

# Remembrance of Bob Reid, Devoted Journalism Teacher

By Ray Elliott

I was lucky: I knew UI journalism professor Bob Reid when I was a high school journalism teacher; I knew him when I was a graduate student in the journalism department and he was my professor; I knew him when I was his colleague at the university; and I knew him as a friend all through those years.

He was a prince of a man, an extraordinary teacher.

Don't get me wrong. He wasn't always Mr. Nice Guy. But he was a dedicated teacher and an astute judge of human nature who made the world he lived in a much better place for having been there. And he taught journalism like his students were out in the world instead of in the classroom.

My initial encounter with Bob as a graduate student was in his "Issues in Journalism" class not long after he came to the university. We sat around a conference table and talked about what we'd read and whatever issues he thought important and relevant. He'd play the devil's advocate, challenge us to provide facts to back up our positions and cajole us to think about what we were saying.

It was one of the most thought-provoking classes I ever had as a student, and one I tried to emulate as a teacher. He gave us a great deal of freedom and latitude in selecting topics to write about for assigned papers. I liked that and considered myself a fairly decent writer, but I wasn't the best proofreader to ever walk through his classroom door.

I still have the paper in my files where I'd spelled Pulitzer two different ways in five misspellings of one of the most well-known names in American journalism. Normally that would have earned me an F on the paper. But Reid made some constructive comments about the contents under the A- grade before he wrote, "Your copy editing was pretty sloppy in a few places, Mr. Pooltzer! But, on the whole, nice work."

The brief compliment took some of the sting out of the biting comment about my sloppy copy editing. Since then, I've never seen the name or never started to edit any piece of copy without thinking of Bob Reid and the importance of good proofreading. A good many other things Reid said or did have stuck with me through the years, none more so than the deep and abiding care he had for journalism and for the students he taught. And I'm sure there are hundreds, if not thousands, of his former students who have similar thoughts of him daily.

He was everything a teacher in any discipline should be.

Another lesson he taught extremely effectively was the importance of meeting deadlines. I'd taught in high schools for a number of years before I arrived for in his class and had heard every excuse known to high school teachers for late papers: even that the dog ate it. And we were always expected by students and parents to give extensions and not penalize the student for missing a deadline.

But Reid had told us at the beginning of the semester that short of a serious illness and a doctor's note to that effect, a death in the family (or maybe our own) or a natural disaster that we could document and prove we were affected by that assignments were due when the bell rang for class. I took him at his word. Not everyone did in the beginning.

When one of the first assignments was due, most of us passed our papers around the table where he sat collecting them when the bell rang. One young graduate student came rushing into the classroom about 30 seconds late. He walked up to Reid and held out the paper.

"What's this? Reid asked.

"My paper," the student said.

"I don't want it. You missed the deadline."

"But the bell just rang."

"And you missed the deadline. The paper just went to press."

End of conversation. End of story. End of students missing deadlines.

I thought of that last year when Bob had retired because of heart problems and I was teaching the "Introduction to Journalism" class as a visiting lecturer. Like many journalism teachers, I included Bob's definition of a deadline in the syllabus and asked the teaching assistants to strictly enforce deadlines.

No longer teaching in a high school, I was quite amazed one morning to receive a call from a parent (in Chicago) of a student who had missed his morning bus and had arrived at his discussion class a few minutes late and the teaching assistant refused to take his paper.

"That's a bit too strict, isn't it?" the parent asked.

"Not really," I said, thinking of Bob. "The press was rolling."

Reid would have nodded in approval.

Soon after his retirement, I got a call from a student of Bob's from some 20 years ago wanting to know how he was and if he'd quit smoking yet. I thought he had but I wasn't sure. He'd smoked since long before I'd known him. And when the powers that be banned smoking from campus buildings, you could still see Reid outside puffing away on occasion.

Next time I saw him I told him about the call and asked about the smoking.

"Oh, yeah, I've quit," he said with a twinkle in his eyes and that infectious little smile he often flashed when he was amused. "Should have done it a long time ago and would have if I'd known it was so easy."

On the day he died, I'd just finished opening and reading his Christmas card when my wife called to inform me of his death. It hit me hard.

"I'm doing better than a year ago," he'd written in the card and mailed just the day before, "and have learned that treading water rather than swimming laps has its own joys, especially the freedom to read, read, read."

Bob Reid read voraciously and "swam laps" furiously for a long time. He gave his all for his work, and he'll be missed. But he had been working with the UI College of Communications and Dean Ron Yates to establish the Bob Reid Teaching Development Fund in journalism.

Too bad he won't be around to see the fund up and running. Teaching young journalism students to have that "fire in the belly" about their work was his life. And developing teachers to follow in his footsteps is a fitting legacy.