

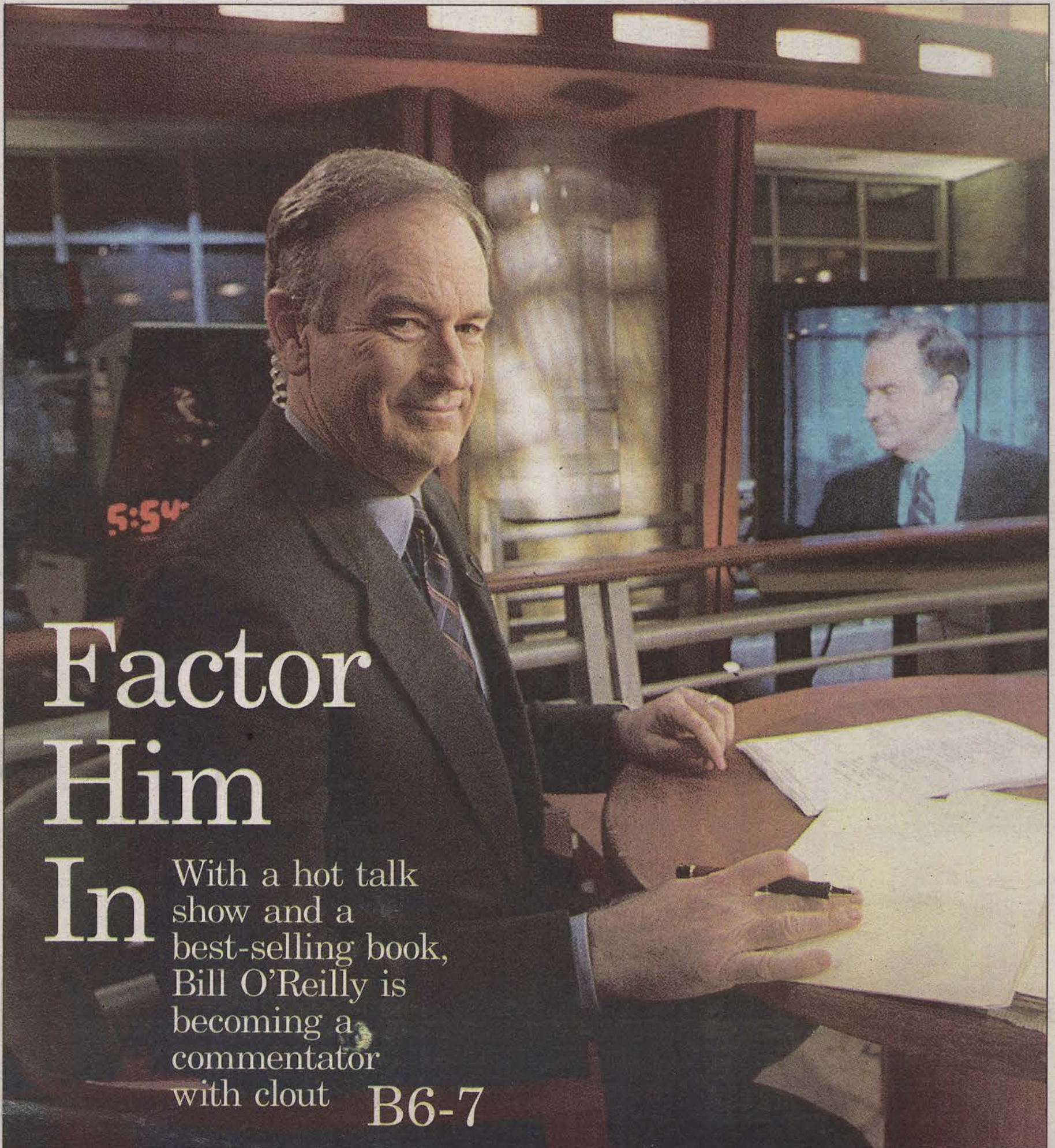
Part 2

BEYOND PUMPKIN: Getting under the skin of winter squash.

B 10

SPIN CITY: Sheen has a thankless job. No thanks, Charlie.

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Factor Him

In With a hot talk show and a best-selling book, Bill O'Reilly is becoming a commentator with clout **B6-7**

The Westbury native is host of "The O'Reilly Factor" on Fox News.

Newsday Photo / Bruce Gilbert

Always cocky and opinionated, commentator Bill O'Reilly seems equally pleased to hear from fans and enemies

By Bill Jensen

THOUSANDS OF LETTERS lie in plastic U.S. Mail tubs strewn about Bill O'Reilly's corner office in midtown Manhattan. O'Reilly gets a lot of mail. He says he gets more mail than Oprah.

The news anchor sits with his back to the room, hands on the keyboard, head bobbing and weaving between his computer screen and a pile of e-mails that he's printed out.

O'Reilly needs to type all the words that people use to describe him, words like "annoying" and "ignorant," as well as "you're," "going," "to" and "hell," so he can read the letters off a TelePrompTer on the last segment of his show, "The O'Reilly Factor," cablecast nightly at 8 and 11 on Fox News. The viewers' reactions to O'Reilly are one of the biggest reasons people stay tuned till the end. One letter will wax poetic, call him a saint; the next, a fascist. He has yet to become popular enough in America to be the one we love to hate. But you get the impression from his sly smile that O'Reilly is the one who loves to be hated — as long as he gets his point across.

He continues to type methodically. On the wall hang two newspaper front pages, both assassinations: one, McKinley; the other, Kennedy. Boxes filled with copies of his book, "The O'Reilly Factor: The Good, the Bad and the Completely Ridiculous in American Life," which is No. 2 on the New York Times best-seller list, teeter above a doormat featuring a picture of Hillary Rodham Clinton and the quote "I've always been a Yankee fan." A tall bottle of Rembrandt's "Dazzling Fresh" mouthwash catches the sun to the left of the computer monitor.

After he's satisfied with the finishing touches on the last segment, O'Reilly swivels his chair around to the front of the desk.

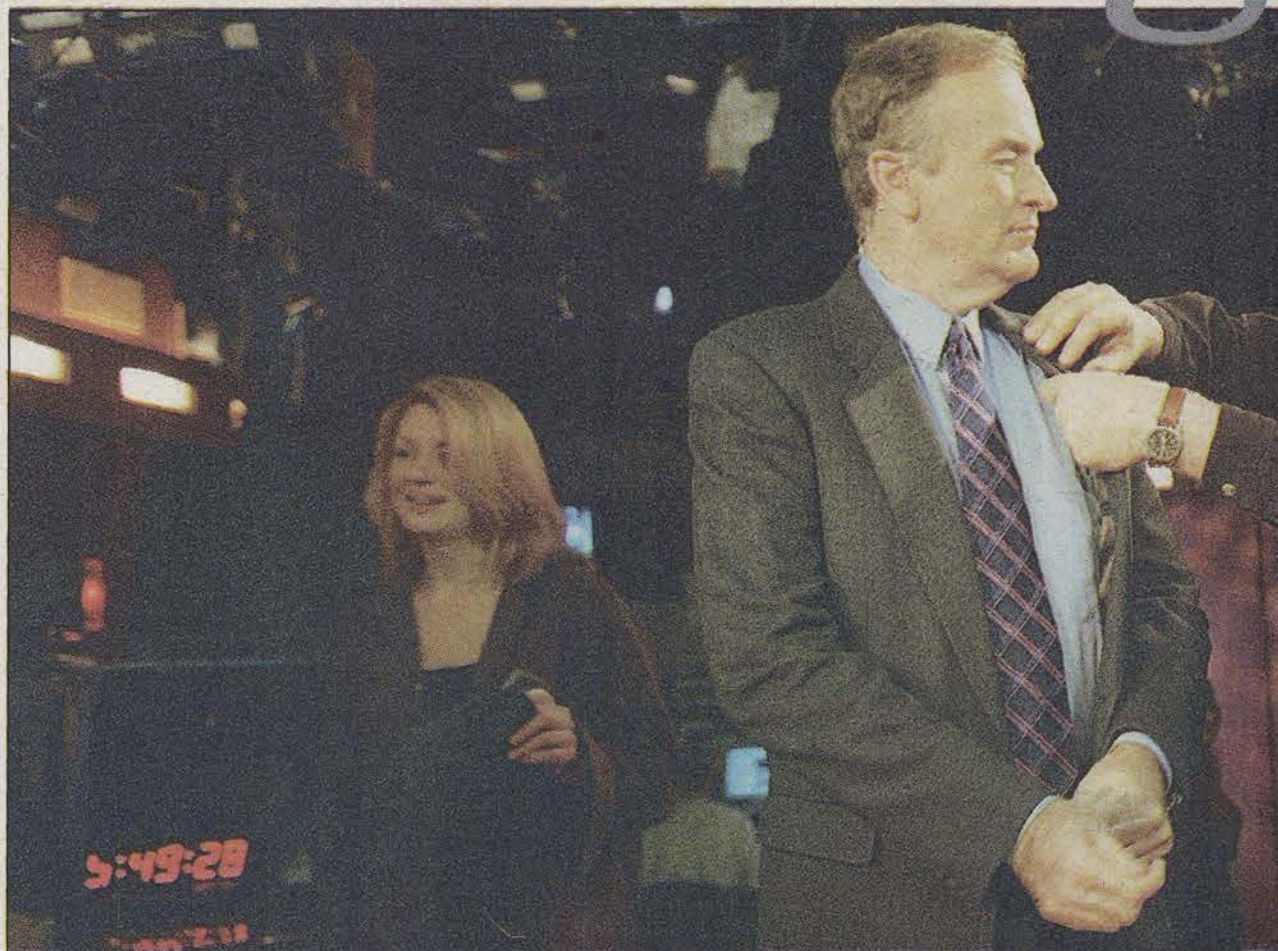
"It's about time my hometown paper has done something on me."

IN THE MELODRAMA of TV news, O'Reilly has cast himself in the role of the bad guy with the good message, a Clint Eastwood with a mike who went through four stations in five years, ticked off many a producer and wouldn't play by the company rules. The rebellious attitude, which O'Reilly, 50, has honed over 25 years in the news business, has him sitting close to the top rung of cable commentators, overtaking Geraldo Rivera and beating or tying Larry King nine out of 23 nights in a recent stretch.

It's a vindication for a guy who prides himself on not kissing the ring of the networks. A guy who prides himself on being obnoxious yet informative, a threat to Ted Turner and CNN. A guy who prides himself on being the only person willing to say something to Morley Safer when the "60 Minutes" icon cut to the front of a long line at the CBS commissary. A guy who begins his book with an anecdote about rebelling against Sister Mary Claudia at St. Brigid's School in Westbury on his second day of first grade.

O'Reilly maps out his rebellious nature along with discussions on class, race, politics and religion in his book, which was the No. 1 seller on Amazon.com earlier this month. The book has received acclaim for its thought-provoking ideas, though a ponderous 40-page section in which O'Reilly lists his dislikes (Charles Manson, "South Park," Al Sharpton, NBA ticket prices) and likes (Wayne Newton, Martha Stewart and Janet Jackson, "a lively performer who seems to understand the meaning of the word melo-

Courting



Bill O'Reilly, host of "The O'Reilly Factor" and author of a best-selling book with the same title, gets miked

dy") seems to have been shoved in the back to give the smallish tome more weight. But the biggest sound you hear from the publishing world is coming from the critics, scratching their heads and wondering where the heck this guy came from.

Critics were baffled that a TV figure with what they thought was a cult audience would be able to sell so many books. But while O'Reilly's take-no-prisoners, take-no-bull attitude has built him a following, he feels it's hampering the book from being as big as he thinks it should be.

"This book is huge," he says, pointing to the jacket cover of himself smiling. "How come I'm not on 'Good Morning America' and the 'Today' show? Am I boring? I got Random House behind me, the biggest [publishing] house in the world, pitching me over there, and they're, like, 'We'll pass.' Where's Oprah's book club? I'm writing this book for working-class Americans, which is what watches her program. How come I'm not sitting next to Oprah? I'll give her a big kiss and I'll bring brownies."

O'Reilly's whines and rants not only make good copy, they're getting him good results. When Newsday called "Good Morning America" to find out why the man with the No. 2 book in the country had yet to be invited on their program, no one would give us an answer. A week later, he was on the show. He played us like a fiddle.

IN HIS 4-YEAR-OLD SHOW, O'Reilly gives time to politicians, celebrities and trendsetters. He'll ask the tough questions, and needle a guest until he gets an answer. But occasionally, O'Reilly will do a feature on an average, working-class American who has accomplished something great. These are the angles that O'Reilly says separate him from the competition.

O'Reilly relates to those everyday men and women by referring to his hometown a lot. The ultimate boomer breeding ground, Levittown is the place where the American Dream can live or die. Where the village green was close enough for the women to walk to while their husbands went to work with the family car. The symbol of the bootstrap-pulling

strength of a nation back from the war. It's about time we had a social commentator from Levittown. The only problem is, O'Reilly isn't from Levittown.

"The Westbury section of Levittown," O'Reilly explains. "For the sake of the national audience, I say Levittown, 'cause I lived in a Levitt house, but it's the Westbury post office." While O'Reilly's gerrymandering is not as severe as, say, Vanilla Ice claiming he was from the 'hood, it says something about the image he is trying to present to the American public — O'Reilly, the average Joe, made good. Now, he's fighting for all the other average Joes out there, telling it like it is.

"We've got two white, rich guys running for president, both of whom I don't know what kind of connection they have with those of us from Levittown," O'Reilly says of the two political candidates. "Those guys talk a good game, but I don't really think they know what's going on down in the trenches."

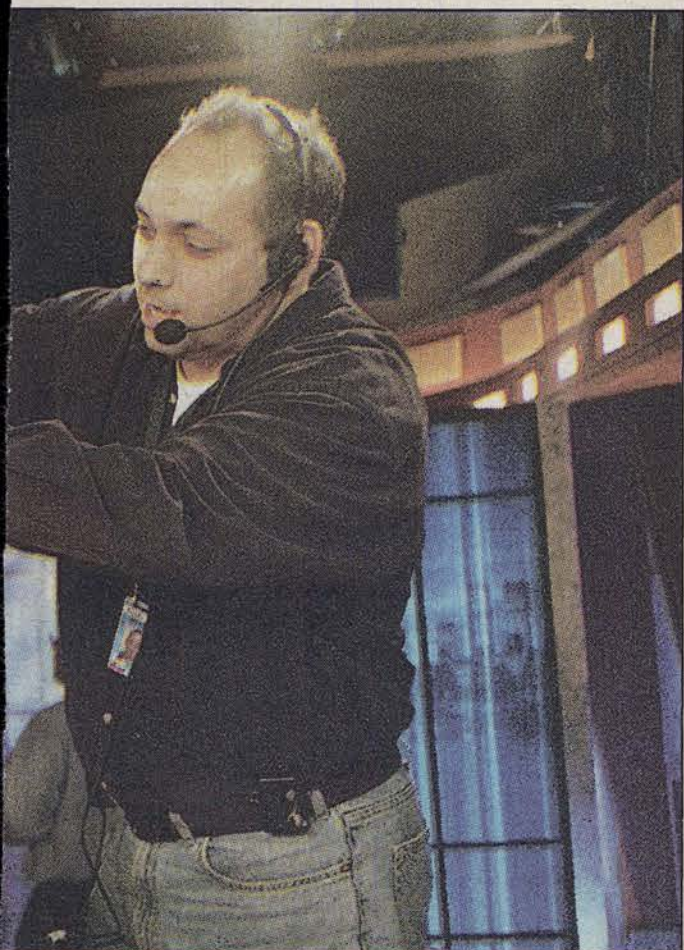
"The media doesn't cover stories about people in Levittown," O'Reilly continues, falling into a rant. "They don't give voices to those people, and I do. And that's why I'm successful. I know what life is like for working Americans, and that separates me from 80 percent of the national journalistic corps, particularly in the role of anchor."

The anchor O'Reilly has in his sights is CNN patriarch Larry King. CNN does not perceive O'Reilly as a threat, with the network's public relations director, Christa Robinson, referring to the nights O'Reilly has beaten King as "blips" in the overall ratings scheme. (Producers at rival CNBC's "Geraldo Rivera Live" refused to be interviewed for this story.)

"Nine out of 23 [nights]? That's a lot of blips," says Bill Shine, Fox News executive producer of prime-time programming. "If I was them, I'd get a better radar. I see [O'Reilly] being No. 1 on the cable news channels without a doubt."

But remember that the ratings are skewed. Besides the fact that the two do not go head to head — O'Reilly is on at 8 p.m.; King, 9 p.m. — there's also the fact that 25 million fewer households have access to Fox News than to CNN, so the ratings are prorated by Nielsen. So the O'Reilly numbers have to be taken with a grain of salt. But that grain

Controversy



Newsday Photo / Bruce Gilbert

of salt is burning the eyes of CNN. Make no mistake, this is turning into a war.

O'REILLY GREW UP in a working-class, Roman Catholic household. After St. Brigid's elementary school, his father enrolled him in Chaminade, the exclusive Catholic High School in Mineola. The school gave O'Reilly his first taste of class distinction.

"I didn't do well in Chaminade," admits O'Reilly. "I was in with a bunch of Garden City rich kids, and the culture gap was huge. I had one sport jacket from Modell's; they had six sport jackets from Saks. And they made fun of my one sport jacket from Modell's, and I punched them in the mouth.

"My father broke his back paying that tuition. He knew I needed discipline and structure, and the school provided that. . . . Where nine out of the 10 parents in Levittown weren't smart enough to know that, and their kids now don't have the master's degrees and are firemen or whatever. Now, there's nothing wrong with that," O'Reilly says emphatically. "In fact, I keep my old friends from the neighborhood [O'Reilly plays quarterback in an intense touch football game every Saturday in the fall with his old friends], and they're cops and firemen and carpenters. And they have good lives, some of them. But they're never gonna break out of their economic circumstance."

Michael Vickery, who grew up with O'Reilly, turned out to be one of those cops. Vickery, 46, an officer in Rockville Centre, still keeps in touch with his old friend, and says O'Reilly hasn't changed much since he was a kid.

"He was always opinionated," says Vickery, who still lives in the Levitt section of Westbury. "Not to the degree that he was annoying, but he was very driven."

"He was take-charge with all the kids," remembers the anchorman's mother, Ann O'Reilly, who still lives in the Westbury house where he grew up. "He was the leader of the gang. Lots of fun. Vivacious. But in Chaminade, he had three hours of homework every night. That sort of clipped his wings."

O'Reilly lived the life you'd expect from a baby boomer on Long Island. He played Little League for Central Nassau. His first job was at the local Carvel. He had his first make-out session at an Annette and Frankie movie at the drive-in. When disco hit, he went with it, referring to himself in his polyester era as a "dancing machine."

AFTER GRADUATING from Marist College, where he played football, O'Reilly took a \$5,000-a-year teaching job at a Catholic high school. He then left teaching for Boston University's master's program in broadcast journalism. For years he kicked around various stations, at one point earning extra money writing gag lines for the local Saturday night monster fest, "Uncle Ted's Ghoul School" in Scranton, Pa.

O'Reilly won two Emmys during his tenure at "Nightline" and at CBS and at the helm of "Inside Edition." The tabloid show, which O'Reilly took over when David Frost quit in the show's first month, was a big success. So what does O'Reilly do? He leaves it to get a degree at Harvard.

"I believe he had intentions of running for political office at one time," Vickery says. (O'Reilly says he wouldn't run for office, "because I have more power here. I can expose more people here. If it changes, with campaign finance reform and the clubhouse breaks down a bit, then I'd look at it.") He has said that he would entertain ideas of running for the Senate in 2006 if Hillary Clinton wins this November.)

At Harvard, O'Reilly was hit with the same class distinctions he found at Chaminade 30 years earlier. It's the class distinctions that O'Reilly consistently comes back to in conversation.

"I'm for everyone in Roosevelt and Malverne and Hempstead, to figure out what's going on here," O'Reilly states when the topic of the class situation on Long Island comes up. "And stop with the whining about my relatives were slaves, 'cause that ain't gonna do you any good. I don't like built-in excuses. I heard that my whole life: You're not good enough, you'll never make it as an anchorman, you'll never do this, you'll never do that. . . . You know, I'll give it my best shot. And I think everyone should do that. No matter what color they are. And they have to understand, it ain't race holding them back anymore, it's class."

The tall, middle-aged white man who now lives on the North Shore of Long Island with a wife and baby is easy to peg as a conservative. But his stance isn't hardline, and he disagrees with many Republican views. "I'm against the death penalty. I'm for big government supervision of pollution control. I believe in reasonable gun control, trigger locks; all those posi-

tions are so far away from the conservative base that I get just as much mail from conservatives calling me a liberal as I do vice versa."

IT'S HIS CONTRADICTIONS, as well as his cockiness and growing power as a bona fide news force, that are making his talk show the one guests might want to avoid if they're not willing to make a big splash. O'Reilly has a very simple way of getting people to answer a question. "Just ask it," he says. If they don't give the answer, he'll ask it again. If they give an answer he knows is untruthful, he's done the research and will call the person on the discrepancy.

When a spokeswoman from the Democratic National Committee said the group did not contribute any money to Hillary Clinton's campaign, O'Reilly says she was hiding behind semantics. She said the DNC gives money to the "contribution campaign."

"Now, look, everybody in the audience saw [it]. Everybody," O'Reilly says. "Now, I don't have to go in with a battering ram and hit the woman again. It's there, that's it. It's like a prize fight — they're down, you go back to your corner. I tell you that most of the time, I don't even let them go down. Most of the time, I hit them, they wobble and I pull them in. 'Cause I'm not a bully."

O'Reilly doesn't go in "with a battery of questions." He knows what his first question is, then after that, he simply plays off the answer. When George W. Bush came on the show, O'Reilly says, his first question was the toughest he's ever asked on "The Factor": "You know you said during the debates that Jesus Christ is your personal philosopher model, I was very impressed with that. But that being said, I don't know if Jesus would be thrilled with all the executions going on in Texas."


Bush stuttered through an answer and O'Reilly set the tone for the rest of the interview. He credits Bush for coming into the studio, but claims this year's two other political heavyweights, Al Gore and Hillary Clinton, won't. "They're flat-out scared to come out. Those two individuals do not want to answer pointed questions, period. Not from the Newsday editorial board. Not from Bill O'Reilly. Not from anybody."

O'Reilly describes his show as a "no-spin zone," and says that the absence of rhetoric and party-line talk frightens the politicians. But he also says he's not out to bite the heads off his guests.

"I don't want to make people look bad on 'The Factor.' Nobody can say 'I won't go on 'The Factor' because of that rude ——— O'Reilly.' I'm not Morton Downey right here. I'm not trying to humiliate someone for my own self-aggrandizement. I can tell you, 80 percent of the time, I can destroy people out there, and I will not do it."

But he won't bake them brownies, either. ■

Bill Jensen is a freelance writer.



How do you feel about Bill O'Reilly? Is he a hero or a heel? Log on to Newsday.com/features to take a poll.



O'Reilly visits his mother, Ann, at the house in Westbury where he grew up.

Newsday Photo / J. Michael Dombroski