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OBITUARY

# An obit for the man who taught me how to write them

## Andris Straumanis, associate professor of journalism at Wisconsin-River Falls, died this month

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I found myself typing into Google: "What are the stages of grief?" and "How long will it take to accept an unexpected death" several times over this past week.

My journalistic instincts kicked in as I researched absolutely everything, even the emotions that we feel from day to day.

My internet searching came after the death of Andris Straumanis, associate professor of journalism at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. He died unexpectedly on Sept. 11. He was 66.

Andris was a dear friend and mentor to a wide variety of people, many of whom were journalists who went through the River Falls program and went on to work for news outlets in Western Wisconsin and elsewhere.

If you've been a regular reader of the Star-Observer, the River Falls Journal or the Red Wing Republican Eagle over the years, you've likely read a story by one of Straumanis' former students.

In one of Andris' classes, he taught us how to cover a death. There is even a reminder hanging in the Student Voice Newspaper office at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls that reads: "People die they do not pass away or expire."

And while that seemed like a very direct way to talk about death even back then, it feels even more uncomfortable now when writing about him.

About two weeks ago, I was sitting in my car in the drive-thru of a coffee shop when someone who also went to River Falls texted me: "Hey Melissa, I just wanted to let you know I got a message this morning that Andris unexpectedly passed away yesterday."

I thought about that teaching right away, because "passed away" always feels like a lighter way to deliver the news of a tragic death. When I walked into my front door my partner asked me "What's wrong?" I responded with "Andris died."

I didn't want to believe it, though. I hadn't ever experienced an unexpected death in my life before and this felt unreal.

When someone influential in our lives dies, it is exceptionally hard to accept. Andris was one of the most influential people during some of the most important years of my life.

I attribute many of the reasons I have continued to work in the journalism field to Andris.

He taught an entire generation of journalism students at UW-River Falls, from 2005 to 2023. His impact was vast. The Student Voice Campus Newspaper thrived because of his guidance and expertise; he enjoyed watching students succeed and he gave them the tools to do so.

I was convinced that he knew absolutely everything.

If I struggled with filling some space in the Student Voice or couldn't narrow down a captivating headline, I would go to him for some guidance. He delivered advice in a way that always made me think "Wow, that is so obvious, how did I not think of that?" He provided guidance at ease and always had the right answer.

Andris based his teachings on facts and he encouraged us to always do the same in our work. His journalistic integrity was a top lesson he passed along to his students.

So, according to an article on TalkSpace, it takes the average person six months to two years to grieve the loss of someone close to them.

I don't know how long it will take to grieve Andris, but I do know that many of his teachings are embedded into my mind and I use them every day. So while one day I may not feel the grief I do in this moment, I will still embody many of the teachings he left with me. I am in my fourth year working in the newspaper industry, a line of work I never envisioned myself doing, but with Andris' encouragement, I have found it is exactly what I was meant to do.

Though I have been writing news stories non-stop for a few years, I still have a document saved entitled "Article Format." It is a step-by-step tutorial, compiled by Andris, on how to reach out to a source, set up an interview and how to write a story.

I think I have it down by now, but I keep it because it is a slice of Andris' teachings that I sometimes reference — just in case.

Although I can no longer tap into his knowledge, I will hold close everything Andris taught me, about journalism and about life.

I remember the last time I saw Andris was at the downtown Hudson Dunn Brothers, a common place for us to meet a couple of times each year. He reinforced some of the lessons he always instilled in his students. "Make sure you are being valued in your workplace," "Don't be lazy," and "You can always do better."

When I received that message from my fellow student just two weeks after seeing him, I had an unbelievably hard time trying to accept it.

There is a sign that hangs in the Student Voice office that says, "Wise words to live by: What would Andris do?"

How fitting it was because it was so true.

I still think about this saying every time I go to write a headline or complete a story. I always want it to live up to his expectations. The next time I am seeking his advice, I'll refer to that saying.

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