

HUGH DOWNS Biography

Hugh Downs, one of the most familiar American television figures in the history of the medium, is the co-anchor of ABCNEWS' 20/20, the primetime newsmagazine program.

In addition to his role as co-anchor, Downs goes into the field to report news features for 20/20 and to profile important personalities. He prefers to concentrate on issues of science, medicine, aging, adventure, the fine arts and family. He also provides commentary in connection with various 20/20 reports.

Some of Downs' most recent segments have included a report on the groundbreaking scientific discovery of telomerase, an "immortalizing enzyme" which in lab tests increased the lifespan of human cells by 40-50%; a profile of Carla Dunne, a courageous young woman who overcame blindness to become a world-class (and Olympic) athlete, including a reunion with the pediatrician who took her sight as a precaution against cancer; a report on turbulence, one of the leading causes of passenger injuries during airline flights; and a revealing look at the short-term memory loss associated with aging and how it can be prevented.

In April 1996, Downs reported on one of the most personal stories in his career: His successful double knee-replacement surgery, performed at Harvard's Massachusetts General Hospital on January 27, and his amazing recovery from the procedure. Downs, who detailed his experience of the innovative operation in a 20/20 report, returned to work two weeks after the surgery.

A selection of Downs' widely acclaimed adventure stories and travels around the globe — trademarks of his 17 years with the broadcast — was a special segment included in a two-hour retrospective program in 1988, marking the tenth anniversary of 20/20. Downs also reported on one of the most important medical breakthroughs: Vitamin A therapy, used to reverse nutritional blindness in children. One of the adventure segments was diving in a cage off the coast of Australia to film the Great White Shark.

In 1990, Downs anchored a one-hour ABCNEWS Special, *Depression: Beyond the Darkness*, which focused on the devastating illness that afflicts as many as 20 million Americans each year. The broadcast examined how the illness can be treated and how individual sufferers and their loved ones cope with the trouble it brings. In 1991, the American Psychiatric Association honored Downs with its annual Robert L. Robinson Award for his work on this special.

Downs anchored an ABCNEWS one-hour special, *The Poisoning of America*, in 1988 as part of the critically acclaimed *Burning Questions* series. The broadcast explored in depth the problems and visible damage we are faced with on land, in the air and in water, and how these changes in the environment may affect our lives in the future. This special won Downs his second Emmy Award. In 1989, Downs hosted *The National Cholesterol Test*, which explored what Americans can do — through improved nutrition and cholesterol awareness — to live healthier lives. In December 1985, Downs hosted the three-hour ABCNEWS Closeup documentary, *Growing Old in America*, which examined the problems and harsh realities facing millions of America's aged and their families.

Downs has enjoyed a distinguished career in radio and television as a reporter, newscaster, interviewer, narrator and host. In 1985 he was certified by the Guinness Book of World Records as holding the record for the greatest number of hours on network commercial television. And in May 1989, Downs celebrated his 50th anniversary in broadcasting (both radio and television). To commemorate this milestone, 20/20 aired a special retrospective segment looking at some of the memorable moments during his 50 years in broadcasting.

Among a number of Emmy Awards Downs has received were one for his work as host of the Public Broadcasting Service program, *Over Easy*; a Daytime Emmy Award for “Live From Lincoln Center: Yo Yo Ma in Concert” (Downs has hosted PBS’ Live From Lincoln Center since 1990); and for a 1989 in-depth interview with Patty Duke about her struggle with manic depression.

In April 1995, The Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago presented a gala event, *A Salute to Hugh Downs*, in conjunction with *Hugh Downs: A Television Retrospective*, an exhibition that showcased some of his most memorable programs.

ARA Living Services presented Downs with their first 1991 National Media Award for “excellence in long-term health care reporting,” for his 20/20 segment on the problems families face when attempting to place loved ones in quality-care nursing homes.

In May 1990, Downs was given the Broadcaster of the Year Award by the International Radio and Television Society for his many achievements during his 50 years in radio and television.

In 1986, Downs was awarded the National Headliner Award by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. He was also the recipient of the 1985 Award of Merit from the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. He was also honored in the National Council on Family Relations film awards competition for his 20/20 report, *Diet Unto Death: Anorexia Nervosa*.

In addition, during 1982, Downs was the recipient of the Carr Van Anda Award for “enduring contribution to journalism” from the Ohio University School of Journalism, and received the Emerson College Joseph E. Connor Award.

In September 1962, Downs began a nine-year career as host of NBC News’ Today program where, each morning, he reported to the nation on the news of the day and interviewed statesmen and leaders from around the world.

In addition to his work hosting Today, Downs was a reporter and narrator for a number of NBC News documentaries and specials, including *The American Wilderness* (1971), the Emmy Award-winning *The Everglades* (1971), *The Ice People* (1970), *The Great Barrier Reef* (1970), *Survival on the Prairie*(1970) and *The First Americans*(1969).

He left the Today show in October 1971, in order “to move on to other things and additional interests,” including writing, teaching, lecturing, private consulting in communications, and other opportunities in television. He is the author of seven books.

Downs was born in Akron, Ohio. He began his broadcasting career as a radio announcer in Lima, Ohio at the age of 18. After serving in the U.S. Army, he joined NBC in Chicago as a staff announcer, and joined the Home show on that network in New York in 1954. From 1956-57, Downs was the announcer for NBC’s *Caesar’s Hour*.

In July 1957, he helped launch *The Tonight Show* with Jack Paar and stayed with the late-night series for five years. In August 1958, Downs became host of the daytime game series *Concentration*, a role he continued when he began his Today show appearances.

Downs has lectured throughout the country on a wide range of subjects, including the quality of life, energy, the role of the communicator in environmental concerns, the exploration of space and aging in America.

Downs attended Bluffton (Ohio) College, Wayne University (now Wayne State), and Columbia University, and holds a post-Masters degree in gerontology from Hunter College. He has honorary doctoral degrees from St. John’s University, the University of Maryland, and Daniel Webster College in Nashua, N.H., among others. His latest — a Doctor of Fine Arts — was awarded in June 1994, by Hunter College of the City University of New York.

He has authored an autobiography, *Yours Truly, Hugh Downs*; and Doubleday published a collection of his science articles entitled *Rings Around Tomorrow*. His other books are *A Shoal of Stars*, his account of sailing a 65-foot ketch across the Pacific; *Potential*, a psychological study of human maturity; *Thirty Dirty Lies about Old*, which debunks the myths about aging; *The Best Years Book*, a manual on late years' planning; *On Camera: My 10,000 Hours on Television*; and *Fifty to Forever*, a manual on planning for later years. Downs' most recent book is *Perspectives*, a wide-ranging collection of more than 50 of his most interesting, informative and entertaining essays, adapted from his ten-minute radio broadcasts of the same name on the ABC Radio Network.

In addition to his activities in the communications field, Downs is Chairman of the Board of Governors of the National Space Society, Chairman of the Board of the United States Committee for UNICEF, Trustee of the Menninger Foundation, and has served as a member of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Advisory Council.

Downs chairs the Research and Education Committee of the Geriatrics Advisory Council of the Mount Sinai Medical Center. And in June 1992, he received a Certificate in Geriatric Medicine for Continuing Medical Education (CME) Geriatrics Review Course at Mt. Sinai Hospital, New York. Downs also serves as a member of the Board of Overseers of the Brookdale Center on Aging of Hunter College, a post he has held since 1982.

He and his wife, Ruth, have a home in Arizona, in addition to maintaining a residence in New York. They have two grown children, Hugh Raymond and Dierdre Lynn.