

GARY OSTROM SERVICE COMMENTS

by Tom Schaub

Well it would be impossible to relate the impact that Gary had at The Chronicle in just a few minutes— there is just so much. He was a great boss, a true newspaper man and one funny guy. I asked some of my Chronicle friends to share some thoughts and they were happy to contribute.

Boss

First, something that Chronicle people can certainly attribute to Gary is what we call ourselves as a group. We're not Chronicle associates, we're not Chronicle veterans, we're not ex-Chronicle staffers. Help me Chronicle people, we're the Chronicle Family.

There are no quotation marks around Family. For a group of people who were in the publishing business - - - who were always on guard for overused metaphors - there is no hesitation to use the term Chronicle Family.

We WERE a family. We still ARE a family. There were 2-300 of us at any given time and the culture that Gary encouraged was nothing short of "family." We care about each other and he cared about us. Of course, like any family, there were crazy uncles... and disagreeable aunts... and all manner of red-headed step children. They might drive you nuts but if they ever needed you – you were there.

This from Penny Larson: Every single employee mattered to him. He knew every single one...from the management team, to the mailroom, to Glenn Miller, who swept and shoveled. He knew every name, and the department they worked in.



There wasn't anyone at The Chronicle who couldn't go in and talk to the big guy. Particularly about cars. Buying a car... fixing a car... Maybe talking about the car that GARY just bought... or maybe the OTHER car that Gary just bought.

Jim Boes remembered how Gary spent time with employees "Managing by walking around" and making them aware of how much he valued what they did.

Stan Harrison recalls that it was Gary Ostrom who administered his written test when he applied for a position as a copy editor fresh out of college in 1977. "I'll always remember his welcoming smile and confident handshake." He says "Gary had a special talent for putting people at ease. I missed one question on the test that any would-be copy editor should have known, but thankfully, was hired anyway."

Michelle Forberg remembered that when the air conditioning broke down, which it did once in a while –it meant Gary bought ice cream for everyone!

Federico Martinez wrote "The last time I saw Gary he learned that I was now a journalism professor at Michigan State University. We talked for a while and when we said our farewell, he made a special point to refer to me as Professor Martinez." Over the years it's become more apparent the effect he had on my life.

Sheila Reinecke related "About 2 years into my employment, I got a call that my Mother was gravely ill and was in a Detroit hospital. Gary had me leave immediately to be with my family. After my mom passed away, I knew I had to stay in Detroit for some time and was afraid that I'd have to resign from The Chronicle. Gary worked with me and I'll always be grateful.

Newspaper's Role in the Community

Gary was keenly aware and thoughtful about the role of The Chronicle in the Muskegon Community. The fourth estate, the advocate for the public. We had reporters at seemingly hundreds of municipal meetings each month, in the courtrooms, at the police stations and anywhere news was happening.

It wasn't just reporting the news. Gary understood that the scrutiny that we gave to government affected how government performed.

Gary also understood that the editorial voice of a newspaper played a vital and important role in a community. Gary's editorials were very well read. They sometimes were the catalyst for important change. Sometimes they calmed a situation... And sometimes they explained a complicated situation.

Gary was a trusted voice in Muskegon – a deep thinker, not susceptible to hype - but also keenly aware that positive people with great ideas could bring positive change to our community.

He was a statesman who framed many of the issues of our community for over twenty years – all with humility, reason and grace.

Barb Reichert remembered Gary for his Integrity. Sometimes the decisions he made were easy ones but sometimes those decisions were very hard. He knew that truth matters and you don't get to play by your own set of rules. When tested, Gary always came down on the right side.

Kevin Kyser noted how proud Gary was of our 150th Anniversary and surrounding events. He was in his element, and understood the significance of the Chronicle's place in Muskegon's history. He came up with the tagline "Writing history day by day."

Gary was determined that The Chronicle would be a great corporate citizen in Muskegon. We put our money and our resources where our mouth was. Gary wanted The Chronicle to do good things in the community.

People no doubt are aware of efforts like The Seaway Run, Student Showcase and the Old Newsies/Goodfellows efforts. However, those were really just the tip of the iceberg. There really wasn't much in the community that The Chronicle wasn't contributing to in some way.

I remember having a sense that revenue wasn't the real priority – it was just how we paid for all the good things that we got to do in the community. It was important to make money but the “fun” was in helping. That's what got Gary all jazzed up.

Humor

Those of us who knew Gary ... knew that he was one of the funniest guys on the planet. The master of the one liner. He could singe your eyebrows with a single sentence.

Chris Zahrt wrote: You would be in trouble if you found yourself sitting next to Gary at a banquet - and - if that speaker was somewhat less than riveting. He'd lean over and say the absolute funniest, - razor sharp, - one liner you can imagine. He, of course, would have a straight face – completely innocent -- and leave you looking as if you were having a seizure.

Circulation Director Jay Wallace observed that Gary had a way of diffusing a tense or stressful moment by injecting humor into the conversation. It put everything back into perspective and showed us that things weren't as bad or dire as we thought.

Controller Kim Ahrens said that "Mondays were usually great days to go chat with Gary because he had new jokes and quips from watching Saturday Night Live – and he could quote them all verbatim.

Gary always took particular delight in patiently listening to Kevin Kyser and my various "pitches" for marketing campaigns that we were proposing – campaigns that we had spent hours and hours working on – blood sweat and tears – blisters on our fingers. He'd lean back in his chair, make a tent of his fingers, look up at the ceiling and say "Yeah, so what else do you got."

Gary was a "collector." He had shelves in his office that were just jam-packed with little knick knacks. **Every** letter opener and **every** paper weight from **every** civic group that he had **ever** talked to was there along with little cars and pen sets and probably a muffin from 1981.

Penny recalled a favorite shelf item which was the "Yes Man." The Yes Man was a plastic head of a guy who, when you pushed a button would say a "**Yes Man**" **phrase**. A phrase that Gary thought we - as his subordinates - should memorize. Some of his favorites were:

"I'm sure whatever you're thinking is correct"

"I couldn't agree with you more completely"

"What more can I say when you're right you're right"

Bill Iddings, relates a story about Gary being interviewed to fill the vacant seat on the Norton Shores City Commission after his retirement. The interviewer was questioning whether Gary “**could take it**” if a citizen came in complaining and ranting at him for no reason. Gary responded that he was the former publisher of The Chronicle – **Are you kidding me!!**

Over the years Kevin Kyser and I got the chance to make a number of funny videos - for 25 year club inductions or retirements. When Gary announced his retirement everyone knew what had to be done.

Kevin and I were all over town doing shoots. We hijacked a live Rotary meeting... we rode around on golf carts with Gary's golf partner Quinn Champion... we shot video at the airport... at Muskegon Brake... we enlisted actual actors, and generally ran amok around Muskegon. What struck me was that everywhere we went, everyone was thrilled to be a part of honoring Gary.

{Pause}

Gunnar Carlson wrote this: The old comedian Joe E. Lewis said, "You only live once ... but if you do it right, once is enough." Gary's "once" was far too short, but he surely "did it right" ... and we were all the beneficiaries.

So, I posted earlier, that the world is a little less thoughtful...a little less decent...and a little less hilarious because our friend Gary Ostrom is no longer with us. But fortunately, we are all better people for having known Gary. I know that we can pick up the slack.

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