

KATHY QUINN  
CREATING  
AN  
ARTS  
LEGACY

BY LISA SKOLNIK



A

nthony Quinn. The name didn't mean much to Kathy Benvin in 1985 when her uncle told her the actor was looking for an assistant. She'd just returned from Italy, where she'd spent her first year post-college working in hotel management to improve her language skills.

"I didn't know who he was, it wasn't what I wanted to do and I wasn't the least bit interested in the job. I thought I was too good for it," she says, ruefully adding, "we didn't have Google or Wikipedia in those days."

If she had been able to Google Anthony Quinn, she would have learned that despite the Greek name, he was born in Chihuahua, Mexico; was spirited into the U. S. hidden in a sack on his mother's back when he was 8 months old; grew up dirt poor; and at a time when discrimination ran high and "Mexicans were treated like dogs in Hollywood, he became the first Mexican to become a leading man and win an Academy Award," as she now points out.

"He won two for Best Supporting Actor and earned two more nominations for Best Actor in a Leading Role," notes Jean de St. Aubin, executive director of the Gene Siskel Film Center, which will show a collection of his classics during a film retrospective, opening on Friday, May 4.

And if Kathy Benvin had been able to do a quick search on Mr. Quinn back in 1985, she would have learned that Mr. Quinn was also a self-taught artist with enough ability to win cash prizes to support his family as a youth, and earn a significant amount of acclaim and money for his work as an adult by showing and selling in galleries around the world.

His success in both fields is the inspiration for the Anthony Quinn Foundation, which will also host an event, in conjunction with the film retrospective, at The Casino Club on Thursday, May 3 to raise money to provide scholarships for summer arts programs to young adults of high school age across the country.

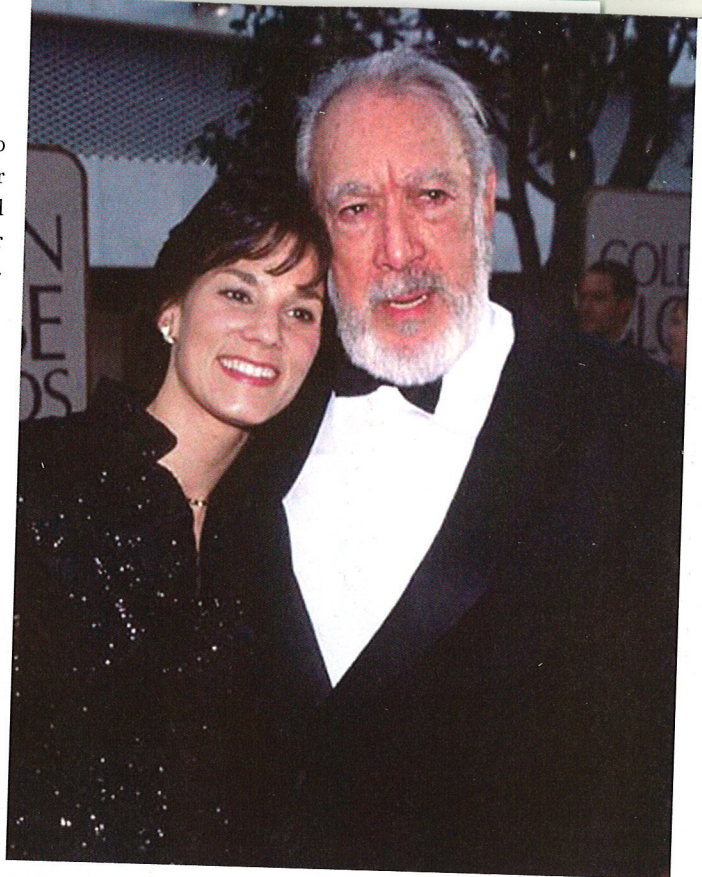
Still, it might not have made a difference to the then 23-year-old. Despite his star status and intriguing background, he was 70 and she was looking for a "good career move. But my uncle was persistent," she laughs. Still, she cancelled her first interview with Mr. Quinn because of bad weather, and went the next day "completely unprepared for the interview," she admits.

Mr. Quinn lived in a patrician Fifth Avenue apartment, so "I expected to see a whole staff," she says. Instead, he threw open the door himself. "There was this tall, handsome, vibrant man looming there who had just come in from running in the park. I was speechless," she says. "He laughed at my reaction, then grabbed me and said come in."

The actor was moving, and his most immediate need was to pack up his 10,000-volume library. He tore up the resume she handed him, they talked and he started reading her passages from Browning and Shakespeare. "I went home with five books, and he said, come Monday, work a couple of weeks and if we like each other you'll stay," she explains.

She never left, and eventually married Mr. Quinn, officially becoming Kathy Quinn. When he died in 2001, they had two children – Antonia, 7, and Ryan, 4. And knowing his whole life story today, she is in awe of the fact that "he attained success against all odds."

Mr. Quinn came to painting and acting circuitously. When his father would take him to work with him as a kid, "Anthony would sit quietly in a corner and sketch the actors. Once, Douglas Fairbanks gave him \$25 for a small portrait he did, which was more than his father made in a week," says Ms. Quinn.



Kathy and Anthony Quinn

After his father's death, Mr. Quinn became the man of the house and took on all sorts of jobs to make money. His most successful tactic was to enter competitions for dancing, sculpting and even drafting; he often won, and the prize money was significant at the time. One of those competitions – a concept drawing for a supermarket – earned him an internship with Frank Lloyd Wright, who insisted he have surgery for a speech impediment caused by his frenum, the flap under his tongue. "He told Anthony, you can't be an architect if you can't speak properly," says Ms. Quinn.

Mr. Wright paid for the surgery, but Mr. Quinn lined up therapy with a teacher by working as a janitor at her acting school in exchange for speech lessons. One day, she asked him to fill in for a student with stage fright, and he got the acting bug, explains Mrs. Quinn. He added a constant string of auditions to his many jobs to make ends meet, and eventually got a parts and an offer from a studio for a \$300 a week contract. "Frank advised him to take it and told him, you won't make that much money as an architect," says Ms. Quinn.

Undeniably, Mr. Quinn had outsized talents that contributed to his achievements, and a modicum of good fortune that he was astute enough to mine. But today, the odds are even tougher for young adults from every walk of life thanks to the economy and a rough job market. Ms. Quinn is set on increasing those odds through arts program scholarships provided by the Anthony Quinn Foundation, which she founded in 2007 precisely because "Anthony never had the chance to finish school, or take more than a few acting or painting classes," she notes. ■

For information on the Gene Siskel Film Center Anthony Quinn retrospective, visit [www.siskelfilmcenter.org](http://www.siskelfilmcenter.org). Tickets to the Anthony Quinn Foundation gala at the Casino Club are \$250; visit <http://anthonyquinnfoundation.org> for information.