

By Steve Wilson
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Nice guys sometimes do finish first.

John S. Carroll proved it. His affable personality played a big part in a lustrous career as one of the nation's most accomplished newspaper editors.

Carroll died at his home in Lexington two weeks ago of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a rare degenerative brain disorder. He was 73.

Kentucky has not known a better editor, and I've not had a better friend in journalism.

Carroll collected a trove of national awards, first as metro editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, then the top editor at the Lexington Herald-Leader, Baltimore Sun and Los Angeles Times. At the Times from 2000 to 2005, he led the paper to an extraordinary 13 Pulitzer Prizes.

If you could construct the ideal editor, Carroll would be the model. He had exceptional writing and editing skills, keen news judgment and high standards. He had a deep passion for the news and an uncommon ability to develop big stories.

"John could see the forest clearly, while most of us, including me, were lost in the trees," said Bill Marimow, a former colleague who is now editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer.

But Carroll's success owed no less to his likability. His style was both gracious and tenacious. He earned the admiration of even the most unruly journalists. He was a great listener and could recruit the best because they wanted to work with him.

At a memorial service I attended Monday at Lexington's First Presbyterian Church, the tributes were glowing and heartfelt.

"John taught me that great editors can be humane," said Dean Baquet, who Carroll hired as managing editor of the LA Times and is now executive editor of The New York Times. Carroll's staunch leadership inspired the LA staff and sharply elevated its performance, he said.

No one summed up the man better than Norman Pearlstein, the top editor at Time, Inc., and a classmate of Carroll at Haverford College in Pennsylvania.

"John was our generation's best, most respected, most beloved editor," Pearlstein told the crowd that packed the church.

He was less beloved in Kentucky in 1985 when the Lexington Herald-Leader published stories about cash and gifts given to University of Kentucky basketball players by boosters, violating NCAA rules. The articles won the paper's first Pulitzer Prize.

Carroll later wrote about that episode and put it in good perspective:

"The Herald-Leader offended an entire state by disclosing widespread cheating in the University of Kentucky basketball program. Angry citizens boycotted the paper's advertising and circulation. A bomb scare emptied the building. Someone fired a rifle shot in the pressroom. The electronic media mounted months of abuse, including a talk show whose topic was, 'How can we destroy the newspaper?'

"But the newspaper was not destroyed. Far from it. In circulation and profits, the Herald-Leader flourished during the '80s as never before. That's because, over the long haul, people don't buy the newspaper because it serves them pablum or because they think the editor is a nice guy. They buy it because it tells them significant things they don't already know.

"In marketing, the idea is to manage the number of complaints down to zero. That's fine if you're making toasters, but a newspaper that gets no complaints is a dead newspaper."

Carroll cared deeply about education, and another project he led called "Cheating Our Children" documented deficiencies and political missteps harming Kentucky's public schools. The stories were a catalyst for passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990, which came to be seen as a national model.

The Lexington Herald and Leader had long languished under local ownership, but their acquisition by Knight-Ridder Newspapers in the 1970s led to a major turnaround. Carroll was named editor of the morning Herald in 1979. I had been appointed editor of the afternoon Leader the year before.

We were competitors for the next three years before the papers merged, but we were also good friends. We talked daily, and I can't recall a single argument.

We each loved to get a good story first. After his first months in Lexington, Carroll was not happy that the Leader had beaten his paper on several local stories and said he wasn't sure why.

I said we had better sources since I had been in Lexington longer and my staff had some older, well-connected reporters.

"Well, enjoy it while you can," he said with a good-natured chuckle, and as the weeks passed, the tide turned with more scoops showing up in his paper.

Though our careers took us to different states, we stayed in touch. Whenever I had a thorny newsroom problem, he was the first person I called. His advice was invariably right on.

Carroll was an uncommon blend of talent and humanity. As a journalist, colleague and friend, he ranked right at the top.