

Keeping us on our toes

by BROCK WEIR

I didn't always want to be a journalist.

My Grade 8 graduating yearbook, for instance, immortalizes a snapshot in time in which I wanted to be an archaeologist.

The origins of this dream ? unlike so many of the priceless artefacts uncovered by the people who chased, followed and succeeded in this dream ? have been lost to the sands, mists, and otherwise shifting soils of time.

Maybe it was an Indiana Jones obsession I've now forgotten about.

Maybe it was the countless ?documentaries? (and I think it's fair to use that term pretty loosely) that were a hallmark of CITY-TV in the mid-1990s to mid-2000s that sealed the deal. After all, in a recent excavation of my basement, I've found several such programs I evidently felt prudent to commit to VHS tape, everything ranging from the secrets contained behind the blocks of Egypt's pyramids, the search for Cleopatra's tomb, the hunt for Atlantis, and even submarine missions down to the Titanic's wreckage.

Regardless of its origins, it was a dream that I held close to my heart for many of my formative years, before my goal posts suddenly shifted towards journalism.

My father, who studied journalism in the heady days 1960s before going out in the field to ply his craft in media outlets that once published under the Maclean-Hunter banner, might want to take some of the credit for this gear-change. Maybe there's a kernel of truth there that I'm yet to find, but the truth of the matter is, it simply dawned on me that such a career would be the perfect way to marry my interest in current events with a passion for writing.

It was a goal which, from that point, was more or less set in stone but, for a good long while, there were few opportunities to practice.

Preparing for Grade 9, an information session in August of 1999 opened my eyes to some of the possibilities that were out there. Among the extra-curriculars promoted by guidance counsellors and what seemed at the time to be impossibly mature soon-to-be-Grade 12 students was the possibility of writing for our student newspaper, the supposedly venerable The Forum.

That helped me get over my fears of leaving behind elementary school for the big leagues, but the reality was a different story.

Despite the best efforts of teachers and those students in Grade 12 and OAC (yes, this was indeed some time ago) who were leading the club, we were lucky if we were able to get out two issues a year; and they were hardly newspapers you could open up and pore over. We had to make due with a few pages of 8.5x11 stapled haphazardly in the top left corner.

We were hardly a threat to any media outlet before or since, but despite the experience being nowhere near what I imagined, it was a start, and a good opportunity to practice and grow.

But, just a year or two later, another opportunity came knocking.

My local paper was looking for new student writers for their monthly At the Schools section.

The idea behind the section was to highlight the unique voices of high school students, allow them to scratch the surface of their school environment, and report on the issues that mattered to them and their peers.

I can't remember the specifics behind the application process, but what I do remember is the excitement I felt when presented with the possibility and the even greater excitement that percolated to the surface when I realized that, whatever the application entailed, I had made the cut.

I could feel the proverbial butterflies as my dad drove me down from Newmarket to our first editorial meeting in a board room incongruously located near the back entrance of Hillcrest Mall, and they were fluttering something fierce when I took my seat at the table with my new volunteer colleagues.

Then it was time to make my pitch ? a look at some of the programs that were in place for students with intellectual disabilities to learn and acquire practical skills and what was then a dearth of opportunities for them within the community once they aged out of high school programs in their early 20s. (Thankfully those days are long gone as parents and advocates since stepped up to fill what was nothing short of a canyon-sized gap in the system!)

As I wrote that story, I couldn't help but think a lot had transpired since my face first appeared in Metroland's Newmarket Era, then known as The Era-Banner, serving the communities of both Newmarket and Aurora, being given a helping hand by my mom as I walked along a pommel horse in a gymnastics program for toddlers!

And so it was: my first chance to see my byline in print, an instance never to be forgotten.

While I pursued journalism at university, my working career took a bit of a side-quest before a permanent opportunity to ply my trade in my new hometown came about. I found myself working at an independent newspaper seated alongside the reporters my name appeared alongside once-upon-a-time, now as colleagues, friendly rivals (I hope), united in the effort to train our respective and unique journalistic lenses on many of the same subjects, people, and events that make our communities ?home? to so many people.

For better or worse; and over the years there has been plenty of both.

I'm a firm believer in the old adage that a rising tide floats all boats, particularly when it comes to the state of journalism, and there was no satisfaction to be taken in Friday's announcement that Metroland had gone into bankruptcy protection and would cease publication of a print edition effective September 14.

In many cases, these newspapers were part of the very fabric of our communities, some serving our towns for more than 150 years. As far as the people they employed, some were nearing 40 or even 50 years with their fingers on the pulse of the place we call home.

As much as we journalists prefer to relay the news rather than BE the news, these tireless reporters should be celebrated for their tireless work.

As a colleague, you welcomed me to the table as an equal, however callow; as competitors, you kept us on our toes; as veterans of our business, you deserved better ? and I, for one, must say thank you.