

Almost Famous

What does it mean to be famous? One definition, according to Dictionary.Com, is as follows: Having a widespread reputation, usually of a favorable nature; renowned; celebrated: a famous writer.¹

Throughout the course of Martin County's history, there have been many individuals that have had significant accomplishments in a variety of fields and professions. There are, however, very likely many more that have been productive members of society but may not have reached the pinnacle of their respective professions, and therefore have lived without the fanfare and recognition that the most gifted in their fields and professions might receive. This is true from politics to sports, from medicine to the acting profession, and beyond. It could in all probability be said that most people end up somewhere in the "middle" in their professions, rather than at either end and, consequently, may not be considered "famous."

One person that might fit that characterization is Martin County native Paul Willson, a comic actor and improve artist. Born on Christmas Day, 1945, in Fairmont, Minnesota, he is the son of Doris and Lee Willson. His father worked in a variety of jobs that included real estate, magazine advertising, and public relations which eventually led his family to the San Francisco Bay area in 1952.

According to an article from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Willson is quoted as saying, "I was shy as a boy, I was afraid to say anything that might be wrong." He apparently never thought as a youth that he would become an entertainer. However, he had an ongoing love for comedy, including performers such as Steve Allen, Ernie Kovaks, and others. As a result, he eventually became involved with an improv workshop which appeared to have been a turning point in his life. Improv, or improvisational theatre, is a form of acting in which the actors use acting techniques to perform spontaneously and may use audience suggestions to guide their performance as they create dialogue, setting, and plot.

Although you may not be aware of this, it is very possible that you may have seen Paul Willson on either television or on the big screen. He is likely most well-known as the guest character "Paul" on the television show "*Cheers*," which he also reprised in the *Cheers*' spin-off *Frasier*. He was also Garry Shandling's neighbor "Leonard Smith" on *It's Garry Shandling's Show* from 1986-1990. *It's Garry Shandling's Show* was an American television show broadcast on Showtime from 1986 to 1990. It was created by Garry Shandling and Alan Zweibel. The show is notable for its frequent use of breaking

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/famous>

the fourth wall to allow characters to speak directly to the audience. The show also inspired shows such as *Malcolm in the Middle* and *The Bernie Mac Show* to break the fourth wall.²

In addition, he has numerous film credits including being one of “The Bobs” in the 1999 movie, *Office Space*, that also included the well known actress, Jennifer Aniston.³ Other film appearances include the man in the ticket line in *The Sting*, 1982, Grimsdyke in *My Best Friend Is a Vampire*, 1988, a coal executive in *Straight Jacket*, and many, many others. Television appearances include Bill in *Empire*, 1984, Dennis Taylor in *Fast Times* (also known as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*), 1986, Deputy Zajac, a recurring role in *George and Leo*, 1997-1998, appearances on *Malcolm in the Middle*, and many others.⁴

So, would this Fairmont native be considered “famous?” Paul Willson has a lengthy resume of work in the entertainment industry, as an actor and a writer, both in television and the movies. Although perhaps not as readily recognizable as many of the more well known “famous” actors and actresses with starring roles in movies and on television, he has certainly appeared in numerous supporting roles with many of those noteworthy Hollywood personalities. Without the inclusion of his skills, they too would probably not have been nearly as successful, as well known, or as “famous.”

For more information on Paul Willson, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It's_Garry_Shandling's_Show

³ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0151804/fullcredits>

⁴ <http://www.filmreference.com/film/51/Paul-Willson.html>