



# David Sontag

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*Photographs by Michael Zirkle*

North Carolina Symphony Trustee David Sontag moved to Chapel Hill at the end of 1998 and joined the Symphony Society Board in 2005. Sontag's distinguished career in entertainment includes writing and producing award-winning films and television programs and holding senior executive positions at Twentieth-Century Fox, ABC-TV, CBS Films and NBC-TV. Some of America's most memorable television was created by, developed or flourished under his watch: *M\*A\*S\*H*; *The Paper Chase*; *James at 15*; *A Christmas Memory*; *Sister, Sister*; and *My Father's House*. He taught at the American Film Institute, the universities of California and Colorado and the Institute for American Indian Art. He also has managed the careers of major Hollywood stars such as Steve McQueen, Mel Brooks, James Coburn, Robert Culp and Sandy Dennis. Currently Sontag is the Wesley Wallace Distinguished Professor and Director of Writing for the Stage and Screen at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

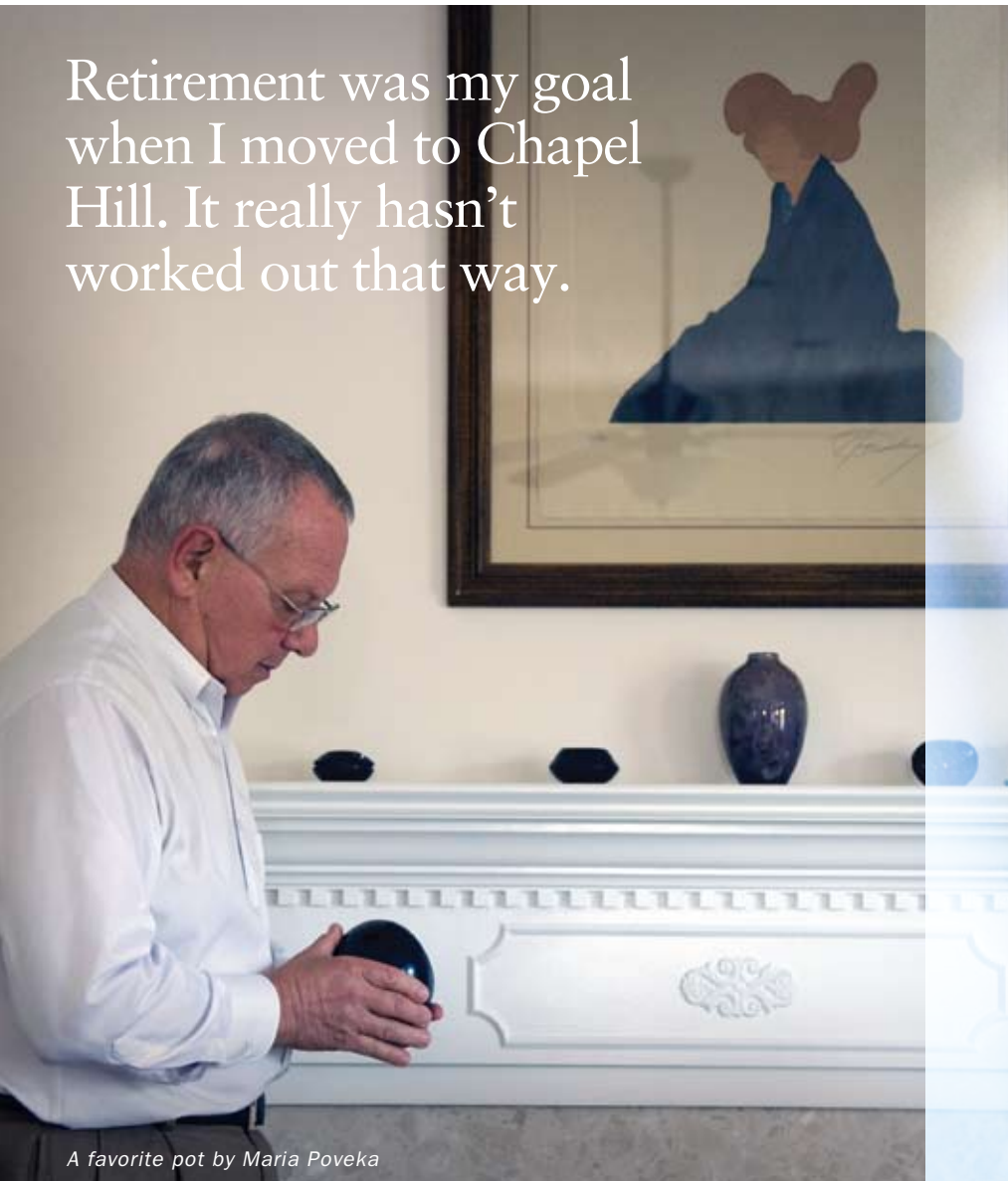
**BORN IN:**

I was born in Manhattan – a street kid.

**EARLY AMBITION:**

I wanted to play basketball and baseball. My dad, John Sontag, was a legendary basketball player. He played on pro teams in the early 1900s – a lot of different teams. He, his brother and his dad all went to Stuyvesant High School in lower Manhattan.

Retirement was my goal when I moved to Chapel Hill. It really hasn't worked out that way.



A favorite pot by Maria Poveka

For many years, I spent summers at Camp Winnaukee on an island in New Hampshire. One summer I had a running battle with the basketball counselor, an All-American at Columbia University, about whether my dad was a better basketball player than he was. I was really bragging. The counselor bet me that he was better than my Dad. The winner would get all the loser's desserts for the rest of the summer. On Parents' Weekend the counselor and I were shooting baskets waiting for the parents to arrive by barge. Suddenly, I heard someone yell "Hey, David throw me the ball." It was my Dad standing at half court. I threw him the ball and he hit eight out of eight from half court. My Mom then said,

"What about me?" and promptly hit five out of five from the free-throw line. The Counselor looked at me in disbelief and said, "The desserts are yours." I was a happy camper!

#### **WOLFPACK:**

My older brother Richard went to NC State for textile management. I became interested too and followed him to Raleigh to get a degree in textiles and chemical engineering. I was on the basketball team until I completely destroyed my ankle in the pre-season.

#### **THE BIG BREAK:**

While still a student, I worked for and helped launch WUNC-TV. My first job

after graduation was as a page at NBC. At that time NBC had an Executive Training Program. The program was eighteen months long. The six people selected traveled throughout NBC working in various departments. At the end of the eighteen months you were supposed to be hired for a junior executive position. The program was open to both employees and non-employees. I was lucky to be selected as one of the six people. At one point in my rotation I was in the Program Department and assigned to work with a wonderful guy named David Tebet who was the number two man in Specials. One day Tebet and I went out to the studio where Jerry Lewis was rehearsing his first solo show. It was the days of live TV. The show was to be broadcast live that Saturday night. During rehearsal there was a technical problem that no one seemed to be able to solve. I whispered to Tebet a possible solution. Dave Tebet's background was as a Broadway press agent. Not sure if I was right or not, but willing to take a chance, Tebet yelled out, "The Kid says...." The solution worked. The next day there was a staging problem. I whispered to Tebet again... again he called out, "The Kid says...." Jerry Lewis thought that was a great idea and asked that I stay close by and help. The result of it all was that I was pulled out of the Executive Training Program and put in charge of Saturday and Sunday programs for the network. In addition, I became Bob Lewine's (Executive VP and head of programming) assistant. It was the beginning of the Golden Age of TV and I was 22 years old.

#### **THE SECRET TO HIS SUCCESS:**

I never seemed to follow a proper career path. I was always taking chances because I wanted to learn new things, to look for the next new challenge. Bob Lewine left NBC and became the head of CBS Films. He offered me the position as head of development at CBS Films. It was a chance to create and produce. It was an opportunity to work with some of the top writers and directors in Hollywood. So I said, "Oh, I haven't done that yet. OK, I'll try it!" I think the secret is to have a bit of luck, but be sure to deliver. I have always been inspired by the Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney movies where Mickey says "This barn will make a great summer theater." To me, everything is a barn! I have been

very fortunate in my career to have had great mentors and be in the right place at the right time. I have always remembered those who took a chance on me and have tried to do the same for others throughout my career.

#### FAVORITE PERSONAL TV OR FILM PROJECT:

I couldn't possibly answer that. It would be like choosing among your children.

#### FANTASY CAREER:


Kitchen designer. When I moved here, I bought a house that was still in process. There were some things about the kitchen plan that I wanted changed. The contractor argued with me, said it couldn't be done. Eventually, I convinced him and he finished the kitchen the way I wanted it. The kitchen won first prize in the Parade of Homes. Later, I found out that they were building many of their new houses with my design.

#### SILK PAJAMAS:


Hugh Hefner wanted to do television and asked me to create a show for him. I did. It was called *Playboy After Dark*. The show is still talked about and is now available on DVD. Hef is a great guy – he's not like everybody thinks. He is very smart. His reputation as a sexist is inaccurate and undeserved. There has never been a "glass ceiling" at *Playboy*. From its very beginning *Playboy* has always had women in key executive positions in the organization when the rest of corporate America did not.

#### CIRCLING THE WAGONS:

I was asked to do something for the Bicentennial. I gave it a great deal of thought and wondered what our history looked like through the eyes of the people who were here first. Because I had gone to summer camp I thought I knew a lot about Native American culture. But once I got started, I realized I didn't know anything. I gave the studio its money back. I settled on the idea of doing a series of films following a fictional Navajo family (the Yazzies) from before they saw the first white man until the present day (the idea preceded *Roots*). I started doing tons of research, but had never been on the Navajo Reservation. One night I was having dinner in Santa Fe with Laura Gilpin [ed. note: well-known photographer of



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## biggest self-indulgence: my life.

the American West]. She said, “You’re worse than a John Ford western. Instead of the Indians circling the wagons you’re circling the reservation.” I started to protest – I mean, how would I do this? Laura got up to make a phone call. This was in the days when there were no cell phones and certainly not many people on reservations had phones of any kind. She came back and announced, “You’re going to Window Rock (the capital of the Navajo nation) next week. I’ve set it up with Carl Gorman.” Now, who is Carl Gorman? Carl was a medicine man, a member of the tribal council, a great elder of the tribe, and the first important Navajo painter. His son became an even more famous painter – R.C. Gorman.

### ON THE RESERVATION:

I alternated my time on the reservation with work at the Aspen Institute. Every time I went down there, I was starting from scratch. I never took a piece of paper, a pencil, a tape recorder or a camera. I just hung out. If they were picking melons, I picked melons. I was also spending time with the Hopi at Second Mesa. I would play basketball with the kids and generally hang out. Every evening I would head down off the Mesa and sleep in my Ford Bronco. One night I was heading for my truck. This family called out to me, “Where are you going? Stay with us, have dinner.” That was my entrée. After that, I stayed with different families up on Second Mesa. On the Navajo reservation I was also invited to stay with many families. At both Hopi and Navajo I was privileged to be invited to attend various ceremonies and sweats. I made many friends many of whom were and are great artists. I am fortunate to have some of their works in my personal collection. I have never believed that I own these things but rather I am privileged to hold and observe them for a period of time after which they should be passed on. Just before I moved here I gave my Navajo rugs to the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe so that others may share in their beauty and spirit.

### BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT:

After six years of research and writing NBC bought *The Yazzies* and we started in to pre-production. There was a change of administration at NBC and the project was cancelled. I was upset, but I’ve always wondered if I would try to resurrect it if the opportunity should ever arise. When I first conceived of *The Yazzies* there were very few Native American actors, writers, directors working in film. If I did it now, I believe that we could do the films with Native Americans in front of and behind the camera.

### PERSONAL HERO:

Maya Angelou. She’s a poet, a writer, a dancer, a cook – the creativity just flows out of her. She has an extraordinary understanding of the human condition. She sees everything so clearly and she has room in her heart for everyone. I have two heroes, actually. The other is Murray

Gell-Man – just because he’s the smartest person on the planet. Murray is a Nobel Prize winner – for his discovery of the Quark. One night I cooked and gave a dinner party at my home in Santa Fe as a fundraiser for The Institute For The Preservation Of The Original Languages of the Americas (IPOLA) for which I was a board member.

Somewhere in the room, I heard a man’s voice speaking Navajo. The only Navajo speaker as a guest that night was the Navajo educator, potter and medicine woman Gloria Emerson. I looked around, trying to figure out who it was, and of course, it was Murray. I just looked at him, shaking my head. He looks at me, smiles and shrugs.

### BON APPÉTIT:

I love to cook. I have no particular specialty. I might start with a recipe, but then I will embellish – add ingredients and make various changes. I’m a member of *Chaine des Rotisseurs* and am the *Vice-Conseiller Gastronomique de Triangle* (see the organization’s website at [www.chaineus.org](http://www.chaineus.org)). I really enjoy this organization. We have fabulous black-tie dinners six times a year. There are many courses and often there is a theme. At least one dinner is ethnic. Our local chapter includes great chefs like Scott Howell and Brian Stapleton, sommeliers and serious foodies. There are branches of *Chaine des Rotisseurs* all over the world.

### ALWAYS IN THE FRIDGE:

Salsa. And cheese – I like to have a good selection, but not too much at a time because I really like cheese. Also, there is always an assortment of mustards. And I do have a well-stocked wine cellar.

### BEST ADVICE HE EVER GOT:

I was working on a big production of *Antigone* at NBC for the Kaiser Aluminum Hour. My mom came to visit me on the set. People were coming up to me with questions or problems and I was answering them and making decisions and giving advice. My mother watched this for a while and then she says to me, “So David, these people are professionals, right?” Yes, mom. “They’re trained in their jobs, they know what to do?” Yes, mom. “They’re professionals and they

listen to ... you?" So this is what I always remember – to respect the very talented people I work with. I've been very lucky in dealing with people all my life because of what my mom said that day.

**ITEM HE COULDN'T LIVE WITHOUT:**

Family things. Everything else, everything I've acquired over the years – they could go to other people eventually. But family things I wouldn't give up.

**WHAT HE READS:**

I have so much material to read from my students that I don't get to read just for entertainment very often. I read six newspapers a day: the *News & Observer*, the *LA Times*, *New York Times*, *London Times*, a Russian paper that is in English and *The Jerusalem Post*. I also get intelligence briefings, so it's about ten to fifteen pieces a day. I like to keep up – what is Chavez doing, for instance? And then I check to see how the press in different parts of the world is reporting the story. Politics, economics – there are all sorts of things that I like to follow.

**RETIREMENT PLAN:**

Retirement was my goal when I moved to Chapel Hill. It really hasn't worked out that way. Projects just keep coming my way.

**ON THE NORTH CAROLINA SYMPHONY:**

The North Carolina Symphony is a superb orchestra for players to learn how to be their best selves. Our struggle is in the role of education – what should it be, what can it become. Projects like *Blue Skies and Red Earth* give uniqueness to our orchestra and insight into new ways to serve the state. No other orchestra that I know of has a state mandate like ours.

**BIGGEST SELF-INDULGENCE:**

My life. I indulged myself with my life – indulging whatever interest I developed. I love taking chances, always trying whatever comes along!

