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NEAL SHINE | 1930-2007

A champion of fairness, children and Detroit

Free Press journalist led with heart and humor

April 4, 2007

BY JOE SWICKARD
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

From copyboy to publisher, Neal Shine used his 45 years at the Free Press to tell the great stories of the city he loved and to stand up for the regular people and their kids he knew from their two-flat apartments, factories and corner markets.

He was, at heart, a storyteller -- a gifted one -- and a fighter.

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As a journalist, he extended his gift to champion children's rights, racial justice and the efforts of Detroit to persevere through hard times.

He helped lead the Free Press through historic, challenging events -- the postwar boom, the 1967 riot, one of the last great newspaper wars and a bitter strike that divided his newspaper -- and kept a heart-to-heart bond with Detroit. And he loved the Free Press so much, he needed two retirements to leave.

On Tuesday, Shine, 76, died at Bon Secours Hospital in Grosse Pointe from respiratory failure as he fought a resurgence of cancer. He was with his family.

Shine started at the Free Press as a copyboy in 1950, and by 1995 had carried the titles of reporter, city editor, managing editor, senior managing editor, columnist and publisher.

Shine was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer in 1993 but overcame it. In 2005, he had a pacemaker implanted and underwent surgery for skin cancer. This spring, he was hospitalized while vacationing in Florida, and tests revealed the lymphatic cancer had returned.

He also had recently battled pneumonia.

Shine was a passionate Detroiter who graduated from St. Rose High School and the University of Detroit. Colleagues and friends said he never stopped urging the city and its people forward, even as he worried that he asked too much, too often.

"But the truth is, I always know that you are there," he wrote in a column to his hometown in 1986, "ready to do what has to be done to take some of the sharp edges off life in this town."

In a little more than a week that year, Shine raised \$6,000 from readers to get a newer bus for an east-side youth organization -- enough money in those days to also pay off a repair bill for the old bus and insure the new one.

And his affection didn't stop at 8 Mile.

After a Free Press reporter wrote that kids in the Dominican Republic were playing baseball using folded cardboard for gloves, he asked readers to check their closets and garages for old but still worthy mitts.

It didn't take long before he was flying to the Caribbean with more than 1,000 gloves.

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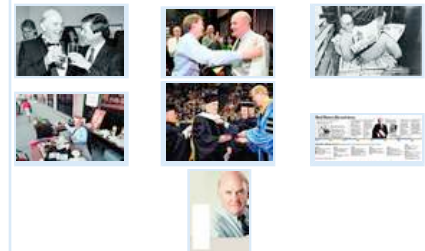


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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Funeral information

Visitation for Neal Shine is expected to be held April 9 and 10 at Verheyden Funeral Home, 16300 Mack Ave., Grosse Pointe Park. His funeral mass will be April 11 at St. Ambrose Church, 15020 Hampton Ave., Grosse Pointe Park. Detailed information on times will be on [freep.com](#) and in the Free Press as it becomes available.

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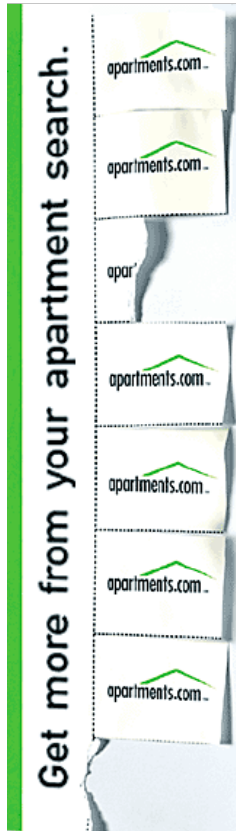
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His list of honors bestowed by city and regional organizations ranged from the March of Dimes and the American Lung Association to the Catholic Association of School Administrators, the Poletown Churches, the Pallotine Fathers and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southeastern Michigan.

"He's the closest thing the Free Press has to a pope," longtime reporter Jack Kresnak, a former seminarian hired by Shine, once said.

Paul Anger, Free Press editor and vice president, hailed Shine as an icon.

"He was iconic to journalists across the country -- his name was larger than life, standing for excellence, courage and integrity. He was iconic to Detroit -- a Detroit who had such passion for the region and the city and the people here and pushed so hard to make things better for all. He was iconic to the Detroit Free Press and all of us Free Pressers -- a rock of a man who guided this newspaper through turbulent change with decency and wisdom," Anger said.

Free Press Publisher David Hunke said: "If there was such a thing, Neal was a common, everyday lion. He commanded so much attention and respect, yet had little use for it.

"We were blessed to have him at the Free Press."

Added U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Damon Keith: "Neal's basic quality was fairness. He was just basically a fair man and he listened to other people and took their advice and counsel."

Shine's Free Press career spanned the transition from soft-lead copy pencils and paste pots to computers and the Internet. Shine was in the middle of one of the last great newspaper wars and then helped implement a controversial joint-operating agreement between the Free Press and the Detroit News that merged their business and production operations.

As a reporter, Shine exposed the mishandling of cases in the Macomb County juvenile courts, and as an editor he helped direct the Free Press staff to a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the 1967 Detroit riot.

He was a man of great passions: for his family, the Irish, his craft and Detroit -- especially the beloved east-side streets of his youth.

Standing up for the people

Shine believed that newspapers must be more than scorecards of woe and

caprice.

Recalling his encounter as a copyboy with the Free Press' resident poet, Edgar Guest, Shine wrote that Guest "believed the only reason for any of us to do this work was to make sure the newspaper's considerable power was used to help those who had run out of choices."

In 1993, after a year of Detroit's children being slain in record numbers, Shine declared the Free Press could not stay on the sidelines

"We are no longer going to be just the scorekeepers," he wrote in announcing the creation of Children First, a newspaper campaign that advocates on behalf of children's issues.

It is one of the longest running campaigns in American journalism.

Shine was the public face of the Free Press -- after-dinner speaker, college lecturer and active member of countless organizations and committees.

"I'm from southwest Detroit, and we didn't have a voice till he sat down and listened to us," said reader Eusebia Aquino-Hughes, 52. "At community meetings he talked to you as if you were as important as the governor or Coleman Young. With him, you always had an ear and a place at the Free Press."

Shine also savored the often unruly newsroom atmosphere where reporters hung rubber chickens from the ceiling.

"I liked the way it smelled," he wrote of the former Free Press building at 321 W. Lafayette: "cigar and cigarette smoke, paper and paste, ink and newsprint, lead melting in the composing room furnaces."

It was a Free Press of eclectic hiring policies and open doors. Walking the halls were folks like Big Foot, a downtown character who used the washrooms; a preacher who came through with a parrot on his head, and a pair of sisters thought to live in a stairwell.

In the 1967 riot, Shine finagled an armored car so reporters and photographers could travel around town. When the violence waned, he took it 3 blocks west on Lafayette to the Detroit News building and used the loudspeaker to call upon the rival journalists to surrender.

Raised in rough times

Cornelius James Shine was born Sept. 14, 1930, to Patrick and Mary Ellen Shine, east-side Detroit Irish immigrants. His father was a streetcar conductor for 40 years, and his mother cleaned houses as a teenager.

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The Shines lived for years in the upper flat at 1532 Lycaste. He attended St. Rose Catholic Church and graduated from parish schools.

And he knew hard times firsthand.

Crowley's department store once sent a truck to repossess the family's furniture, but Mrs. Shine prevailed when she told the men they might as well take Neal and his two younger brothers if they took their beds.

He never forgot the lessons and characters of the neighborhood movie theaters, candy stores, childhood adventures and tragedies. He knew the city as a wonderful web of schools, parishes and street corners.

He went to the C.I. Walker branch of the Detroit Public Library on Mack. It was there he read "Bob Gordon, Cub Reporter" and had the "first thoughts in my mind about journalism, and they never diminished."

Shine fell in love and married Phyllis Knowles in 1953.

After graduating from St. Rose, he went to the University of Detroit, where the offices of the Varsity News student newspaper will be dedicated the Neal Shine Media Center on April 18.

As a junior, in 1950, he joined the Free Press as a copyboy at \$3.55 a day.

With other copyboys, he flirted with the underworld through the We Never Sleep News Agency, passing horse racing news to bookies.

After graduation, Shine was drafted into the Army in 1953 and served in postwar Austria.

Becoming a legend

Returning to civilian life and the Free Press, Shine was given a tryout as reporter in 1955, and Pulitzer Prize winner reporter Ken McCormick treated him to a cup of coffee.

Newspapering, Shine wrote, "was too much fun ever to be considered a real job."

He was a city desk reporter, covering the police beat and eastern suburbs, and later worked nights.

He won a Page One Award in 1959 for public service reporting on mishandled cases in Macomb County Juvenile Court.

While Shine was covering courts and making about \$100 a week, a judge threatened him with a \$1-million libel suit.

"Easy come, easy go," he told Phyllis.

He was named city editor in 1965, managing editor in 1971 and, even though his mother had said he was merely a jumped-up copyboy, he became senior managing editor in 1982.

Enthusiastic police reporter Brian Flanigan, with streetwise rascality and a vocabulary that would make a pirate blush, was a favorite. He addressed Shine as Gramps and regaled him with tales of his beat and the scabrous pressroom at Detroit police headquarters.

Newspapers across the country have been enriched by the journalists Shine helped bring through the Free Press.

Shine was the model for the colorful editor Nelson Kane in "The Rosary Murders," a Detroit-based mystery novel and movie by former priest William X. Kienzle.

The avuncular charm was not mistaken for professional flabbiness.

When a federal judge crashed his car into a trolley outside the Free Press, the judge angrily shouted that a photographer could not take his picture. Shine turned to the photographer and said, "Take it."

In 1989, after two years of legal wrangling, the U.S. Justice Department approved the Free Press-Detroit News joint-operating agreement.

That same year, Shine announced his retirement.

Then-Mayor Coleman A. Young called Shine "one of the better bastards to work for the Free Press" and wished him well in "other, more honorable pursuits."

In a show of affection, Flanigan and fellow staff members Kresnak, Peter Gavrilovich, Joe Grimm and William Mitchell conspired to relocate Shine's entire office -- complete with working computer and telephones -- onto the sidewalk outside the Free Press building.

Flanigan said Shine should end his career as it started -- on the street.

The police ticketed him for impeding pedestrians that morning, and the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit offered Shine sanctuary.

Instead of retreating to a church, Shine took to the classroom, teaching journalism at Oakland University.

Emily Prawdzik Genoff, a former student of Shine's at Oakland University, said she is reminded almost daily of lessons he taught -- about journalism and life.

"One of the first things I displayed in my office was a 'good luck' note he wrote me shortly after my graduation," she wrote in a tribute Tuesday at www.freep.com. "I keep it in a frame on my desk. Each time I look at it, I'm reminded

of what a blessing it was to have had the opportunity to know Mr. Shine."

Retirement didn't last.

Nine months later, he was back, this time as publisher at the behest of Free Press' parent company, Knight Ridder, to smooth the JOA transition.

In 1993, he was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer and went through two years of chemotherapy and radiation to curb the disease.

Two years later, the two Detroit newspapers and their unions went to war in a bitter strike. Many strikers crossed the picket line and rejoined the paper while the strikers denounced them and Shine as union-busting Judases.

But Shine defended the management position, saying that the striking Newspaper Guild was being gulled by others "who couldn't care less" about them.

Shine retired again at the end of 1995.

But he never quit. Always a Free Press ambassador, he continued to teach at Oakland University, and the Free Press endowed a journalism ethics lecture in his name at Michigan State University.

He also wrote a book about his mother, Mary Ellen. The book, "Life with Mae: A Detroit Memoir," is to be published by Wayne State University and is undergoing the final editing.

To the end, it was clear that he saw journalism not as a job but a gift.

"Thank you," he wrote in his farewell column of Dec. 24, 1995, "for everything."

Shine, who lived in St. Clair Shores, is survived by his wife and six children: Judy Heuvelman, Jim Shine, Sue Epp, Tom Shine, Peggy Shine and Dan Shine. He also is survived by 17 grandchildren and two brothers.

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