

Writing Exercise – Don White

Journalism has a heart

By Jeff McDanald

At the close of a long and respectable career as a newspaper writer, editor and publisher, Don White has a confession to make. “The first words of mine that were ever put into print were the best thing I ever wrote.”

He was referring to an impassioned letter that he wrote 38 years ago to his hometown newspaper, the Somerset Commonwealth-Journal in Somerset, Kentucky. White was in his early 20s, and the country was embroiled in the Vietnam War. In the midst of being herded onto a military recruiting bus packed with other young men, he began to take stock of his life.

“I didn’t have the slightest idea why we were at war with Vietnam,” said White. “I sat down at a typewriter and just started speaking from my heart. That’s the reason I say it was the best thing I ever wrote. It came right from the heart.”

White missed the draft because of a bad knee, but the passion that he put into his writing was not missed by the editor of the newspaper that received his letter. The editor called White and offered him a job at the newspaper.

“I was sociology major in college,” said White, who attended the University of Kentucky. “I’ve never had a journalism class in my life. My whole career has really been an accident.”

Despite the lack of a journalistic pedigree, the life of a newspaper man agreed with White. “I discovered that I had a knack for writing people stories. Human interest stories,” said White. “I loved the sounds and smells of the newspaper. I couldn’t believe that I was getting paid to do this.”

His next job was a stint at the Lexington Leader (now the Lexington Herald-Leader) where he honed his newspaper skills as a Wire Editor. Although, by most standards, he had worked his way up the ladder to a larger newspaper, he was unhappy with spending his day in a cubicle in the big city.

When an opening came up for an editor in rural Casey County Kentucky, White jumped at the chance to get back to small town life. He began to spread his wings as a journalist with a column called “Riding the Ridges.”

“I bought a motorcycle and went out in the hills looking for something to write about,” said White. The stories came easily. He developed a reputation for reporting about colorful backwoods individualists. “I found some crusty, dear old country souls.”

Later in his career as publisher of the award-winning Anderson County News in Lawrenceburg, White's heart again led him to an important crossroads.

He pioneered a unique program that published not only the names, but also the mug shots of local DUI offenders. The controversial decision drew a lot of local outcry, which eventually led to national attention as well.

"It changed my life," said White. "The Associated Press picked up the story and then it became a national story. The media descended, and I was on local and national television."

White gained strength from the media attention. Although he previously was never comfortable speaking in front of groups, he rose to the occasion, and is now a sought-after speaker.

"It's hard to have friends and do your job," White said of his 38 year career in the newspaper business. "You have to tell the truth, and get up there and get on with it." Spoken from the heart.