

SO YOU WANNA BE A JOURNALIST ?

EXCALIBUR

In this shameless piece of self-promotion, Excal editor Graham Thompson interviews former Excalibur hacks who have moved on to greener pastures. Photographer Marc Sostoloni went along on this dangerous assignment. The five journalists hash over old memories and give some poignant pointers for would-be scribes.

ROSS HOWARD
GLOBE AND MAIL
EXCALIBUR '66-'70

When did you get started at Excalibur?

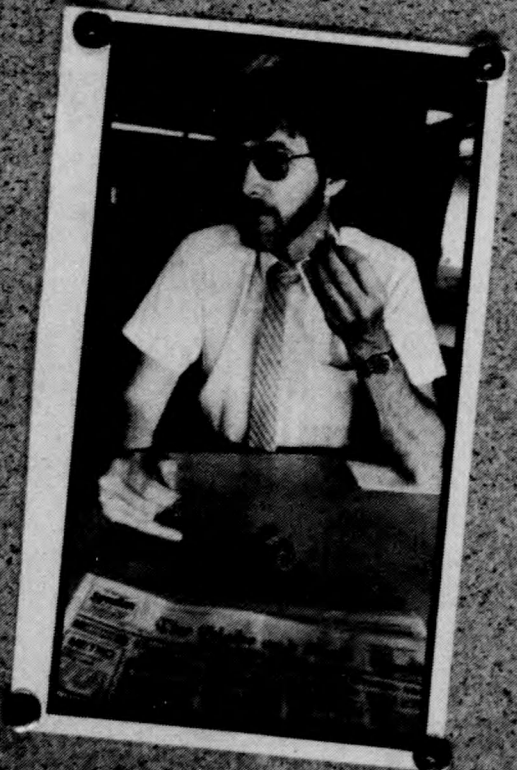
In 1966—my first year at York—there wasn't any paper, so a bunch of us started it up.

I started as the layout editor, and I didn't really know anything about layout, but you buy a book and we went to a CUP (Canadian University Press) seminar at Ryerson. It was great.

It was in the good old days when students caused a lot of unrest. Scaring presidents and all that shit.

How did you get along with Murray Ross (York's first president)?

He didn't like us for a while. We didn't think we liked him either. The university had to be very liberal. It was not the kind of era when



What advice would you give to an aspiring writer?

Don't take journalism. Take a couple of courses like Mass Communications or Sociology. Contemporary Canadian history counts if you're in politics. Mackenzie King, for instance, is really relevant when you're writing about the Liberals.

A university degree plus experience—student newspaper experience—is more valuable than journalism school, period.

I'm almost sure that the papers now all realize that if somebody can hack it out for two or three years on a student paper—be really good, save every clipping, and really offer to string repeatedly. Call the Globe, call the Star, call anybody. Keep trying to string. Papers have nothing else to go on when you walk in except what you look like, how you sell and what you've done.

How's the pay?

The money is still terrible. If you really want to make money there are other ways to do it. There is still an apprentice type system. You've got to put in your years of experience. I think I'm lucky. I went from a student newspaper in a brand new university to one of the biggest four papers in the country. I've only had to move twice to get the so-called flagship newspaper.

A lot of people don't. They go from Excalibur to the Willow Banks, Saskatchewan Bi-Monthly Farmers' Gazette, and then to the Trenton Daily Times and then maybe they get on the North York Mirror—which is one of the worst Mirrors.

Do you have any tips to impart?

People who write implication stories are well read. You have to be colorful and explanatory. Explanatory journalism is the new buzz word. What does it mean? What does it really mean?

LEORA AISENBERG
CTV-CANADA AM
EXCALIBUR '78-'82

How did you get your start?

I decided in high school that I wanted to become a journalist. In September in my first year, I walked into the newspaper office. I didn't even say anything—I just walked out. It seemed like everybody was so old and intellectual, and they were all talking Marxist politics—boycott South Africa or something. Here I was, this little green first-year student, and I thought,

you stamped hard on your student newspapers. Freedom of press? Shit, we didn't even know what it meant, but we would yell it. We got in trouble and had a lot of fun.

How did you get along with CYSF?

In those days the school was very small and CYSF and Excalibur were equal powers. Those people who were on CYSF were somewhat worried that we would campaign against them. And we did.



'Oh, my god! I can't compete with that.'

The first story I did was on fashion in Central Square. When I look back at my articles now, I want to quickly burn them at the stake or something. My paragraphs were fifteen sentences long. You couldn't edit what I wrote, it was so bad.

What does your job entail?

My title is Story Editor, whatever that means. Basically, you come up with stories for the next day's show. So we have a meeting at ten o'clock every morning where we are each responsible for spewing out a couple of ideas. You pray every morning that when you get up, there's something happening in the world, because when there's not, you're in big trouble.

So you read the wire copy, read the papers and listen to the news.

What advice do you have for a student starting a career in journalism?

Be really aggressive without being obnoxious. A lot of people tend to put themselves down when they go into an interview. I don't think I got this job because I'm a great writer, because I'm not. It has to do with being able to get a story and interviewing someone. . . . You have to have respect for them but not reverence.

I got thrown into a situation last October where I had booked Meryl Streep, and neither of the hosts was able to do the interview. So I said to my boss, 'We spent three months getting this woman and there is no way we're not going to do her.' So I went and I had to do it. I edited myself out of the tape.

But that was scary as hell, because here I was going to interview Meryl Streep. But it was great; first of all because I wasn't on camera. So all the pressure was off. All I had to do was bring things out of her.

MICHAEL HOLLETT
NOW MAGAZINE
EXCALIBUR '74-'77

How did you get your start in journalism?

The first week of my first year I went to Excalibur. I was CUP (Canadian University Press) editor in the fall, and news editor in January.

Did it affect your school work?

It certainly destroyed my studies.

When did you make the jump to a full-time journalistic career?

I was working with Excalibur, and I didn't have any job plans. I was busy coordinating the plans for election of



a new editor and I got this call from a friend who knew about a job in a small town—Orangeville. I went there and became editor of that paper. Then I went on as editor of the Georgetown paper. Then I took a paid vacation. I got a sleazy government job for a year, and I used my extra time to plan NOW.

What gave you the idea to start NOW magazine?

I was at a point in the newspaper business where I would have to specialize. I was an editor at small-town weeklies; my next step would have been as editor or writer at a daily. I would have had to give up layout and production; all the things I liked. So I was interested in a situation where I could use all the skills that I have. And I wanted to find a way to utilize all my friends.

From my York experience I got in touch with a lot of talented people. As I went on and worked in other areas, it was obvious that they were more of a unique group than I had thought. So I wanted to get back and utilize them somehow. This seemed to be the best way to do it.

What advice would you give a new writer at York?

I recommend that anybody who is thinking of journalism should certainly work at Excalibur. They certainly should not be shy about working a small-town newspaper either. It really teaches you a lot about markets—meeting an audience's needs rather than you're own preconceived ideas.

What about working at the Toronto Star, or Globe and Mail?

That was never very attractive to me. I had my complaints with those papers for one thing. They're just money-making machines. They don't inspire me in terms of what a newspaper should be. They don't have that kind of aura for me the way they do some people.

WARREN CLEMENTS
GLOBE AND MAIL
EXCALIBUR '73-'75

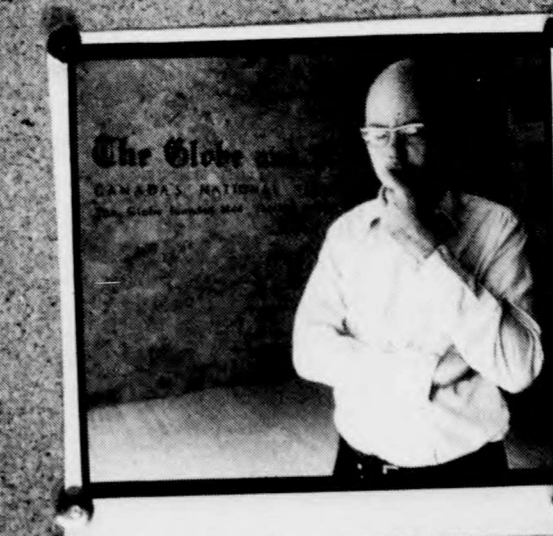
Where did you begin your journalistic career?

Well, I guess I got started at the Winters' Seer. I went there about 1969 or 1970. I came at a time when everybody on the Seer was quitting. It was a sixteen-page paper and it was mainly entertainment.

I did that for a couple of years and then I became entertainment editor of Excalibur. I was selected editor of Excalibur the year after.

How do you handle the constant pressure to produce copy?

Well, for the first six months it was really bad. I'd find myself sweating blood and working till nine or ten at night to try to get an editorial into tip-top shape. But, after about six months you get used to the routine, the deadlines, and you develop a rhythm for writing.



What advice would you give to a new writer?

I'd recommend they go to Excalibur if they have any talent whatsoever. The

two obvious skills are reporting and editing. Both talents are in demand and often a newspaper will appreciate somebody who does both.

What kind of education should a writer obtain?

As general as you can get. Learn as much of everything as you can. I think narrowly restricting yourselves to newspaper pursuits is a bad move.



PAULA TODD
TORONTO STAR
EXCALIBUR '82-'83

What happened when you volunteered at Excalibur?

I remember being terrified as I walked through the doors because it seemed like a very ominous place. It seemed like a lot of very important things went on there. I was truly surprised to learn that that wasn't the case.

So I went downtown and interviewed this man and he seemed sort of interesting. I wrote an article and it appeared in the paper the next day.

I began that winter and ran for editor three months later.

How did you get your job at the Star?

I applied to the Star even though I was told there wasn't a chance of getting in because I didn't have a journalism degree.

I remember walking into a room filled with editors, and they interviewed me for about half an hour. They asked me all sorts of questions—bang, bang, bang, bang. When I walked out I thought, 'Well, that's that. I won't be walking into the Star again.'

Then I got a call about two days later and they told me I was hired.