What I’ve Done With My Life

Frank McCulloch ’41 (journalism), ’67 (honorary doctorate of humane letters)

Described as a force in journalism for more than 50 years, Frank McCulloch ’41 (journalism), ’67HDG launched his career in journalism as a student journalist at Nevada, as editor of the campus newspaper, Sagebrush. Following graduation, he got his start at the United Press in San Francisco. He then returned to Nevada to uncover links between organized crime and casinos in the 1940s as a reporter with the Reno Evening Gazette.

McCulloch was hired by Time magazine and wrote the 1955 cover story on Thurgood Marshall and conducted the last interview given by Howard Hughes, then one of the world’s richest and most mysterious men. Hired as a managing editor by the Los Angeles Times in 1960, McCulloch helped transform the newspaper into a world-class publication. He left the Los Angeles Times to cover the Vietnam War for Time in 1963 and during his four years there was widely regarded as one of the most respected journalists covering the war. From 1975 to 1985, McCulloch worked for the McClatchy newspapers, first as managing editor of the Sacramento Bee, then as executive editor of all McClatchy newspapers. Reflecting his passion for work, McCulloch was named in seven libel suits—all successfully defended—during his McClatchy years. These lawsuits helped establish protections that journalists benefit from today.

Although he spent his career at the side of the top publishing families in U.S. history—the Chandlers, the Luce, the Hearsts—he inspired and championed the work of others from behind the scenes. McCulloch led a generation of reporters including Karsten Prager, whom he hired in Saigon and who later became international editor for Time; author and Pulitzer Prize winner David Halberstam; Lowell Bergman of the New York Times and Frontline (PBS); and many others.

Days after retiring from McClatchy at age 65, McCulloch was hired by the San Francisco Examiner, where he worked as managing editor until 1991. From 1991 until 1994, he served as board member and special consultant to the Center for Investigative Reporting, the nation’s oldest nonprofit investigative reporting organization, based in California.

In October 2003, McCulloch was recognized by the Center for Investigative Reporting for his lifetime achievement as a reporter and editor.

Today, McCulloch is retired, though he says he still dreams about the newsroom every night. He said that without the Reynolds School of Journalism, held “still be pitching hay in Fernley … It’s dead true. It’s not an exaggeration.”

McCulloch’s history runs deep with the University. In 1967, he received an Honorary Doctorate and was the Commencement speaker.

Another thing I’m proud of is starting, maintaining and establishing investigative reporting at the Los Angeles Times, Sacramento Bee and San Francisco Examiner. Investigative reporting deals with misdeeds, inefficiency or any kind of corruption within institutions that have considerable public consequence. It inevitably leads to libel suits.

The first job in which I formally ran investigative reporting was at Time Life news service. We had three of the best investigative reporters in the country: Sandy Smith, Denny Walsh and Bill Lambert. Denny Walsh left and went to work for the Sacramento Bee. About year and a half later, I joined him and we had the start of a great investigative team. We created a corporate investigative group there with three reporters: Denny from Sacramento, a reporter from Modesto and one from Fresno. During the five or six years of the team’s existence, seven libel suits were filed against us, and we won every one of them.

Investigative reporting is more formalized now. The Center for Investigative Reporting (which used to be run on contributions) began in a little office in San Francisco. It has now moved to UC Berkeley and has become a major force in journalism education. I’m also proud that I took the Los Angeles Times into coverage of minorities—particularly blacks and Hispanics. Those minorities had been ignored except for crime news before I became managing editor.

What are your fondest memories from your days at Nevada?

I really enjoyed all four years at Nevada. Those years were enormously pleasant and rewarding for me. I had three professors that I was impressed with: S. Allen Lough, chemistry; Paul Harwood, English; and Anatole Mazur, political science. They were all supreme lecturers and experts in their areas.

I pitched a no-hitter in inter-fraternity baseball. That’s not a bad memory. We won the inter-fraternity baseball championship that year, and I pitched every game.

What have you done that you are most proud of?

I’m enormously proud of the creation and maintenance of the Frank McCulloch Award for Courage in Journalism. I am happy that it will continue for future generations of journalism students.

What advice would you give someone just starting out from college?

I wouldn’t presume to advise physics majors or medical students. I’ll stick to journalism students. One premise I suggest you follow is not only to gather facts—which you certainly have to do—but be honest. If you’re honest with yourself as a reporter, you’ll find over and over again that your own conscience and judgment will tell you the way things stand at the moment. If you have 49 facts that say a building is painted red and one uneasy feeling that it is an illusion, be honest with yourself and find out why you feel that way. More often than not, you’ll discover your impression was right. Being honest is a quality in journalists that is at least as important as all other good practices. It’s one of the things that distinguishes superb journalism from good or adequate journalism.