

CD Lifestyles, 1989-92

By **Kim Whitesell Ramsey, CLAS 1992**

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When I climbed the stairs to the fifth floor of Newcomb Hall for the first time during the spring of 1989, I thought I was going to work production for The Cavalier Daily. When I left the fifth floor upon graduation in 1992, I thought I was going to be a journalist. As it turns out, I did neither.

What I did do was get highly involved in both the Cavalier Daily's Lifestyles department and the lifestyle of the student paper itself. I spent three years – progressing through the Lifestyles section from writer to associate editor to editor – learning not only about AP style, writing and editing copy, and designing layouts, but also about how to work with other people in very close quarters and under stress.

The CD's office at that time consisted of three small offices for the five managing board members, a newsroom, the ads room (which was turned over to the graphics department in the evening), the process camera room, and the back room, where production and photo worked. There was also a front business office, where our receptionist, Sharon, and our accountant, Early, worked.

The newsroom was an exciting, frustrating, alive space. Four daily editorial departments – news, opinion, lifestyles, and sports – each had a single desk and shared the bank of six computer terminals against the wall. Phones rang, interviews were conducted, stories written, pages composed – all within that one green-carpeted room. Nothing was quiet or secret.

While the University's news was being spread on the front pages of the CD, the news of the CD was spread – and often created – in the newsroom. Put nearly 100 college-age men and women together in a small space for as many as 50 to 60 hours a week, and plenty of grist for the gossip mill develops. Relationships were born and died on a regular basis all within the newsroom's walls. At one point, there was a sort of Kevin Baconesque chart linking a large number of CD staffers together, with “hooked-up with” replacing “co-starred with.” Opinion editor Rob McWilliams referred to it as “the CD soap opera.”

Working on the CD was tough on relationships, both romantic and domestic. I know my apartment mates began to wonder what I looked like after a while, and I'm sure I didn't

do my share of cleaning. Socially, it was much easier to go out drinking with fellow staffers after a late-night roll time than it was to go home and see what the roommates were up to.

Fortunately, I started dating a fellow CD'er early on, so we both shared and understood each others' devotion to the paper. Plus, we were able to see each other as we passed in the offices, and occasionally grab a slice of pizza together at the Pav. I think non-staffers had a hard time understanding, and not resenting, the amount of time and energy the CD required. I myself remember being jealous of the time that my then-boyfriend, now-husband, Scott Ramsey, spent on the fifth floor five nights a week night as a managing board member.

All the gossip and personal connections flying around the newsroom came to a head each February during elections. While, on the surface, election debate centered on qualifications, in truth, many of the speeches for and against candidates, and subsequent votes, were based on relationships. It was a basic matter of who liked whom. Debates for managing board members, in particular, took hours, and got quite personal and emotional. Department staffs often voted in bloc, so the larger and more cohesive the staff, the better their favorites fared during elections. At the end of 20 or 24 hours, however, we always ended up with a staff – five managing board members, one assistant managing editor, an ads manager, five copy editors, and two editors for each daily department.

Looking back after 10 years, it is this staff, and the personal relationships that tied us together, that I remember more clearly than the particular news issues of the day.

That's not to say we didn't have our share of big stories, including the Persian Gulf War and Operation Equinox, the federal drug bust on three University fraternities. As a member of the Lifestyles department, though, I was covering these stories tangentially – I remember writing a piece on the marketing of Gulf War merchandise, for example – and not involved in the intense beat reporting and detail gathering of the news department. Consequently, I'll defer descriptions of these stories and their coverage to staffers who were more involved at the time.

As a staff, we took these issues and others very seriously. We considered The Cavalier Daily to be the journalism school of the University of Virginia. We consulted both the AP and CD style books regularly. We held writing workshops. Many of us aspired to be journalists, and a few actually succeeded.

During my years, The Cavalier Daily won the Regional Pacemaker award from the Associated Collegiate Press – which ranked us as one of the top 10 college newspapers in the country – and we were also the only college paper to compete on the professional level for Virginia Press Association awards. We were fiercely proud of the job we accomplished each day.

This pride manifested itself in an intense rivalry with the UVa.'s other student-run newspaper, the University Journal, which during that time increased its coverage from three days a week to five. If memory serves, UVa. was the only college in the country with two daily student newspapers. Both were broadsheets, published Monday-Friday, with anywhere from 6 to 12 pages, depending on the supporting ads of the day.

The two competing staffs maintained a cool relationship; rarely did the two mingle and friendships develop. I do remember one CD-UJ football game, complete with biased game stories written up, but never published, by each paper. I also know of one friendship (that endures to this day) between rival editors-in-chief and one failed relationship between an editor-in-chief and a staff member of the competing paper.

The presence of the University Journal kept us on our toes editorially, stylistically and financially. We scanned its pages almost as religiously as we examined our own, watching for style changes, news scoops, and new advertisers to approach or old ones who'd switched.

Of course, we maintained that there was no true competition between the two papers: The Cavalier Daily was clearly superior. We believed they copied our style more often than we stole ideas from them. We crowed about sending reporters to news events instead of reporting on them after watching the event on television. We were especially proud to have two reporters, David Hallock and Steve Power, reporting live from the Pentagon and White House briefing room during the Gulf War.

There was one incident that both papers reported on the same day that nearly got us in trouble. A student fell into the window well of one of the libraries (I think it was Alderman). The Cavalier Daily reported it as an accident, printing the student's name as it appeared on the police report. The University Journal ran the story without the name, but reported that the student "jumped spread-eagled" into the well in an apparent suicide attempt. Publicly, the CD was chastised for releasing the student's name; privately, our staff was appalled at the UJ's unethical reporting of rumor.

The UJ's rapid growth during those years took a toll on the CD financially, as both papers were competing for a limited number of advertisers. Since the UJ received Student Activity funds, it was able to undercut the CD's ads rates.

The UJ had an additional financial advantage: Its production was done on a desktop publishing system, while the CD used an old Compugraphics system that used expensive paper and chemicals to produce columns of copy.

During the summer of 1991, Editor-in-Chief David Hallock and Business Manager Scott Ramsey leveled the playing field on the production front by replacing the Compugraphics system (including the typesetter not-so-affectionately called "Maggie" or "the bitch," as in "The bitch is down again") with desktop computers and laser paper. Microsoft Works (Word's predecessor) and Aldus PageMaker replaced Maggie's arcane typesetting codes and M1 and M2 tape. The copy was still printed out, waxed and pasted onto the flats,

however, and photos and ads were still produced on the process camera, before the flats were couriered to Culpeper for printing.

The change to desktop publishing was good for the paper's bottom line. Not buying supplies for Maggie alone helped bring the paper out of debt and pay for the desktop system in the first year or two. Lowering the costs of production also helped the CD stay competitive financially with the University Journal.

The change was not as good for morale, however. During the first few months, it was a common sight to see Operations Manager Monisha Kumar (now Longacre), storm out of the production room, in near-tears, yelling, "I HATE COMPUTERS!"

Morale boosting fell to the managing editor. Anita Kumar took this task seriously. The staff worked hard, but we played hard too. A week after elections each year, the CD sponsored a Rotunda dinner, where graduating staffers said goodbye and reminisced. In both the spring and fall, the CD had a spot in the field at the Foxfield steeplechase races. The week after spring exams, we celebrated the end of the year at a rented beach house in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

There were numerous parties, both planned and spontaneous: Band parties at fraternity houses, post-election parties, final roll parties (dancing to the B-52s at Jared Carlson's apartment), spring and fall cocktail parties (any official business with the University administration was conducted early in the afternoon, we'd all go out to dinner, and then return to the hosting fraternity house to get sloppy drunk later in the evening), and one summer staff party in particular that ended with at least five of us passing out on the sofa bed in Anita's apartment.

Those were good times.

I didn't end up doing production, and instead of pursuing journalism I spent my first few years out of college as an editor at a newspaper features syndicate and then as a marketing coordinator, before quitting to stay at home with my kids. Sometimes things don't work out the way we expect them to. Sometimes, they're better.