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Cliff Robertson and my brother

Joe Ferullo | Sep. 15, 2011 NCR Today

The actor Cliff Robertson [1], who died this weekend at age 88, was a very important member of my family. We were not at all related and we never actually met.

But Robertson won his only Oscar for the title role in a movie called "Charly," It was released in 1968, when I was 11 years old, and featured Robertson as a mentally-challenged man who swept floors in a small bakery.

My father owned a small bakery in The Bronx at that time. More importantly to all of us, my older brother was also a mentally-challenged young man who sometimes dropped by the shop to sweep the floors.

In the film, Robertson's Charly becomes the subject of an experiment -- one that works and turns him into a genius by the middle of the story. When I heard about the movie, I couldn't wait to see it: there weren't a lot of stories around then about brain-injured adults, and I hoped "Charly" would touch on the things my family went through every day.

It did -- in ways I couldn't realize at the time. I asked my mother and father to go with me, but -- to my surprise -- they said no thanks. So I called up my best friend Steve and we went together. It was an extreme experience, watching Charly transform into a wunderkind, and then, by the start of Act Three, realize the magic was wearing off and he would inevitably regress into the floor-sweeper he had once been.

I told my parents all about it later that night. I could tell it was not a comfortable subject, so I rushed my recounting, and moved on to other stuff (I think Rick Barry had just joined the old ABA, and my Dad love basketball).

It was years later when my father and I talked about it: he couldn't go see the movie, he said, because it hit too close to his dreams. He never really reconciled with having a mentally-challenged son -- every morning, he said, he would expect to wake up and find it was a dream; for a moment each day he'd look for a "normal" boy to come walking down the stairs, ready for school or sports.

"Charly" was that dream and -- in the way it ended -- it was a nightmare. The movie's message was that some things can't be undone, no matter how hard we try, no matter how we wish and hope.

As a family, we carried Cliff Robertson and his performance with us for many years. It helped me -- I also had wished things were different in our house in The Bronx, but in the years ahead, I taught myself to come to terms with how some things just are.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/movies/cliff-robertson-oscar-winning-rebel-dies-at-88.html