

Greg Berlanti (C94)



Greg Berlanti is an alumnus of Northwestern University's School of Communication, graduating in 1994. He is frequently identified with the notation "(C94)," indicating his graduation from the School of Communication in the class of 1994.

His notable ties to the university include:

- A major gift: In 2020, Berlanti and his husband, Robbie Rogers, gifted \$2 million to the School of Communication to establish the Barbara Berlanti Professorship in Writing for the Screen and Stage, named after his late mother.
- Alumni involvement: He and fellow classmate and producer Julie Plec (C94) served as the national co-chairs for Northwestern's Reunion 2024.
- A lasting friendship: Berlanti and Plec have remained friends and professional colleagues since their time as classmates at Northwestern.

Berlanti and Plec were classmates and friends at Northwestern and have remained close throughout their incredible careers in Hollywood. Between the pair, they have directed, produced, and overseen countless memorable projects ranging from Riverdale and The Vampire Diaries to Dawson's Creek and Love, Simon—many of which they worked on together. Explore how they have maintained such a meaningful relationship and why they have stayed connected to Northwestern.

Episode 166: Welcome Back Wildcats with Greg Berlanti '94 and Julie Plec '94

Hollywood Producer Expands Dramatic Writing Program

A \$2 million gift from alumnus Greg Berlanti and Robbie Rogers will endow a new professorship at the School of Communication.

Northwestern alumnus Greg Berlanti powers through Hollywood, from teen dramas to comic universes

<https://www.northwestern.edu/magazine/northwestern/spring2004/features/coverstory/sidebar1.htm>

Ever Good

Munching on a bagel, Greg Berlanti (C94) props his sneakered feet onto a conference table covered in yellow legal pads and surrounded by half a dozen writers preparing to plot out the first winter sweeps episode of his WB drama Everwood.

“Thematically, we talked about this episode having a lot to do with sex,” says Berlanti, creator, writer and executive producer

of Everwood. "This will be known as the episode where Ephram lost his virginity."

With boyish good looks, the 31-year-old Berlanti, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, could easily be mistaken for the older brother of his main character Ephram, a soulful teenager who has a tumultuous relationship with his doctor father, Andy, in a small Colorado town to which they move after his mother dies.

Small wonder: the family drama is "fairly autobiographical," Berlanti says. Whether it's sex, drugs, diseases or simply father-son dynamics, Berlanti and his team of writers draw from experience to make the stories authentic.

In this episode, the 14th of season two, Ephram has sex for the first time without telling his father, who in turn is hiding from his son that his own love interest is HIV positive. Meanwhile, Andy is torn between loyalty and duty when the young daughter of a close friend comes to him for birth control.

"With sex and with drugs, do I tell my son it's OK to smoke pot? No. Did I smoke pot? Yes," one writer offers. "Adults are always saying one thing to kids, having done something else."

"Why do we do that?" Berlanti asks.

"We know the pain, and we always think we can prevent our kids from getting hurt," the writer says.

"Protection," Berlanti says. "That's our theme."

Berlanti does not shrink from controversy. Last season's abortion on Everwood was the first on broadcast TV since Maude in November 1972. When Berlanti was in charge of Dawson's Creek, he helped bring Jack's character out of the closet, making him the first gay teen on network TV. Jack also shared the first TV kiss between two guys.

“Network TV is fighting for relevancy,” Berlanti says. “Reality TV works because all the characters are real. Cable is without any restrictions. Network TV is this rarified environment. If it’s going to stick around, it has to remain relevant.”

Berlanti doesn’t win every battle. This season *Everwood* did an episode where a family deals with a child saying the S-word. At first, the network allowed the word to be filmed, but at the last minute, executives pulled the audio. Berlanti insists he wasn’t just trying to be provocative.

The story “has social resonance,” he says. “The goal is to be real. I think so many years of cheesy TV have put a bad taste in people’s mouths.”

Still, the network gives Berlanti a fairly wide leash because of his reputation as an effective show runner. In that position Berlanti is in charge of the entire cast and crew and the delivery — on time and on budget — of 22 episodes of television a year, all of which he shapes from script to screen.

“The ability to put art on one side and hard-hearted commerce on the other, Greg Berlanti has that beautifully,” says Northwestern professor David Downs. “He was able to step back from the whole system and say, ‘I see.’”

While most writers labor for years before running a show, Berlanti rocketed to the top of *Dawson’s Creek* at age 27, one year after getting his first job as a staff writer. He was hired after the show’s creator saw his independent film *The Broken Hearts Club*, a coming-of-age story about gay men. A year later Berlanti reluctantly took charge of the show at the network’s request.

“I was surprised at how well prepared I was,” he said.

Berlanti credits the acting program at Northwestern and points out that he wrote 10 scripts before he ever sold one. He advises aspiring writers to perfect their craft before they get their shot, and

don't get caught up in thinking Hollywood is all money and glamour. Develop your voice and realize the work is hard, he says.

"At any given time, three episodes are being written, three edited, one is being shot and one prepped. I have seven to eight hours of TV in my head," he says, decrying his lack of time for a personal life. "After six years, I don't even bother to fool myself. A lot of great friends have fallen away because it's 14 hours a day, seven days a week for 10 months."

His friends, however, beg to differ. Berlanti manages to bring many of them into his work world.

"What I have loved about him, since he made his mark, is his loyalty," says Downs, who has had recurring roles on Dawson's Creek and Everwood. Berlanti also hired Northwestern friend Rob Nagle (C92) for a couple roles, and he gave Jason Moore (C93) his first opportunity to direct television.

"Single-handedly, he made that happen for me," Moore said. "I'm eternally grateful. Greg is an incredibly generous, loving, giving person. He knows the creative process is about faith and trust. He puts that faith and trust in people, and that's what makes his projects good." — J.H.