



# OF LOVE AND DEATH THE DAY HE LEARNED THE *READER* WAS SHUTTING DOWN IN MINNEAPOLIS, THE PAPER'S NEWS EDITOR LOST HIS FATHER TO HEART DISEASE IN CALIFORNIA. NOW HE RECALLS HOW ONE LOSS WAS INTERTWINED WITH THE OTHER.

**O**n March 12, 1997, at three o'clock in the afternoon, *Twin Cities Reader* staffers gathered to hear the *Reader's* new owner, Stern Publishing president David Schneiderman, confirm their worst fears: The paper, he said, would be closed in two days.

While sudden, Schneiderman's announcement was not unexpected. In hindsight, there had been a kind of grim inevitability about the *Reader's* fate ever since its parent company, City Media, had been acquired in June 1996 by American City Business Journals based in Charlotte, North Carolina. ACBJ bought City Media for its business publications, and although the new owners at first assured *Reader* staffers that the paper would stay open, they never expressed any interest in investing in or running an "alternative" weekly.

When Stern bought local rival *City Pages* in February 1997, the *Reader's* fate was sealed. Even though the *Reader* was marginally profitable, selling it a month later was, for ACBJ, a simple act of corporate housecleaning. ACBJ had no interest in competing with the deep pockets of Leonard Stern, the billionaire pet-

supplies magnate and publisher of New York's *Village Voice*.

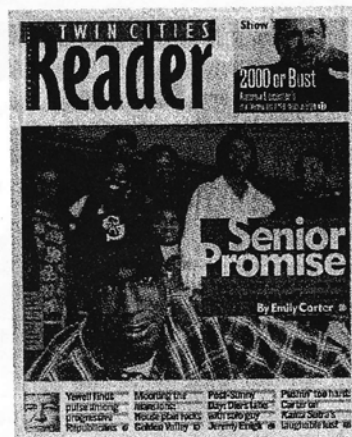
For Stern, killing the *Reader* to eliminate *City Pages'* competition was Monopoly Capitalism 101, although many have since questioned whether the payoff in increased ad revenue was worth the reported \$2 million Stern paid for the *Reader*. As a result, *City Pages'* former owners were suddenly rich, while three dozen dedicated people who loved their work were on the street.

This was not a merger.

**I**n the summer of 1996, at the time of the ACBJ purchase of City Media, I had been a contributor to the *Reader* for a year-and-a-half; for six months I'd been writing a politics column. Toward the end of August, just before I was hired as the paper's news editor, I visited my father in Stockton, California.

After more than two decades of heart problems, including four heart attacks and two multiple bypass operations, my father's health was not as urgent a concern as it should have been—I had convinced myself that he was indestructible. This time,

BY JOHN YEWELL



The *Twin Cities Reader's* last issue, March 12-18, 1997.

when I arrived in Stockton, he was his usual gregarious self, chipper and happy to see me. But something was different. He moved much more slowly and had to rest halfway up the ten steps leading from the manmade lake behind his house. He was thinner, paler, older.

A few days after I arrived, he suffered an attack of congestive heart failure and was rushed to the hospital. I found him a few hours later in intensive care, hooked up to a spider's web of tubes and wires. Yet there it was again, that singsong voice, as if nothing was out of the ordinary, welcoming me with an enthusiastic "Hello!" into his hospital "suite." Sitting there next to his bed, I finally realized that I could lose him, and soon. I felt like a small boy. I squeezed his hand, told him I loved him, and cried. He just

**B**orn in the late summer of 1922, on almost the same day Jay Gatsby died, my father grew up on Long Island's north shore, near "the white palaces of fashionable East Egg" that F. Scott Fitzgerald described in *The Great Gatsby*. Later my father left a public-relations career in New York to move the family to southern California. For several years he worked at various sales jobs, eventually becoming active in politics, his true love. For some fifteen years he served in a number of staff positions with the California state legislature, finishing his career as a labor consultant for the state chamber of commerce. While he tended to hold firm opinions, he was proud of the professional trust he cultivated among people on all sides of the issues. And he was an irrepressible optimist, with

sign many prominent New York landmarks, including the George Washington Bridge.) His mother, he continued, "was a very religious woman and totally convinced I was going to hell in a hand basket." He then suggested, poignantly, that his parents' example had left him adrift in a lifelong search for the meaning of love. "For all the religion they tried to teach me," he said, "I never experienced any love between my parents. I am not sure I ever learned it."

Reading that diary, I was struck by how my own youthful memories of my father revealed a man struggling with that legacy. He could be unyielding, demanding, and combative—but also kind and thoughtful. He was devoted to his family, but, like many parents, he had trouble coping with teenagers growing up in a world so unlike

## DEATH BESTOWED ON BOTH MY FATHER AND THE READER

smiled and told me not to worry. He said he felt fine.

For the next forty-eight hours I lived in his room in the ICU, sleeping on a reclining chair. We watched television and talked about nothing in particular. I became friendly with his nurses, who seemed to have developed a real affection for him. When his test results came back, there was nothing encouraging. Only 15 percent of his heart muscle was still working. Worse, his kidneys were beginning to fail—and along with them his chances for a heart transplant and the hope that had sustained him in recent months.

The truth of his condition could not be sugarcoated. During those precious hours together, with that certain knowledge settling in for both of us, talking about my future seemed a lot easier than talking about his. How were things going in Minnesota? he wanted to know. Did I get that newspaper job I wanted?

a sunny disposition and a weakness for silly puns.

But the journey to his mostly cheerful state of mind had been difficult, occasionally marked by tragedy. His mother, stricken by a heart attack while preparing dinner one evening, died in his arms when he was eighteen. Not long after he'd returned from the service in World War II, his college sweetheart perished in a fire. Thirty years later, he lost to breast cancer a woman he'd intended to marry.

In a rare unguarded moment, he once confided to a diary the frustrations he had felt growing up the only son of a workaholic father he barely knew—and whom he could never please—and a strict mother who had trouble showing affection. "My father was a completely regimented man who ran his life by the clock and demands made upon him by his clients," he wrote. "I never had any prime time with him." (His father was a commercial artist who helped de-

that of his own youth. At times he seemed at wit's end, trying to devote himself to professional success while struggling to give to his family the time that his own father had never been able—or willing—to give to his. His determination to be a model father took a heavy toll. Just as I was about to leave home for college, he was finally, at fifty, fulfilling a lifelong dream: to run for elective office—in this case, county supervisor. But a heart attack forced him to withdraw, bitterly disappointed, from a race he would have won. Worse, more personal tragedy—a divorce from my mother—loomed on the horizon.

The *Reader* hired me about a week after I returned to Minnesota in September 1996, and I took some pleasure in telling my father. From his enthusiastic reaction you'd have thought I'd been hired by the *New York Times*. It had always been that way with him: effusive expressions of congratulations as if compensating, I would later

realize, for the praise he'd never received from his own father. That's not to say he wasn't sincere, for I know that my happiness, coming as it did after several years of professional frustration that had in some ways mirrored his own, was what mattered to him. And I knew that it brought him some peace.

**T**he late Mark Hopp started the *Reader* in 1976, originally calling it the *Entertainer*. By 1988 Hopp had brought in investors planning to expand the business, but within a year he was ousted by his partners and lost control of the highly leveraged enterprise. Thus began the history of absentee ownership that would ultimately be the *Reader's* undoing. "The *Reader* was the better of the alternative weeklies in the Twin Cities," wrote *Corporate Report* editor and former

from his cubicle after a phone call, twirl his ponytail, and let out a "Woo-hoo!", followed by "Punk rock!" or "Rat bastards!", depending on the outcome of the call. The natty and puckish Jon Tevlin would regale us with tales of venality uncovered during one of his periodic forays into the Hennepin County court's records department. Claude Peck kept things loose but focused.

We were conscientious, contrarian, and irreverent, trying every week to beat the dailies to important stories. In my rosy memory, no issue went to press without a scoop, but there were in fact many firsts, several involving the slaughter of sacred cows: the bowdlerization of Fitzgerald's work by Garrison Keillor and friends during a local celebration of the novelist's birth, the extent of theft within the Minneapolis Police Department's evidence room, the battle over

## A WELL-DESERVED DIGNITY.

*Reader* writer Eric Wieffering in an editorial obit last April. "But for most of [its] last dozen years its business operations were a mess."

During its lifetime the paper had earned a spotty reputation. It hit bottom in 1982 when it fired writer Paul Maccabee for criticizing Kool cigarettes, a major advertiser—an action that garnered national notice and criticism. But in its final years the paper earned critical acclaim. "Claude Peck was the paper's final editor," wrote Wieffering, "and during his two-year tenure the *Reader* was better than it had ever been."

The *Reader* I knew during those last several months was blessed with a rare unselfishness, an air of collaboration in the editorial department that made helping one another with sources, suggestions, and story angles an unconscious act of collegiality. At times it was a rollicking place to work. Burl Gilyard, our lanky and brilliant media columnist, would rise up

the speakership in the state House of Representatives, the announcement of Sandy Pappas's candidacy for St. Paul mayor, to name a few. Through the fall of 1996 and into the following winter, the Twins stadium issue became a particular institutional obsession.

Then, early in January, the rumor surfaced that we had been sold to the Phoenix-based New Times chain of alternative weeklies. The rumor was false, it turned out, but a small shock wave went through the office when what we'd all feared was revealed to be true: that ACBJ had put us on the market. In our own pages we played the story tongue-in-cheek: "*Reader* to Sever Ties with *New Yorker*," ran the headline, an allusion to Advance Publications, ACBJ's corporate master and the owner of the legendary weekly magazine. Faced with the prospect of having to do battle with a recapitalized *Reader*, *City Pages* owner Tom Bartel went looking for a white

knight, and in mid-February he found one in Stern. Bartel sold his paper for an undisclosed amount, reportedly about \$5 million. Significantly, the deal allowed him to keep his staff in place.

The *City Pages* sale caused commercial interest in the *Reader* to wither. No one wanted to pay good money for the financially weaker of two competitors in a market suddenly dominated by a billionaire. We were also learning just how large the gulf was between our dedication to the *Reader* and ACBJ's lack of interest in it. We were fighting for a paper we loved to make it worth keeping, but ended up propping up its sale value. Meanwhile, ACBJ's incessant dithering—the company had by then spent at least six months trying to decide what to do with us—would prove fatal.

**M**y father was determined to fight for his life too. After his first heart attack, in 1972, he didn't pussyfoot around when it came to his health. He followed a strict diet and started to exercise regularly. Most important, he remade the inner man, becoming more thoughtful and learning to keep stress to a minimum. Over time, his occasional fits of anger that I had known in my youth became fewer and finally disappeared altogether, replaced by a certain grace. He did these things because he loved his family and knew we loved him, and he didn't want us to worry. One of his favorite lines was the old saw, "If I'd known I was going to live this long, I'd have taken better care of myself."

I learned of the *City Pages* sale while back in California researching a story on San Francisco's experience building a privately financed ballpark—a piece that would later gain some notoriety under the headline "Build It Yourself, Carl!" One evening during my West Coast stay, I took my father to a restaurant near his home. Since the

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previous summer's hospital visit he had invested a lot of time and precious energy adjusting his medication and taking tests. But by February, when I saw him, it was apparent hope was fading.

Still, he continued making plans, discussing new kidney treatments and working on a long-shot attempt to convince the doctors that he should receive a new heart. I recall his irascible side resurfacing during dinner as he complained to the waiter that the tomatoes in his pasta were sour. There was fight in the old guy yet, I thought. But the memory that stays with me is his appearance, for he couldn't walk from the curb to the door without assistance. The vigorous man who, not so long before, had loved to tramp the golf course in his retirement had been replaced by this gaunt figure who spent most of his energy trying to hide his fatigue.

We chatted a while at his home after dinner, but he tired quickly, so I gave him a big hug and said good-bye. But I kept forgetting things. Before I was able to embark on the ninety-minute drive back to San Francisco, I must have returned to the house three or four times—first it was my keys, then my camera, then something else. Each trip was another opportunity to say good-bye, and by the last time we managed to make a joke out of it. Fate, I realized later, was not being very subtle.

At the end of February, after I'd returned to Minnesota, my father was back in the hospital—in fact, he had been there for several days before I found out. When I called him in his room I was frantic. He had done this before—experienced a medical emergency without telling his family—and he was perturbed that I had learned about it. He said he was not in any immediate danger, and explained his silence the same way he always did—that he didn't want anyone to worry about him. He then asked me not to tell my siblings. I agreed, but made him promise never again to keep his health problems a secret. I told him I loved him, and then I said good-bye.

**T**he *Reader* continued to suffer from a kind of commercial affliction whose cure remained a

mystery. Some staffers hid their anxiety behind brave faces and hopeful rationalizations, but meanwhile there was a quiet exodus under way in the ad-sales department. While résumés were dusted off, the rumor mill was spinning. One story maintained that because of the trouble it was having finding a buyer, ACBJ had taken us off the market and was going to let us go on publishing. This cheery scenario, alas, stumbled out of the gate.

Then, over the second weekend in March, some of us heard that Stern had bought the *Reader* too. The deal was supposedly cut at some fancy Manhattan cocktail party. Considering Bartel's arrangement with Stern, the implications were clear. If Stern had promised to keep *City Pages* running, there was only one reason for Stern to purchase the *Reader*. On Monday, March 10, we heard that ACBJ president Ray Shaw was flying in the next day. The Twin Cities dailies picked up the story, and suddenly we were front-page news. Denial gave way to bargaining, with acceptance moving up on the rail.

The next afternoon, the staff gathered to hear Shaw announce that the *Reader* had been sold to Stern. He spelled it out coldly, rationally, as a simple business decision. "Don't you realize what this means for us?" I asked pointedly. "I know *exactly* what it means," he replied.

Remarkably, the work went on. Even when it was evident we were goners, one of our interns, Dan Fierman, doggedly pursued the story of the shutdown of radio station REV 105, whose demise was taking place concurrent with our own. That evening, after putting our last issue to bed, we all went out and got clobbered.

The next day, March 12, at our weekly editorial meeting, we ditched the usual agenda and reminisced. There were plenty of tears and not a few wisecracks. After the meeting some went to lunch, others started to pack. As a final irreverent tribute, art director David Steinlicht put together a mock "Get Out of Town" cover, in

the style of our annual special issue, featuring pictures of the staff. That afternoon, Schneiderman arrived from New York and made it official. He held out the hope that some of us would find jobs at *City Pages*, but we were under no illusions.

I thought about my father and how I would tell him the news. I figured I would have a few weeks before his subscription stopped and he'd know something was up. I feared for how the news would add to his worries, and possibly affect his health. When I got home that evening I felt bereft. The *Reader* had not been simply a livelihood for any of us. And then the phone rang. It was my brother. Our father had died that afternoon.

**M**y memories of what happened the next day are hazy. I barely had time to finish packing and say good-bye to my colleagues before getting ready to fly to California for the funeral. I remember plenty of tears and many thoughtful expressions of condolence. And I remember a private conversation with Schneiderman, during which I told him what many others have said and written since—that he was killing the wrong paper.

My father and the *Reader* were connected for me. My interest in politics had come from him, spurred on by dinner-table arguments about the Vietnam War and other social issues of my youth, and that interest had ultimately led me to the *Reader*. My father and the paper shared a steady, simultaneous decline, and I am haunted by the image of my father collapsing in his hallway virtually at the moment Schneiderman announced the *Reader's* shutdown.

My father was a good man who had many friends. He found love within himself, and gave that gift to his children. Death bestowed on both my father and the *Reader* a well-deserved dignity, revealed through simple expressions of grief, regret, and praise.

I miss my father. I miss the *Reader* too. But I know I can always find another job. ■

*John Yewell joined the St. Paul Legal Ledger as staff writer in October.*