

## THE CELEBRITY AND ME

### NW Ohioans talk about their encounters with the famous

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Celebrities don't always hang out on the red carpet or party in swanky clubs when they're not working.

Sometimes, they just want to feed a bag full of hot dogs to some gators.

At least, that's how Joe Deuble and his family from Fostoria ended up meeting basketball star Shaquille O'Neal about six years ago when they were visiting a place called Gatorland in Florida.

So what if Mr. Deuble's brush with fame was more like a brush with Shaq's armpit, when you compare the two in the photo? (Mr. Deuble stands 5 feet, 7 inches tall. Shaq is a towering 7 feet, 1 inch.) He still can say he's hung out with the friendly future hall-of-famer, and isn't that the point?



A young George Clooney was best man at the wedding of the nephew of Mary Helen Wright, of West Toledo.

"Getting to meet somebody that famous, not everybody gets to do that," said Mr. Deuble, 44, who works as an inspector at a crankshaft manufacturing plant. "We share in their stardom with them."

It's a natural inclination to want to be close to power and fame. It's even true for those who already have it. Just look at the Congressmen who were star struck last month — and their staffers, a number of whom asked for autographs — by baseball legend Roger Clemens even as he was called to testify before them.

These days, our royalty and heroes have been replaced by celebrities. Meeting those stars has become a way of transferring—even if it's just for a moment—some of their power.

"I think in part it's like a secular version of sainthood, of being in the aura of somebody," said Leo Braudy, author of *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*. "Just as famous people seem to have a glow about them that makes them hyper-real, you get a little bit of that yourself."

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Maybe it's the transfer of that glow that made Richard Saunders light-headed when he shook hands with President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s.

When the commander-in-chief flew to Toledo, Mr. Saunders, 79, was a Lucas County sheriff's deputy stationed at the airport with a line of cars. Upon landing, the president, five-star general, and hero of World War II walked up to the black Lincoln where Mr. Saunders stood.

"I opened the door, he shook my hand and thanked me, and I almost fainted," the West Toledo man remembered. "It just flabbergasted me. I don't think I washed my hand for a week."

He's told the story so many times that he said his kids tease him about it.

"I would give anything for a picture of that," he said. "It would be proof of what I told my kids."

In a way, these encounters themselves are proof of something, proof that these larger-than-life figures actually are real. We're used to getting to know celebrities through their images — in magazines, movies, newspapers, ads, and on television. Seeing them without the filter of the media, which can be manipulated or distorted, seems

important and revealing.

We all wonder: Is Angelina Jolie as sexy as she's made out to be? Is Tom Hanks as nice as he is in the movies? Is George Clooney as debonair as he appears?

"That's really the first thing that comes out of someone's mouth, some comparison with image and the real thing," said Joshua Gamson, a sociology professor at the University of San Francisco who wrote the book *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. "That's a big dynamic in celebrity culture: How close are they to the image that they project or that others project for them?"

Heather Smith LaPoint, of Holland, wasn't sure what to expect when she found herself face-to-face with her idol, actor Al Pacino, after she and her husband landed at a small airport in Columbus. She wanted to be respectful, but couldn't resist the urge to approach him.

That snapshot seems to have won a sort of cult following. Mrs. LaPoint keeps a copy at work and at home. Her mom has a copy, and so do her cousins and sister. It kept getting passed along, and somehow even appeared in a local doctor's office, where someone she knows noticed it.

Why all the fuss?

"I don't think people anticipate an average person from Toledo to stumble across him," Mrs. LaPoint explained.

It's true that it might be harder here than in, say, L.A. But if the celebs don't come to you, you can always go to them.

That's what Kellie Hanson, of Waterville, did last year. She won a contest to fly to Hollywood and go on a date with Brody Jenner from the MTV reality series *The Hills*. They went to a party where Miss Hanson ran into Lindsay Lohan, Jennifer Lopez, Carmen Electra, and others.

The 20-year-old's favorite moment, though, was meeting Paris Hilton, whom she found very friendly. After dancing together for a while and parting, they were reunited later in the evening.

"Paris came up to me and said, 'Kellie, where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!'"

Christie Pitney, 17, of South Toledo, met O.J. Simpson on the ski slopes in Colorado in 2005 (although the exchange student from Spain who was with her had no idea who he was).

It being New Year's Eve day, the group asked him to wear a celebratory hat for a photo, and he obliged. Despite becoming a notorious figure in recent years, Simpson was gracious and Miss Pitney said she was happy to have the bragging rights of meeting him.

"He was really nice," she said. "Everybody was talking to him. He seemed great."

Lisa Rosen, of Sylvania Township, ran into past Super Bowl MVP Tom Brady at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial. After an emotionally draining experience at the memorial, she wanted to feel a connection to something good and ended up asking for a photo for her son, Stevie, who is a big fan of the quarterback.

"To this day, Stevie still hasn't forgiven me for not taking his Patriots/Brady jersey to Israel so that I could've gotten an autograph as well!" she said.

No doubt, these meetings are a thrill, but it's a one-sided thrill that celebrities deal with in different ways. Some are happy to sign autographs or meet with fans, but others become curmudgeons who avoid places where they might be recognized.

It's important to keep common courtesy in mind before approaching one, according to Al Wittnebert, an officer of the Universal Autograph Collectors Club from Florida who has plenty of experience meeting celebrities. His advice is simple:

"Never, ever, ever bother them when they're working, when they're eating, and God knows, when they're in the bathroom."

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