Al inherited me as his co-producer in the latter third of his career at KET. Good for me that he was well-broken into the ways of TV (for the most part) by my predecessors, among them Donna Moore the former deputy director. I was one of those who labored for him Mr. Holwerk – but Al would lament on occasion that I sometimes got that confused.

My Friday night dates with Al as co-producer of Comment began in August 1997. He peppered me with so many questions about my background… professional and personal. And, after each answer he’d reply in that seemingly approving, yet still skeptical … “I see.” It didn’t take long for us to find our groove.

Al would skid into KET each Friday night with windblown hair and an arm full of the week’s papers and legal pad of scribbled notes that only he could read. He’d dash into the makeup room and hold court with the panel he’d assembled for the night running down the topic points and making assignments on who was take what. As Ronnie Ellis shared with me, along with sincere apologies for not being able to make it tonight, the makeup room strategy often didn’t play out on air. Ellis recalls that when he and Mark Hebert were on together, AL would tell them: OK…Hebert, I’m going to start by asking xyz, and then Ellis I’ll ask you…But, when it came to show time, Al would reverse things and ask Hebert – Ellis’ question and vice versa. Ellis said they came to expect this and developed a number of segues like: Yes, Al, that did happen today and the governor said such and such and by the way Mark you were there, what did you think? Ellis said Smith would sit there grinning like a possum eatin’ bumblebees.

But Al has a very sensitive side…a nurturing side that he’d freely show to the newbies on Comment….the print journalists who feared live television, the greenhorns fresh to the state government beat and the quick, sound-bite talking TV types who felt privileged to be among the elite fleet of journalists invited to be on Comment. Al instinctively knew who could handle what charge or topic (even if he forgot who he assigned it to) and knew when throw a life-jacket to those about to sink. Al was a star-chaser… he could see the star-power of folks like John David Dyche and Stephenie Stitzer and of course his favorite mentee… Al Cross. Don McNay often credits Al Smith for helping him reach new levels of success.

All of the Comment gang is quick to testify how appearing on the show elevated their career and status as a journalist. It was and is the place for a journalist to be seen and heard. And, it’s helped reporters in a pickle in ways they never expected. When Ronnie Ellis was trying to park in a private yard in Prestonsburg for a Hillary Clinton event for which he was running late, a little old lady came waving her finger to get off her yard, but when she stopped short and realized “You’re Ronnie Ellis aren’t you? I watch you on Friday nights. I just LOVE that show. Go ahead and park HERE honey… Ronnie offers praise for Comment as it saved his hide from the unemployment line.

Al has been a mentor and groomer of the finest journalistic talent Kentucky has to offer… an indisputable fact.

For many viewers though, it was Al’s end of show commentary or what he called “go-outs” that made it clear to viewers that wasn’t just invested and committed to journalism, but history. It was where he connected… eyeball to eyeball through the lens of a camera. Whether he mused about his rural roots and experiences in Tennessee and Russellville; the foibles of leaders past and present; the heroic figures like journalist Alice Dunnigan, nurse Mary Breckinridge and Kentucky’s Force of Nature Sally Brown; or energetically waxing about the state of education or the many other issues that ail us – he was endlessly enlightening, amusing and engaging. Not for his benefit, but for ours.

For 33 years on Comment, Al was our tour guide through Kentucky history and politics, on and off camera, regaling us with stories in the animated fashion that I dare not imitate.

In a farewell e-mail message to Al when he left Comment back in 2007 by Cheryl Truman…”There are some Kentucky characters for which this can be said: ‘you can see their faces, and know you are home….that has always included Al Smith.’” One of Cheryl’s colleagues at the Herald-Leader Jamie Lucke put it this way back then “Comment is a repository for journalistic memory in Kentucky, a place where we learn from and challenge each other and fit the week’s news into history’s arc.” That was and still is the mission of Comment.

Before the studio lights dimmed and Al walked off the Comment set a few years ago, we took a road trip together to his Russellville roots for a piece we produced in his farewell program. I spent the day taping him meet up with old and new friends who carry on the work he once did in the downtown newspaper there. He talked about the business and how it has changed with his radio pal Don Neagle, the fight over school consolidation and better hospitals. When Al walked the streets of Russellville that overcast October day… he was a ROCK star, but his swagger was humble and introspective. You could see the years of reflection flashing before his eyes… it was moving for me, and I realized in a new way, a more appreciative way – of the treasure Al is to Kentucky. A man dedicated to his craft in all its incarnations; to telling the truth and putting up a fight for it and guiding generations of Kentucky journalists and public servants. That’s just a few of the reasons Al Smith is so deserving of this honor tonight, for four decades of uncompromising work… done quintessential Al style.

Thanks Al, for being my cheerleader, as you have been to so many others. Thank you, Al, for sharing your gifts with Kentucky and with me. It is an honor to stand before you and give you the praise I failed to do years ago…I’m better for knowing you and so is Kentucky!