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COM225  
Dick Feagler  
April 4, 2006

Who is Dick Feagler?  
(written as a news column)

My husband always tells me, “You waited again until the last minute to do your homework.”

Well, I did. When it comes to writing, my best writing happens at the last minute. At the same time, my daughter, who is 6, asks me to read her a bedtime story before going to bed.

“Not tonight Cassi. I have homework to do,” I said to her. “I promise I will read to you tomorrow night.”

Tonight, I’m writing about Dick Feagler.

Dick Feagler came to Cleveland State University on April 4. He was asked to speak to us about how journalism has changed in the last 40 plus years that he has been in the newspaper business. Not only has he had 40 plus years in the business, 35 years has been as a news columnist.

I, along with other students, had an opportunity to ask Feagler questions after the presentation. One student said to Feagler that, even though he didn’t like Feagler’s comments about certain topics, he did like how Feagler presented the topics.

I was about the third or fourth student to ask questions. In our Media Writing class, we had been working over the past week, coming up with questions to ask him. They included topics like: advice for aspiring journalists; the best part of his job; his preference in working for television or radio; and inspirations for column ideas. With all of these ideas that could have been asked, none of my classmates wanted to get up and ask.

I got up and asked Feagler, “Have you ever been sued for writing your columns? And if so, which ones?”

Before asking my question, like everyone before me, I told him my name and major. “My name is Cathy Hennes. I am an English major, and I like to write.”

Before answering my question, he says, “Well so was I, an English major.”

Then he went into his answer. In all his years of writing columns, he had never been sued. He had only received a threat for a story he did. He received a threat by a sheriff from a county in the middle of the state.

There had been a shooting. Feagler said the sheriff was browbeating the wife of the suspect for information on where the sheriff could find the husband.

At that time, there was no air conditioning. The windows were open, and you could hear what the sheriff was saying. Because Feagler could hear everything that the sheriff said, he called in and wrote a story, with quotes from the sheriff.

Well, Feagler said the story made the sheriff look bad. How could Feagler know this information; he must have made it up.

He said that sheriff threatened to come up to Cleveland and shoot him.

Well, when he got to Medina, his better senses got to him, and the sheriff did not follow-through with his threat.

At that time, there were no such things as computers to transmit stories back to the main newspaper office for tight deadlines. At that time, you had to phone in your news stories, especially if you had a deadline to meet. No technology.

He said he realized how technology has changed, not only for news, but everything in general over the past 40 years. He talked about how he traveled long distances to give speeches, like the presentation he was giving for Cleveland State.

Being an older man and traveling long distances, the first thing he wants to do when he arrives is use the restroom. But, he says that the host of the event always wants him to immediately “meet some people.” The first thing he wants to do when he arrives is not “meet some people.”

He wants to use the restroom. He uses the restroom and washes his hands.

After washing his hands, he realizes that there are no paper towels to dry his hands, only automatic hand-drying machines. The machine has a sign that says to rub briskly.

He says that you could rub your hands briskly for an hour, even if you rubbed down to the bare bones and the bones will still be wet.

The situation was that when he would come out of the restroom with wet hands to “meet some people,” everyone knew he was in the restroom. They knew because Feagler had to wipe off his hand on his rear to shake or else share his wetness with the “people.”

From that, he got down to the business of why he was there.

During the lecture, he said that he started out in the news business in 1963. He was right out of the Army. Feagler said that there were two newspapers printed during that time, The Cleveland Press and The Plain Dealer. The Cleveland Press was the largest at the time and printed their papers in the afternoon, six days a week.

Growing up in Sandusky, Ohio, a Greyhound bus would bring five to six copies of The Cleveland Press. Unlike The Plain Dealer, you could always find it every morning in Sandusky.

At the time, television only had three main networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. In the Cleveland area, he believed there were two other stations, an independent channel, Channel 61 and PBS. At the time, the news was only 15 minutes long. They only showed still photos of the news stories they were covering and had no video footage, like they do today.

At one point early in his career, during the mid-1970s, the news business in Cleveland went on strike. The NBC channel in Cleveland asked Feagler to come and read stories for them on the air. At first, he said he didn't want the gig because he didn't want to have anything to do with television.

He was a newspaper man.

But, he told them why not?

The first time he went on the air, he realized what he was doing was reading news stories that had been written for television. He said to the audience to bear with him. He knew he wasn't good looking enough for television, nor was his voice very good for television. But, he had mouths to feed because of the newspaper strike. As soon as the strike was over, he would be gone.

The television people were so excited about what Feagler said on the air. But, Feagler told them he was only telling the truth.

Once the newspaper strike was over, the television people asked him to stay. And stay he has, for over 30 years.

He has written stories about many topics. He wrote about the first trial of Dr. Sam Sheppard. Some of his most recent news columns include: "Immigrants always work their way here," "Afghanistan would fester fine without us," and "PC dimwits, have you any sense? No sir, no sir, we're quite dense."

Feagler is very critical in his writing of the government and governmental agencies. But, why not? He's a newspaper columnist. It's his right to write about the bad government.

He spoke of how he discussed with his wife about the possibility of retiring. He felt he was getting into a cycle of rewriting the same column over, "same column, just the names have been changed."

He said that when you write a column for too long, you become a character of one's self.

Then came George W, he says. He has gotten enough new ideas for columns since George W. Bush became president of the United States. "And he hasn't let me down yet!"

So, he figures he will get a few more good years of writing before retiring.

He said to never reuse your news columns. That is a huge "no-no."

He also said that he still believes in the inverted pyramid for news writing, although much of the news stories written today are more sensationalized than when he began. There used to only be feature stories, columns, and editorials. Now all three types mesh together, like spumoni, he said.

He didn't know where the newspaper business was going. He did say that writers have to be flexible.

Now, back to my question that I asked. I was very elated to know that such a well-known news columnist didn't have a degree in journalism, but in English. A recent visit to his newspaper, The Plain Dealer, awarded me with the knowledge that the editors didn't want to speak with us as students because we weren't "journalism majors," which I shared with Feagler after the presentation. He couldn't believe it either.

I am so glad I asked my question. I had the courage to stand up and ask the question, when my classmates didn't. Plus, I was elated to know that a news writer could have a degree other than journalism to write for a news paper.

Of all the questions asked, no one asked him to give advice to aspiring new journalism students.

How sad.