

## ***The 49ers: Oral Histories of Americans Facing 50***

**by Rob Trucks**

*Over some eighteen months, right up until the eve of his own 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, Rob Trucks interviewed more than 200 49-years-olds. This is some of what they said.*

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### **#190: Kim Severson**

Kim Severson has written for the New York Times since 2004. She is currently a national correspondent based in Atlanta where she lives with her partner and young daughter. She has won four James Beard awards for food writing, and her latest book is *Spoon Fed: How Eight Cooks Saved My Life*. We spoke in July of 2011, less than two months before Severson turned 50 on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

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I don't think it hit me until maybe a couple years ago, and then I kind of put it away and it really has only been this year that the magnitude of that's been apparent.

I haven't had a birthday that's felt this big ever. It's reflective and it's significant and it's spiritual. And, boy, it is something. For me, it's a big, big deal. And I'll tell you the truth: I'm surprised that it's such a big deal.

It bothers me a little bit, in like, *God, I am old now*. But more, it's just the wonder of it. I mean, I feel like I have suddenly walked into a different body and a different life, to find myself at 50. I still think of myself as 25 and so I go, *I'm 50? Wow*. And there's a certain freedom that comes with that, and a certain freaked-outness.

I think there's a real heft to it. There's a real heft to it, and it really makes you think about what little time you have left. But on the one hand I'm like, *Dang, I made it. I made it this far. I can't believe it*. And that's kind of cool. And now that I'm 50 I don't have to give a s--- anymore. There's a kind of a relief in that and there's kind of an appreciation of all the things that I've done in my life to get here. And then there's like, *Wow, you better really make some choices that you care about*. You know, whatever comes next, those choices matter and you better be picking things that are significant to you. So there's that sense of time speeding up, but there's also a great amount of acceptance and kind of wonder at it all.

It may not be the day that matters as much. I think it's more about the run-up to it that's more significant this time around. You know, it's the contemplation versus the actual day.

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I got on my high school newspaper and then I was pretty much off to the races. But I had two older brothers and early on I learned the value of telling on them as a place of power in my family, and so I was pretty well set to be a newspaper reporter.

I'm three credits away from a college degree, and I had always wished that I had paid more attention to my education. I really wish I had pursued that. I wish that I had spent more time learning.

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On September 11<sup>th</sup> I was in line at the San Francisco airport with my partner. We were getting on a plane. I was going to wake up and turn 40 in Italy, where my grandmother's from. And my mother was supposed to be getting on a plane in Denver, my brother was already in Italy and we had aunts who were coming in from another part of the country. And so on September 11<sup>th</sup> I was very excited. I was getting on a plane to go to Italy, and we were going to fly overnight. And I had this whole idea that the first piece of earth I would step on when I was 40 was going to be Italian soil. And, you know, on September 11<sup>th</sup>, we know what happened. They shut the airport down, and I had to stay there and report for the rest of the day for the *San Francisco Chronicle* and we ended up, I think after a couple days, driving down to Ojai and kind of trying to go to a spa or something to celebrate, and it just was, you know, a bunch of rich people in bathrobes watching CNN. And it was quite grim obviously. That was my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I had a dog killed on one of my birthdays when I was kid. I can't remember if it was my 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, but my dog got hit by a car in front of me. I talk about it, but on my birthday it's not like, *Oh, this was the day when that happened.* That doesn't necessarily come up on my birthday, but it definitely comes up. It doesn't haunt my birthday anymore.

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I guess it's more about trying to cut out stuff that doesn't matter more than adding things. I mean, I feel like the work now is so much more internal than external. I certainly want to get more out of the things I do. I'm trying to pay more attention to the joy of every day and of the moment than trying to pick things off a list that I feel I need to get done. I feel like I've spent a lot of years trying to accomplish things and get things squared away in my life, and now I feel like I need to really spend some time being present in my life. That's what I feel like I've missed in the last 50 years. It sounds a little metaphysical and voodoo, but for me it's continuing more of a seeking a spiritual path and a spiritual center and understanding. I mean, that's a big piece now. That looks way different now than it ever did in my life. And also making sure whatever I do I'm really, really having fun and doing what I want to do.

I'm letting go of the *supposed to* part. I feel largely like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing in terms of my work, and I think somehow I got this gift of a three-year-old and that feels pretty significant. And I feel like I can show up for my family and other people, so all those things feel like I'm doing what I think is what I want to be doing. But there are a lot of shoulds I'm trying to let go of. You know, you get nervous. Like, what's the secure choice? What's the right choice? What's the obligation choice? And I think I need to shed some of that.

I think it's a matter of inner happiness. I hate that whole *Follow your bliss*, but following one's own heart. And for me it's been a process of trying to rediscover my heart and rediscover what matters to me and not what I think I ought to be doing or what my obligations were in society. It's about getting back to kind of a more innocent part of myself and to what makes me happy. And that may have to do with better or different sex or it may have to do with different kind of work or it may have to do with spending my time differently. But it's something about letting go. You know, stop hauling that big bag of obligation that one has hauled one's whole life and let go of some of those ideas that what's in that bag is what's going to make you happy. And mid-life crisis, for me, is just about trying to get back to my heart and trying to get back to what matters for me.

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I am probably in the middle of a mid-life crisis right now. I think the cliché of the sports car and, you know, the twenty-year-old wife is certainly a male focus, but let me tell you, I've talked to more friends who are my age who are really rethinking a lot of what they thought they should be doing, rethinking what matters. Some of them are deciding to stay put. Some of them are making really radical changes. But I am here to tell you, a mid-life crisis is part of the sisterhood as well. I can't tell you how many women I know who came to some kind of something at this age in their life and saw a clear choice of one path or the other and took it. Or didn't.

I think I realized I was going to turn 50, and then it occurred to me that I was in a mid-life crisis. I think that's it. And this is the other thing: this is about the age when women either start to go through or are completing menopause, you know, the sort of 48 to 52 range. That's huge. It's a huge change for women in terms of sexuality and in terms of the end of those fertile years, and that sure gives a girl pause. That's a big piece of this for a lot of women.

I think there is something to that, like, *Boy, I'm not getting any younger*. I mean, I think, like, *This might be the last year I play softball* or, you know, *I'm never really going to run a marathon*. But I also think you have to just accept where you are because whining's not going to bring it back, so you might as well get on with it. I still think I'm in a little bit of a denial about how little I can really do with my body.

I play these gals and some of them are in leagues that are really great, competitive, like the kind of ball I used to want to play, and I just can't do it. I'm now like the kind of liability old lady on the team, you know. I mean, my mental game's good but my physical game just isn't there. I can't play with the young kids anymore. I just can't do it. I've got to find one of the older ladies leagues, or I'm going to have to start coaching pretty soon.

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I used to look in the newspaper sometimes at birthdays of famous people, and I always thought, *Well, okay, you know, so and so's only 47. I'm not that old yet. So and so's only 46. I'm not that old yet*. So I used to pride myself on at least being in the middle of the pack of the list of famous people whose birthday it was, and now I'm one of those old people.

You know, we're at the age where our parents are dying, and obviously, you know, we're going to die, but I just don't think, like, *Oh my God, I'm going to die*, because I pretty much get that's going to happen. I'm not scared of death or worried about death, but I do think about being in the wonder of what comes next and being in the wonder of the cycle of life from childhood to old age. I sure have thought about that a lot more.

I have not had a lot of deaths of people my own age around me. I did have a really good friend of mine in Alaska who died a couple of years ago. It was pretty shocking. And she didn't die a very pretty death, so, you know, that makes you pause.

I don't know why people die and the more I try to think about that the worse off I am, so I don't really look at it like, *Oh, why them and why not me?* With this woman, she died of drugs and alcohol, and so I do think about *Why did I stop? Why could I stop and why couldn't she?* And that

certainly gave me pause. But in the cosmic sense, like, *Why is God picking this person and not me?* I've been perfectly happy to let that be a mystery and just trust that somebody else is in charge.

I didn't think I'd make it to 50, to be quite frank with you. I remember when my older brother turned 50. I thought, *Jeez, that's crazy*, but, you know, he's not that much older than me. But I thought, *50?* I said that to my mom the other day. I said, "I'm going to be 50. You have a daughter who's 50." She said, "Oh my God, I can't believe that. You're not going to be 50." And pretty much I am. And, you know, it's just remarkable.

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I know that you usually get more out of giving to someone than taking. I know that acceptance is the key to my happiness. I know that if you just sit around for a little while whatever's going on will change; it's not the end of the world. I know that feelings are not facts. I know that it's worth it to go out of your way to eat better food. I know that it's not a good idea for me to drink. I know that my parents did the best they could.

I really believe we're all going to be all right.

### **#228: Mark Schauer**

After twelve years in the Michigan State Legislature, Democrat Mark Schauer defeated Republican incumbent Tim Walberg in 2008 to become the United States Congressman representing Michigan's 7<sup>th</sup> District. In 2010 Walberg defeated Schauer in a rematch and Schauer now works with unions and non-profits to bring "green jobs" to his state. He spent the weekends around his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday attending a Michigan football game with his father and visiting his three grandsons.

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My wife asked me if I wanted her to throw me a party, and it just didn't really appeal to me. You know, I had done a lot of parties – better known as fundraisers – as a candidate, and it just sort of felt like putting on a fundraiser. And I don't know if this is sort of a transitional time, sort of looking more inward at family, but I'm doing exactly what I want to do on my birthday.

I've always, like my dad, had a youthful appearance. I've looked younger than my age. And so as I've gotten older I've always been like, *Okay, hitting 30, I'm reaching adulthood. Hitting 30, people will take me seriously.* Hitting 40 it's like, *Okay, I'm sort of hitting my professional stride or whatever.* 50, I'm very optimistic about it. I feel great about it. I think it's sort of another one of those moments where you think, *Okay, I'm an adult.* And I feel like there is a certain earned wisdom that comes with that. You're not maybe climbing so hard, you know, learning the hard way and making mistakes and learning from those along the way. Hopefully most of those are in your rearview mirror. So I look at 50 just with great optimism.

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I lost my mom two and a half years ago. I was very, very close to my mom, and she suffered a pretty long, debilitating illness. And honestly, when I get up in the morning I go online and read the newspaper. I read my hometown newspaper and I go to the obituaries. And it's not infrequent that I go to a wake at a funeral home for somebody I know. I don't want to say that it's routine, but in a

way I acknowledge it as part of life. It is part of the life cycle and, you know, we're all mortal. I'm not clear exactly what my philosophy is, but it's not as simple as "when your number's up, your number's up." I guess I would summarize it this way: there are no guarantees. There are no guarantees, and that's part of why, you know, post-losing a brutal election, having served an incredibly intense 14 years in politics, I'm making sure that my priorities are straight. I'm trying to enjoy life and do good things that are important, that fulfill me, that are making the world better, but I'm not sacrificing my family any longer to do that.

I wasn't able to make it to the memorial service or the funeral, but a pretty prominent guy, African-American police officer, active in his church...I knew him. I know his son. While I wasn't able to acknowledge this man's passing, I saw his son in a restaurant this morning. You know, part of it is knowing what's going on, but also being able to sort of reach out to people. And so I saw this man's son and told him that I had been thinking about him and praying for he and his family and, you know, what an honor it was to know his father and what a great man he was.

I think it's just being connected to people, and I think that matters. It mattered to me when my mom died. I was astounded by some people that I had a business connection with, through, you know, being their Congressman or their Senator. You know, they took the time to travel to where I grew up and go to my mom's funeral. I mean, that really mattered. I'll never forget that or forget the people that did that. That really, really, really mattered.

I was there, actually told my mom – my dad was present – told my mom in the hospital that she was not going to get better, and that she probably just had a number of days to live. And I just saw the look in her eye of sort of vulnerability and, you know, a little fear. But I was able to give her some comfort and some assurance that everything was going to be okay. Having that experience, it changes you. And that, combined with some friends around my age that, you know, have died... You know, we're mortal. We don't have guarantees and you better do whatever it takes to be happy.

It's all part and parcel of why I chose public service as a career. I inherited, I think, a sense of caring and compassion for people from my parents and grandparents. And I think particularly my mother, but both of my parents. My dad was a high school teacher and my mom was a nurse. We were raised in the Methodist church and my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, was part of what our values were. And that's why I gravitated to the work that I did in the non-profit sector before politics, and then politics as a means for social change and helping to make people's lives better.

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I got plenty exhausted in my work. I mean, being in Congress, and two brutal campaigns on both sides of a two-year term, is the most exhausting thing I've done in my life, and probably that I ever will do in my life. And there were times where, you know, the personal reservoir was pretty empty, but you just had to sort of press yourself to do it. But now I feel like I'm able to step back and have more choice about what I do. And the stress, a lot of the stress, most of the stress [laughs] is just relieved. Now I'm able to function without all of the stress and a lot of the requirements that were placed upon me. The work that I do still is in the domain of trying to help people, trying to help put people to work, trying to create economic opportunity, trying to deal with, you know, social and economic and environmental justice. I mean, my wife has figured out that I'm not going to be happy

unless I'm involved in doing that in some form or fashion. It's just the stress is dialed down a million degrees and I just feel much more sort of free to choose how to do it.

I feel much more balanced, and I like that. And it's not to say that I won't ever consider running for office again, but I'm not looking. I'm really not looking ahead right at this moment. You know, I lost my job like a lot of Americans lose their jobs, and it messes with you and it is difficult. I knew that I was going through a transition and I just allowed myself to acknowledge that: *This is a transition. You will work your way through it. Be patient and things will be okay.* And I had a set of principles and one of those was to have more balance in my life, to do work that matters to me, that I care about, with people and organizations that I like and enjoy. And have time to exercise, make my family my first priority, travel. You know, do things that I enjoy. And I feel great. I do feel balanced. I do my best to manage that, but I hope this is a model that I can sustain for some time into the future.

There were moments of wondering. I won't say self-doubt, but there were moments of questioning. It was a question of *Am I going to be able to find the perfect job? Or, Am I going to be able to piece together a number of things that really work?* And I had the patience to let it evolve and I didn't panic. I had faith in myself that the respect that I had earned, the goodwill that I had earned would result in me being able to do work that I cared about that would also allow me to continue my standard of living and prepare for retirement. And there were moments. There were definitely moments. And, you know, it caused some stress in my marriage, no question. My wife and I had conversations about money that we'd never had before. There were moments. But I'm fortunate that I didn't panic. I worked as an independent contractor – and I'm thankful for those that provided that opportunity—and I was able to sort of build and piece it together. And, you know, nine months after losing my job I feel like I'm in a really, really, really good space.

I received incredible support. I'm the youngest of two children – my sister's two years older than me – and we both received incredible support, that we were smart and talented and, you know, I took advantage. I was a very good student. I don't think I'm the smartest guy in the world but there aren't too many people who work harder than I do. And I think that's why, you know, I was a high school valedictorian. My parents made it possible for me to go to a good college. And I think, with the support and love and belief from my family, I've got a pretty darn good toolkit. And I think knowing that I had that toolkit gave me the confidence that I needed to weather this small storm and put myself in a really good place.

The good thing is, I loved school. I loved it. A competitive drive was sparked in me at some point there and school certainly was an element of competition and an art, you know, competing against yourself and excelling and pushing. And so my problem, as I was getting sort of late in high school, was trying to figure out what the hell I wanted to be. That was the harder part. It's like, *Okay, you're interested in everything and you're pretty good at everything, so what are you going to be?* That was, in part, why I ended up going to a liberal arts college. And going to Albion College was a great opportunity because, going to college at a liberal arts school, it's like everything is there in front of you. You know, whatever you want to choose, those paths are open to you. And so I knew school was important. I was driven to, you know, do well, sort of dream big, think big. And it took me a long time. I'm not sure I ever really figured out what I wanted to be. I'm not sure I have. But I'm having fun along the way and I think doing some good stuff.

I lost a cousin. He was six years younger than me. He was close. He was like a brother to me. Even though he lived in New Hampshire – we lived in Michigan – he was like a brother to me. And we were so much alike and he died of leukemia. And, you know, that really, really sucked. Really sucked. That was not, that was not right.

Christopher was an inspiration to me and his death was an inspiration to me, and just, you know, motivated me to be the best person that I could be.

I think about Christopher. I know his mom and dad – my aunt and uncle – tell me that they think Christopher would've been a lot like me. And I know that from time to time when they look at me they think that. He would be 43, 44 years old, and he would be a great person doing great things. I don't feel burdened by that. It's more, you know, an occasional reminder. And maybe there is a bit of responsibility, but I don't think it's any additional responsibility.

I think I feel maybe a general responsibility to be, I do feel a general responsibility to be a good person. And to make a difference in small ways – sometimes large ways – in this world. And I don't know any other way to do it. But I know that's the way he would be too. And after he died I thought about him a lot. He was sort of a kindred spirit and a guardian angel for me. And he'll always be with me but, I think he would be approaching life very much the same way that I do.

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Politicians are viewed very negatively [*he laughs*]. I mean, look at Congress's approval rating. But by and large these are folks that just put their heart and soul into this. And make themselves vulnerable in a very unique way. They're actually putting their name on a ballot and are being judged by thousands of people. And winning is sweet. I mean, it is an amazing feeling.

Here's a bizarre thing: I found myself looking on YouTube at my speech, you know, Election Night 2008 when I won. And here I am watching myself. First time I'd seen it. And it was weird but, you know, there's nothing like that sort of exhilaration. I'd like to see my concession speech in 2010 and compare it. But I think what makes this unique is just the vulnerability. And I can attest to a lot of the emotions that come with that loss, a lot of swirling emotions. Some are sort of, you know, feelings of failure, rejection, uncertainty, financial concern. I mean, there's just a myriad of things going on. And I think the commonality with other people losing their job, it tests your resolve.

Earlier in my life I think I was so focused on, and so excited about my work, my career, that I think I had blinders on that affected relationships. You know, I was married once before. I think I've figured out how to be a husband now. It's still a work in progress, for sure, but I think I was a little lopsided when it came to just commitment to my work. It's part of the experience that I talked about. It's like turning 50 you would hope that most of that wisdom, you know, you've earned it and some of the mistakes are in the rearview mirror.

My two favorite words in the English language are "Grandpa Schauer." I just love it.