

Rancho Mirage Writers Festival: Bill Gates talks new book, living in Coachella Valley

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The daily life of a Desert Sun reporter is a never-ending game of "what will today bring?"

One day you're rounding up restaurant inspection reports at your desk, and the next you're interviewing celebrities on the red carpet at the Palm Springs International Film Awards ... or sitting across from one of the most influential people in the world: Bill Gates.

It's no secret that the Microsoft co-founder spends time in the Coachella Valley — he's often spotted at the BNP Paribas Open and much has been written about his home at the exclusive Vintage Club in Indian Wells — but interviewing Gates, like he was any regular Joe, seemed like a nonstarter. Until his team reached out to do just that.

Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder and author of "Source Code," a memoir about his childhood, stands for a photograph in Indian Wells, Calif., on Jan. 6, 2025. Gates is set to speak at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival in February.

Gates has an impressive list of accomplishments. He, along with Paul Allen, revolutionized computer software and helped make personal computers more accessible, and he's dedicated most of his life to philanthropic efforts. But this interview wasn't about all that. Instead, we were chatting about his upbringing in Washington, which included being a rebellious young boy who, unsurprisingly, found an interest in computers.



Bill Gates, Microsoft co-founder and author of *Source Code*, a memoir about his childhood, stands for a photograph in Indian Wells, Calif., on Jan. 6, 2025. Gates is set to speak at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival in February.

Gates is set to release his most personal book yet, "Source Code," a memoir about his childhood, his time at a private prep school and how he got his start in programming, on Feb. 4. He will also speak at a special Rancho Mirage Writers Festival event at 4 p.m. Feb. 10 in the Rancho Mirage Library. His favorite author, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, will be interviewing him. The festival, taking place Feb. 5 through 7, is sold out.

Bill Gates' Palm Springs-area connections

How do you start a conversation with a tech pioneer? By asking him the same question you would ask any other local resident: How long have you lived here?

His parents bought a home in the Vintage Club community in 1989 and would visit on the weekends.

"Our family was golfing quite a bit at that time," Gates recalled. "It's only later that I more got involved in the tennis thing. Now I golf very little, and I play tennis and pickleball a great deal."

Gates continued the tradition of traveling to the Coachella Valley on the weekends until the COVID-19 pandemic, when his sisters also bought homes in the area. Now, when he's not traveling the world for his philanthropic work, he spends November through May in the desert, enjoying all the walking and hiking opportunities the environment has to offer.

"Not as many trees like the Northwest," he added with a smile.

It's not long into our interview that I relax, and it appears as though Gates does too. Even though I've had the opportunity to interview well-known people over the years, I haven't had a one-on-one, in-person chat like this before. Not to mention, Gates has a very precise minute-by-minute schedule, and you find yourself constantly checking the clock to see how much time is left. But once Gates begins talking and making me laugh, all those built-up nerves I had going into the interview start to go away.



A 1965 photo of the Gates family.

This is the first time that Gates will be speaking at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, and it's the perfect place for him to be. In "Source Code," he shares that he's loved literature and reading since childhood, and he was actually an assistant librarian during his elementary school days, where his main task was finding missing books.

He's even more excited to be interviewed by Goodwin. Her latest book, "An Unfinished Love Story," is both a personal account of her relationship with her late husband, Dick Goodwin, an aide and speechwriter to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, as well as an exploration of American history in the 1960s. Gates called it a "phenomenal book" and was eager to have a deep discussion about it, but he cut himself short. He simply ended with "I love books."

Gates said friends recommend a lot of books, but once he likes an author, he tends to gravitate toward their work. One he had just finished up at the time of our interview was "Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI" by Yuval Noah Harari, who previously wrote "Sapiens."

From rebellious child to pioneering tech giant, Gates covers it all in 'Source Code'

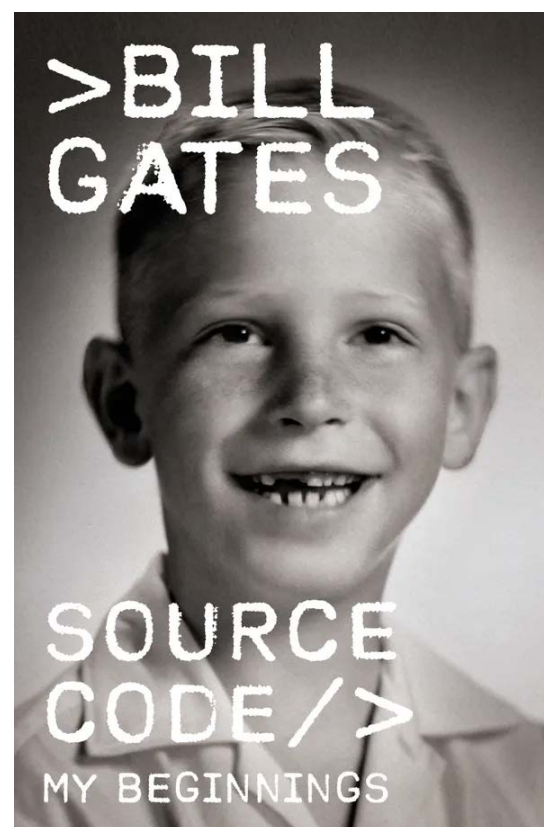
Though Gates has written a number of books over the years — including "How to Avoid a Climate Disaster" in 2021 and "How to Prevent the Next Pandemic" in 2022 — this is the first time he's giving readers an in-depth look into his early life.

About five years ago, the idea for a memoir came about when Rob Guth, former reporter for the Wall Street Journal and "Bill Gates chronicler," began to gather materials for a single autobiography. However, Gates said that book was "getting too long and complicated," as it was trying to incorporate too much from his life.

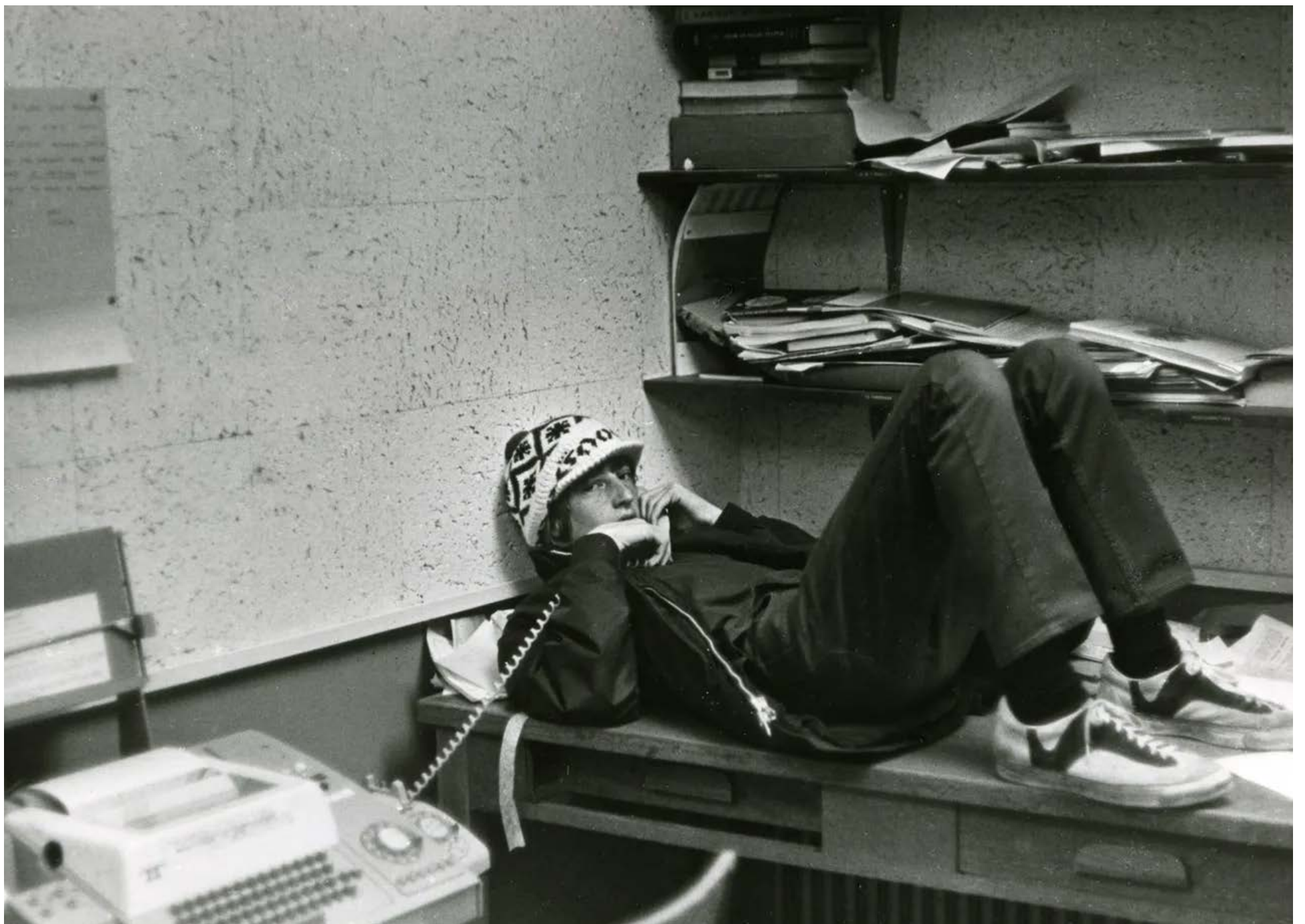
Instead, they decided to focus solely on "this period of time that completely shaped me, where I can talk about my parents and Kent (Evans) and Paul (Allen)," he said. "That came together pretty well. We didn't want it to be too long, and it's definitely been fun going back over."

Not to mention, the timing lined up perfectly: This year, Gates will turn 70, Microsoft will celebrate its 50th anniversary, the Gates Foundation will turn 25 and his father would have turned 100.

"Source Code" dives into Gates' quaint childhood in the suburbs of Seattle, where the only major drama that ever seemed to happen was a tornado in 1962. As he details what he called "the least crazy childhood one could imagine," he also shares quite a bit about his parents, sisters and grandparents, particularly his maternal grandmother, Adelle Thompson, who was a whiz at card games.



Bill Gates' new book, *Source Code* will be released Feb. 4.



Bill Gates at Lakeside in 1973.

It might surprise some readers to learn that Gates was a rebellious child who didn't want to respect his parents or think they should make all the rules, and he wasn't that great of a student, at least until math and reading caught his attention. When he was 13, he was enrolled in Lakeside School, a prestigious private prep school where his interest for computers took off. Given all the technology we have available today, it's a bit surreal to read about a young boy discovering BASIC code, writing his first computer program for a game of tic-tac-toe and the journey it would eventually take him on.

"Microsoft's early slogan was 'A computer on every desk and in every home,' and sometimes because people thought it was so weird we left out the 'in every home' part because people were like, 'What would they do with them?'" Gates said. "There really was no software industry. A tiny, tiny little industry. Now the most valuable companies are software-centric. ... But to have a dream that became one of the greatest change agents of my lifetime, starting with the microprocessor, PC, the phone, the internet and now getting into the early AI era, I've been lucky enough to be involved."

In line with his rebellious nature, Gates and his friends figured out how to hack into the computer systems at school to get free computer time, but once they were discovered, they were banned from using them. Of course, that didn't stop them, and eventually their skills were utilized to make computer programs for their school. By age 17, Gates had the proverbial 10,000 hours of practice needed to be considered an expert at computers, which even he admitted was "ridiculous."

"That was the time the microprocessor is coming, and the insight that I have, together with Paul, of, OK, software is the key thing here, let's just do a pure software company, all emerges from that time at Lakeside and Harvard," Gates said.



Bill Gates and Paul Allen at a teletype machine during the 1969-1970 school year at Lakeside prep school.

At one point in the book, Gates writes that "the climate of limitless potential was the backdrop for my early life," noting the county's optimism of sending people to the moon, cartoons like "The Jetsons" depicting a high-tech future and a slew of inventions, like the first laser, factory robot and silicon chip. Had he been born at a different time, Gates believes his life path would have been "utterly different."

Gates said he enjoyed the process of writing the book, even if he had to revisit some challenging times in his life, such as the death of his friend Kent at a young age or the tumultuous relationship he had with his parents and eventual business partner Allen (Gates said "he was amazing, but different in terms of how he did things and thought about things"). The editing process was a bit tedious, he admits, and would take several hours at a time because he'd be thinking back on the past.

Gates: 'The adults got such a kick out of me'

When you've managed to reach a level of success that surpasses your wildest dreams, it may be hard to fully process it all. When asked if he's in awe of his younger self, Gates is quick to praise his parents and teachers for their support and the exposure he had, rather than prop himself up.

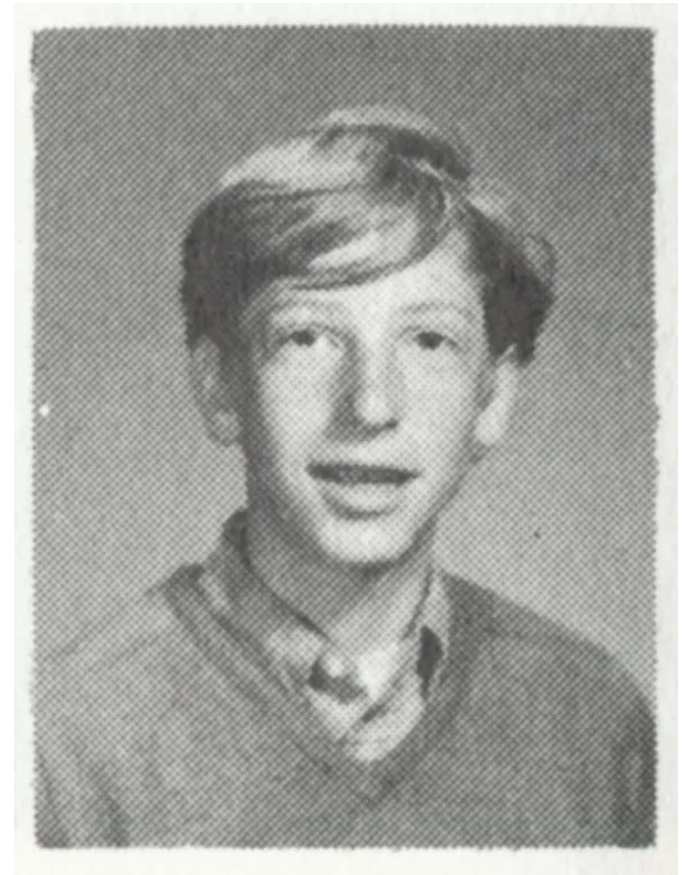
Bill Gates' Lakeside school directory photo during the 1971-1972 school year.

However, when he does reflect on his younger self, he said there was "some kind of ambitiousness or willingness to be contrarian" within himself which clearly contributed to his success. Additionally, he spent a lot of time interacting with adults, whether through family friends or his work in school, and his social skills were developed before most of his peers.

"As I did various programming things, the adults got such a kick out of me, and I enjoyed their advice and help a lot," Gates said.

He viewed American theoretical physicist Richard Feynman as a role model growing up. Feynman said that in order to do something different, you have to approach work with a different point of view. Gates and his pals saw the potential in the microprocessor, while the adults around did not believe computing would take off as it did. In the end, those who were curious enough to ask questions helped advance the field of possibilities. That advice paid off in the end, and it's what he encourages other people to do in their work.

"Source Code" may also inspire people to chase after what they love most. As Gates' story shows, sometimes all it takes is finding your spark, being exposed to it for a long time and continuously wanting to improve your skills (also a bit of luck). He also hopes his book gives hints about raising an unusual kid and directing excess energy into productive avenues.



Bill Gates' Lakeside school directory photo during the 1971-1972 school year.



Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates

"I got exposed to writing code and told, 'Hey, that code is not good enough,'" Gates said. "If you obsess about something, which in my case, a high percentage of it was 'hey I want to write better code, let me look at other people's code,' getting feedback, you can really get unusually good at something. It's like Bobby Fischer playing chess night and day."

At 11:40 a.m. on the dot, our interview came to a close. Gates and I only reached the tip of the iceberg when it comes to his childhood, let alone his fascinating life, but he's planning on writing two more memoirs in the future about Microsoft and his philanthropic efforts. Who knows, because we live in a climate of limitless potential in the 21st century, maybe we'll get another chance to dive further into his life.