

Meet The Press

Alumni bring the news to the Garden State and beyond

By Mary Galloway Dovey '75, '96

Mary G. Dovey '75, '96 is a writer and public relations professional. She lives in Egg Harbor City.

Toss a pencil across almost any newsroom in New Jersey and it's bound to be caught by a Glassboro State-Rowan graduate. Long before the journalism program began in early 1970, alumni were working at newspapers throughout the state. Today, they and the 'J' grads who followed are among those at the top of their profession, helping to shape the content, the feel and the future of newspapers in the Garden State.

New Jersey's editors and reporters continue to help Rowan students and one another. While they may be fiercely competitive, they are also part of a fraternity where the salary is fair at best, and the hours long and unpredictable. The skills necessary to succeed include an insatiable curiosity about the world, the ability to learn quickly, write well and have an overwhelming interest in lives of people often far different than their own. It also helps to have a healthy skepticism, a commitment to the public good and a never-ending supply of energy because each day, the task begins again.

"It's very dynamic work with hard hours. But it's different everyday," says *Star-Ledger* reporter Steve Chambers '83, who covers general assignments and religion for the 14th largest newspaper in the nation. He calls reporting "public service work."

"Everybody thinks reporters are vultures; that's stereotyped. I've met a lot who really care about the people they write about," he says. Once a week, Chambers is part of a group of *Star-Ledger* reporters who volunteer to mentor

student journalists at Malcolm X. Shabazz High School in Newark. Chambers also makes time to help other kids at La Casa de Don Pedro, a Latino social service agency in Newark, with homework after school. "I've written a lot about kids in the community and I didn't want to just talk about them as statistics," he says.

Bill Long '61 emphasizes acquiring and reporting local news as editor-in-chief of three hometown newspapers, *The Gloucester County Times*, *Today's Sunbeam* and *The Bridgeton Evening News*.

Together, the papers are part of the 10th largest newspaper chain in the country and reach more than 50,000 readers in southern New Jersey.

"It's impossible for any other medium to convey local news in as meaningful a fashion as a hometown paper," says Long, who credits former Department Chair George Reinfeld for teaching him the importance of re-writing, and English Professor David Lloyd for convinc-

ing him that he could "put one word in front of another and have it make sense."

Long proudly calls much of what his newspapers present "refrigerator journalism"—school honor rolls and awards. "This gives us the foundation to do enterprise, hardball stories. People aren't saying that we're taking away from the things they want to see," he says.

Long and his staff actively seek feedback. Once a year, *The Times* holds a workshop open to every organization in the region. "We explain how to get things into the paper, and answer criticisms and comments. In fact, I tell them to envision

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Melanie Burney

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a bull's eye on me and fire away," he says.

Long believes that each newspaper has had a positive effect on people's lives. He says, "Sometimes it may be informing them, at other times, righting wrongs, or giving people a voice. It's been very fulfilling."

At *The Press of Atlantic City*, southeastern New Jersey's major daily and one of the state's few remaining family-owned newspapers, editor-in-chief Paul Merkoski '66, is surrounded by Glassboro and Rowan grads from several decades to whom he preaches the same message—to involve ordinary people in their stories.

The Press invites readers to be part of its editorial boards and often advertises upcoming features, asking readers to contact the paper and share their thoughts and experiences on subjects from serious—the Atlantic City tunnel project—to silly—readers' favorite light bulb jokes.

"It's a natural way for editors to overcome reluctance of staffers to hang out with non-big shots," Merkoski says, adding that reporters should take the same delight in seeking out information and asking questions of everyone from the person living under the boardwalk to Donald Trump.

Associated Press (AP) correspondent Melanie Burney '84 writes dozens of stories each week that appear in many N.J. newspapers and become the basis for the news at radio and television stations that

carry the AP wire. Often, her work is carried across the country and throughout the world, yet many of these stories never carry her name—only the line, "By The Associated Press."

"The AP is everything to everybody, and our initial audience is editors. We do the big stories and whatever else in between. I've done breaking news, sports, financial, crime scene, agricultural pieces. To write a story that makes sense, I've had to learn to ask all the right questions. Sometimes, it means out-shouting the media mob because there's only one moment," says Burney, who covers Burlington, Camden, Gloucester, Cumberland and Salem Counties.

On breaking news of national interest such as the May 1997 murder of Pennsville cemetery caretaker William Reese by suspected serial killer Andrew Cunanan, Burney dictates the story over the telephone to an editor who will put it out on the national newswire. Her notes have to be accurate. "The first time I did it I was in an absolute panic.

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As an assignment editor, Phil Wajda '88 makes sure that he has the right reporters in the right place at the right time. After eight years with *The Courier-Post*, the state's fourth largest newspaper, Wajda left in August to become the assignment editor at *The Times-Union*, the Albany, New York region's major daily.

Making news decisions depends on instinct and organization and he has thrived on the challenge. "The writing always came easily to me, but it was talking to people and listening to their stories that has kept me most interested," he says. "Every day is fresh. You have the opportunity to do something





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Paul Merkoski

new, follow up, or make something better. In fact, you have 365 chances to get it right."

The journalists give the University a lot of the credit for their success. "By the time I got out of school, I was able to really hit the ground running," says Chambers, who began writing for the student newspaper, *The Whit*, during his first week of freshman year under then-adviser, *The Philadelphia Inquirer's* George Anastasia. "It felt like I had already been working," Chambers says. "I'm very appreciative that my school got me into a great career."

Former *Courier-Post* editor Dave Hoh '76, another veteran of the Rowan journalism program, had the greatest influence on Burney. As an adjunct professor at Rowan, Hoh was the first working reporter and editor she had ever met, and he went to great lengths to encourage her. "When I first came to Glassboro I wasn't that familiar with the journalism program. It was only after I graduated and saw the respect for the program by my colleagues in the field that I knew my degree was worth something," she says.

It was Rowan Communications grad Bob DeMore '75, a journalism teacher at Burlington City High School, who first recognized Wajda's talent and urged him to seriously pursue his interest. Later, Rowan Professor Jack Gillespie, then Bill Long, Wajda's first editor at *The Gloucester County Times*, convinced

him that this was the work he was meant to do.

Long continues to recruit as many as 10 to 12 reporters a year from smaller papers, Rowan and other schools. "They're not going to get rich," he says, "but they'll have fun."

Merkoski agrees that the career pay-off for reporters won't necessarily show up in their bank accounts. "You'll never make much money at it," he says. "But if you're the kind of person who wants to write, do graphics or take pictures, or who is imaginative and intellectually curious, it's a wonderful life."

Wajda advises aspiring reporters to develop a knowledge of events and the world around them. And to read. A lot. "It's important for younger people to realize that journalism isn't a 9 to 5 profession. You have to have a passion for this business."

While computer technology has revolutionized newspaper publishing, the Internet has made the field smarter, Chambers says. "With electronic libraries and e-mail, you can be a lot more accurate. You have so much stuff at your fingertips." This is especially true for reporters who cover trends, he says.

Unfortunately, technology also has its downside. "We have a standard phrase: 'You've got the job, but don't let me see you in the newsroom,'" says Merkoski. Reporters can extend their reach and get contacts through the Internet, but they risk ignoring local people if they use it

too heavily, he explains.

Merkoski believes that newspapers have a strong future. "I can't imagine a world where people wouldn't want someone else to take all the information, distill it for them, package it all together, print it and deliver it to their door. And do it all for 50 cents. Newspapers give people something to laugh at or be saddened by. They are a habit." ■