

# Total recall: Local author pens book on strengthening memory

By Sara Dunn

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Everyone's been in a scenario like this: While out and about with a friend, you run into someone you know fairly well and that awkward moment arrives -- you can't introduce the two, as you can't remember the latter's name.

Rhinebeck resident Brent Sverdloff said he has a few pointers and tips on how to avoid situations like these and he's written a book about it, titled "How Could I Forget You! A Creative Way to Remember Names and Faces."

Potentially inspired by the particular order of characters in his fairly complicated name, maybe, Sverdloff also holds coaching events to help people of all ages – from teenagers to senior citizens – learn different memory priming techniques to keep them sharp and ready for quick recall.

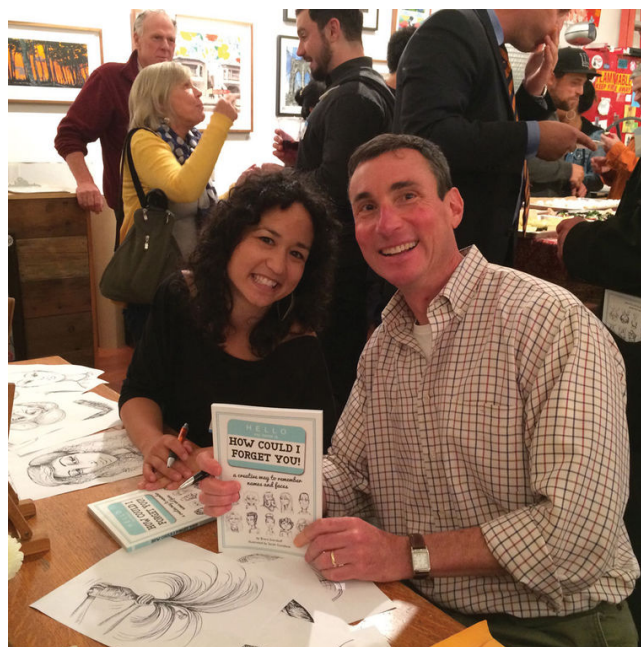
The coaching, both in groups and one-on-one, came before the authoring of a book.

Dating back to 2004 when he was living in Boston with his husband Craig St. Clair, he began holding memory-strengthening workshops. The couple moved to San Francisco for a while, but then felt drawn back to where they had come from, and moved to Rhinebeck.

"We felt nostalgic for the Northeast," he said. "But we didn't want the stress of city life."

In his workshops, he'd employ the written work of others. Many people told him he should write his own book, but he didn't think the market could handle another memory-building tome. They told him he was wrong. So, he set about getting his tricks, tips and advice down on paper.

"And my goal at 48, was to get a book out by the time I turned 50," he said, noting that he'd worked on the book for two years, but had been working on his methods for 15 years prior to that.



## Author and Illustrator

Rhinebeck resident and author Brent Sverdloff sits with Sarah Goodwin, who illustrated his book, at an event to celebrate the release of, "How Could I Forget You? A Creative Way to Remember Names and Faces."

That's the timeline on the professional side of coaching. But insofar as the spark that lit the inspiration to dive into the area of memory coaching, that arrived while sitting in eighth grade English class when, one day, a substitute teacher named Mrs. Barnhouse walked into the classroom.

"Put your books away," Sverdloff said she told the students. "I want to teach you something they don't teach you, but they should."

That clandestine lesson was to offer the students some methods on how to strengthen their memory. She voiced a list of 10 words that she wanted students to try to recall in order – without writing them down, of course.

Decades later, does Sverdloff remember that list of ten? Of course, he does.

But for purposes of explanation of Mrs. Barnhouse's technique, Sverdloff offered an example of No. 1 on the list: television.

He explained that to remember the word and the order, one must employ a very simple word that rhymes with the number on the list and then pair that word with the actual word on the list and create a mental image associated with the words.

In this case, in choosing "run" to rhyme with "one," one could imagine hundreds of television sets running in a marathon, Sverdloff said. The point is to pick an image that is outrageous.

"You want to make it extreme and to add motion and make it as absurd or exaggerated as possible," he said.

This also applies to remembering people's names and a theory of Sverdloff's he named the "Baker versus baker paradox."

"If you tell someone you are a baker, they will tend to remember that – associating the word with an association from childhood: a tray of cookies, someone in a white apron, the smells," he said. "If someone introduces themselves as Mr. and Mrs. Baker, that disappears. It doesn't have the same resonance."

He said when he first started teaching workshops, they were almost exclusively filled with senior citizens, who, as a demographic group, tend to be very interested in the tips and advice he has to offer.

"You are never too old to start new things. It's like taking up yoga, varying activities later in life – picking up a foreign language or a new instrument – it keeps your mind elastic," he said.

But as a result of the growing ubiquity of handheld digital devices in the last decade, he said he noticed a stark change in the age of those signing up for his workshops: teenagers.

"They are so focused on their devices and not as present," he said, of the potential negative effect of smart phones. "They are looking for easy solutions. This shift to speed, efficiency and convenience is

not so good for our brains.”

To stay sharp and strong, our brains require what Sverdloff described as “desirable difficulties.”

“If learning is made too easy, it does you a disservice. If you don’t have obstacles to overcome, you don’t get traction,” he said.

In his classes with young people, he brings in a newspaper to show students how reading hard copies will help them retain information much better than from a small backlit screen.

Just the small physical effort it takes to turn a page, or the smell of the paper, can help the reader remember better, he said. He does this, too, in part, because memory game apps are becoming more popular.

“But that just perpetuates the problem,” he said.

Getting away from devices and interacting with others is necessary to brain fitness, he said.

“It’s one of the reasons we moved to Rhinebeck,” he said, of the daily, face-to-face interaction with others that village life offers. “It’s not just because it’s nice. It’s also because it’s good for you.”

Not too long ago, Sverdloff attended the wedding of an old friend, and there were quite a few other guests who also had been in that very same eighth grade English classroom decades ago when the substitute teacher gave a day’s lesson that had such an impact on the direction Sverdloff’s life would take.

The irony is, when he asked the others about Mrs. Barnhouse and her recall techniques, nobody else remembered her. Not a one. Except, of course, Sverdloff.

To learn more about Brent Sverdloff’s book, coaching, specials events, and to read his blog, visit [www.flexyourmemory.com](http://www.flexyourmemory.com).