



Author
Journalist
Professor Publisher **Father**
Grandfather **Editor**
Pulitzer Prize Winner

Warren Lerude

Warren Lerude '61 (journalism)

What I've learned is that life is full of surprises, heroics, creativity and hard work, thrills, spectacular opportunities and dreams come true.

I hadn't thought about it that way until Senior Editor Melanie Robbins asked me to share what I've learned in my 71 years with readers of *Nevada Silver & Blue* magazine.

Let's start with dreams come true.

When I was a 23-year-old journalism student at the University of Nevada in 1960 I met a beautiful, kind, loving and very smart 20-year-old co-ed of Genovese Italian descent. She had sparkling blue eyes, light, golden brown hair and a warming smile that would light up friends and strangers alike. Her name was Janet Lagomarsino. She was a second-generation Nevadan as was I. We married after my graduation in 1961 and set out on a dream-filled life that would bring us three wonderful children and take us across the oceans to the world's great cities and spiraling mountain peaks.

Throughout our 48 years of marriage we have learned—and are still learning—that if we are lucky, and if we work at it, life is full of continuing education, adventure, humor, grace and giving to others, courage, perseverance and storytelling.

I deepened my learning about storytelling from Nevada's gifted author Robert Laxalt, who coached me away from my fear of writing a book. Chapters are just like feature stories, he told me, assuring that since I'd written many hundreds of such stories I could write a book. Just blend each chapter into the next and keep writing, keep the story moving, he said. He made it sound easy but he knew it was not.

Bob Laxalt knew the writer's fear of the blank page. He had tried again and again to write about his Basque sheepherder father, only to pull the pages of wrong words from the typewriter and cast them into the wastebasket. Again and again, he tried. Again and again, he failed. But he kept writing.

And then he wrote: "My father was a sheepherder, and his home was the hills." His iconic book *Sweet Promised Land* came to literary life.

Keep writing. I have followed that advice into my own books, columns, editorials, essays, feature stories, breaking news stories, local, regional, national and international storytelling.

Perhaps the most significant thing I have learned is that we learn from others who take the time to teach us. If we learn that lesson well, we then take the time to teach others, new generations.

I had the good fortune to meet such a teacher when I was 17 years old, about to graduate from Reno High School and wondering what to do with my life. On a spring day in 1955 I drove up North Virginia Street, parked my car at a curb near Artemisia Hall and walked on to the University of Nevada campus. I'd never been to the academic part of the University. I'd only been to football and basketball games.

While neither of my parents, Les and Lone Lerude, had gone to college, they very successfully had founded Reno's Wigwam Coffee Shop, known to generations for its hot apple pie and butter sauce, and they encouraged me to pursue higher education.

I walked into what was then the Thompson Education Building just off the Quad and asked

a woman at a desk if I could talk to someone about the possibility of going to college. Would you like to speak to the dean? she asked. I didn't know what a dean was but I said yes and she took me around a little counter into an adjacent office and introduced me to a man I learned was Dean Garold Holstine.

He asked me what I would do if I had a million dollars and didn't have to work. An interesting question for a teenager in faded jeans, T-shirt and no concept of college.

I guess I would like to help people, I said.

How'd you do in math? he asked.

Not so good, I said.

How about English? he asked.

I got As, I said.

The education dean personally walked the teenager to the nearby journalism department in what is now the Jones Visitor Center on the Quad and introduced me to a man I came to know as "Higgy" or "Prof", the legendary A.L. Higginbotham.

Higgy was a born recruiter. You're going to be a journalist, he beamed.

What's a journalist? I asked.

I learned in my classes with Higgy and another professor, Keiste Janulis, that a journalist could right wrongs, report and write about the needs of struggling and oppressed humanity, comfort the afflicted (and some say afflict the comfortable).

I learned as a young editorial writer for the *Reno Evening Gazette* that many African-American children did not know how to swim

because they lived in Northeast Reno and the public swimming pools were in mostly white Southwest Reno.

I learned that daily newspaper editorials were powerful enough to move white officials of Reno City Hall to go into the neighborhoods where they could learn about the needs of their black constituents. The editorials stirred public opinion and led to construction of a swimming pool in Northeast Reno's Traner Middle School where black and white boys and girls could all swim together.

I learned as a young father married to an inspiring and caring young mother that our own children, Eric, Christopher and Leslie, needed the structure and love of a family sharing enjoyable and challenging thoughts around the dinner table each evening about what they had done to help someone or what they had learned that day. And I learned that a family traveling together to countryside, mountains and cities on vacations would inspire quests for adventure with their own children, our grandchildren.

The quest for learning, which had been inspirational for me at the University of Nevada in journalism, led me to search out mentors and I found them in the likes of Nevada J grads Paul Finch '56 of *The Associated Press* and Rollan Melton '55 of the *Reno Evening Gazette*, *Nevada Journal* and the corporate management intelligence of Speidel Newspapers Inc.

Paul hired me into The AP where I learned the dedication—and thrill—of intense, split-second, reporting and writing in competition against our worthy foe *United Press International* at a journalistic level meriting a front page byline in *The New York Times* and hundreds of other newspapers across the nation and around the world.

Rollan hired me away from The AP into the Reno newspapers as a reporter and encouraged me toward a career in editing and management, which would inspire my development of public service investigative reporting and publishing. This provided me opportunity to serve on seven Pulitzer Prize juries over three decades at Columbia University in New York City and the privilege for me to lead a team of editorial writers to win the Pulitzer Prize in journalism in 1977.

Rollan enabled me to learn the unique financial stewardship of our executive owned Speidel Newspapers Inc., which had been established by the financial visionary publisher Charles H. (Chick) Stout.

We all learned about Wall Street as Speidel went public in 1973 and into a merger with Gannett Co., Inc. in 1977. This produced major shareholder gains that enabled many Speidel executives and spouses and descendants to share hard-earned wealth with our alma mater University of Nevada and our nationally acclaimed Reynolds School of Journalism.

The merger with Gannett provided more opportunity: to learn from world press leader Al Neuharth, who invited me to join his teams in the founding of both *USA TODAY* and the Newseum. The latter is the remarkable museum of the news from prehistoric cave drawings to the Internet now on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.

Perhaps a most significant learning experience was in making our journalism education dreams come true. Rollan and I sat down for discussions with the University's great president Joe Crowley in the mid and late 1970s. Rollan was a senior executive and director of Gannett and I was editor and publisher of the afternoon *Reno Evening Gazette* and the morning *Nevada State Journal*.

We made Joe Crowley an offer that he didn't refuse: If Joe would permit the good but small department of journalism, for decades in the College of Arts and Sciences, to become a full-fledged, independent school of journalism with its own dean, we would reach out to our national journalistic friends to help make it happen.

To the good fortune of today's students and more generations to come, Joe Crowley, a political scientist who knew the value of good journalism in society, gave his approval and successfully sought that of the Board of Regents.

Together, we approached major media owner Donald W. Reynolds and his chief executive leader, Fred W. Smith, and, with their blessing, vision and support, the Reynolds School of Journalism was born in 1984.

This Reynolds School of Journalism stands today as a national beacon of excellence as

our students and professors collaborate in learning how to define the new technology media that will build on the old standards for America's innovative communications future. Never have there been such opportunity—and incentive—for students and teachers to learn together. My own students are teaching me how to use my new iPhone.

This new generation of students will discover the answers to questions haunting today's perplexed media leaders as newspapers cut back on content and some disappear altogether, stocks fall from from \$82 to \$2 a share, dividends are slashed by 90 percent and management and employees together are forced into unpaid furloughs or terminated.

We have painfully learned this at a dramatic moment when readers are clamoring for more news anywhere they can find it—mostly on the Internet where they are hard-pressed to find credible investigative reporting and editing.

Importantly, I have learned through this career that journalism is the lifeblood of Democracy. And I have learned over the last 28 years on the Reynolds School faculty how to teach this to our students.

The lesson is profound. In 1734, John Peter Zenger was thrown into jail by King George's governor in New York City for allegedly libeling the Crown of England. A colonial jury decided that truth was a defense against libel and that Zenger had printed the truth. He was set free and he continued publishing the news in his *New York Journal*.

Nine years later, Thomas Jefferson would be born. He would proceed to write the Declaration of Independence. Forty two years after Zenger's colonial jury newspaper trial, the colonies would conduct a revolution and establish the United States of America based on freedom of expression.

This, one hopes, we all have learned. **N**

Warren Lerude, professor of journalism emeritus, is co-author of American Commander in Spain, Robert Hale Merriman and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, published by the University of Nevada Press, and the text of Above Tahoe and Reno, published by acclaimed aerial photographer Robert Cameron of San Francisco.