

Eldred was one of last 'old-school newspapermen'

By Andrew West
Delaware State News

DOVER — We rarely heard Tom Eldred raise his voice in the newsroom.

But some years ago, there was such a moment as he gave a governor's spokesperson a lesson in democracy.

"The people of Delaware didn't elect you," Tom said sternly into the phone. "The public deserves to hear it directly from the governor."

We could not hear the other side of the conversation.

"You don't understand, do you?" Tom barked. "I am *the public*, nothing more, nothing less."

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Thomas Eugene Eldred, an editor and writer for the Delaware State News for 13-plus years, died Monday evening after a six-month battle with cancer. He was 66.



Andrew West

From the Editor

"Tom Eldred was one of the last of the old school newspapermen," said David Bonar, a former Delaware State News reporter and broadcast newsman. "He simply loved his profession and was extremely dedicated to it."

Tom was honest, objective, fearless and compassionate.

"His journalistic integrity was impeccable," said Mr. Bonar. "One of his strongest traits was to demand that public officials be the ones 'on the record' rather than depend on some spokesperson. His view was always that a public servant or elected officer should be the one quoted, not some paid PR specialist."

"It's what made him special."

We have received so many calls and letters of condolence this week. Some came from people who had to answer tough Eldred questions.

"Delaware lost an important voice, an outstanding journalist and an incredible person recently in Tom Eldred's passing," wrote Delaware Gov. Jack Markell in a blog entry Wednesday.

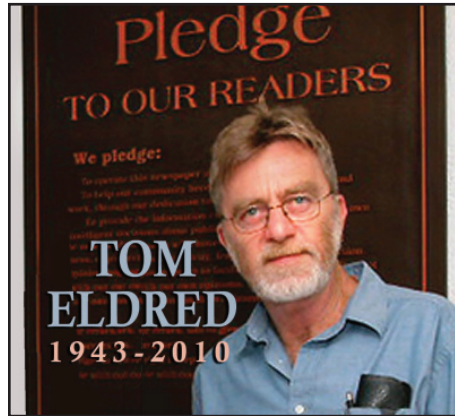
"Journalism is not an easy job, but it is one that Tom loved. He recognized how important his work was to our state and how important an active press is to our democracy. He chose his career in large part because he cared about his community and the people around him and understood how his work could help make each at least a little better."

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It was curiosity mostly that guided Tom Eldred.

This was common to both his personal and professional life.

His children tell some humorous stories of his curious and contemplative nature.



His son Colin recalled how his father pondered the size of glaciers while fishing in Canada in recent summers and how he repeatedly asked locals on the Spanish River questions about the logging industry.

The same nature led him to story after story here in Delaware.

It was amazing how he could notice something like the tops of trees lopped off north of the Dover Air Force Base and turn it into an interesting people story.

He scoured public notices, court documents, and pretty much anything with words looking for places where the newspaper should shine some light. We will miss the click of the silver pen as he pointed to the nuggets that stories were built around.

Once he had a bead on a story, he would pursue it relentlessly.

Tom used to say he loved "the chase."

It showed in the quality and depth of his work. Among the strongest were pieces he did on heroin use in Downstate Delaware; child sex abuse; and licensing and disciplining of doctors.

"He was a true newspaper professional, in every sense of the word, who quickly knew when there was a story to sniff out even as there were forces that tried hiding the real news from the media and public," said Carlos Holmes, a former reporter and editor at the Delaware State News.

Tom did much of his thinking and mentoring just outside the building.

"Even though I didn't smoke, I often accompanied him on his smoke-break walks through the parking lot and around the building," said Drew Volturo, a reporter for the Delaware State News for eight years. "A lot of times, we talked about story ideas, angles, sources or just general newsroom business."

"But most times, we chatted about personal stuff — trading stories about our lives, what we did last weekend, national politics, sports — while circling the complex. Sometimes those conversations became two-cigarette breaks. It was through those interactions that I learned how to have a deep appreciation for my job and life in general.

"From Tom, I learned how to have a 'water-rolling-off-a-duck's-back' attitude about things. No matter how hectic things got in the newsroom, Tom's demeanor was always the same — even-keeled. He rarely

Tributes to Eldred

- Read tributes to Mr. Eldred written by Drew Volturo, Dave Bonar, Carlos Holmes and David Skocik in the "From the Editor" blog at <http://de.newsrap.com/blogs/blog/6>.

- Click on the Obituaries link in the Dover community page at www.newsrap.com to find Mr. Eldred's obituary and share your memories in the guest book.

got angry or overly excited, save for the occasional 'Oh, for God's sake!' he'd belch when something unbelievable would happen, such as a lawsuit filed against the state police or an unsatisfactory answer to a request from a state office."

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Tom was born in New York City.

His parents, Edna and Thomas Brownell Eldred, were hard-working folks who were exceptional artists and members of a progressive and thoughtful art and social scene.

His father's works are still popular among art buyers.

There was a day last summer when Tom was alone in the newsroom contemplating an eBay purchase of one of his father's works. It was a portrait of Tom when he was young.

Tom enjoyed reminiscing about it, but he passed, believing the piece was overpriced.

Tom sometimes would surprise friends and colleagues with stories of his past.

Movie star Marlon Brando was his babysitter in the late 1940s. The two often walked to the Central Park Zoo together, said Tom's sister, Patricia Eldred.

Tom aspired to be an actor. In New York, he went to acting school with the likes of Jon Voight and Steve McQueen and made some "B" movies.

In 1961, he shared an apartment with Bob Dylan, who went by his birth name of Bob Zimmerman at the time.

"Years after that he would still swear that Dylan stole his guitar," said Patricia Eldred.

It was acting school that led him to newspapers in the early 1960s.

He needed a night job so he could balance it with school.

The New York Times hired him to work as a copy boy. He also worked in the morgue, the newspaper's library, where he assisted many veteran reporters — including Sydney Schanberg, who went on to author Cambodian war story "The Killing Fields."

While a Delaware State News reporter, Tom had a routine of clipping newspaper articles for extensive background files he kept. Each Sunday at the family's dinner table, he would sip Irish whiskey and meticulously snip articles, using the same methods and systems he learned in the Times' morgue.

The open road called Tom in the 1960s as he headed off to California, sharing a motorcycle seat with a wife and poodle.

He moved to Pennsylvania in the early 1970s to live and work on his grandparents' farm.

The farm was too small to make a living on, but Tom found work at the Franklin News-Herald as a reporter.

History is what led Tom to Delaware in 1996. He moved to the Kenton area to experience life in a 17th century home once owned by Federalist Nicholas Ridgely. The Eldreds had spotted the home in an advertisement in the Wall Street Journal.

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Tom is survived by his wife Cyndi, an advertising manager at the Delaware State News; his daughter Jaime Rafferty and her three children, Sarah, Nathan and Nicholas; sons Caleb and Colin; and his sister, Patricia.

In recent years, he often talked about how much he enjoyed spending time fishing and playing tennis with Colin; traveling overseas to spend time with Caleb; or visiting Illinois to see his daughter and grandchildren.

While his boys were in school and playing sports in Smyrna, Tom rarely missed a football or baseball game or tennis match.

"I think one of the most important things I gained from him and saw demonstrated by him was his intense unconditional love for us children that seemed enhanced by his grandchildren," said Jaime.

"When my daughter (Sarah) was born in 2004, he insisted on being there for her birth.

"As I was being wheeled down the hospital hallway back to my room after the delivery, he was standing at the nursery window staring at my daughter, eyes and cheeks flooded with tears, clapping loudly for all to hear, crying out loud and repeating 'She's just beautiful, Jaime!'"

Tom's family said he did not bring newspaper life home with him.

"Work was its own world," said Caleb.

But that did not mean that current affairs and issues were not discussed in the home.

Tom had the ability to stir up conversation. His sister Patricia said he had the same ability to put a "burr under a saddle" as their mother did.

"I believe he has saved all of us children from taking life too seriously through his life lessons and made an impression on us to always find a way to express ourselves and not let things bottle up," said Jaime.

"He encouraged openness and discussion and it was an important part of our daily lives during childhood and even in adulthood."

Caleb said his family will cherish his honesty and unconditional love.

"The only thing he needed was family," said Caleb. "Life was simple for Dad and simple for the right reasons."

Andrew West is managing editor of the Delaware State News. E-mail comments to awest@newsrap.com.