

tunnel vision

A publication for alumni of student media at Vanderbilt University

PAST LEADERS

VTV AND MY CAREER

Justin Smith discusses the value of Vanderbilt Television to his career and his support of Vanderbilt Student Media ...

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bright lights *an alumni column...*

Bloom, Bayless, Woodward & Bernstein and Jim's Farm

by Irvin Muchnick '76



Irvin Muchnick

Like my friend Bob Costas, the late Peter Jennings, and assorted journalistic and media betters, I'm a proud member of the fraternity of college drop-outs. This is not to be confused with the Amalgamated Association of Morons in the Three Stooges episode "Half-Wits Holiday."

I "attended" Vanderbilt from 1972 to 1976 on the Grantland Rice Memorial Scholarship, thanks in part to a recommendation letter from a previous recipient

(and my *Hustler* editor-in-chief forebear) Roy Blount Jr. Decades later, Roy and I would be on opposite sides of a landmark legal dispute, when he, as president of the Authors Guild, supported a global class-action copyright settlement to which I, as a former assistant director of the National Writers Union and freelance rabblouser, objected. This case would go all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court under what I must admit is a most tasteful name: *Reed Elsevier v. Muchnick*.

During my years on Nashville's western border, I dreamed of becoming as great a writer as Nathanael West, and I beat a path from my dorm to the *Hustler* offices, the non-alcoholic saloon of my misspent youth. Evidently, I didn't spend nearly enough time with my nose in textbooks exploring whether Freud had a man-crush on Marx.

One semester I got the bright idea of scheduling my classes to start every day at 8 a.m. and end by noon. This way, I could fight all the way through even if I were just completing a *Hustler* production night on Sunday or Wednesday, or just returning from the printer in Murfreesboro on Tuesday or Friday. Let's just say this plan didn't work out so good, either.

My colleagues were folks like John Bloom (today more famous as drive-in movie critic and redneck street philosopher Joe Bob Briggs) and Skip Bayless (today more famous as ... Skip Bayless).

Dan Bischoff, my ex-best friend, did most of the deep thinking as managing editor during my junior year, while I was editor-in-chief, mostly preening. Bischoff, whose own professional journey has included a stint as art critic for the *Newark Star-Ledger*, was quoted in the recent *New York Times* obituary of Lionel Talzapan. (You can look it — and him — up.)

An editor at *Venus* during that period was a smartass by the name of Alex "I Am Not Chancellor Alexander Heard" Heard. In a further display of the clout of the Sarratt Tunnel mafiosi, Alex, as executive editor of *Outside* magazine, last year interviewed me about my current obsession: the under-covered scandal of widespread sexual abuse at USA Swimming and other Olympic

Committee-sanctioned youth sports programs. There isn't a doubt in my mind that this is a story of global, Catholic Church scale. And maybe before too much longer I'll find a book publisher who agrees.

For me, life at Vanderbilt was mostly long nights of Woodward & Bernstein imitations. That, and hanging out with a tight group who enabled my lack of social development. We loved to wax outraged about this or that. My kids don't quite believe me when I say that, upon encountering news of the "Saturday Night Massacre" — soon-to-be-impeached President Richard Nixon's sacking of special prosecutor Archibald Cox — on the WRVU teletype machine, I actually thought the times they were a-changing.

As others have more eloquently written, our paterfamilias was James Turner Leeson Jr., former Associated Press reporter and Race Relations Information Center director, who was the vaguely defined "advisor" to the Vanderbilt Student Communications entities. The highlights were times spent at

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Jim's farm in Franklin, which featured horse Sister and dog Fraulein. A few years after not graduating, I stayed there for a weekend while I was hitchhiking around. Jim and I made homemade ice cream and blasted Blondie records.

It took a while to get my muckraking career untracked. This owed to a period of househusbanding, but even more to my abject incompetence at cajoling editors and publishers. In 2007, ECW Press of Toronto published my *Wrestling Babylon: Piledriving Tales of Drugs, Sex, Death, and Scandal*, basically a collection of pieces, some of which had been cover stories in major magazines.

Almost immediately, WWE star Chris Benoit went on a double murder-suicide rampage that, for a few weeks, was honey to the flies of cable news. I went mano a mano with the host of *The O'Reilly Factor* and ECW commissioned me to write *Chris & Nancy: The True Story of the Benoit Murder-Suicide and Pro Wrestling's Cocktail of Death* (2009).

Benoit, in turn, was a wedge into traumatic brain injury in sports and entertainment. That is the subject of both my new book and the current movie *Concussion*, in which Will Smith affects a bad West African accent in

his portrayal of my NFL whistleblower friend Dr. Bennet Omalu, the pioneer of contemporary research on chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

May I brag about my kids?

Jake just started with the Brooklyn public defender's office. He was news editor of the *Columbia Daily Spectator* before two years as a Teach For America foot soldier at arguably the toughest high

school (now defunct) in West Philadelphia. While at NYU Law, he commuted to Alabama on death penalty cases for the legendary Bryan Stephenson's Equal Justice Initiative.

Nate (who was named after Nathanael West, and coincidentally born on the 50th anniversary of West's death) is living, traveling, studying, and working in

China following graduation from UCLA. He's sharpening his fluency in Mandarin, which of course is poised to become the lingua franca of the 21st century.

Mara, now at UC Santa Cruz (where she will major in some combination of anthropology, art history, and feminist studies), was electrified by her month in Cuba last summer. She wanted to go there before Washington-Havana relations got fully "normalized." Mara declined comment on whether this is because her wayward parents don't do normal.

Lia Fu Hao is in fifth grade. We were gifted with her on my birthday, and just before her own first, in Jiangxi Province. In other words, Lia is the gift that keeps giving. Who knows — maybe some day she'll graduate from Vanderbilt. *

Irv Muckenick is a widely published journalist whose work has appeared in The New York Times Magazine, Sports Illustrated, People, and many other major magazines and newspapers. He has been interviewed on forums as diverse as Fox News' O'Reilly Factor and National Public Radio's Fresh Air with Terry Gross.

He is the author most recently of Concussion Inc.: The End of Football As We Know It — which is dedicated to Jim Leeson.

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