

Breaking Bad™s bad boy Bryan Cranston

by Eirik_Knutzen

The Rev. Bob - an ordained minister in the Universal Life Church - befriended Bryan Cranston when both spent a summer of leisure on Catalina Island (26 miles off L.A.'s coast) in the mid-'70s. Cranston was having a good time during his summer break from studying police science in college; the Rev. Bob was cruising in neutral between performing wedding ceremonies.

BRYAN CRANSTON - In 'Breaking Bad,' Bryan Cranston plays Walt White, a mild mannered high school chemistry teacher who finds himself catapulted into the unfamiliar world of drug crime. CNS Photo courtesy of Fox. One day - probably during a chat over a couple of beers - the jolly non-denominational minister leaned over and said, "Oops, I accidentally booked two weddings on the same day at the same time ... do you want to do one?"

Surprised, Cranston stammered, "What - perform a marriage?"

Laughing, the Rev. Bob's reply was, "Yeah! They'll pay you \$75 for the ceremony, then you stay for the party, eat great food and meet all kinds of girls."

Minutes later, the merry churchman whipped out a portable electric typewriter, typed Cranston's name on an application form and sent it off to an obscure State of California department.

As nobody asking to become an ordained minister in the Universal Life Church is ever turned down (it has some 20 million untrained members today), the Rev. Bob handed over a couple of books on marriage ceremonies with a hearty handshake. Cranston soon found every claim to be true, indeed.

Before the terrific gig was over, budding actor Cranston had officiated at approximately one dozen weddings scattered throughout Southern California.

"I had fun, but I took it very seriously, put some performance into each ceremony and made it meaningful because it was a real marriage that a couple would remember forever," he recalled. "Later, Rev. Bob married my wife (actress Robin Dearden) and I in real life."

The son of modestly successful thespians Joe and Peggy Cranston (who met in a Hollywood acting class in 1947) got his acting start in a TV commercial at the age of 8, but did not retire from the ministry to reach for the brass ring at Warner Bros. or 20th Century Fox.

"To put it bluntly, performing wedding ceremonies was only a means to an end, a way to make money," he said. "It just wasn't what I wanted to do with the rest of my life."

Enlightenment escaped Cranston until a couple of years later, after dropping out of school and embarking on a cross-country motorcycle trek with his brother, Kyle. They had many adventures - including briefly being sought by law-enforcement agencies in a dozen states on suspicion of murder in the case of a Florida restaurant co-worker - by the time he discovered Henrik Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" during an intense Virginia rainstorm.

Soon back home. Cranston launched his acting career with a handful of commercials and a tiny guest spot on "CHiPs." Inching his way up the slippery ladder, he finally found success and financial security as Hal, "Malcolm in the Middle's" weird and hairy dad. The part yielded three Emmy Award nominations and a Golden Globe Award nod before the Fox network pulled the plug.

Although he kept fairly busy with supporting roles in such daytime soaps as "Loving" and feature films - including "Saving Private Ryan," "Private Offering" and "That Thing You Do" - it was the recurring role of the strange, nitrous oxide-addicted dentist Tim Whatley on "Seinfeld" that offered a clear path to the Big Time.

"From that day on, every casting person in Hollywood knew my name," he mused. "'Seinfeld' was magic that let the whole industry know I was in the loop."

It only took about 20 years of hard work, occasional highs (including the 1998 miniseries "From the Earth to the Moon" as astronaut Buzz Aldrin) and bitter disappointments for Cranston to headline his own television series. "Breaking Bad," a pitch-black comedy from Vince Gilligan ("The X-Files"), features Cranston as Walter White, a standard-issue white guy stumbling through life as a high school chemistry teacher forced to moonlight at a car wash to make ends meet.

The meek teacher - whose life is vastly complicated by a pregnant wife (Anna Gunn) and a teenage son (RJ Mitte) struggling with cerebral palsy - is finally kicked into high gear when thrown one more curveball: He has inoperable lung cancer and given a slim chance of staying out of a casket within two years. But a severe twist of fate throws White into business with an unscrupulous former student (Aaron Paul) - who flunked his class - cooking up the finest crystal meth in New Mexico.

"I love it," said Cranston (who has a teenage daughter, Taylor) of the show's initial seven episodes. "The greatest thing about being part of a successful series like 'Malcolm' is that I'm now able to make decisions based on artistic merit and not financial need," he explained. "I can do what I want, and 'Breaking Bad' is it. It's controversial, constantly dealing with ethics and morality. Walt has no illusions about breaking the law, but for the first time ever he is feeling alive."

Â© Copley News Service