

To One Day Be Judged

Musings from a mile above Nashville. By ALEX BURKETT

AMONG MY BEST friends is a small Cessna, which provides the only venue these days where I can watch the world go by, and look upon Middle Tennessee and ponder where we've come, where we're going, and my role in chronicling it. We speak our own language up there, a mile high, in unspeakably tranquil refuge from the pressures of putting out a biweekly newspaper.

I confess to the Cessna, as we slice through the winter air together, that my biggest, most consuming fear is becoming irrelevant. I'm petrified of not making a contribution — of accomplishing mere deeds as editor-in-chief at the *Vanderbilt Hustler*, but not leaving the campus in May with a lasting and meaningful contribution.

My friends whisper of escapism when they talk about my exploits in the air, but I don't see it that way. I write flying off as a part of my job, because the best writer is he who has accrued the longest, most diverse life history, and I can't conceive of a better way to see the world — to observe it, to know it — than from an airplane.

I fancy myself more an observer than a reporter. I guess it's natural; I couldn't be one

without being the other. But in many ways, the best reporter is a pilot. He ascends above the fray to make sense of it all, getting the helicopter view from overhead and simplifying it for readers who can't be there to see it for themselves.

As the editor of students' primary source of information on everything Vanderbilt, I think it's my job to observe, to analyze, and to know something before I begin even to report a single word.



NEIL BRANKE

The truths most vital to any member of a newspaper's staff are that he is insignificant, soon will be obsolete, was born long after the newspaper's nascence, and likely will die long before it prints its last page. That's particularly important for college newspaper editors to remember, particularly when they occupy their office for, at most, a year's time, and enter their job knowing they'll be replaced, trying desperately until then to make a difference, to make a contribution. But I can report only that which happens. If nothing of note happens during my tenure as editor-in-chief, I'll simply have to be satisfied with being reliable.

But I haven't been so unlucky as to writhe in a drought of news. On a campus with 10,000 students and more staff members, there's always news.

The University has embarked ambitious-

ly on a path toward its future size and shape, preparing for residential colleges and aligning itself with the newest incarnation of the ever-changing paradigm of higher learning in the United States.

Vanderbilt, historically the stiff, somewhat high-brow conservative institution of southern legacy, has begun to shed its old skin and force a new identity. Progressivism is the only ideology acceptable in any intellectual community.

Vanderbilt administrators' decision last fall to delete the word "Confederate" from Confederate Memorial Hall, a dormitory on the University's Peabody campus, was a particular high point of the *Hustler's* reporting record. We broke the story, which spilled into local, regional and national headlines within days.

In one sense, our reporting of the renaming of Confederate Memorial Hall was routine: It told the story of yet another University-led initiative designed to refocus Vanderbilt's image as a progressive, somewhat urban, somewhat "hot" school that was trying to delete the regional boundaries that have heretofore defined its student body.

But in another sense, the Confederate coverage was a reporter's — and editor's — dream. It prompted fascinating dialogue about race in America, and conjured memories of America's past racial sins from which we continue to learn. Our coverage had a very real, almost visceral social value, something we don't always enjoy with reporting on a new greenhouse or on scholarship winners.

Information, if it's anything, is a business. We are the distributor — the middle man —

of information, and our readers are its consumers. And as in any business, sometimes it's difficult, if not impossible, to please everyone.

One student, trying to defend his friend who had been arrested two days earlier while allegedly attempting to break into the Federal Courthouse in downtown Nashville, made an interesting demand.

"Your reporter didn't tell me I'd have to tell the truth once she started asking me questions," he said. "So if you print the story, I'm going to say that everything I told her was a lie." His demand was that since he hadn't been truthful with our reporter, we must not use the interview in which he had revealed some potentially damning information about his friend's night on the town.

Needless to say, he hadn't lied. But my conversation with him, which lasted the better part of an hour, underscored the delicacy of our relationship with our readers.

On the one hand, we all inhabit the same community. All of us at the *Hustler* pay Vanderbilt tuition each year, we all attend class, we all go to weekend parties. And despite its recent growth, Vanderbilt's student body is still pretty small: One of our staff members estimated recently that students here are separated by a scant two degrees. Everyone knows everyone else through one friend.

Unequivocally, it's a small community. Almost every story in the *Hustler* affects at least two people I know, so it's important that the newspaper institutionalize a spirit of impartiality and a sense of detachment characteristic more of larger, metropolitan products than of newspapers serving markets Vanderbilt's size.

But we all live by the same rules, and it's the newspaper's responsibility to report on those who don't.

It's important I consider carefully what I write, and what the *Vanderbilt Hustler* reports. Vanderbilt's students, an increasingly diverse, Brobdingnagian bunch of scholars, academics and future power-mongers, are growing

increasingly sophisticated with every new freshman class. Perhaps no other newspaper in the country must navigate such a tenuous course through such an unforgiving and sophisticated readership.

Making our job even more difficult is the schedule we work.



ROB FRANKLE

We are practitioners of a craft whose beauty takes shape in the witching hours. Ours is a life of plenty of Coca-Cola, coffee, candy and sucrose. Like us, our office never sleeps. More often than not, I fantasize about joining the hordes of other Vanderbilt seniors as they trek to Hank Williams's and Chet Atkins's old haunts in downtown Nashville on weekday nights.

I see them — all of them — reading our product bleary-eyed in the mornings after what I imagine to be long afternoons of golf and tennis, looking tan even in January as they work their way through the paper from the crossword on the back page.

In those moments of self-doubt, I usually wander back into my office, where there's a bulletin board on which, ever the escapist, I've tacked a poster of a tropical paradise in Mal-

dives. Next to the poster there's a card whose cover declares, "Some people are special." It's a greeting card from Wymon Hayes, a Vanderbilt Dining Services employee whose son was on board the *USS Cole* when it was attacked by Al-Qaida operatives in 2000.

I covered the story of Hayes's family as they watched television news broadcasts of the attacks, and wondered and prayed about the safety of her son. I look at the card and smile, every time, as I remember when I called Hayes, famous among students for the hugs she used to dispense at the entrance to Rand Dining Hall at dinner time, shortly after she talked to her son for the first time after the attack.

I remember how Hayes, characteristically calm and spiritual, seemed so utterly energized, entirely relieved. She was a story. She was also a mother.

"Oh, honey, I'm just so happy," she told me, clearly fighting her emotions. "I've been praying so hard, and I know everyone at Vanderbilt has been, too." And then I remember why I edit Vanderbilt's student newspaper, why I decided to write in the first place.

A mile above the city, hurtling through space at 120 miles per hour, it's easy to romanticize about

the news business and collect my thoughts. But nothing is easier to me than writing a compelling article, than telling a good story.

I imagine the Cessna and I will continue to escape from the stresses of the daily grind as often as possible. But I also imagine I'll one day be judged, in some way, for my work at Vanderbilt. I hope my contribution will prove to be as profound as Mama Hayes told me it would be, as she prepared to welcome her son home. I pray I won't become irrelevant, amid the roar of the Cessna's engine and the wind racing around us.

The way I figure it, irrelevant is the worst thing a man like me can be.

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