

## One man's opinion "The best journalism job in Maine"

### Fall 2007 Magazine

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While his peers stop short of opinion, that's where Bill Nemitz begins. Adjunct faculty member and columnist for Maine's largest newspaper, he recently incited more than 200 online comments when he accused readers who spew anonymous nasty comments of not having the guts to sign their names.

"That captured my role, which is to be provocative, get people talking and reacting," he says. "You don't write a column hoping everyone will agree with you," he adds.

As online journalism explodes, he readily hears from people who have opinions about his opinion. Readers used to write him letters (he kept them all), then they switched to e-mails, and now they post reader comments.

Considering that his first newspaper job in 1977 issued scissors, a glue stick and a manual Underwood typewriter, the era of citizen journalism, blogs and new media constitutes a major transition for him. "Part of me wants to keep up with it and part of me wants to crawl in a hole," he admits.

The whole concept of journalist is rapidly changing, according to Nemitz, as reporters must consider how recorded sound and visuals enhance stories published on the Web. The Press Herald recently hired its first full-time online reporter, who will carry a reporter's notebook and a video camera.

"I'm absolutely stunned by the changes in the last 10 years," he says.

In the meantime, writing a column three times a week for the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram hasn't changed dramatically. Still, he's come a long way from that first job at the Waterville Morning Sentinel, where he was a reporter for six years before moving to the Portland Evening Express for two years. After that, he spent 10 years as city editor and then sports editor at the Press Herald. When he started as a columnist, he feared his writing muse might somehow seize up on deadline, but now, "something always comes out."

Even after all these years, he claims writing is an unpredictable process. Sometimes it takes 45 minutes to compose his column, but other times much, much longer. Before he begins to write even one word, he gathers the facts. Roughly two-thirds of the time spent on each column is story development and reporting; just one-third is writing and editing.

He describes a love/hate relationship with story ideas. "Sometimes they jump out at you and other times I can be at my wit's end," he says.

Looking back, he realizes the memorable ones come from a "state of controlled panic." Last July, as he searched for a column idea, he saw a



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photo of President Bush getting off of the plane for a visit to Kennebunkport, Maine. "He looked awful, he looked stressed ... it was in the middle of all the Gonzalez stuff ... and the idea came that I should write a letter to him suggesting that he quit."

The story generated a huge reaction (again those reader comments).

His ideas often come from the news landscape, where his thirst for stories in weeklies, dailies and blogs is insatiable. "I look for a certain angle that hasn't been developed, or I notice if I'm having a strong reaction to the story." When he is relaxed, doing something mindless like mowing the lawn, ideas tend to surface more easily. Questions, or something someone said, flow to the top, and he's got his story hook. He writes it down on a scrap of paper and throws it into his worn briefcase.

"When I started I had a whiteboard filled with story ideas that I would cross out as I did them," he says laughing. "Now I'm not that organized."

Readers send in ideas, as well. When several suggested he write about an extra-friendly flagman at a highway project, that did lead to an actual column. Though he can't respond to all reader suggestions, he replies to most because it's worth it. Even if their current idea won't work, they might mention something else that peaks his interest.

Nemitz loves talking to people. In fact, it is the most enjoyable part of what he does.

After 12 years and 1,500 columns, it's not uncommon that the subject of his column has a niece or uncle or sister that he wrote about earlier. "Maine is a small state... Maine is a community," he says.

A graduate of Catholic schools, Nemitz grew up in Needham, Mass., and graduated from the University of Massachusetts, where he had a "seasparting experience" after wandering into a journalism class. "All of a sudden I was completely engaged. I always liked to write and when I wrote to my grandmother to thank her for the birthday money, I always included details of my life and wrote four pages. 'This one's going to be a writer,' she would say."

Nemitz is more than a columnist. In fact, his most profound experience as a journalist has been reporting from Iraq. While he was there in 2004, a dining hall where he had just eaten lunch was blown up. Two Maine soldiers and 20 others were killed. "You don't walk away from that unchanged," says Nemitz, who has gone to Iraq three times. In 2004, he and photographer Gregory Rec, were named Co-Journalists of the Year by the Maine Press Association for their work there. This fall, he received a Distinguished Service Award from the New England Press Association.

He sought out the Iraq assignment because he didn't want the experience of Maine soldiers to disappear for 12 months. "Had we, as Maine's largest news-gathering organization, not gone over to tell their story, it would have gone untold," he states. The trips also allowed him to serve as a direct connection between the soldiers and their families, friends and communities back in Maine.

Nemitz also went to New York City after Sept. 11, New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and Ireland after the Good Friday accords. Only the Ireland trip was the newspaper's idea; the other assignments he proposed himself.

In his role as columnist, he says, "I enjoy what I do the most when I can find a good, old-fashioned narrative." After that, he wrestles with how to maintain the thread of the story - and keep the tension or drama - without going over 600 words. Where to start and what to leave out are often key decisions.

Although he used to "soak up a story like a sponge and then squeeze it out," he's learned to be ruthless with side topics. "In storytelling, you digress at your own risk," he says.



*Adjunct faculty member Bill Nemitz is a regular columnist for the Portland Press Herald and Maine Sunday Telegram. A past president of the Maine Press Association, he's been teaching at Saint Joseph's since 1993.*



One reason Nemitz loves to teach writing at Saint Joseph's is that it's so different from what he does on a daily basis. "The columnist leads a lonely life," he says. "The class is so collaborative ... you get to talk about writing, and it's fun to watch them evolve." He says it's also a great feeling when he runs across one of his former students in a professional context.

Nemitz says he will always have the desire to get close to big stories, like Iraq, and won't rule out going back there. He also thinks about writing a book in the future. But, for now, he'll concentrate on writing his column. "I wouldn't trade this for anything," he says. "I get to go see the world unfold .... I feel blessed."

by Charmaine Daniels

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