



University of Pittsburgh Greensburg

Creative & Professional Writing Alumnus Testimonial

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Jim Wexell

Class of 1983

After I left Pitt-Greensburg, I took a job with a guy -- Vic Ketchman -- who's gone on to become one of the top football writers in the business. He pioneered a path for me to follow after he left Pittsburgh first to work for the Jacksonville Jaguars and now with the Green Bay Packers. He was the sports editor of a suburban Pittsburgh paper and he liked what I had done as a stringer while at UPG, but told me he was concerned about hiring me full-time because I had an English Writing degree instead of a Journalism degree.

He did hire me, and while I may have been lacking in some training, I can say 30 years later I have been better served with the Writing degree.

Right now I am the publisher of a subscription-based website for Scout.com called SteelCityInsider.net. This is my 20th season covering the Steelers. My subscribers can get just about all the news on the team they want all over the Internet, but they can only come to one place that mixes news and storytelling and that's my site. Maybe I don't have a plant in the front office to apprise me of the next free-agent contract, but when Mike Tomlin or anyone else confides a unique football story to me, I know exactly what to do with it.

People want to know about the sports figures. They want to know what makes them tick and what kind of people they are. I feel my storytelling skills that have evolved from the "New Journalism" crowd of the 1960s have helped me out time and time again. I believe that's what sets me apart from the crowd, and that that's the only way to draw customers in an oversaturated Internet market.

I am also the associate editor for Steelers Digest, which, in spite of technological advances, still comes out later than newspaper/Internet reports. It's a magazine, not a website. The editor, Bob Labriola, relies on me to make the same story everyone else is covering, and putting out three days earlier, relevant. If it requires using first-person in what would normally be a flat news account, then I do that, or whatever else it takes to set our piece apart. My old-school editor

doesn't mind; in fact he encourages me to experiment. I do believe that was the mantra for us back in school, so I simply rely on those fundamentals, and guess what? They still work.

In 2004 I was asked by a publishing house to write a book on the 1970s Steelers -- Tales From Behind The Steel Curtain. I had six weeks to write it. I mixed current interviews with old newspaper accounts and produced a book that Jack Lambert called the best book ever written about his team. Now, there's truly a great book on the team out there right now by Gary Pomerantz, but Jack liked my storytelling (probably because the best stories were about him). Anyway, because of that book, Lambert agreed to a rare interview for my second book, Men of Steel, and that certainly helped my marketing angle. It was a where-are-they-now type of book, so I did close to 30 portraits of players, about whom much had already been written. Digging into their lives and churning out stories with details about their childhoods and families and lives after football set it apart.

That was it for me from publishing houses, from which I received an initial payment and then some royalties. My third book, Steeler Nation, was self-published, and the payoff was much greater. This was a road-trip book in which I was the story, even though I don't think many reviewers realized that. I went from story to story while following the team's schedule, which coincided perfectly with my schedule. My background as a writer with a minor in journalism was the perfect combination for this book.

I know enough about journalism to stay with the pack while reporting daily for a suburban paper in Uniontown. But I really believe that what I was trained to do at UPG, under your direction Judy, is what has set me apart, what has put food on my family's table, and what is sending my daughter to college. So I will always be grateful to you, and I have no doubt I'm not the only one who feels this way.