

Friend, mentor and former Advocate editor McCord dies



Heidi Hodges

Guest columnist

You might remember him, and his one-year assignment as the editor of the Door County Advocate in 1995-96.

Dick McCord caused a lot of waves, frustrated a lot of staff, ruffled a lot of feathers, and came up against a ton of resistance during his time with the paper.

He was definitely an outsider stepping into a community and a role that seemed always reserved for an insider. He didn't know whose toes not to step on, or what was part and parcel of daily life here. It didn't matter — he charged right in.

I had been at the paper for about seven years when McCord was brought on by then-owner Frank Wood. The Advocate had gone through a series of editors by that time and was looking for a long-term solution. Wood, however, had underlying reasons for bringing McCord on board, and had not been fully upfront about the anticipated length of McCord's tenure.

It was, as it turned out, not a long-term solution. It was only one year.

But what a year it was.

During those 12 months, I received what would probably be the equivalent of a master's degree in journalism.

I was 29, and still feeling a bit prodigal. But also feeling entirely underpaid, so I had been resting on my laurels, slowing down on going "above and beyond."

Then, along came McCord.

The staff tried to understand how to work with him. For me, knowing his pedigree (he came within a hair's breadth of winning a Pulitzer Prize, had owned a renowned and award-winning newspaper in Santa Fe, and had cut his teeth working with top journalists at Newsday in New York, I tried to impress him.

That, it turns out, was not an easy task.

Early in his tenure, he invited me out for a lemonade at a café. We sat outside, chatted a bit about my experience, past awards and career goals. Then he told me what he expected. In a word: excellence. And he would provide me with opportunities and guidance. He wanted to get me out of the photo darkroom, and out shooting and doing stories.

Those were welcome words.

He never sugar coated anything. And once, when I was exceptionally proud of a piece I produced — the staff was tasked with writing vignettes of how the city coped during an unexpected electrical outage — he saw it very differ-

ently. He was harsh and definitely disappointed by the work.

It brought me to tears. Over a two-paragraph story.

I kept going back for more, though. And I clearly remember when it "clicked," and I stepped up my photography game at a swim event at the old Peterson Pool. I dug in. I looked for the better angle, sought the better moment.

And he responded. I was hitting the target.

McCord was in Door County during an exceptionally weird year. Peterson Builders was closing, a town chair was on the hot seat and there were allegations of a Nazi gathering on Rock Island (that was his biggest regret at the Advocate, he told me years later — putting a Swastika on the front page because there were no photos to illustrate the story).

Winter was extraordinarily harsh. Summer was extraordinarily hot and humid. We once had an electrical outage on deadline.

There was an ostrich from a local farm that had gotten loose and was missing.

And at one point, a deer was hit on Third Avenue, crashing, not quite dead yet, into the Advocate's front door while we were putting the paper together. Yeah, weird.

After a year, when his contract was up, he left. A lot of folks were happy to see him go. But I felt empty. His tenure was the first time I was pushed to be better, despite outside influences like what I was getting paid. Excellence is its own reward.

His parting gift, as editor, was a copy of Sinclair Lewis's book "Main Street."

We continued to be friends. He'd always contact me and let me know when he was in Wisconsin. And, in 2009, after I had gone through cancer and difficult treatments, my family took a trip to New Mexico where he lived and had a fantastic couple of days with him in Santa Fe.

The last time I saw Dick was in 2013 in Door County. Advocate icon Keta Steeb had just died, and I had been hired as the editor of the Door County Magazine. Both were big upheavals in my life.

We sat outside at my campsite at Quietwoods, reminisced, and I grilled some potato sausages from Bley's grocery (I was still trying to impress him).

In about four hours, he gave me a lesson on how to be the editor: The organization, the expectations I should have, and the how-tos. I learned everything I needed to know while sitting around a campfire. Everything.

McCord didn't suffer fools or folks who didn't see it his way. He had a keen sense of humor and enjoyed good conversation. He loved his dog. He loved New Mexico. He was thoughtful. Unrelenting. Willing to pull the "excellent" out of anyone willing to put up with him.

I am going miss all of that.

Heidi Hodges is a freelance writer and photographer. Contact her at heidihodges.com.