

Veteran journalist Reddy to retire; influenced O&E's style, content

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

His turning point came when he was a 26-year-old Chicago cab driver sitting in a Halsted Street cab with a pul. The pul advised John Reddy to go to college.

"I'll be 30 by the time I get out," Reddy objected.

"You're going to be 30 anyway," said the friend, and that settled it.

"I went down to the University of Illinois at Navy Pier. I majored in journalism," Reddy recalled.

At 30, married and with one child, Reddy earned a U-I degree and got a job on the Sterling (Ill.) Daily Gazette. The one-time Navy carpenter and cab driver had launched his career in people-oriented journalism.

The working part of his career will end March 31 when Reddy, a Bloomfield Township resident, retires at 65 as vice president for editorial of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this and more than 60 other weekly and semi-weekly newspapers in Michigan, Ohio and northern Kentucky. He'll spend the month of March breaking in his successor, Jeanne Towar.

Making a difference

"Reddy wanted to make a difference. Many agree he has."

"I used to get the bulldog edition of the Chicago Tribune. People used to stand around, waiting for the papers, and they always complained about papers," he said. "Many Republicans thought that flaming young liberals were running the (suburban) papers. My view was that anyone has a right to have a position fairly and well represented."

Rich Perlberg, now general manager of the HomeTown Newspapers headquartered in Howell, was among many who absorbed Reddy's message.

"There is one overriding dogma of John's," said Perlberg. "When someone is upset about our news coverage or editorial position of a particular issue, we should be able to ask, 'Was your position fairly and accurately reported in the paper?'"

"If we are doing our jobs, the answer has to be 'yes.' And most fair-minded people, even if they disagree with our overall coverage, will eventually concede that we have done our job if we have hit that standard," Perlberg said.

Next Reddy became a community editor in Palatine, Ill., for Paddock newspapers in the northwestern Chicago suburbs, then moved to the Chicago Sun-Times' suburban and city desks. He was impressed by the fact that the woman who interviewed him for the job had helped make journalism — and film — history by spotting a cleaning woman's classified ad that said "Call Northside 777." The paper's investigation freed an innocent man from prison.

"I came here (to Michigan) 30 years ago this month. The National Newspaper Association put my resume in the hands of Henry Hogan (then publisher of the Birmingham Eccentric). By then I had changed my mind about looking for a new job, but Hank said, 'Don't say no until you come over and look.'"

"Joan (his wife) encouraged me. We drove over here with four kids and looked. There was a sense of community here."

"That was the time of the fair housing ordinance fight (following the 1967 Detroit riot). I told him he had to support the fair housing ordinance or I wouldn't come. Hank was very supportive of the editorial department and

of me as an editor.

"I was managing editor. We created the Troy edition, then West Bloomfield, Rochester and Southfield. I was managing editor while all that went on."

"Then Hank bought the paper in Cincinnati and needed someone to run it. I was there from 1972 to '76," he said.

Reddy downplays his own work as a general manager, but others don't. HomeTown's Perlberg recalls how Reddy stepped in as manager of that group of six weeklies after Rolly Peterson's sudden death on Christmas Eve of 1989.

"Reddy's death was traumatic," Perlberg said. "John walked into a shell-shocked division and provided the leadership and guidance necessary to keep operations stable."

"He wisely led those with experience lead the way when appropriate, but he was far from a shell-shocked division and provided the leadership and guidance necessary to keep operations stable. Then he helped the new GM (general manager) during a 90-day transition period and gracefully stepped aside."

But that's getting ahead of the saga.

Heading the merger

In 1975 Reddy was brought back from Cincinnati to be executive editor of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, formed a year earlier by the merger of Hogan's Eccentric group with Phil Power's Observer group.

"When John was in charge," said board chair Power, "the company's newspapers won more state and national awards for editorial excellence than any other group of community newspapers in the country."

Reddy likes to tell reporters — young and old — to observe people browsing in a bookstore. "If they see dialogue, they'll read it. If they see long, gray paragraphs of prose, they'll skip it or put it down. Dialogue is people."

The moral: Use direct quotes to tell a good news story. So that means part of the business is listening to people.

Another lesson is to make use of graphics — charts, pictures and graphs that tell the "what" of a story. "That frees up the writer to explain the why and how and the implications."

While media critics often deplore USA Today as "McPaper," Reddy praises it for use of charts. "Charts were slow to come into newspapers because no one is driving it. It takes senior management and well-trained young professionals to drive it."

More than boosters

Part of the business of suburban newspapers is helping to build communities.

"We're building communities, not as blind boosters, because they suffer from failed credibility."

"There's an implied social contract. We have to fulfill our readers' expectations," he said, hinting at the consequences for an editor if he or she fails to display changes in the trash pickup schedule on page 1 or the rites of passage, such as marriages and deaths.

"There's a reward for those who fulfill that social contract: 'They (readers) will give you license to talk about the prickly things that disturb their consciences and make them uncomfortable. The single most important distinguishing characteristic is its editorial page and its editorial voice.'"

Oh, and a good paper should be "predictably unpredictable."

At The Observer & Eccentric, Reddy moved up the ladder to general manager (1977-82) and corporate vice president for editorial (since 1982), with fill-in stints, as Perlberg noted, managing various divisions.

Reddy is blunt about the sometime adversarial role of editorial and advertising people within newspapers.

"There are not enough good editorial people in senior management. The reason is that they refuse to learn anything about management. The only way you can have a free press is to have an economically sound press."

"There's really a strong need for senior management to have an advocate for the editorial department. It's easier for them (management) to remember that if it's personified in their midst."

"I'm not sure how well I did, but at least they had to look at me before they walked all over the editorial department."

Power is sure Reddy did well. "He used the position as a bully pulpit from which to preach the special role and notable successes of community journalism."

"We will miss his constant voice counsel and his unfailing attention to making our craft as community journalists better," Power said.

A playwright?

And soon comes retirement.

"I saw a couple of people retire, and they were like fish out of water. That's not going to happen to me," vowed Reddy, relating how he arose at 4 that morning to practice on the piano (Albeniz and Chopin).

"Joan has always wanted to go on an archeological dig. I can sit and do water colors while she does that."

"My goal is to write some plays. It's an extension of (a reporter's use) of quotes. There needs to be a chemistry between the playwright, the director and actors. You have to construct it so they (director and actors) have some ownership in a way that won't distort it."

So far he has written three vignettes, but details must wait until opening night.

There was something he failed to appreciate as an 18-year-old in the Navy that he has been correcting — foreign travel. This year he and Joan will see the cave art in France.

After studying Spanish in high school and French in college, he is working on Chinese. "I'm listening to tapes. If anybody wants to help me talk Chinese, I'd be glad to hear from them," he said.

It's more than just knowing the words. It's understanding how other people think because, said Reddy:

"I truly enjoy knowledgeable and stimulating people."



Signing off: John Reddy editorial vice president of the O&E's parent spent 35 years shaping suburban journalism.

Oakland students win in bridge contest

The Mackinac Bridge Authority and the Michigan Department of Transportation have announced Kate Warren is the first-place winner in the Mackinac Bridge 40th Anniversary Essay/Poetry Contest in the ninth through twelfth-grade category. The West Bloomfield High School senior will receive a \$500 savings bond.

Warren's entry was one of 1,880 entries submitted from

across the state to celebrate the anniversary of the "Mighty Mac" on Nov. 1, 1997.

Winners in the fifth through eighth-grade category included first-place winner Chris Allen of Clarkston Middle School and two Lake Orion Scripps Middle School students: Sean M. Martin and Christina Valka, who received third and fifth place honors.

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