



# Meteorologist: Joel Bartlett



**Class of 2003**  
*Silver Circle Profile*  
By: Kevin Wing



How can a shipwreck change the course of someone's life? Just ask **Joel Bartlett**.

"I never dreamed of being a weatherman," says the always-polite, ever-friendly Bartlett. "I knew what a cloud was, but that was about the extent of it."

It was a sailing trip off the coast of the Bay Area that would change Bartlett's life forever.

The year was 1974. Bartlett was 33, living in Marin County and into his sixth year as a staff meteorologist for PG&E. Outside of work, Bartlett and a friend took a keen interest in sailing. The two of them purchased a sailboat, eventually becoming members of San Francisco's Golden Gate Yacht Club.

"My friend and I did a lot of sailing, and we used to race our boat on Friday nights," he explains.

One evening, the friends set out for sail on the Pacific Ocean, just off San Francisco. They ventured out despite a weather forecast that called for inclement weather.

For them, it became a very stormy situation, to say the least.

"We got caught in a storm," Bartlett recalls. "The boat washed up on some rocks, and we were shipwrecked."

They made it safely back to shore. The next day, Bartlett and his friend were front page news. A newspaper reporter interviewed them, took a photograph of their broken vessel and put them on the front page of the *San Francisco Examiner*.

"The whole ordeal was incredible," Bartlett says. "Because of our horrible experience, all of the area yacht clubs were calling, asking if I would talk about this wreck, and talk about the weather, with yacht club members."

One of them was the Tiburon Yacht Club.

Bartlett went to Tiburon to speak about his experience. In the audience, listening intently, was a man named **Bill Hillier**, who was then the programming manager for KPIX Channel 5 in San Francisco.

When Bartlett finished his presentation, Hillier walked up to him to ask if he ever considered taking his meteorology background to the world of local television news.

At that time, KPIX needed to hire a weekend meteorologist.

"Bill said that the station wanted to hire a meteorologist instead of a personality," Bartlett says.

He went in for an interview and an audition. Before long, it was time to say farewell to PG&E and hello to a new career on television. Bartlett was offered the weekend weather job.

"I was given a 13-week contract," Bartlett says. "I left a very secure job with PG&E."

His 13-week contract ultimately became a 31-year career on Bay Area television.

Remember the sailboat mishap? Bartlett ponders what would have happened had the shipwreck never occurred. He admits life probably would have been a lot different and "not as much fun."

It has been six years since Bartlett retired from Bay Area television as one of the region's most beloved weathercasters. Now 71, he shows no signs of slowing down.

In the last two weeks, the Emmy® Award-winning Bartlett, who was inducted into the distinguished *Silver Circle* of the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in 2003, has been a busy man. In late June, he and **Sahar**, his bride of 18 months, moved from Marin County – where Bartlett has called home since moving to California from his native Virginia in 1968 – to Santa Rosa, where they purchased a horse ranch. At press time, they were still living out of moving boxes as they were getting settled into their new home.

Busy? No kidding. A week ago, Bartlett left home for a few days for a marlin fishing competition off Baja California, something he enjoys with a passion. It is the kind of competition, however, to which the marlin is caught and released back into the ocean.

After several days out of town, Bartlett returned home to help his wife settle into their new home. Matching their love of horses, the couple's new ranch is perfect for them.

"I love nature and animals, and everything, ever

*continued on page 15*



since growing up in Virginia," he says. *continued from page 14*

Born in 1941, Bartlett was raised in Arlington, Virginia. In 1962, he graduated from Virginia Tech University with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering. He joined the ROTC, then entered the U.S. Air Force, where he was eventually commissioned a second lieutenant. While in the Air Force, his superior officers told Bartlett that they wanted him to be a weatherman.

"I thought, hey, what would that be like? Every pilot needs to get a weather briefing," Bartlett says. They wanted someone with a math and science background, which he had.

He soon found out how much he loved meteorology.

"I enjoyed it more than engineering," he explains. "As meteorologists, we would tell everyone that we worked in the world's largest laboratory, the Earth's atmosphere."

Bartlett ended up spending six years as a meteorologist in the Air Force. By the late 1960s, he was beginning to set his sights on the West Coast, particularly California. He discovered that PG&E was searching for a staff meteorologist to be based in San Francisco.

Like today, forecasting the weather was "pretty important" to PG&E, Bartlett says. "The main reason I applied was because it was in San Francisco."

Landing the job with PG&E in 1968, Bartlett left the Air Force and moved to the Bay Area, choosing to commute to San Francisco from Marin County. For the next seven years, he was an integral part of the utility company's meteorology department. "They have a very sophisticated weather operation. Weather is very important to their operations for obvious reasons," he says.

But, it was that fateful day in 1974 when Bartlett and his friend ran their sailboat aground off San Francisco that changed his life forever.

Bartlett decided it was time to leave PG&E and accept the weekend weather job at KPIX. At that time, the station's main weatherman, **Leon Hunsaker**, was retiring, and Hillier was on the hunt to add to his station's weather department stable. (Hillier was a programming genius for KPIX. He helped create KPIX's *Evening Magazine* in 1976. At that

time, the station was owned by Group W, a subsidiary of Westinghouse Broadcasting. Group W would later syndicate *PM Magazine* to other stations across the country, based on Hillier's popular *Evening Magazine*, which remained on KPIX's early-evening schedule until 1991, only to be resurrected again briefly several years later.)

Eventually, Bartlett became the station's chief meteorologist, a major ingredient in an on-air formula that would one day become the No. 1-rated newscast in the Bay Area.

In those days, overtaking perennial news leader, KGO-TV Channel 7, was no easy feat for KPIX or the other Bay Area stations.

But, in the late 1970s, with Bartlett joining anchors **Dave McElhatton (SC'88)** and **Wendy Tokuda (SC'01)** and sportscaster **Wayne Walker (SC'95)**, the KPIX *Eyewitness News* team nearly made it look easy. KGO-TV's *News Scene* franchise, by far a huge favorite in Bay Area living rooms, had been No. 1 since 1969, when the ABC owned-and-operated station changed the face of local TV news by creating the "happy talk" concept. To the theme from the movie, *Cool Hand Luke*, anchors **Fred Van Amburg (SC'88)**, **Jerry Jensen**, meteorologist **Pete Giddings (SC'93)** and sportscaster **John O'Reilly** brought a new brand of TV news to Bay Area television sets. KGO-TV remained No. 1 through the 1970s, but KPIX began gaining ground in the early 1980s with the success of the McElhatton-Tokuda-Bartlett-Walker team. Finally, in 1982, KPIX's *Eyewitness News* became the Bay Area's most-watched newscast. What the other stations could not perform in beating KGO-TV, Bartlett and KPIX did, and handily.

"We just enjoyed each other so much," Bartlett recalls. "We got along fabulously, and it showed on the air. We had incredible chemistry. Viewers took notice, and slowly but surely, our ratings started going up. We had a great camaraderie. Everyone got along so well that we would do things socially as well. Dave (McElhatton) was a prince of a guy."

During his 14 years at KPIX, producers put Bartlett out in the field for live shots every chance they could. But, as much as he could deliver the weather to viewers effectively outside, he could do it just as well in the studio.

*continued on page 16*

# Silver Circle Member: Joel Bartlett



*continued on page 15*

It is there that Bartlett, unbeknownst to him at the time, would create something that would become something of a trademark for him through the years.

"We had a big weather map, and I'd write the temperatures on that map with a big Magic Marker pen," Bartlett explains. "While doing the weather, I started flipping the Magic Marker in the air. I started doing it occasionally, then I started doing it every night, when it was appropriate. I'd then tell viewers to 'go out and make it a great day.'"

That line, and the pen-flipping, would become Bartlett's signature. Viewers loved it. In fact, Bartlett estimates he dropped the pen three or four times while live on the air, out of the tens of thousands of times of throwing pens in the air.

In 1989, Bartlett would continue flipping his pens and delivering the weather at KGO-TV, when then-news director **Harry Fuller (SC'01)** wooed him away from KPIX with an offer the longtime meteorologist could not refuse.

Fuller was about to create a new unit called "The Naturalists," and he wanted Bartlett to join Giddings, **Leigh Glaser** and **Brian Hackney** in rounding out the weather team. They were unique in the Bay Area in that the four would also file news stories about ecology, nature and the environment—which was near and dear to Bartlett's heart.

"It was hard moving from Channel 5 to Channel 7," Bartlett admits. "We were a great team over at Channel 5, all of us. But, it was strictly a business decision."

During his years at KGO-TV, Bartlett would deliver the weather during the station's evening newscasts, sharing night duties with Giddings, the station's chief meteorologist since the *News Scene* years. Bartlett would also work some weekends, then eventually began doing reports for the station's morning newscasts.

In 2006, after 31 years on the air between KGO-TV and KPIX, Bartlett decided it was time to retire.

In 2007, he met his future wife, Sahar, at a benefit to rebuild old horse stables in Fairfax. Four years later, on Jan. 16, 2011, the pair married at "a beautiful winery in the north part of the South Island

of New Zealand." Bartlett's friend, former KTVU and KGO-TV director, **Ken Czys**, who moved to New Zealand several years ago, helped Bartlett to set up the wedding.

"We are just so happy together," Bartlett says of he and his wife. "We love to travel. She has a place in Panama, and we go there all the time."

This year, the Bartletts purchased a small horse ranch on three and a half acres outside Santa Rosa. They have two horses and two dogs. Aside from the main house, they also have a small cottage on their ranch.

Bartlett says caring for the horses is a fulltime job, morning, noon and night.

While television news is now in Bartlett's past, he seems far from being retired. He remains very active in the community. He is the former president of the Marin Horse Council. He also volunteers for the Blind Babies Foundation, based in Oakland, and is involved with the Giants Steps Therapeutic Equestrian Center for Disabled Children, in Petaluma.

Bartlett has two children from a previous marriage: daughter, **Cory**, 34, is an administrator with the Modesto Unified School District; and son, **Todd**, 32, is an aspiring actor living in Los Angeles. Sahar has a son, **Alex**, 19, from a previous marriage. He is a sophomore at Cabrillo Community College in Santa Cruz County.

Bartlett is also a grandfather to his daughter's two children, **Tucker** and **Ellie**.

"A lot of things in my life have been blessings in disguise," Bartlett says. "Doing the weather on TV was one of the luckiest breaks for anyone to have, and it happened to me."

