

Hot Type

Daily Southtown Bombs the Competition

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A Tribune reporter called last week and wouldn't give his name. Check out the early coverage of the Unabomber, he told me. "The Southtown kicked our butts."

The Southtown sure did. On April 4, the day the arrest of Theodore Kaczynski made front pages across the country, the Daily Southtown front page was above and beyond. It carried two exclusives. Reporter Sean Hamill, who'd begun his search by calling every Kaczynski on a list produced by the secretary of state's office, tracked down a pair of aunts who sketched the family history. And columnist Phil Kadner, tracing friends of friends, found a Dartmouth professor who'd been Kaczynski's pal when they were boys in Evergreen Park. No one else could match these stories, and the Southtown wound up quoted and credited by USA Today, Time, Nightline, Reuters, and the Associated Press.

"It was just basic journalism," Kadner said. "I started making phone calls all over the place. You just kind of hope somebody will know someone who knows someone, and it just worked out this time. It's always a matter of luck getting this kind of story."

Kadner's luck didn't end when he located Dale Eickelman, a professor of sociology. "He said he valued social contacts more than any other, and it was kind of neat I got hold of him that way. I was the only person he was going to talk to," Kadner said Eickelman told him. "I thought, sure, until the New York Times and Nightline call him. But apparently they called and he said no, I'm not talking."

"The whirlwind began the next day," says Hamill. It was the national media calling, hoping to piggyback on the Southtown. "All the networks and magazine shows, the New York Times, all the tabloids. The Globe offered me a thousand bucks, straight up, to help them. It was to some degree rather shameless. It was not what I expected. I expected people would try to find [the aunts] themselves."

But if other reporters tried they failed. The aunts' phone numbers are unlisted, and the Southtown kept their names out of the paper to protect its story from the opposition and the two elderly women from a horde of reporters. Days later the Southtown was still the only news shop that had actually talked to anyone from Theodore Kaczynski's family. "Nobody else seemed to want to do the legwork," Hamill tells me.

The Southtown's said no to every offer to buy or borrow the two aunts. When editor Michael Kelley turned down The Jenny Jones Show last Monday night he had producer Don Hewitt's home phone number in his pocket—just in case he might have a change of heart about 60 Minutes, he told me. But he hadn't.

But the Southtown's superiority didn't rest solely on its exclusives. The shortcomings of the downtown competition were defined by an April 5 Tribune story, headlined "A most unlikely hometown for a radical," that described Evergreen Park in the 50s when Kaczynski grew up there as "a place as wide-eyed simple as a Doris Day movie, a booming blue-collar bedroom community where the kids sucked malts through a straw at Wimpy's after school and their folks headed off to Bleeker's at night to bowl in leagues."

This is boilerplate folklore written on the run by outsiders. The Southtown would never tell its backyard readers they'd once been "wide-eyed simple." But a reporter

did go over to the high school and talk to students. “We all feel it’s very sad. But if it’s going to get us on the map, it’s pretty cool,” said one student. “I think it’s cool someone from here went to Harvard,” said another. The reporter noticed “that several students showed up dressed in hooded sweatshirts and dark sunglasses” inspired by the FBI’s Unabomber sketch.

“That’s not small-town reporting. That’s just good reporting,” Kelley told me. “The reason the Tribune didn’t have that stuff is their problem. It’s the kind of reporting I was taught at the Kansas City Star 30 years ago.”

Maybe so. But good local reporting is produced by touch as well as footwork. By a literary yardstick the Southtown stories didn’t stack up. But they were familiar and comfortable. Evergreen Park in the Southtown wasn’t some icon-ridden microcosm of yesterday’s working-class America. It was home.

On April 5 Hamill produced a second interview with one of the aunts. More certain now that the Southtown would protect her, she opened up, and her recollections became tart and specific. Until brother David was born, Theodore, then seven, would be affectionate. Then he turned. She remembered the time his father said to him, “Why don’t you have some conversation with your aunt?” And Theodore replied, “Why should I? She wouldn’t understand me anyway.” When Theodore graduated from high school at the age of 16 and was on his way to Harvard, she arranged a meeting with a notable graduate of that university, Daniel Burnham Jr. After their conversation, the aunt recalled, Burnham told her “he had never met a boy who was such a snob.”

These stories define Kaczynski in the context of an old woman whose feelings had once been hurt and who did not forget. A paper with an ear for such highly personal memories and another for the giddy chatter of high school kids will be put away as a keepsake in plenty of local attics.

Ron Brown: Wrong Place, Right Time

He was, agreed the media, a piece of work. A “dealmaker, not a philosopher,” he “combined charm and guile, loyalty and cunning” but “evidenced a sad recklessness in his own financial dealings” as he “savored the accoutrements of wealth and power this city [Washington] offers.” He was “one of the premier Washington fixers of the modern era...an unabashed power broker,” a “lifelong liberal” but also “a product of the freewheeling Washington of the nineteen-eighties.” He “found a way to turn his fixer’s art into a kind of statesmanship.” He “often skirted the ethical edge,” and so threatening “were the scandals involving his personal financial dealings” that some friends “urged him to quit before he lost his reputation and his fortune.”

But none of this mattered much when Ron Brown’s plane went down. Dying in the line of duty and in his prime, Brown was mourned as—to quote the same postmortems from Time, Newsweek, the New Republic, and the New Yorker—“the most effective” secretary of commerce since Herbert Hoover, “a man of conviction” and “discernible idealism” who had “an abiding, and rather old-fashioned, dedication to public service.” No judge would ever peer down at a fallen Ron Brown and harangue him for a “betrayal of trust.”

Seconding the judge who’d drummed Dan Rostenkowski out of decent society, the Sun-Times pronounced, “He was one of the most important men in Washington, and with that power went higher obligations to the public trust. His violations of those higher obligations deepened his betrayal.” So it goes whenever powerful people fall from grace—the grace of deferred censure. The day before the Sun-Times published its lecture Brown was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Did Rostenkowski, out of office and past his prime, admire the elegant career move by which a kindred spirit left on top, eulogized for his good works and spared humiliation for his flaws?

Risks Worth Taking

In Jessica Dubroff's house there was no television. Were there newspapers? Did she even know, as she began her flight across America, that a few days earlier a much bigger plane than her own had crashed in the mountains in Croatia? Did her parents keep that calamity a secret?

And if she knew, what did she make of the knowledge? Her mother said she was fearless, but that could mean either that she didn't understand danger or simply that danger didn't perturb her. The test pilots in Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* maintained themselves in a state of denial: the buddy who "augered in" was a buddy who'd made an unaccountable mistake. Did a seven-year-old who'd been flying six months believe she was incapable of mistakes?

Every commentary I've read on the death of Jessica Dubroff has found her parents irresponsible and their New Age philosophy that can so casually celebrate a short life ending in "a state of joy"—as Jessica's mother put it later—harrowing. The family's notion, reported in the *Tribune*, that life is about "being," rather than thinking or even feeling, sounds like the kind of existential gibberish associated with the ecstasies of the Third Reich. But I've learned as a reporter not to put much stock in the first responses of mourners desperate to make sense of tragedy. And as for that fearlessness that Jessica's parents refused to wean her away from, society demands it and exploits it.

Obviously the men who died with Jessica made very stupid decisions. But someone has to grow up to be a test pilot. Someone has to grow up to be Picabo Street, hurtling down mountains while the rest of us wave flags. Someone has to run the physical and intellectual risks that scare off everyone with a lick of sense about how great those risks are. Was it a failure of parenting that inspired Winston Churchill to assert, "Nothing in life is so exhilarating as to be shot at without result"?

Bravado is infuriating in the young, and when we think adults are encouraging it we want to wring their necks. Yet if we want our children safe we also want them bold. The little Jessicas lucky enough to grow up moral and in one piece and still scared of nothing may not be much like you or me. But they're indispensable, and they have to come from somewhere.

Hounded by the Press

Circulation totals being more precious to newspapers than circulation revenues, when the dailies get their paws on a new subscriber they sink their teeth in. Just read their bills. “Delivery and billing continues until you notify us to stop your service,” says the Tribune’s. “Service and billing will continue unless you contact us,” says the Sun-Times’s. In other words, you may be the world’s biggest deadbeat, but you won’t stop getting our paper.

Last week E-mail brought me a nonsubscriber who’s now sporting teeth marks. “Either the Chicago Tribune is desperate for subscribers, or it feels strong and powerful enough to act like a bully,” wrote Jay Schieber, an assistant professor of chemical engineering at IIT, “because it has resorted to harassment and threats to those of us who do not read their publication.

“Since I arrived in Chicago last summer, the Chicago Tribune has called me approximately twice a month in attempts to convince me to buy their product. The rate of calls is astounding, considering how seldomly I am home in the evenings to answer calls.

“At first, I politely told them that I was not interested, and they insisted on knowing why. I told them that, as far as I could tell, they were more interested in selling readers to advertisers than they were in selling news.

“After the third or fourth call, I simply told them that I was not interested, and when they insisted on talking, I simply cut them off by saying ‘Thank you,’ and hanging up. However, after many more calls, I told them that I did not want to be called again, and that I had the legal right not to be harassed. The woman told me that she would remove my name from the list, and was polite about it.

“However, after I was called twice more, the most recent occurrence being this morning, I told the fellow that I considered his call to be harassment. He said that there was nothing in his computer about it, and that sometimes it takes several weeks to process such information. I told him that that was his problem, and that the Chicago Tribune has a legal obligation to respect my rights.

“His response? ‘Well, you can go ahead and file that lawsuit, but I hope you have a lot of money, because we do.’”

At this point Schieber wrote me. I called the Tribune circulation department Monday morning and described its representative’s snappy banter. In midafternoon Tom Buttel, who heads the Tribune’s telemarketing operations, called back. “I’m surprised someone would make that comment to Mr. Schieber,” Buttel said. “We try to be very sensitive about calling.”

I've seen just enough of phone rooms not to be surprised at all. "Sensitive telemarketer" is more than an obvious oxymoron. Given the nature of the work, the lists and quotas, the whips and chains, a telemarketer who doesn't indulge in an occasional zinger could go up like a gas-filled cellar.

Has Schieber's name been taken off your list? I asked.

"Yes it has," Buttell said.

Was it taken off before I called?

"No sir. Not at all."

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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