

# GROWING UP FOX

BY DAISY PRINCE | AVENUE | APRIL 2016

**Sam Fox is just like you and me**, except that he knows a lot more famous people. As the son of actor Michael J. Fox and his wife, author/actress Tracy Pollan, his encounters with A-listers trickle through his conversation. When Fox mentions his favorite football team (the Jets), he often watches games from the owner's box; when talking about taking the 23andMe genetics test, he knows Anne Wojcicki personally. At a recent hockey game at Madison Square Garden, he chatted to Tom Hanks about the merits of taking the subway. Friendships with celebrities are part of who he is, but it doesn't affect his demeanor, and he is entirely unsnobbish. If there is one thing that does define Sam Fox, it's being part of an extended, clannish family and a dyed-in-the-wool New York City lover. Beyond that, he's that rare find: a decent guy who went to top private schools (Dalton and Friends Seminary), a top college (Stanford, for two years) and now works for an internet start-up (onefinestay.com). He's courteous, kind and down-to-earth. However, in one very important way, Sam is a lot more like me than he might be like you. Both of our fathers have Parkinson's disease. But more on that later.

When I first meet Fox, he's patiently waiting by the door of the Marlton Hotel, checking his phone and dressed in the standard millennial uniform of jeans, a plaid shirt and sneakers. Taller than his dad, his resemblance to his famous father is uncanny, and I have a feeling that one of the banes of his existence must be a constant stream of well-meaning strangers coming up to him and saying, "Do you know who you look just like . . .?" And lots of not very funny Marty McFly jokes.

Although blessedly anonymous for most of his life, there have been moments when the uglier side of fame has reared its head, most notably when Fox was a very young child. A particularly jarring episode occurred when he was with his parents in London, staying in the same hotel as Princess Diana. It was just after *Back to the Future Part III* had come out, and millions of flashbulbs were trained on the family, scaring young Fox out of his wits. "It was just insane with all the press, and I couldn't handle it."

There have been other times when he's been randomly mobbed, once when he was touring colleges in the Midwest at 19 and was ambushed in the airport by a high school girls' soccer team. On another occasion, it happened the week after his appearance at the Golden Globes in 2013, when he was at his previous job for Farmersweb.com, working out a deal with an Upper East Side girls' school. "I was handing out samples of apple butter or something, and one of the girls recognized me, and there was this crazy explosion. I think because they had nothing better to do, and it was after sixth period on a Tuesday," he says lightly, laughing it off.

Fox is more puzzled than perturbed by the attention. He doesn't really understand what the value would be of his photograph on someone's wall and says his father feels the same way. But he is

unquestionably grateful for the access his proximity to fame has given him. He knows that it can help his father's foundation and will walk the red carpet at their annual fundraiser but then go back to living a (relatively) normal life.

Fox is close to both sides of his family. Weekends as a child were spent going to either Connecticut or Vermont with his mother's family, and other holidays with his dad's family in Canada. When he was a little older, due to his father's filming *Spin City*, the family bought a house in Quogue. "I grew up with all of my cousins, 10 or 12 of us, and I'm still very close with all of them and my aunts and uncles." (One of his uncles is renowned food writer Michael Pollan, now a professor at Berkeley, whom Fox used to visit when he was attending Stanford.) Michael J. Fox has four siblings, and Tracy Pollan is one of three. And Sam has three sisters himself: twins Aquinnah Kathleen and Schuyler Frances, who are 20, and Esmé Annabelle, 14. Growing up in such an extended clan meant lots of support, and so Fox wasn't burdened by some of the pressures that come with being a child of famous parents.

In his own friendships, he'll admit that his parents were "interesting to people for maybe 5 to 10 minutes" before moving on.

"I make the most of the opportunities I have, either fun, social things or being involved in the foundation to do good," he says. Fox is very involved with the Michael J. Fox Foundation and particularly with Team Fox, the grassroots community fundraising section, and has been since he stuffed donation envelopes for them in high school. "I think a lot of other foundations are learning from us and coming up with outreach programs like it. It's a way for everybody to contribute something to the cause. No matter the amount of money, you can come together to find a few people to raise a couple of dollars." Team Fox also has a group running in the New York City Marathon, which Sam has never run. He says he is "not the most athletic person," but is happy to cheer on the members of Team Fox who complete their goals. "My mom and sisters and I are always there with lemonade at the home stretch."

As one of the members of the Leadership Council of the Michael J. Fox Foundation I've always been impressed by how much the foundation does to support members of Team Fox. They have just launched a new extreme sports initiative, Tour de Fox which is a three month physical odyssey undertaken by one of the foundation's employees, also coincidentally named Sam Fox (no relation). Equally as impressive in a different way is the gala, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Cure Parkinson's." More than \$5 million is raised on the night.

Fox comes every year to "A Funny Thing" fundraiser and, as he has a passion for good music, probably always will. We rhapsodize for a while about what a good party "A Funny Thing" is. The program is just the right length of time, with good food and drink, but most important, incredible entertainment. The come-

dians go always go on first, and in the years I've attended they've had: Denis Leary, Louis C.K., Colin Quinn, Seth Meyers and Tina Fey. The musical line up is even more impressive: Elvis Costello, James Taylor, Chris Martin, Lauryn Hill and Paul Simon. Oh, and sometimes Ryan Reynolds stops by because he's famous and handsome and his father has PD. But the thing that always brings the house down is when Michael J. Fox grabs the guitar and sings "Johnny B. Goode" to a screaming crowd.

"A Funny Thing" is where Michael J. Fox's celebrity connections do make a difference. Sam notes, "You don't know who's going to come until 20 minutes before. You wonder if you are going to have a musical guest at all and all of a sudden Dad is like, 'Oh, hey I just got off the phone with . . .'" And Paul Simon turns up and plays to a sold-out crowd.

Fox doesn't remember when his father didn't have PD. He used to call him "Shaky Dad" as a child, in reference to his father's difficulties controlling his dyskinesia—or trouble performing voluntary movements, which often occurs as a side effect of longterm therapy with Levodopa.

In many ways, Fox is an old soul, less inclined to be out partying than someone else the same age might. His two nods to any kind of rebellion are the fact that Fox has a tattoo of a ham on his lower arm, ("I know, a ham, pretty funny for a Jewish boy") a symbolic gesture for a friend who died, and an earring. It turns out that the earring has been around since he was 11 or 12, when Fox managed to cajole his parents into letting him get one in exchange for a trip to the doctor he didn't want to make. "It was very arbitrary because I had wanted one for a while. At that time, my dad had his ear pierced anyway, so it wasn't like they could really say no."

He said in terms of strictness, his upbringing was right down the middle of the road. As you might expect from someone who got into Stanford, Fox worked incredibly hard as a teenager—his parents were always trying to get him to go out, and neither he nor his sisters had curfews, because they didn't take advantage of their parents' trust. If this sounds like Fox is an introvert, that's not the case; he's actually pretty outgoing and has a natural charisma that he seems to have inherited from his father.

The other aspect of his character that Michael J. Fox has passed on to his son is his positive attitude to life. "Be in the moment: that's his whole thing, his optimism and not being personally affected by the disease whatever your circumstances, not letting it affect how you go through life." Although Fox seems generally upbeat about his father's disease and life in general, there is no question that having a parent with a debilitating illness changes your outlook on life.

Fox is unafraid to face his future, and to that end has bravely taken the genetic test 23andMe to find out if he has genetic changes that would increase his risk of developing Parkinson's. He doesn't. He is also the only one in his family to have taken the test. As someone who is certainly at risk for developing the disease herself (and who also hasn't taken the test), I'm impressed at Fox's courage. Wasn't he terrified to find out the results?

"Part of what I get very strongly from my dad is just not worrying about the things that worrying isn't going to help. He tries to

teach that as his mindset but if it's not your mindset it's very hard to wrap your head around. My sisters, my mom, are optimists too, but they are not the same kind of roll-with-the-punches optimists that my dad and I are. Luckily, I haven't had too many punches."

In most respects, Fox comes off as a fairly carefree guy. MJFF board member and family friend Barry Cohen is certainly a fan. "My kids grew up with the Foxes in the same Manhattan building. Sam quickly became part of our family. Sam is now a Renaissance man, but before that he was a Renaissance boy. We've been to Carnegie Hall and the Philharmonic together. We've been to see the Who and John Mayer. Sam introduced me to ski biking, and he knows way more about food than I ever will."

Fox's interest in food led him to drop out of Stanford to work for Farmersweb.com, an online company that connects farmers directly to restaurants and is very much in line with the popular farm-to-table movement. He has since transitioned to a new job in the online world called onefinestay. An upmarket home-stay company, Onefinestay was founded in London and is just expanding into New York. The company finds hosts who want to let out their homes when they are out of town, and onefinestay applies a hotel-like, high-end level of assistance. For the guests it's a turn-down service, and for the hosts it's turn-key. Unlike similar companies, every guest is met in person by someone from onefinestay who walks them through the apartment and makes sure they understand how everything works. The personal greeting is also a guarantee against some of the, ahem—shall we say—unsavory elements that seem to have plagued the home-stay industry.

Fox came on board a year and a half ago working in sales. His colleague, Erin Booth, sings his praises: "Sam was our one-man sales team in a period of high growth for the New York business, meeting with and signing over half of our portfolio. He has a really great way with people and a natural ability to make connections."

Fox has now slurped down his second cup of coffee and paradoxically, after all that caffeine, seems more relaxed and more like the 25-year-old he is.

We return to his love of music, and Fox even shyly admits to playing bass and guitar. At his summer camp in Vermont, Camp Killlooleet, run by Pete Seeger's brother, John, Fox was in the band.

He teases me for not knowing who Pete Seeger is: "Banjo player, probably one of the most famous folk musicians ever," he says. We also have the ubiquitous social media conversation, and it turns out that there are Sam Foxes far more famous than he is. He gets tweets aimed at them sometimes, like the one he got from Boy George that was meant for the singer Samantha Fox, thanking her for her support of the LGBT cause. "I wanted to say, 'thanks, you're welcome, but not the same one.'"

As it happens Fox has a newish girlfriend, called Nora, whose parents live in England and whose dad is the dean of Oxford University's Saïd Business School. His face lights up when he talks about her: it must be serious. As we wind our talk down, I can't help thinking that if I do end up raising my two little boys in New York City, they could do a lot worse than turning out as normal as Sam Fox.

*To find out more about the Michael J. Fox Foundation and Parkinson's Research please go to [Michaeljfox.org](http://Michaeljfox.org)*