

By John Krull
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INDIANAPOLIS – The first ones came hard.

It was the era of the great newspaper columnists – Mike Royko was the king – and I wanted to be among them. Thirty years ago this summer, I got my shot, writing a column for the late and much missed Indianapolis News.

I was young, not much past voting age. As is the case with many people who long for something without really understanding why they want what they want, I didn't quite know what to do with the opportunity once I got it. My earliest columns were awkward efforts. I tried to dazzle readers and I ended up boring them.

Then I learned that the rules for writing a column are simple, if not always easy. Tell a story. Have a point. Most important, be honest.

Readers respect honesty. It keeps them coming back even if they disagree with – even if they despise – what the columnist says. One of the earliest and most profound lessons in my education as a newspaper columnist was discovering how many people read my pieces on a regular basis just to be angered or outraged. They'd call me or send me long letters detailing all the ways I was wrong. I learned some things from them. Sometimes they changed my mind. Always they broadened my outlook. I hope I did the same for them.

I also learned that there were ways to make even the oldest stories fresh. At political events, I found that it was best to get away from the pack and find a perch from which I could observe not just the speaker, but the audience. The key was figuring out not what the leader said but how the voters responded to it. The relationship between them was the thing that mattered.

Setting also counted. Late in the spring of 1988, Michael Dukakis and Jesse Jackson were in a struggle to determine who would be the Democrats' presidential candidate. For the first time in our history, Americans confronted the possibility that a black man could be president. I got one of the few interviews Jackson gave when he came to Indiana to campaign in the primary here. It took place in the rear of his campaign bus.

For an hour, we talked in the back of that bus about what it would mean to have a descendant of slaves become the leader of the free world. The symbolism wasn't lost on either of us.

I also learned to look for the small, revealing moments. I remember walking behind Ronald Reagan and his aides in 1990 after he'd given an otherwise forgettable speech at the Indiana Roof Ballroom on behalf of Hoosier Republican candidates. A balloon popped and Reagan – who'd been shot and nearly killed in an assassination attempt early in his presidency – flinched. He collected himself immediately. He chuckled and muttered, under his breath, "Missed me," before going back to shaking hands.

That chuckle and murmur told me more about the discipline and toughness that powered Reagan's career than any speech ever could.

But the most important lesson was that the biggest stories often aren't the best stories. It came from a melancholy older woman who talked with me while I was reporting another story, one I've forgotten now. She told me that reading the newspaper sometimes made her cry, because reading and talking about the paper were things she used to do with her late husband. The small things – the tiny intimate moments – were what she missed most

about their life together. I wrote a column about her, but it really was a column about love, about loss, about grief.

Years later, it's still my favorite column.

When I started writing a column, the news industry was in upheaval. The recession of the early 1980s slowed advertising to a trickle and changes in the way people lived and got their news were wreaking havoc in the business. Afternoon papers like The News were dying and a lot of talented journalists lost their jobs.

Thirty years later, we're in the middle of another period of upheaval. Once again, we're seeing papers go under and talented journalists lose their jobs.

But journalism always has been a tough profession for tough and tough-minded people.

The profession will endure, because people, their lives and their stories always will matter. We just need to figure out new ways to pay the bills.

As for being a columnist, well, no one ever said it would be the easiest job in the world. It's just one of the best.

John Krull is director of Franklin College's Pulliam School of Journalism, host of "No Limits" WFYI 90.1 FM Indianapolis and executive editor of TheStatehouseFile.com, a news website powered by Franklin College journalism students.