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How I Spent My Summer Internship

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Every time I see a story about newspapers being doomed—such stories are published on the Internet every hour or so—I hope today's journalism students, training now for digital media, might still have the kind of summer I spent in 1987 as a reporting intern at the St. Petersburg Times' bureau in Pasco County. It was the best summer of my life.

As a sophomore at Northwestern University and a reporter for the school paper, I desperately wanted to line up a summer internship. I applied to almost every paper hiring. I had never heard of the *St. Petersburg Times* and I didn't know a soul in Florida. Mike Foley, the *Times* recruiter who came to Evanston in the fall, said he wanted to interview only juniors and seniors. I signed up, anyway.

Tall, wiry and longhaired, Foley wore thick glasses and a perpetual smile. He was like a grown-up version of Boon in *Animal House*—suave and cool and always ready with the right wisecrack. I confessed to breaking his “juniors and seniors only” rule. Foley loved it. He was a rebel and he thought I was one, too. He hired only one intern from Northwestern: me.

The editors at the school paper, all older and more accomplished than me, were surprised. So was I. A rebel? I went to church every Sunday and worked at the library. I was a virgin and had never ingested any drug stronger than alcohol and aspirin. Think of Evan, the meek Michael

Cera character in *Superbad*. Certainly, Foley had made a mistake. Later, an editor one rung down the food chain from Foley called my dorm room to talk summer arrangements. U2 blared in the background as I answered. No one important ever called my room. I scrambled to kill the volume. The editor, Joe Childs, thought this was hilarious. One editor thought I was a rebel and the other thought I was a rocker. I figured when dork-o college boy hit town they would cry "false advertising" and demand a trade.

During spring break I flew alone to Florida to arrange summer housing. I stepped outside the Tampa airport and was assaulted by Florida's wet-blanket humidity. There was a palm tree outside the terminal door. A palm tree? I grew up in the Chicago suburbs. Our airports had asphalt, more asphalt, and then a different shade of asphalt outside their terminal doors.

I had paged through a AAA guidebook in search of "affordable" motels near downtown St. Petersburg. I was pleased to find one that allowed me to pay day by day with traveler's checks. I arrived to find an aging, red, single-story edifice with storm doors that opened into the parking lot. If my mom had been there she wouldn't have gotten out of the car. I couldn't have been happier.

I drove my rental car to see Foley at the first big-city newsroom I'd ever visited. He took me into his office and told me I actually wouldn't be working in the big headquarters; I'd be north of the city, in the Pasco bureau. I asked why. We need good people up there, he said soberly. *He needs good people up there!*

Go enjoy yourself tonight, Foley said. Drive west to St. Pete Beach until you get to the Don

CeSar hotel, the huge pink palace, and turn left. Go to the Hurricane Lounge and have a fish sandwich. Then spend tomorrow holed up in your bare-bones motel room doubled over with food poisoning. Well, Foley hadn't mentioned that last part.

With one day lost to violent illness, I drove north to Pasco. I checked into a new motel and leased a studio apartment for the summer. What was the management company thinking? I was 19. Perhaps trying to validate Foley's image of me, I presented myself at a local bar (uh, I forgot my ID at home?) but the bouncers there, unlike the local landlords, took age seriously.

In June, on my first day of work, I wore a short-sleeved shirt that was too big and a tie that was too wide, both handed down from my dad. I shook hands with the bureau chief, Jeff Testerman, a sandy-haired, mustachioed man who reminded me of Burt Reynolds. Jeff had been a banker before he became a journalist, and his knowledge of public records—deeds, mortgages, land records—remains legendary at the *Times*. Pasco's intern the previous summer had been a house sitter for Jeff and his wife and had called them, alarmed, to report multiple lizard sightings outside their home. The reporters still laughed about that "discovery." What gaffes would the new boy make?

I was assigned to cover cops and I went to the Sheriff's Office for the morning briefing with Bob Loeffler, the cheerful, portly public information officer. I returned to the newsroom all excited. Three people had stolen a 100-pound pig and roasted it. Theft! Arrests! Stop the presses!

I proudly relayed my find to Jan Glidewell, the paper's columnist in Pasco. Must have

happened in West Pasco, he said. How did he know? If it had been East Pasco, he said, they would have raped the pig and then eaten it.

Glidewell had curly white hair down to his shoulders and a belly that invited comparisons to Santa Claus—well, a Santa who is a nudist and a Buddhist. Glidewell once noticed that his desk was wet each morning. He learned the night cleaning lady was sprinkling holy water on it, hoping to ward off his evil spirits. He once wrote an entire column all in one sentence and referred to an I-75 rest stop as a “poo poo palace.”

There's only one Glidewell, but the rest of the newsroom wasn't far behind in spirit. The guys—and it was largely a boy's club—joked all day and traded lines from *Stripes*, *Animal House* and especially *Caddyshack*. They were talented young men trying to write their way out of the bureau and into the downtown newsroom. But the pressure was less intense in Pasco than downtown, so the place was like a small fraternity house, minus the beer.

We ordered Domino's on Friday nights and ate lunch together at Morrison's Cafeteria. Testerman held up a long stick with a tiny, plastic dinosaur head on the end. A trigger moved the mouth open and shut as he sang “Feelings.” We had post-deadline scooter runs around the inside of the newsroom. I had the fastest time for two laps—the advantage of youth.

I never laughed that hard at my college newsroom, and I never felt so accepted, either. By then they all knew I was a dweeb, not a rebel, but I also was eager and prolific. I wasn't competing against anyone, like at the college paper. I wasn't competing against the other interns, all of whom worked in the big newsrooms in Tampa and St.

Pete. I wasn't all stressed out trying to be a student and a journalist at the same time. I was just "the intern"—part mascot, part journalist, part goofy younger brother.

"Send the intern!" was the favorite cry. When a sinkhole opened or someone robbed a bank, I shot out the door. I drove to a local community center that some teens had vandalized. They had spray painted "Dead Milkmen" on the wall. John Cutter, the assistant city editor, was impressed I knew the band. Finally, some street cred.

During that summer, *the St. Pete Times-Tampa Tribune* turf war was surging into overdrive. Each paper had expanded its reach, crossing Tampa Bay and trying to steal market share. It became one of the nation's best newspaper wars in one of the nation's best newspaper states. The war still rages on today. It was a golden age in Florida journalism. The *Miami Herald* was breaking national stories. Tom French was at the *Times* and writing "A Cry in the Night," one of the classic works of literary journalism. Pasco County was part of the greatness, too. Just two years before I arrived, Lucy Morgan and Jack Reed had won a Pulitzer Prize for taking down the Pasco sheriff.

But none of that made much of an impression on me at the time. I was like a college basketball player who was allowed to play with the Celtics for three months. I didn't stare at the banners in the rafters; I just tried to score every now and then and make sure the man I was guarding didn't get to the hoop.

My competition on the cops beat was Dave Sommer, a deep-tanned, deep-voiced reporter with the *Tampa Tribune's* bureau in Pasco. Each morning Dave and I sat in Bob Loeffler's office

and combed through reports from the previous night's arrests. We asked for copies of reports that looked interesting and had private talks with Bob, then or later on the phone, to pursue independent angles.

I wrote about drug busts, sex crimes, RV thefts. A man forcibly stole the engagement ring right off the finger of his very upset—and very pregnant—former fiancée. A truckload of frozen orange juice concentrate was stolen from a shipping company and set on fire. I conducted a jailhouse interview with a con man who had partied with TWA stewardesses who believed he was Jon Bon Jovi. I did the occasional news feature, including one about a bar whose two bouncers, Tiny 1 and Tiny 2, weighed almost 1,000 pounds combined.

My desk faced Charrie Hazard, the editorial writer, one of only two women in the newsroom. One day, some newsroom chatter turned to sex and someone asked me a question. "How should I know?" I asked with a red face. Charrie laughed gently. It's easy to forget how young you are, she said. If only she knew. I visited a veterinary clinic for a story and, a short time later, summoned the nerve to call back and talk to the beautiful receptionist. What would you say if I asked you out on a date? She laughed. I'd say my husband wouldn't want me to accept. The intern hadn't seen her wedding ring.

That was bad enough. But my naïveté almost got me in real trouble. Deputies arrested a man in connection with the murder of a convenience store owner. I went to interview his neighbors in Moon Lake, a rural area with unpaved roads, trashy mobile homes and livestock wandering about. A seasoned reporter would have gotten in

and out fast, and maybe brought a photographer along for safety. I wandered in alone and was gone for so long that Testerman sent a reporter to bring me, or my corpse, back to the newsroom.

I spent most of my free time alone, but there were a few memorable newsroom parties at staffers' homes. Late into one such soiree, a colleague impressed with my deep voice suggested I sing "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" and then join him in drinking a metal tub full of beer. I declined both invitations. At another we all downed tequila shots and watched *Caddyshack*.

On my last day, Childs and Testerman called me in for an exit interview. Did you break any laws this summer? They were joking, but unbeknownst to them the true list included DUI, careless driving, underage purchase of alcohol and lying about my age to get into a bar. Maybe I was more of a wild man than I thought. Or maybe I had become one. Someone asked if I was happy the internship was over. No, I said. But I need to get back to college, where the party scene is tamer.

I didn't see Foley again until fall, when he returned to Northwestern for his next recruiting trip. He took me to dinner and we sat in an office at Fisk Hall, the home of the journalism school. There we were, two rebels, talking about the new round of applicants and trying to find the *Times'* next intern.