

He Implored Us to Lift Our Sights

By Paul Duke

I owe my life to Joe Nettles. That may be an awesome burden to impose even on such a legendary figure as Nettles, but it happens to be true.

Unlike many students of my day, I didn't have the faintest idea what I would do after graduation. I had no burning ambitions, no consuming goals. As an English major, I dabbled in campus journalism on The Collegian and Web staffs but never considered this a passport to the great beyond.

Nonetheless, in my senior year I signed up for the Nettles' class, not so much because of my change in thinking as the need to take an additional class to assure sufficient credits for a degree. Besides, somebody had told me Joe's class in basic journalism was a crip (easy).

It was not. It was tough, one of the toughest classes I ever took. It also reflected the professor --fascinating, compelling, mesmerizing. In looking back to those long-ago years, the teachers who stand out in my memory were those with their own individualistic and unique styles, who brought a little something extra to the classroom, whose mystical manner and presence captivated and dazzled us. This was Joe.

A Nettles' class was never Dullsville. He was, first of all, a superb teacher. He not only knew his stuff, but more importantly knew how to make it interesting. Journalism came alive in a barrage of extraordinary personal assignments that prodded our competitive natures. I can still hear those intimidating challenges --Find out the name of the new football coach before the Richmond papers ... Do a story about the first day the new Westhampton streetcar brought students to the campus at the turn of the century.

Such inventive assignments taxed our youthful ingenuity as well as our patience, but they made the class a stimulating and fun laboratory for a real press room.

But this was only part of the Nettles magic. There also was the more human side. He repeatedly implored us to lift our sights, to aspire for the best in all our pursuits. In preaching the joys of journalism he became the head cheerleader for those whom he felt might bring some talent to the field. He read aloud the stories of students he felt had performed well in their assignments, often embellishing his remarks with an offhanded observation that "We're likely to be reading Mr. Jones in The New York Times one of these days."

All of this energizing wine had its effect. Some of us even began to think seriously of marching forth into the promised land, even if journalists were still viewed in some circles as drunks, bums and ne'er-do-wells. The notion that it is a glamorous business is a recent phenomenon stemming from the rise of television.

But Joe didn't just encourage us. He actively helped us get jobs. In my case I started to consider possibly working for one of the smaller Virginia daily newspapers after

graduation. In talking it over with him in his office one afternoon, he quickly made it clear that he felt I should be bolder and try to start at a higher level, suggesting that I apply to one of the two major wire services, the Associated Press or the United Press.

I was hesitant. These two world-wide news services would never hire a 21-year-old rookie, I replied, implying a visit to their offices would be futile. It was at that moment that I discovered that Joe had a lot more confidence in me than I had in me.

Without a further word, he picked up the telephone, called the Richmond AP office and obtained an interview with bureau chief Frank Fuller. Fuller received me politely but said there were no openings. A month later, however, he called to say a vacancy had occurred and the job was mine --all because of a glowing phone recommendation.

Such is the way careers are made--and why so many of us still regard Joe Nettles as a patron saint.

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