

DONALD G. McNEIL JR. SHB'67:

CRUSADING JOURNALIST, SAFARI RANGER, BUNGEE JUMPER

Donald G. McNeil Jr. SHB'67 is a crusading journalist who has broken stories internationally on AIDS in Africa and nationally on the Love Canal toxic waste site in Niagara Falls, NY. He's written a play produced in New York and taught at Columbia University. And he started right here at Stuart Hall for Boys.

After attending St. Ignatius, he went to UC Santa Cruz, then to UC Berkeley, where he was executive editor of the Daily Californian. He headed to the Big Apple at age 22.

"I'd seen Mean Streets and thought NYC would be a lot cooler than San Francisco," said McNeil, "and there was a girl I was interested in on the East Coast. I came out here and couldn't find a job at all. I went around to all the big newspapers and magazines, like Time, Newsweek and Newsday, but did not have the credentials to be a reporter."

Persistence paid off though, and McNeil landed a job as a copy boy at the New York Times. "I asked what a copy boy did, and it turns out you get coffee, carry type upstairs to the composing room and pick up papers fresh off the presses to go up to the editors for corrections.

"My first night I was told to do the 11 o'clock coffee run, and a bunch of people ordered 'coffee regular.' Since I was from California, I'd never heard this expression before, which in New York means coffee with a little bit of milk. I thought what they all wanted was non-decaffeinated coffee. One of the editors on the national desk sneered, 'You think you want to be a journalist and you can't even get coffee!'"

As inauspicious as that beginning was, it opened the door and he began getting assignments from editors within the paper. "Either I would come up with ideas or they would come up with ideas and ask me to do them," he said.

With his growing confidence came a job offer from Time magazine. McNeil's mentor said, "Don't leave. I'll parlay that offer into getting you a reporter-trainee job."

His first beat was Chinatown, though he didn't speak any Chinese. "There was a lot of gang war going on, so I went down and wrote about the complicated politics of it."

From there it was on to the national scene. "The big story I did as a reporter-trainee was the Love Canal," said McNeil. "There was a guy from the Niagara Gazette who was doing a great job writing about it, but none of the stories had ever gotten out of Niagara Falls. I wrote a bunch of stories exposing it just before it was declared a disaster area."



Don McNeil and friend.

He wrote for many sections, from city news to a stint as Long Island bureau chief. After an eight-year hiatus chasing his personal muse, he returned as an editor in the Week in Review section and wrote on everything from women in combat to why national forests are sold for \$1 per tree. During his hiatus, he wrote three plays, one of which ran off-off Broadway. That prompted the culture editor to make him the theater columnist, which he did until his then-wife, also a reporter, was offered a foreign posting and he lagged along.

McNeil sees his most important stories as those that good pharmaceutical companies into reducing prices for AIDS drugs. "I'm not claiming sole responsibility for this by any means, but I'm part of the reason that prices for the drugs came down from \$15,000 per year to \$150 per year in Africa, because I wrote about how people were being killed by the fact that drug companies wouldn't lower their prices. That's a good feeling; it helped keep people alive, ultimately," said McNeil.

"He's like Teddy Roosevelt, but taller and better looking."

McNeil spent four years in South Africa and reported in an alphabet of African states from Angola to Zimbabwe. He then spent three years in Paris, mostly covering Eastern Europe.

"I really like covering third world countries, and believe me, Rumania is a third world country. People live on the same kind of incomes people live on in Africa, a dollar or two dollars a day, except in Rumania, there's winter," McNeil said.

Dan Lewis, McNeil's boss for many years at the Times, now retired, reminisced about his friend. "He was all over southern Africa doing stories that were quite enterprising and sometimes dangerous," he said. McNeil also threw himself off Victoria Falls Bridge, 300 feet high, in a bungee jump, said Lewis, and trained as a bullet,

so qualified to lead safaris. "He's like Teddy Roosevelt, but taller and better looking," he added.

"Donald has the kind of magisterial intelligence about everything that counts. He can write science, geopolitical and mystery stories. He's done things on Greek mythology and on AIDS epidemics," Lewis said.

"He's a hard-digging reporter. His reporting is formed by so much intelligence and a steel-trap mind, but at the same time it is clear that he's a good natured, warm-hearted person. He writes about these things with concern. I don't think there is another writer at the Times or any other newspaper who beats Donald for that combination of smart brains and a really humanistic disposition," Lewis added.

McNeil has been nominated three times for Pulitzer Prizes, was a finalist in the Leeb Awards for business writing and, with another reporter, won the best foreign reporting award from the National Association of Black Journalists. It was for a series on the effect of AIDS on one small town in South Africa and included stories on how it touched teenagers, rape victims, witch doctors and prostitutes.

His new reports on science and health. "I'm sort of Mr. Pestilence around here. I tend to cover malaria and tuberculosis and AIDS and things that affect the poorer countries, plus I cover whatever weird disease comes up, like SARS, mad cow or monkeypox."

He's not all about diseases and crusading, though. "I wrote a feature about the most famous ostrich smuggler in Namibia and another about the tough life of a drug queen in Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe. That was partially a funny feature and partially a scary story because Mugabe was railing against gays," he said.

McNeil's years at SHB were not always the smoothest, but, "I think I learned to be fairly self-reliant there. I don't know where I got my sense of social justice. I think some of it is family, some of it is Stuart Hall, some of it is St. Ignatius and some of it is Berkeley."

One of his more vivid memories of SHB was the Cuban missile crisis, "praying until we had sweat running down that President Kennedy would solve it. Of course, nobody explained to us that those missiles were in Cuba and there was no way they were going to get all the way to California. I thought we were going to be immolated at any second and that the only power of prayer was holding them up in the sky."

"He is a crusading journalist, but he is not a crusading journalist who makes it all about him and his scoops," said Lewis. "Donald wants to improve the world and if part of that comes from his upbringing and his education at that fine school out there, then I say good for you."