Al Henkel: Real Life, Real Journalist

The 2006 C.E. Shuford Journalism Banquet speaker and NBC Producer Al Henkel epitomizes the real life of a driven journalist

By Michael Mooney

Al Henkel is making another long drive down I-35 from Oklahoma to his home in Arlington. A few months ago he was sleeping in the back of an SUV, eating canned tuna or chili for breakfast, washing his clothes in a garbage can full of water and Dawn dishwashing detergent. A thirsty, starving crowd of New Orleans residents was threatening to take his food and gasoline by force. Welcome to the world of a veteran network journalist.

“I hear it beats the heck out of Baghdad,” Henkel says.

As chief of the NBC New Orleans Bureau, Henkel is responsible for regional coverage for all the NBC channels. Sometimes he has to have material ready for the Today Show, sometimes for NBC Nightly News, often both. He oversees reports for MSNBC and CNBC as well.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, NBC established a permanent bureau in New Orleans on the top floor of the local affiliate building, WDSU. The team there consists of one reporter, a film crew and two producers. They cover predominantly the rebuilding efforts, ranging from initial clean up to Mayor Ray Nagin’s recent call

Al Henkel will speak at the Journalism Banquet April 8. to make New Orleans a “chocolate city.”

Henkel is always on the road. 100 nights a year he will sleep somewhere other than his own bed. He travels approximately 180 days every year, missing birthday cakes, anniversary dinners and several Christmas mornings. It seems appropriate that Henkel spends so much of his time driving. In many ways, he’s been driving through his entire career.

After receiving a B.S. from Iowa State in 1982, Henkel worked his way up through

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Alumni Updates:

- Mayborn Scholars Doug Pils and Josh Baugh were nominated for Katie Awards in 2005. Baugh was nominated for a feature story titled “One Last Gig” that appeared in the *Denton Record-Chronicle*, and Pils was nominated for a wire sports story while working for the AP in Arkansas.

- Josh Baugh accepted a position at the *Bryan-College Station Eagle* covering the Texas A&M University System.

- Mayborn Scholars Emily Bryant (‘01) and Jason Goodman (‘04) were engaged over the Christmas holiday. They met while working at Stevens Publishing Corporation in Dallas.

- Mayborn Scholar and former editor of *Strong Words* Hedish Connor (‘05) works as a medical bibliographer for J.A. Majors in Lewisville.

- Mayborn Scholar Joel Brillant (‘05) started work for the *Denton Record-Chronicle* as a sports writer just before his December graduation.

- Mayborn Scholar Steffi Posel Parkerson had her first child, Siena Katherine Parkerson, Nov. 11, 2005. Parkerson works in the marketing department of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

- Mayborn Scholar Sunny Cearley-Deweber has started working as the advertising and events coordinator for the Oklahoma *Journal Record*.

- Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe now works for the *Denton Record-Chronicle* as an area reporter. She started there Dec. 15, 2005.

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small markets in the Midwest. Making as little as $1.25 per hour in places like Ames and Cedar Rapids, he established himself as a dedicated professional. He moved every two or three years through Tulsa, then Shreveport, then Oklahoma City. In 1990 he was hired as a field producer for NBC news and assigned to the Southwest Bureau in Dallas.

For 16 years he has crossed the country, witnessing almost every major domestic news event of the last two decades. He covered the Oklahoma City bombing, the subsequent trials and the execution of Timothy McVeigh. He has covered floods throughout the Midwest, and tornadoes all over the South. He walked with firefighters, covering wildfires in Montana, Idaho, California, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico.

“It’s a strange thing to see five lanes of traffic heading in one direction and your satellite truck is the only thing going the other way,” Henkel says.

Henkel has been nominated for three Emmys, winning once. He also received an award from the National Association of Black Journalists for a story on the Tulsa race riots.

His job includes a tedious devotion to thorough preparation. To protect himself while covering wildfires, he trained extensively, and is certified as a wildland firefighter. He studied meteorology for hurricane coverage.

“Knowing whether the hurricane will come ashore during low tide or high tide can be the difference between life and death,” he says.

When navigating debris-covered roads after a disaster, Henkel knows which trees can be moved and which ones might be charged from a downed power line.

He says it’s not the adventure or danger that drives him, though. Along with the fact that he gets to see so many different things and meet so many people, he takes pride in the responsibility of journalists. Every story he does is important to someone.

“It sounds campy, but it’s a great job,” Henkel says. “You have an automatic license to ask anything. It’s like handing the keys to the car to a child.”

The fact that journalism is ultimately a business does not escape Henkel either. He affectionately refers to NBC as “the company” and is always conscious that he gets paid because companies are willing to spend money on advertising during the news. That does not deter him, however, from employing as many artistic techniques to his storytelling as he can.

“What distinguishes us from stenographers is not what we leave in, but what we leave out. That’s how we practice our art.”

Often, not even vacations can stop the drive in Henkel. In 2005 he had to cut short a vacation with his wife and three children so he could get back and cover an early hurricane. “What we do for a living never stops,” he says. “You can’t turn the factory off. There’s always another newscast or another deadline.”

Michael Mooney is a Mayborn graduate student and freelance writer.

Al Henkel will be speaking at the journalism banquet April 8. Banquet tickets go on sale March 1.
Mayborn Director’s Book Presents New Ethics Model


The book introduces a new heuristic model for analyzing ethics cases in the media, using a three-dimensional “Point-of-Decision Pyramid” developed by the editors. The book examines these cases from both the communitarian and utilitarian perspectives, while urging journalists to use their moral imagination to make decisions, rather than solely on personal or professional views.

Featuring in-depth case studies of several high-profile cases, including *The Dallas Morning News*’s 1997 publication of Timothy McVeigh’s confession, as well as confronting the issues of balancing patriotism with reporting duties in the wake of September 11.

Twenty-three of the book’s 26 chapters are written by leading media scholars, including several UNT professors and alumni.

Media scholars include Clifford Christians, Arnold de Beer, John Merrill, UNT alumnus James Whitfield, who is dean of the College of Communication at Hawaii Pacific University, and Ralph Langer, retired editor and executive vice president of *The Dallas Morning News*.

Professors Jacqueline Lambiase, Alan Albarran, Elizabeth Koehler and Dan Malone, as well as former UNT professors Michael Bruner, Tom Reichert and John Mark Dempsey also contributed chapters.

Land, Hornaday and the contributors worked for five years on the book. It was a tremendous undertaking for the contributors, but ultimately “fulfilling and gratifying, once it was done,” says Land.

The book features contributors from South Africa, Australia, Germany and across the United States.

Land will be using the book, published by Marquette Books, features 26 contributors.

published by Marquette Books in his Media Ethics class this semester, but is waiving all royalties for his students. Land’s book is available at university bookstores.

Richard Wells Called to Serve His Country

Mayborn Professor Richard Wells accepted a new position and a return to active duty this semester as President of the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.

Wells stated his sense of duty was invoked when the Navy called and told him his “country needed him.”

“They recalled me, but they didn’t have to,” says Wells, who sees this as an opportunity to learn a lot and bring it back with him to UNT after his six months are completed.

“The people I’m working with are top-notch,” Wells says, stating that working with them has reaffirmed his optimism about this country and its military personnel.

Wells has served a total of 33 years in the Navy, with several stints in active duty. He served as the superintendent of the school in 2000.

The Naval Postgraduate School offers graduate degrees in a variety of fields to all branches of the military, with an emphasis on outreach training and research.

The school conducts over $120 million annually in research, while also focusing heavily on homeland security training.

Wells’ duties as president involve juggling the responsibilities of a university president with those of a rear admiral, as well as guest lecturing in several classes.

Wells will teach one online course this semester at UNT and then return full time in the fall.
What’s Going On?

2/1 Part-Time Job Fair 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. University Union 1st Floor

2/13 - 2/17 Student Appreciation Week Drop by the Mayborn for a special treat

2/17 Last day to file a graduation application without a late fee.

3/3 Comps Exam

3/8 Mid-semester

3/13 - 3/19 Spring Break University Closed

4/8 C.E. Shuford Journalism Banquet Gateway Center 5:30 p.m. $15 for students, $25 for non-students.

Ask Nancy

Dear Nancy,
How can I make my emails appear more professional?

Nancy Eanes, Career Development Specialist, congratulates Mayborn Graduate Joseph Okech.

What’s News at the Mayborn:

Student Journalists Win Awards
The Houston Press Club awarded a 2005 Lone Star Award to Mayborn graduate students working in Dan Malone’s Advanced Reporting class for an article in the Fort Worth Weekly titled “Insecurity on Campus.” The project was researched along with students from SMU in conjunction with the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas. The students also won a Clery Award for student crime reporting and a First Amendment Award from the Society of Professional Journalists. This year’s students are focusing on TASER usage by law enforcement and have posted records from almost every Texas county and city on the Mayborn web site at the Distributed Reporting Project page.

Dan Malone wins Katie Award
Adjunct professor Dan Malone won a 2005 Katie Award for Investigative Reporting for his article “A Long and Twisted Road” in the Fort Worth Weekly.

Mayborn Conference Announcement
The second annual Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Writers Conference of the Southwest will be held July 14-16 at the Hilton DFW Lakes in Grapevine, Texas. Speakers include Melissa Fay Greene, author of Praying for Sheetrock, and Hampton Sides, author of Ghost Soldiers, as well as many others. Last year’s conference sold out, so register early. For more information contact MaybornConferenceInfo@unt.edu.

Mayborn Social Club Hits the Web
The Mayborn Social Club now has a blog to announce upcoming social events, answer questions and network. Check it out at: maybornclub.blogspot.com.

Dear Nancy,
How can I make my emails appear more professional?

Your email says a lot about your work style. If there are mistakes or misspelled words, a potential employer might think you’re lazy or sloppy. Result: you do not get called in for that important interview. Here are 10 tips to help you correspond via email with hiring managers:

1. Does your email address sound like a college cutie or a serious job seeker? Blondebombshell@wahoo.com won’t help your search. Create a new email account before sending out inquiries.
2. Keep emails concise. Think before you write anything.
3. Always use the correct spelling, grammar and punctuation. Set your email program to check automatically for errors, but don’t depend on it entirely.
4. Most companies won’t accept attachments for fear of viruses. For best results, copy and paste your resume into the body of your email.
5. The subject line is important. Use it!
6. Your email messages always should be professional. Do not use abbreviations or emoticons.
7. Proofread, proofread, proofread.
8. Check your email account often and answer messages as soon as possible.
9. Know the exact spelling of the person’s name you’re sending email to and her official title.
10. Remember always to include your telephone number(s) in your salutation. Give the employer every opportunity to get in touch with you.

Send your questions to Nancy Eanes, Career Development Specialist for the Mayborn Institute, at neanes@unt.edu or (940) 565-4778.