



BILL MORRIS

By Terence Loose
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This 56 – (going on 36)-year-old Newport Beach resident talks about how to get teens fit, focused and firing on all cylinders in pursuit of their goals.

Sit in a room with Newport Beach's Bill Morris for 10 minutes and it's hard to believe he's failed at anything. But, says the lean, teen motivating machine, it's his failures that have gotten him this far, which is far, by the way. Morris, with a Martin Scorsese rapid-fire delivery and tone that has only been slightly mellowed from his four years on the left coast, has a resume as eclectic as it is impressive. And, armed only with it and an uncompromising goal to help kids find success and happiness, he speaks to teens around the country. "It's all about the kids," he says.

But it wasn't always that way. First recruited by Exxon immediately after he graduated Manhattan College with an MBA in international business, he quickly proved himself and garnered four promotions in five years. By his 32nd birthday, he was international controller of Kidder Peabody, responsible for all financial activities in London, Paris, Geneva, Zurich, Hong

Kong, and Tokyo. From there, he only climbed higher, to occupy a CEO chair for a Wall Street company. But though Morris has spent most of his business years on Wall Street, he insists he's not about the money.

Consider the less-slick-suited side of Morris, who is anything if not well-rounded. He's the reigning sit-up world record holder for one (the 11-hour feat was recognized by the *Guinness Book of World Records*, but not listed in the book because it was considered life threatening since he took no breaks). He's also trained professional athletes and rubbed social elbows with some of the NBA and MLB's biggest names. Sounds tough, and Morris is. But again, there's another side. Ask him who his hero is. "Mother Teresa," he says. When Regis Filbin and Kathy Lee Gifford wanted him on their show, he refused unless he could bring Make A Wish Foundation representatives. The guy volunteers at soup kitchens.

Morris' strongest passion for the past decade, however, has been Success4Teens, his self-designed motivational program aimed at teens. He speaks to any high school that asks – for free. "I make enough money from my corporate speaking and consulting. But don't tell them that," he says with a laugh. His goal is simply to give every teen the tools to become a healthier, happier person. It's a lofty one, but so was 20,000 sit-ups.

So what possessed you to become the sit-up king?

It all began when I saw something on TV for the Make A Wish Foundation, an organization that grants terminally ill children their last wish. I felt so blessed that my two kids were healthy that I became determined to do something to raise money for Make A Wish. Originally, I was going to do a pushup and sit-up contest against the New York Giants. I thought we'll do 500 pushups, 500 sit-ups. They said, "no way, we can't do that many." So I created a "sit-up-a-thon" and went to the owner of my company and asked him to donate a dollar for every sit-up I did. This was my first year, so I did 5,000.

Did you fear you wouldn't be able to do them?

No. I knew I could do it because I've been into fitness my whole life and had set a personal goal of doing 3,500 sit-ups on my 35th birthday. So it worked out great because ABC, NBC and CBS covered it.

Did you enjoy the limelight?

No, I didn't do it for the personal attention. Besides, I think what I did was close to a circus act, a cut above flag pole sitting. The main thing was to raise awareness for Make A Wish, one of the finest organizations out there. Ninety-two cents of every dollar goes to the kids.

So that led you to 20,000 sit-ups?

Not quite, but it was a great way to raise money for the kids, so the next year I did 10,000, then 15,000, then 20,000. I did 25,000 the fifth year, but I don't count that because I took bathroom breaks.

How much money did you raise?

We raised well over \$150,000 because I got other people to do sit-ups with me and they'd get pledges. One guy, for instance, did only a few thousand sit-ups but he got so many pledges from people on the street he raised over \$50,000.

Is that what got you interested in reaching out to all teens?

Sort of. After the 20,000 sit-ups, I got a call from a high school teacher who wanted me to talk to the kids about fitness. I was the 56th person –the Mets, Jets and Giants all came in before me –but she told me the kids paid more attention to me than anyone prior. I'm sure she told that to everyone, but naively, I believed her and decided I could do something really positive for these kids.

That was just fitness, though?

Yes, and I realized that I was only speaking to about five percent of the kids, the athletes who wanted to take it to another level. They were already motivated. And I realized that five percent wasn't the faction I wanted to reach. I wanted to reach the other 95% that were just regular kids searching for direction. So I took the same principles I used to accomplish goals on the field or in the gym and applied them to Success4Teens. The program shows teens how to set their goals, how to deal with setbacks, how to create a positive mental attitude, how to build self esteem and self confidence.

What personal experiences do you draw upon?

Many. One story I usually tell is about my high school years. In my high school they ranked us, publicly. There were 225 kids and they'd post your average and your rank. So, freshman year, I went to the wall to check, and I'm going down the list, starting to crouch down, down. I was 164. It hit hard, but then I realized that I really wasn't any smarter or dumber than any of the others, it was just an effort issue. I became really focused on turning it around, and in the end, I graduated seventh in my class.

What does that say?

It illustrates one of my fundamental principles. Setbacks should be embraced as an opportunity to learn. I'll journal out what I have to do to get to the next level. Then I'll fall again up there and use that to take it higher. It's a stair step sort of paradigm. And the kids really identify with that because we all have many more setbacks than we do successes. Which is why I always say, if you want more successes, fail more.

Do you really believe that?

Well, I know the one thing I remember from the Michael Jordan movie is his saying, "I've missed over 9,000 shots."

What's the number one hurdle kids today have?

TV is one of the major drawbacks to kids achieving their goals, because they're watching someone else's goals and objectives coming true while their own are dormant. Then there's the

video games, the fast food. I hope I don't sound like my father but it just frightens me the amount of roadblocks that kids are faced with on a daily basis.

Why is fitness such an important part of your message?

Because it secures most kids' self-esteem and self-confidence. When a teen is very overweight they're really stripped of any ability to believe in themselves. I don't take it to the extreme, but staying healthy and believing in themselves is one of the starting blocks.

And nutrition?

Nutrition of course goes hand in hand with that. Plus, eating right is vital to energy levels, which is in turn vital to learning. Like I say, "You can't run a Ferrari on regular."

A PMA or positive mental attitude is an important aspect of Success4Teens.

Right. There's a saying that sums that up: Those who say it can't be done are usually interrupted by others doing it.

How about sports stars –some who are your friends –as role models?

Professional sports is kind of a hot button for me. On one hand, I've known some great people who happen to be great athletes. Charles Barkley, for instance. I worked with the Knicks for a while and got to know Charles. At the time I was heavily involved with Make A Wish Foundation and wanted to fulfill a particular boy's wish. He was bedridden in the hospital and his room was a shrine to Charles, who was his hero. That year the Knicks were in the play-offs and Charles had a game on Thursday and on Saturday, and he gave the kid his Friday. Charles' one request was there be no press, he wasn't in it for that. So we drove to the hospital together and Charles sat and talked with the kid for hours.

But...

But the glamour of professional sports is dangerously alluring. Especially when I visit inner cities, all the kids talk about is basketball and boxing. They see that as their way out. My job is to convince them a good education is their best shot, that sport is just the icing on the cake. Because they really don't understand the incredible odds against them. I like that they have hope, but I think it's mis-steered. They're watching Shaquille O'Neil on TV with his billion dollar house and 48 cars.

You speak to all types of kids, though.

Right. This year I spoke to a group of high school presidents, at Stanford. I spoke to foster home kids, halfway home teens, and teens who are incarcerated. A lot of people ask if it's easier to talk to kids in the inner city or kids from wealth. To me they're all the same; they all have hope and are battling the same issues. In fact, sometimes kids coming from wealthy families are harder, because their parents have set the bar so high they don't see any point in trying. But sometimes, for the kids in the inner city, the bar's lower, so any kind of jump, they look like a hero.

Do you insist they formulate a goal?

Not specifically. I motivated them to be a good person and like and respect themselves. More goods things will come from that than anything. One of the things I tell people is I know more unhappy millionaires than you can shake a stick at. Don't think that money is what we're talking about here. Now, money is a wonderful thing and if you look at my resume you might say well, he sure went down the route of capitalism, but really, money is just a tool to get you somewhere else. So I hope that I show them a better way to live and to love themselves. The other stuff will follow naturally.

What's your life motto?

Learn, earn and return.

Check out the Success4Teens' website at www.success4teens.com.