

BLAKE LIVELY Her New Passion • BRUCE & DEMI Fighting to Save Their Daughter

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# People

THE  
LIFE &  
DEATH OF  
A COMIC  
GENIUS

1951-2014

ROBIN  
WILLIAMS

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He was a whirling dervish of frenetic energy, a master of rapid-fire repertoire who could morph from wild over-the-top insanity to subtle tenderness. Robin Williams knew how to make a room laugh or cry—and he knew, when opening up last July about returning to TV, what made him happy. “I thought of a line my daughter once said about me being funny,” he said. “When asked, ‘Do you laugh?’ She said, ‘All the time! Even our pets laugh.’” But recently, laughter was harder to find. “We knew he was struggling,” says a source on the set of his CBS show *The Crazy Ones*. “We were doing a scene, and it was just off. I looked over at him, and in that moment, his face changed. He looked so exhausted and profoundly, deeply sad. And then one minute later he pulled himself back together, and he nailed the scene. He had a depth; that’s where the darkness came from, but there was just so much there.”

On Aug. 11 the 63-year-old multifaceted actor and entertainer, whose career spanned nearly four decades, was found dead in his Tiburon, Calif., home of an apparent suicide by asphyxia. Williams was discovered at approximately 11:55 a.m., and emergency personnel arrived on the scene minutes later, but tragically nothing could be done. Williams had been battling severe depression, his rep said. “This morning, I lost my husband and best friend,” Susan Schneider, 50, Williams’s wife of nearly three years, said in a statement, “while the world lost one of its most beloved artists and beautiful human beings.”



## THE WORLD MOURNS

The day of his passing, fans flocked to Williams’s star on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame, leaving flowers and mementos. The actor was beloved by millions, but his biggest fans were his three children. Daughter Zelda (right, as a little girl in the last photo Williams posted on Instagram) shared her grief on Twitter, quoting Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*. After the excerpt, she added a message to her dad: “I love you. I miss you. I’ll try to keep looking up. Z”



As news of his shocking death swept through Hollywood and beyond, condolences from around the globe were offered to his wife and children: Zachary, 31, Zelda, 25, and Cody, 22. President Barack Obama issued a statement: “Robin Williams was an airman, a doctor, a genie, a nanny, a president, a professor, a bangarang Peter Pan and everything in-between. But he was one of a kind. He arrived in our lives as an alien—but he ended up touching every element of the human spirit.”

Williams’s playful spirit turned out to be no match for the demons he battled since he first burst into America’s living rooms on 1977’s *The Richard Pryor Show* and later broke out as the lovable alien on his own show, ABC’s

1978 hit *Mork & Mindy*. “I used to go to two or three clubs a night and then go to four or five people’s houses just keeping going, going, going,” Williams told PEOPLE in 1982. “The myth of living fast, dying young affected me, but I’ve come out on the other side of it.” It was a battle that recurred throughout his lifetime. Williams was shaken by the 1982 drug overdose death of pal John Belushi and decided to get sober, but he would continue to struggle with alcohol addiction and depression throughout his life. After weathering heart-valve-replacement surgery in 2008, this July he entered rehab again for what his rep called a chance to “fine-tune and focus on his continued commitment” to his sobriety. “He was a guy who had the



Mork & Mindy, 1978-1982



Good Will Hunting, 1997



Dead Poets Society, 1989

## His Most Memorable Roles

He played a lovable alien, an inspirational prep school teacher, a prim nanny and even a big blue genie. But Williams made every part uniquely his own. "[He] was that rarest of things," says Shawn Levy, who directed him in the *Night at the Museum* films. "One of a kind."

Mrs. Doubtfire, 1993



Aladdin, 1992

highest of highs while performing," says Bob Zmuda, the creator of Comic Relief. "But when he walked off that stage and went back to the dressing room alone, he could face the lowest of lows."

Born Robin McLaurin Williams in Chicago to mother Laura, a former New Orleans model, and father Robert, a Ford Motor Company executive, he spent most of his childhood outside Detroit and was painfully shy. Often retreating into his own world of pretend and solitude, playing with toy armies in the basement of his family's mansion, Williams didn't view his parents as being particularly warm. "The ideal child was seen, not heard," Williams told PEOPLE in 2009 when recalling his early years. But Beverly Hopps, a friend of Williams's mom, says his mother's influence was obvious. "She was fun-loving and dramatic," says Hopps, "and he was just like her."

A short and shy teen at the exclusive all-boys Detroit Country Day School, Williams blossomed when he moved with his parents at 17 to the San Francisco suburb of Tiburon and enrolled in Redwood High School, where classmates voted him "Most Humorous" and "Least Likely to Succeed." He discovered a love for theater and won a scholarship to Juilliard in 1973, where he became lifelong friends with classmate Christopher Reeve. It was there that he became obsessed with being onstage. "He learned everything you could imagine at Juilliard," says legendary television producer George Schlatter, who helped launch Williams's TV career. "And then, in his junior year, [famed director] John Houseman told him he couldn't come back, and Robin was devastated. But it was because Robin had learned everything they could teach him. He was beyond funny. He was a genius."

That genius turned his beloved character alien Mork's catchphrase "Nanu nanu!" into a global phenomenon and catapulted Williams into superstardom. Director Garry Marshall recalled walking on the Paramount set with Williams late at night, talking. "Robin always had more energy than any person anywhere, in any room," Marshall remembers. "I said to him that night,





#### FAMILY MAN

The star posed with kids (from left) Zachary, Zelda and Cody and the family dogs in 2006. "He wasn't around a lot when I was a kid," Zelda told PEOPLE two years later. "But I have the wonderful opportunity to get to know him now."

"Do you think we will ever grow up?" and he said, without missing a beat, 'I'm afraid if I ever grow up, I won't be able to make a living.' Play was his passion and what drove him each day." Marshall initially put three cameras on Williams but says he felt that still wasn't enough to catch what the actor was doing: "So I hired a fourth camera operator, and he just followed Robin. Only Robin. Looking back, I should have hired a fifth camera to follow him too."

The actor soon proved he had dramatic chops as well. His turn in 1987's *Good Morning, Vietnam* earned him his first Academy Award nomination. He further surprised audiences with his heartfelt portrayal of an influential teacher in 1989's *Dead Poets Society*; a neurologist in 1990's *Awakenings*; a delusional homeless man in 1991's *The Fisher King*; and a psychology professor in 1997's *Good Will Hunting*, for which he won that year's Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. "He really liked the emotional stuff," says Chris Moore, who coproduced the film. "Watching the

10 takes of every scene that Robin could do totally differently—monologues, emotional scenes, fights—he's just truly a gifted performer."

With those gifts often came great struggle, as Williams went in and out of treatment from as early as 1979 to last month. His first marriage, to Valerie Velardi, a waitress he met while he was tending bar and doing comedy in the mid-'70s, fell apart in 1987. His second marriage, to Marsha Garces, lasted 19 years but ended in divorce in 2008. Married to Schneider since 2011, he lived a low-key life in Tiburon—"There was no better sign of Christmas than Robin's big dinosaur-shaped hedge out

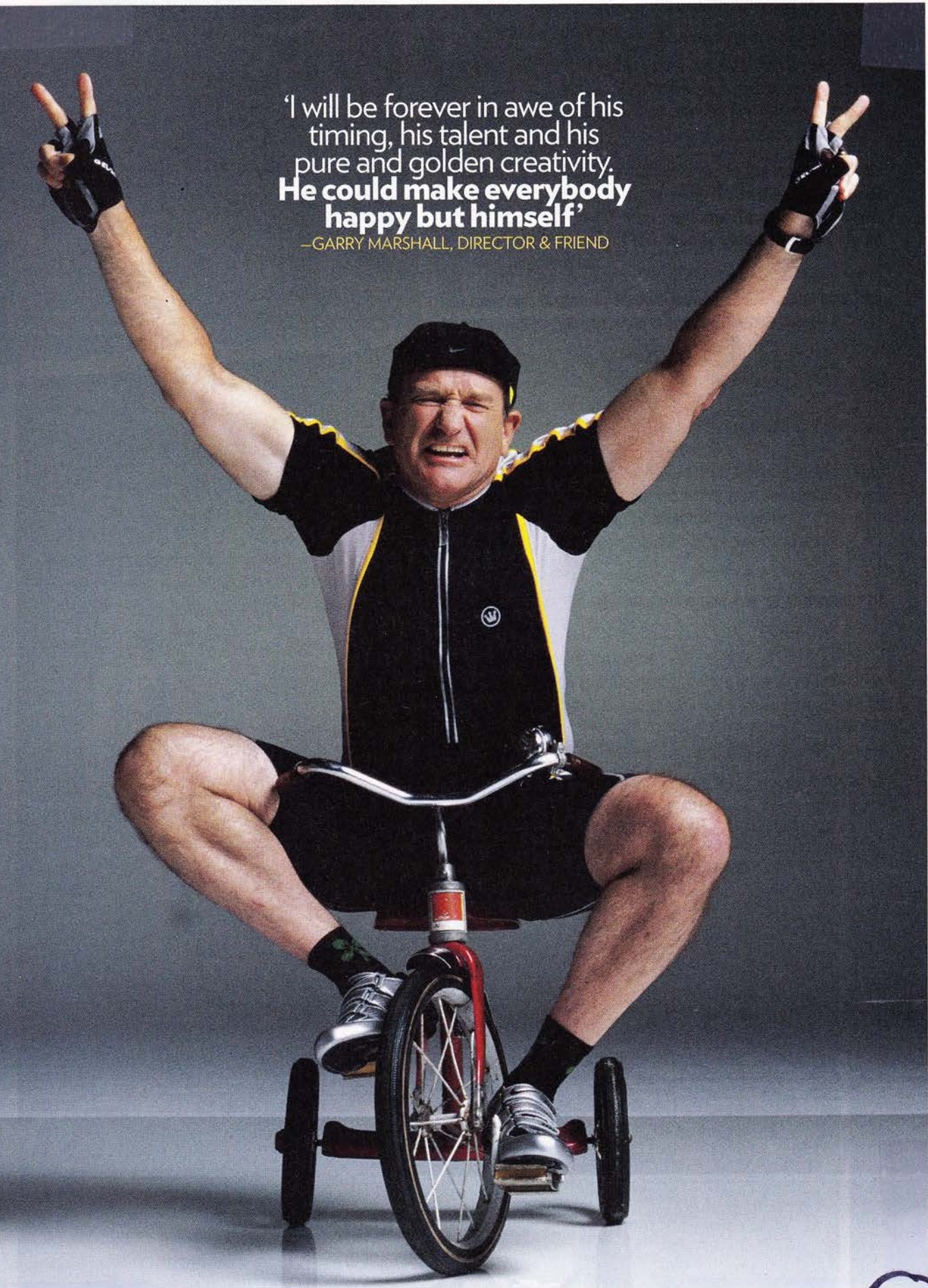
in front decorated in Christmas lights," says local Rachel Braun—and seemed to many to have escaped the demons that had chased him for years. "He was pleasant and kind to everyone," says a source who worked with Williams on *The Crazy Ones*, canceled after one season. "If he was depressed, it didn't show in his work." But others close to him knew something was amiss. "He was a consummate professional," adds another set source. "But you sensed he was holding something in." Pam Dawber, who played the human Mindy to his out-of-this-world Mork, could only say, "I am completely and totally devastated. What more can be said?"

Because he brought laughter to so many, Williams's tragic end is particularly wrenching. Asked last year what made him happy, Williams responded: "Family, work and creating." Those who knew him already miss the alchemy. "Experiencing his genius up close was truly magical," says Scott Weinger, who voiced the title character *Aladdin*. "The world has lost a bright light." ●

**'Robin was a lightning storm of comic genius, and our laughter was the thunder that sustained him'**

—STEVEN SPIELBERG



A full-page photograph of a man, likely Garry Marshall, riding a red tricycle. He is wearing a black cycling jersey with yellow accents, a black cap, and black gloves. He has a pained or strained expression on his face, with his mouth open and eyes squinted. His arms are raised high in the air, forming 'V' shapes with his index and middle fingers. The background is a plain, light-colored studio backdrop.

'I will be forever in awe of his  
timing, his talent and his  
pure and golden creativity.  
**He could make everybody  
happy but himself'**

—GARRY MARSHALL, DIRECTOR & FRIEND