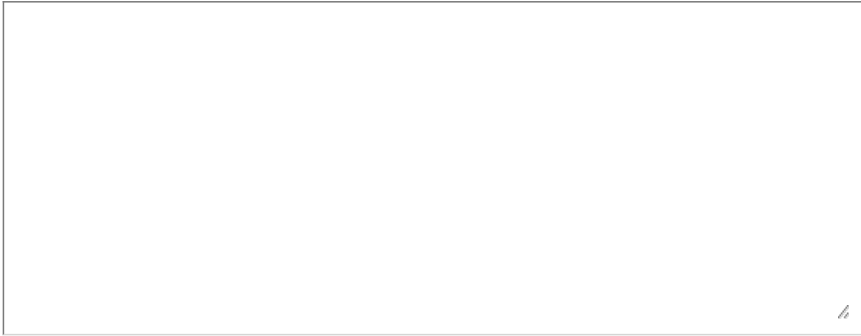
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