

fanfare

20 YEARS AFTER
HIS DEATH,
A LOOK BACK
AT LI'S
BOB KEESHAN,
AKA
CAPTAIN KANGAROO



Remembering a TV icon

C4

'HE WAS JUST DAD'

Remembering Bob Keeshan, the LI family man known on TV as Captain Kangaroo, who died 20 years ago this week

BY VERNE GAY

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The house on Melbury Road in Babylon hasn't changed all that much over the years, at least on the outside, if you go by the pictures on social media. The handsome redbrick Williamsburg Colonial with a decorated crown over the front door is still there, along with the four dormer windows on the second floor which catch the first rays of the rising sun to the east.

For most of the time Bob Keeshan lived there, from 1958 to 1990, he probably didn't see that early sun often. He was already on the 4:20 a.m. out of Babylon to Penn Station, a routine he performed day after day, year after year. He never missed a day, or a train, or a broadcast. Keeshan — Captain Kangaroo — was a man of steady habits.

Beloved by millions of children (and their children), Keeshan was the patriarch — “star” doesn't seem like quite the right word — of a morning show that aired on CBS for nearly 30 years, from 1955 to 1984, and for another six on public TV. Over much of that run, Captain Kangaroo was as renowned as Fred Rogers, or Big Bird, and along with Walter Cronkite and Lucille Ball, the reigning

symbol of a network that once carried the prefix “Tiffany.”

But around Babylon, he was just Bob, husband of Jeanne, parents to Michael, Laurie and Maeve. When Keeshan died at the age of 76 two decades ago this week (Jan. 23, 2004), his son Michael said in a statement that “he was largely a private man living an often public life as an advocate for all that our nation's children deserve.”

'LEADING A PRIVATE LIFE'

Keeshan himself explained in his 1989 autobiography, “Growing Up Happy,” that “home was for me the place reserved for family life. I like to leave it all behind.”

“I enjoy leading a private life not only because I am by nature a private person but because it affords my children and grandchildren an opportu-

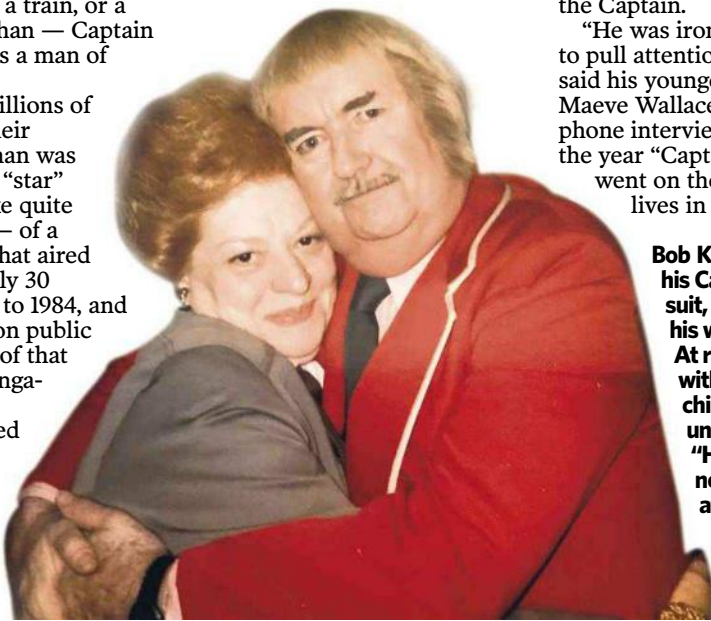
nity to live a conventional life.”

And Keeshan as well. At the Melbury Road house, he loved to barbecue, and work in his vegetable garden. On weekends, he taught his children to sail on the Great South Bay, or he performed administrative duties for the Long Island Yacht Club, which perhaps explains the nautical bearing of his alter ego. (The club closed in 2015.) For many years, he was also a director on a dozen boards around Babylon, including Good Samaritan Hospital in West Islip.

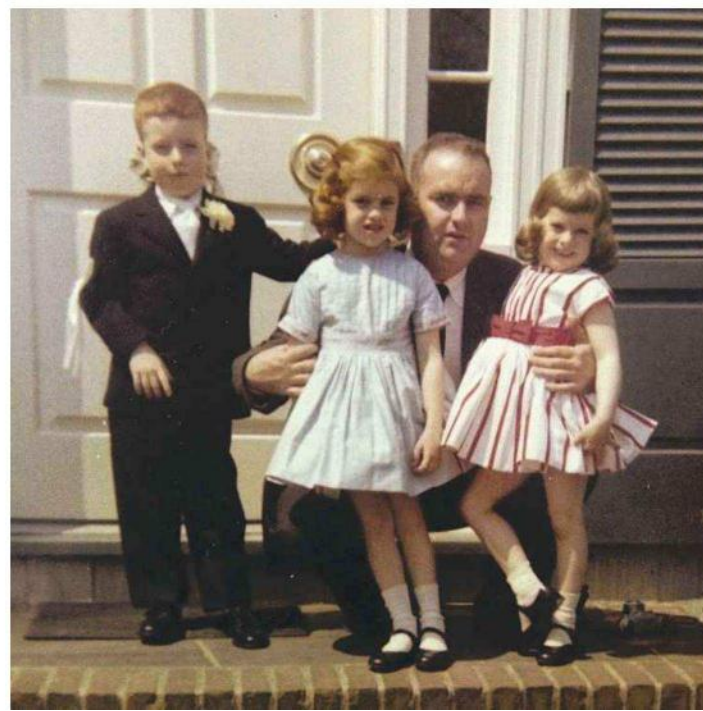
There are few remaining vestiges of Babylon's most famous son, which include an unobtrusive plaque that hangs in the Babylon Historical and Preservation Society. About 15 years ago, someone also placed a wooden statue of Keeshan on the society's steps, according to Judy Skillen, the Society's president. A member restored the foundling, which for years had been sitting unobtrusively on a park bench across from town hall. Skillen says the society hopes to buy a “love seat or settee” for the statue so patrons can take selfies with the Captain.

“He was ironically never one to pull attention to himself,” said his youngest daughter, Maeve Wallace, in a recent phone interview. She was born the year “Captain Kangaroo” went on the air and now lives in Indiana. “He

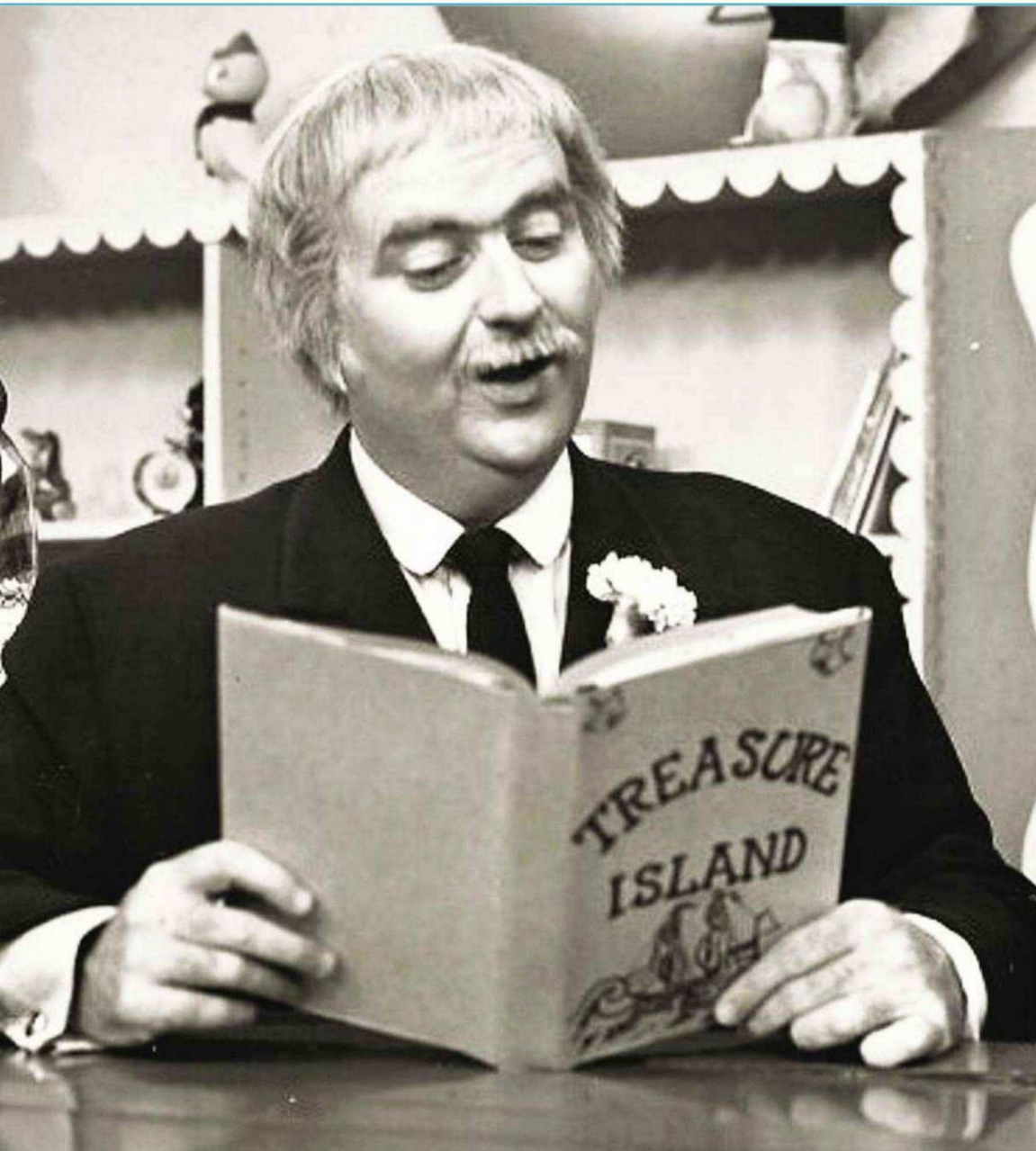
Bob Keeshan, wearing his Captain Kangaroo suit, gets a hug from his wife, Jeanne, left. At right, Keeshan with his three children in an undated photo. “He was ironically never one to pull attention to himself,” said his youngest daughter, Maeve Wallace.



KEESHAN FAMILY



KEESHAN FAMILY



ALAMY STOCK



Fanfare

MORGAN CAMPBELL

The former Keeshan home on Melbury Road in Babylon. Bob Keeshan would take the 4:20 a.m. to Penn Station to do "Captain Kangaroo."

quietly did what he thought was the right thing to do without expecting anything in return, which speaks more to his character than all the plaques out there."

HIS KIDS GREW UP 'NORMAL'

His eldest daughter, Laurie Sullivan, who lives in St. Louis said, "The best part of growing up for us, fortunately, was that it was a very normal upbringing. He wasn't the big celebrity in town. He was just dad." (Their brother, Michael, died in 2012.)

This 20th anniversary arrives at a brittle, divisive moment in American life — not that Keeshan or his beloved Babylon were inoculated from such moments. Over the long course of his show, there was the battle over civil rights, three assassinations and the war in Vietnam. To all of this, Keeshan offered a simple

prescription for the future. The title of that autobiography, "Growing Up Happy," didn't refer to his own upbringing, but instead to the need of children everywhere for love, respect, support and safety. That began at home. It also began on TV, or should have.

In time, Keeshan also became an outspoken critic of a medium that too often failed its youngest viewers. He testified at least a dozen times before Congress about children's literacy, televised violence and the epidemic of unsafe marketing practices to children, particularly tobacco. His own local civic engagement from the early 1950s consistently emphasized education and children's health. He continued that advocacy for years beyond retirement when he and Jeanne left for Vermont, where he became a fundraiser and booster for the

Hugh Brannum, left, as Mr. Green Jeans, and Bob Keeshan as Captain Kangaroo on their CBS kids' show around 1960.

Children's Hospital at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center across the border in New Hampshire.

His family now says that charity always began at home for Keeshan. They say he lived two entirely separate but related lives, one private the other public. Each emphasized civic engagement, but also the vital importance of creativity and faith — both in oneself and in community. Yet both personas were so distinct that his own children, then grandchildren, didn't even know what he did for a living until they were older.

To them he was "dad," or "granddad," they say.

Wallace recalls that as a child she and her siblings

visited a Captain Kangaroo event at Radio City Music Hall. Afterward, Keeshan — out of costume — met them. "Daddy, daddy," his daughter said. "You just missed Captain Kangaroo!"

"Our parents worked very hard at instilling in us a sense that 'You're just normal kids going to school, and have to feed the dog and take out the trash and do your chores around the house.' It was never 'You're the daughter of a famous person,'" she says. "They also instilled in us a sense that you 'give back.' At 13, I volunteered at Good Samaritan as a candy striper and that gave me a perspective that I wasn't in this world in a vacuum. It built a real sense of respect for other people and a sense of just how lucky I was."

'A HUGE INSPIRATION'

Keeshan's grandson, Britton Keeshan, 42, who is now a pediatric interventional cardiologist at Yale School of Medicine and at New Haven Health in Connecticut, says that "My grandfather was a huge inspiration for all of my family's lives, but he's impacted our trajectories in different ways.

"I remember him probably the same way [viewers] remember him from television, as someone who believed in creativity and imagination, but his ethos really translated for me in terms of helping kids. I was going to be either a teacher or doctor."

When Britton Keeshan was 22 and just out of college, he set out to climb the highest mountain on each continent, which he accomplished in 2004, briefly holding the record as the youngest person

5 things you may not have known about 'Captain Kangaroo'

1 "Captain Kangaroo" premiered Oct. 3, 1955, the same day as that other boomer TV fave, "The Mickey Mouse Club."

2 Guests who appeared on the show over the years included basketball's Earl "The Pearl" Monroe, Carol Channing and Marlo Thomas. In the early 1980s, Bill Cosby was a semiregular.

3 A popular urban legend said that rock musician Frank Zappa was the son of Hugh Brannum, the actor who played Mr. Green Jeans, the Captain's sidekick. It was based on Zappa writing a composition named "Mr. Green Genes" on his album "Uncle Meat" and a sequel, "Son of Mr. Green Genes," on his album "Hot Rats."

4 "Captain Kangaroo" remains the longest-running children's series on U.S. commercial television. (PBS/HBO's "Sesame Street" holds the record for longest-running show overall.)

5 The show's memorable theme song was titled "Puffin' Billy," and was purchased from a British stock music production library.

— ANDY EDELSTEIN

See KEESHAN on C6

Remembering the Captain

KEESHAN from C5

to have ever climbed all seven. On the top of Mt. Everest, he left a picture of his grandfather who had recently died.

BORN IN LYNBROOK

Bob Keeshan's Long Island ties ran deep. He was born June 27, 1927, in Lynbrook, third son of Joseph, who ran a string of small supermarkets throughout Long Island, and Margaret, a homemaker. When the stores were sold to a West Coast chain, his father was laid off and the family moved to Forest Hills. A couple of years later, in 1943, his mother died after suffering a coronary thrombosis. (Keeshan himself would be stricken with a near fatal heart attack in 1981.) He later wrote, "I don't think I ever got over her death."

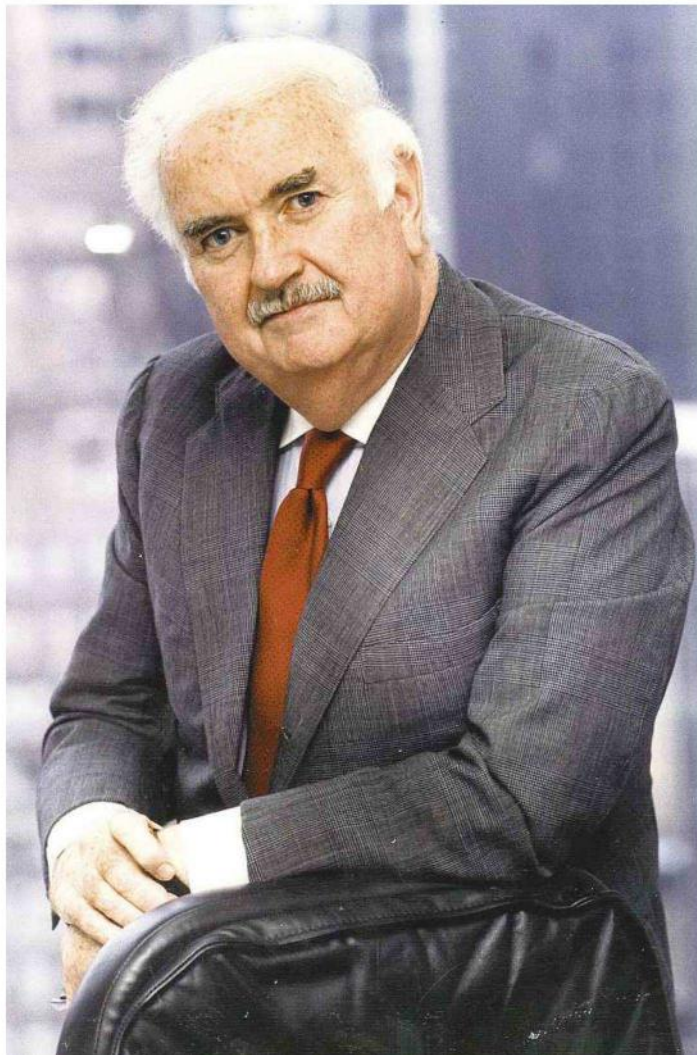
While going to high school, he got a job as a page at NBC's 30 Rockefeller Plaza, then enlisted in the Marines. World War II ended before he was sent into combat, and later, while studying law at Fordham, he landed a job as assistant to NBC's emerging afternoon kid's star, "Buffalo" Bob Smith.

Smith's afternoon show, "Puppet Playhouse," would soon become "The Howdy Doody Show" — one of the most popular and influential programs of the early network TV era. Keeshan played Clara-bell the Clown, Smith's popular sidekick.

Keeshan rode the show to stardom, then a few years in, he and a handful of other key staff members were forced off the show after they got in a labor dispute with the prickly Smith. Keeshan later said he left with a few valuable lessons that he'd one day apply to his own show. Foremost, he decided it was important never to talk down to children through the medium of TV, but rather talk with them. Years later on "Captain Kangaroo," he refused to have a studio audience — then a staple of children's TV thanks to "Howdy Doody's" famed "peanut gallery" audience — because he believed it made viewers at home feel like outsiders looking in.

"It's important to relate to children in a serious way," he wrote. "From birth."

By the early '50s, Keeshan was back on TV, playing Corny



Ron Thomson, of Amityville, carved the statue, above, at the Village of Babylon Historical and Preservation Society. At left, Bob Keeshan at his West 57th Street office in 1987. Below, the Keeshans' grave in Bablyon.



the Clown for a local Ch. 7 show, and he was also back on Long Island, commuting first from Levittown, then West Islip where the family had moved in 1953.

When he first arrived in town he decided "in my wisdom I would also seek a non-paying job and placed my name before the voters of my Long Island school district and sought a place on the Board of Education."

Because the school district was growing rapidly, Keeshan reasoned that "our children would add to the burden of what used to be a small school district. We wanted careful planning to provide for the education of those who would later be known as Baby Boomers."

After he was elected "to the school board by a huge margin of six votes," he wrote in "Growing Up Happy," "a long-

time rather distraught resident of the district ran up the aisle of the crowded auditorium announcing, 'My God . . . they've elected a clown to the school board.'"

Keeshan left Corny and local TV behind for good on Oct. 3, 1955, when he launched his own show, based in part on another one he'd hosted for Ch. 7 called "Tinker's Playhouse." Each weekday morning at 8 sharp, Captain Kangaroo — a courtly, grandfatherly Keeshan wearing a coat with oversized pockets, hence the "kangaroo" — unlocked a magical place called The Treasure House with the help of a drowsy Grandfather Clock. The Captain had on-screen support from the friendly farmer Mr. Green Jeans' (Hugh Brannum, a former big band member) and off-screen support from puppeteer Cosmo "Gus" Allegretti who estab-

lished popular characters like Bunny Rabbit, Dancing Bear and Mr. Moose.

The show included lots of music, reading and cartoons, too. Keeshan stripped some of those of violent, racist and antisemitic imagery, telling the West Islip Board of Education in 1958 that children's TV was "filled with bigotry, animal cruelty, racial prejudices and antisemitism."

REVOLUTIONARY FOR ITS TIME

"Captain Kangaroo" was a simple and revolutionary idea for the time, or as the host himself later wrote, this "was a show for children that are intelligent and potentially of good taste," while the fundamental concept behind it was "to make that one child at home know that he or she is unique, special and is valued."

As the show grew in popularity and prestige, Keeshan

and his wife made certain that life on Melbury Road proceeded as if nothing had changed, according to their daughters. Sullivan recalls that "My mom and dad were very good friends with Roger and Kate Healy who lived in Bay Shore, and they had a very large boat, and on Friday nights, we'd all go over to Kismet on Fire Island." Her father also had "a great vegetable garden where he grew broccoli, peppers and cauliflower."

She says that along with his various civic duties, he wrote and published children's books, which he read to his own grandchildren, and also acted out scenes from one called "There's an Alligator in the Basement." These impromptu performances — where he'd go into the basement then pretend an alligator was lurking behind the washing machine — were great hits, she recalls.

Meanwhile, his TV renown was literally hidden out of sight. The Peabody Awards ("Captain Kangaroo" won three) and Emmys (five) were stored in closets. There was never any shoptalk, says Sullivan, but there was the occasional call from a fellow children's host.

"He and Fred Rogers were very good friends and they held very similar beliefs about programming for children," Sullivan says. "Every New Year's Day, every year, one or the other would call and I remember picking up the phone one year and the voice on the other end said, 'Hi, this is Fred Rogers,' and I said, 'Yeah, right.'"

In 1984, CBS eased "Captain Kangaroo" off the air to make room for an expanded version of its morning news program, then by 1990, Keeshan and Jeanne (who died in 1996) left for Vermont. Both are buried in Babylon's St. Josephs Cemetery.

"He was a wonderful grandfather to his six grandchildren, and a wonderful father," says his daughter Maeve. "The wisdom he gave to all of us was to just be kind and respectful to other people. 'Nobody is better than you are. Just be kind to others.'

"That's just who he was."

VILLAGE OF BABYLON HISTORICAL AND PRESERVATION SOCIETY

NEWSDAY / SUSAN GILBERT

TERRENCE KALINER