



PRODUCER AND PATRIOT

Michael Colbert, B.A. 1991, is a successful entertainment executive with a passion for using live television to unite the country.



By Ellen N. Woods

Michael Colbert's office on Capitol Hill is relatively modest, especially when you consider that he frequently rubs elbows with some of the biggest stars in the entertainment industry. Colbert runs Capital Concerts and is the executive producer of the National Memorial Day Concert and A Capitol Fourth — two of the most-watched live television programs broadcast on PBS each year. The award-winning shows are viewed by millions worldwide.

Colbert and his small staff work at the nonprofit year-round to plan every detail of these two summertime holiday productions designed, he says, "to unite Americans in celebration of this great experiment we call democracy." His office is full of memorabilia and photos that tell the 39-year history of Capital Concerts.

He doesn't mind name-dropping, invariably adding an anecdote or a kind word. He describes actor George Clooney as "so generous" and recalls Clooney taking the entire crew out to dinner after a dress rehearsal. He says General Colin Powell is "absolutely awesome." Renee Fleming? "To hear her sing 'You'll Never Walk Alone' — that voice is a gift from God." John Stamos, who hosted A Capitol Fourth in 2017 and 2018, is "so down-to-earth. What a great guy."

The late, acclaimed actor Charles Durning, a decorated World War II veteran who took part in the invasion of Normandy, served as an actor and host for 17 Memorial Day concerts. "He was like a grandfather to me," says Colbert.

The current hosts are Emmy Award-winner Gary Sinise, who Colbert calls "this generation's Bob Hope" for his dedication to the troops, and Tony Award-winner Joe Mantegna. "Joe says the Memorial Day concert is the role he most looks forward to every year," says Colbert, "because he gets to tell the stories of real heroes."

That's what it's all about for Michael Colbert — the people being honored, appreciated, and remembered each year at these patriotic concerts. The fact that he never loses sight of this may just be the key to his success as producer — that, and his personality.

Colbert makes an imposing first impression, and it's not just his height (6'4"). His smile is wide and contagious. His handshake is firm and genuine. His passion for what he does is raw and effusive. He is fortunate, he'll tell you, to have the "Irish gift of gab," which comes with the hint of a New England accent.

He likes to answer questions in threes.

What keeps him up at night while planning

these live television shows?

"The weather, the weather, the weather."

What does he remember most about his days at Catholic University?

"Community, community, community."

What was it like to grow up in the Colbert family?

"A blessing, a blessing, a blessing."

It was from his parents, Colbert says, that he "learned to care about things past the end of my nose."

"My parents' whole deal in life was, how can you help others? It was completely coming from their faith."

A LEGACY OF SERVICE

Colbert's father, Jerry, grew up in Worcester, Mass. After graduating from College of the Holy Cross in 1964, he spent a year with a Jesuit mission in Baghdad teaching Iraqi schoolchildren. When he returned to the United States, he married his wife, Eileen, and together they headed to Chicago's South Side, where they worked with the poor and became involved in the civil rights movement as lay missionaries with Catholic Extension Volunteers.

In Chicago, the first of their two children, Colbert's older brother, John, was born and Jerry attended Loyola University, earning a master's degree studying film. "And it was there," says Colbert, "that my dad began to understand the awesome power of television — still so new — to effect change, to bring people together."

The Colberts moved back home to Worcester and welcomed Michael. In the mid-1970s, the family moved to New York, where Jerry worked with Marshall McLuhan at the Center for Understanding Media. "Marshall was one of the great media gurus of his time and he taught my dad how to harness the power of television," says Colbert.

That stint in New York led the Colbert family to Washington, D.C., as Jerry became media advisor to House Speaker Tip O'Neill.

Clockwise from left: Michael Colbert and Production Designer Rene Lagler; Executive Producer Michael Colbert with General Colin L. Powell and General Mark A. Milley, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, at the 2018 National Memorial Day Concert; John Stamos, host of the 38th annual A Capitol Fourth; and Joe Mantegna and Gary Sinise, cohosts of the 2018 National Memorial Day Concert.



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“While working for the Speaker, my dad had the idea for the first A Capitol Fourth,” said Colbert. “The National Symphony Orchestra had been doing a July 4th concert on a barge in the Potomac River. My father heard that they had approached the National Park Service about bringing the concert to the Capitol. And he thought this would be perfect for television.”

Jerry brought the idea to O’Neill, who rallied bipartisan support for a nationally televised concert on the West Lawn of the Capitol to celebrate the Fourth of July. And he told Jerry he wanted him to be the producer.

“That was 1981,” says Colbert. “I was 13 years old and I’ll never forget looking up at the Capitol where thousands of people stood wearing their red, white, and blue and watching the fireworks as the National Symphony Orchestra played the ‘1812 Overture.’”

“I’ve worked at every concert since and it never gets old.”

As a junior in high school, Colbert was part of the U.S. House of Representatives Page Program. “We had school every morning starting at 6 o’clock on the attic level of the Library of Congress, and then when the House opened at 10 o’clock we headed over to the Capitol.”

When his year in the page program was finished, Colbert returned to Our Lady of Good

Photos at right: Michael Colbert with his dad, Jerry, the founder of Capital Concerts. “I was lucky to have a great father, teacher, and mentor,” says Colbert about his dad, who passed away in 2017.

Counsel High School, and continued to work for O’Neill as an intern. “I have no adequate words for what a kind, caring, funny, brilliant man he was,” recalls Colbert. “I learned so much from the Speaker. He always told me, ‘People like to be asked and they like to be thanked.’ That’s a lesson that’s served me well in producing the concerts.”

CHARTING HIS COURSE

When it came time to plan for college, Colbert says, “I was thinking about going back to Massachusetts as all of my family had done. But I had the taste for politics.”

So he stayed in Washington, D.C., and majored in that subject at Catholic University. Colbert recalls his college experience fondly, including great friendships that have remained central to his life, among them a lasting friendship with Rev. William Byron, S.J. (University President from 1982–1992), who he calls a mentor.

After graduating, Colbert wondered if the fishbowl of political life was right for him. He lived with his grandmother in Worcester and spent a year working at a Catholic Charities-run homeless shelter.

In 1989, Capital Concerts, the nonprofit organization that Jerry founded to launch A Capitol Fourth, produced the first National Memorial Day Concert. Colbert continued to work at every concert through his college years and after. As his year of service came to an end, the concerts, and the entertainment industry in general, were calling his name.

He decided against taking a full-time job with Capital Concerts. “I didn’t want to be an S.O.B.,” he says. After a pause he adds, “Son of a boss.” (It’s one of his favorite punch lines.)

“I was lucky to have a great father, teacher, and mentor, and ultimately a great friend and boss,” he says. “But there was no free lunch with Jerry Colbert. You had to earn it.”

Colbert left D.C. to become a television producer in his own right, spending time in New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville. He worked on the Grammy Awards, comedy specials, and the Country Music Awards (CMAs). His longest stretch was in Nashville, where he met his wife, Jill, on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry. “Lightning struck,” he says. They were both working on the CMAs and quickly found they had much in common. Jill also graduated from a Catholic university, Webster University in St. Louis. She majored in theater and founded the Nashville Shakespeare Festival. “We shared a belief that the field of entertainment is about much more than fame; that it has a power to heal and unite and inspire,” says Colbert.

After living in L.A. for a few years, Colbert and Jill returned to the D.C. area in the late ’90s and settled in Silver Spring, Md., where they are raising their 13-year-old daughter, Ellen. Colbert became co-executive producer with his dad of the concerts for the Capital Concerts organization. Jill is a producer for the concerts.

“Michael has definitely made his own mark on the show,” says Jon Macks, a writer for Capital Concerts for the last 14 years, who has written for the *Tonight Show* and numerous live television specials. “Michael built a strong production team from his New York, L.A., and Nashville network. He has a vision for the shows, he connects with the talent, and he keeps all the moving parts working together.”

“Michael’s brilliance as a producer is that he never loses sight of what the show is all about. He makes the experience so special for those of us who work on the concerts. I come in from L.A. for the opportunity to be part of something so impactful to the country.”

A Capitol Fourth, now in its 39th year, and the National Memorial Day Concert, in its 30th year, have become American traditions. The National Symphony Orchestra is the centerpiece of both. Fireworks on the National Mall to the music of “1812 Overture” and “Stars and Stripes Forever” add to the celebratory nature of A Capitol Fourth. The rousing rendition of the Armed Forces Medley and the somber playing of “Taps” are standard highlights of





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Actors Brian Tee and John Corbett portray and meet Korean War vets Hiroshi Miyamura and Joe Anello.



Backstage during a rehearsal for the 2018 National Memorial Day Concert with Producer Sean Fogel, Co-Producer Jon Macks, Executive Producer Michael Colbert, and Colbert’s wife, Producer Jill Jackson.

the Memorial Day program, which Colbert likens to “civic religion.”

“There are features to each production that our live audience and millions of viewers at home look forward to,” says Colbert. “But we also look at what is happening in the country. And our programming changes to reflect that.”

MOMENTS TO REMEMBER

This was never more true than in 2001. That September, Colbert and his dad were at Ground Zero in lower Manhattan to meet four fathers amid the still-smoldering ruins. “These men were digging for the remains of their first-responder sons; one of them had lost two sons,” he says, still visibly moved as he recounts the story 17 years later. After meeting the men, Colbert worked on a script that would tell their stories, with Mantegna as the storyteller. “That year, Joe [Mantegna] delivered one of the most poignant lines ever spoken on the Memorial Day stage: ‘How do you describe it as a good day when you find the body of your dead son?’ Those are the moments. Those dads were sitting there in the front row. We have a responsibility to get it right,” says Colbert.

The 2017 concerts featured a uniquely meaningful tribute as Capital Concerts honored the memory of Jerry Colbert, who passed away in January that year at age 74. Jerry had become a legend in the halls of Congress, in the entertainment industry, and most especially to the members of the military, who respected him for honoring their service and bringing national attention to the sacrifices of the troops and their families. “I could feel my dad’s presence as I stood backstage at those concerts,” says Colbert. “He was still by my side.”

“One of the hardest things a person can do is to adequately follow in a parent’s footsteps, especially if that parent had huge footprints,” says Mantegna. “Michael has incorporated all the best traits of his father, and is now leaving significant footprints of his own.”

The 2018 National Memorial Day Concert featured Sinise and Mantegna returning as cohosts; singers Cynthia Erivo, Leona Lewis, Alfie Boe, Megan Hilty, and Charles Esten; and actors Allison Janney, Mary McCormack, Graham Greene, Brian Tee, and John Corbett.

It’s the first-time meeting for Tee (*Chicago Med*) and Corbett (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*) as they arrive in Washington to play Korean War

heroes Hiroshi “Hershey” Miyamura and Joe Anello in a true story handpicked by Colbert.

During rehearsal the day before the concert they stand on the stage in the midday sun to run through an 8-minute staged reading in which the two actors recount a brutal assault on the American troops by the Chinese. Anello was shot in both legs and a grenade blew a hole in his back. Miyamura tried to carry him and comfort him as they were marched to POW camps. They were eventually separated, both wondering of the other’s fate. A few years later, Anello saw a photo in *Newsweek* magazine of Miyamura, who had just returned from two years of internment, with President Eisenhower. “I jumped in my car and headed straight to Gallup (N.M.). Hershey’s working in his uncle’s auto parts store and I walked in and he stared at me as if I were a ghost,” says Corbett in his portrayal of Anello.

Colbert joins the two actors on stage after their first run-through and offers feedback. They listen and ask questions and run through the scene again before the evening dress rehearsal. The next night they take the stage and look out at thousands of spectators on the West Lawn of the illuminated Capitol. With no props, no costumes, no set, the two actors *become* the decorated war heroes as

they tell their stories in first person. They detail the events of the deadly ambush, and as they reenact the moment Anello walks into the auto parts store and sees his friend for the first time since that bloody night in Korea, the audience has forgotten they are actors. In character, they embrace, hanging onto each other as tears roll down their faces. The camera pans to the real heroes, friends now for 68 years, sitting in the front row. As Miyamura and Anello are seen on the big screen for the first time, there is a collective gasp from the audience. Tee and Corbett walk to them, and hold on tight to the men they have just portrayed. The crowd is on its feet, with many people in tears.

These are the moments Colbert works year-round to create. Backstage, he does not allow himself to get caught up in that moment. He has to keep the live show running on time, making constant adjustments on the fly throughout the 90-minute broadcast.

It is only when the monitor goes to black that he takes a deep breath of his own. And in that moment, he says, “I’m still that 13-year-old kid looking up at the Capitol in awe.” **CU**

Photos courtesy of Capital Concerts