

Farwell native says success is based on perseverance



*By Amanda VanLente
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Hard work, perseverance in the face of adversity and a belief in himself carried Colonel Al Terwilliger from Farwell to Julliard Music School in New York City, the lights of Broadway and to owning one of the most successful horse equipment companies in the world.

Terwilliger is a performer and a successful businessman. He has traveled to places like Russia, and vacations in the Virgin Islands. He learned the French he spoke on a business trip during his junior and senior year at Clare High School. He was born in Detroit in 1939, and moved to Farwell with his parents and two older brothers, Rex and Terry, when he was five or six. His parents owned restaurants in the area. This was his first contact with the business world. "I learned how to do business, communicate with people, take money from people," Terwilliger said.

In school, Terwilliger faced ridicule and misunderstanding from teachers and students. "I was an unusual kid. I was looked upon as a little off-cycled," he said.

Terwilliger said he was not bright, but he was full of creativity, something teachers at that time didn't know how to deal with. He said one of his teachers used to play a game with the students. The teacher would draw one line at a time on the chalkboard and see which student could guess the drawing first. Terwilliger said he always guessed the picture on the first or second line, much to his teacher's dismay. Because the other children didn't see the picture until 20 or 30 lines, the teacher wouldn't let Terwilliger play.

At the age of 12 Terwilliger began traveling with minstrel shows and discovered his passion for acting. His parents also instilled in him the importance of attending college.

With this in mind, he transferred to Clare High School in his junior year, he said, because Clare had a theater program and the foreign language program necessary to get into college.

He credits his parents for encouraging him to follow his dreams to the Detroit Conservatory of Music, where he earned his bachelor's degree, and then onto study at Julliard.

Terwilliger said his type of talent was very rare in those days, especially in a town the size of Farwell. "If you weren't going to be a farmer, you were kind of an outcast," he said.

He said his father was a little uncomfortable with his talent, and wanted Terwilliger to conform more. But, he said, his parents were business people, and understood and accepted his creativity. They put all three of their sons through college at the same time, he said, because they wanted better for them.

Once in New York, Terwilliger had no problem finding jobs, and was making \$750 a week at one point working as an understudy in the Broadway hit “How to Succeed in Business.” Little did he know then how successful he would be?

Terwilliger said he had a lot of down time while working the play, and so he started investing his paycheck in some of his ideas. He decided on harness equipment because his father and brother had raced horses at the Harrison fair grounds, and he had always loved the atmosphere. He began with a few workers and ran his business in between shows. Then he met the woman that would change his life. At a horse racing convention in an Ohio hotel, Terwilliger spotted his future wife, at the hotel for a schoolteacher’s convention. “The minute I saw her, she was the gal I wanted,” he said.

Terwilliger and his wife Myra have been married for 35 years. He says she is his other half and he wouldn’t be nearly as successful without her. “She’s one of those women that just lets me create,” he said. “I think the years have been harder on her than on me. I’ve enjoyed just about every minute of it.” Terwilliger and his wife have two daughters. One lives in Ohio and works in child development and the other does space research at the University of Michigan.

“They’re both great kids, but completely different,” he said.

In addition to his successful company, Terwilliger was made an honorary Kentucky Colonel in 1992, and was inducted into the Michigan Hall of Fame at the Michigan Harness Horsemen’s Association bequest in January. He gives credit to his attitude, and said he wouldn’t have succeeded without the right guidance. “The world is filled with people saying ‘I had that idea,’ but I’m a doer,” he said. Terwilliger said he feels people today are afraid to succeed, and are educated to fail.

“The old saying goes ‘those who can’t do, teach.’ That’s a bunch of crap,” he said. “The best teachers have succeeded.” Terwilliger said the power of positive thinking is the most important thing in a successful life. He said life’s too short to worry about what you could have done. Just do what you want to do – and don’t be afraid of making a mistake.

“I didn’t care if I was making a lot of money; I just wanted to have fun. But I sure made a lot of it, and that’s the kicker,” he said.