

Thank you...and Good Night!
A Tribute to John Callaway
By Ed Tracy

John Callaway walked into the construction scene at the Pritzker Military Library in August 2003 with his friend Libbet Richter. Libbet was showing off what she was sure to be the next impressive new cultural institution in Chicago to Mr. Callaway and introducing me, a newcomer to Chicago, who had only been in town for a matter of months. It was quite an embarrassing surprise to me later when I did my homework and realized that I had spent the last two hours with a broadcasting and journalist legend. That meeting changed my life forever and we became fast friends.

John stepped nimbly around the construction debris, the chandeliers that were being lifted to the ceiling and raised his eyebrows when he saw the seven-foot by fifteen-foot video production room where we planned, later that fall, to broadcast live, with audience, full format video of book talks, panels and lectures on the internet.

Like every hour I spent with John Callaway, I learned something essential. He is the consummate interviewer: direct and energetic, with a vast depth of knowledge. Often he'd call himself a "generalist", but there was so much more in John Callaway than anyone will ever know. He was only showing off this wonderfully humble side on those occasions. He was one of the smartest and most caring people I knew...and the best conversationalist.

He truly loved reading, learning and listening – three traits that are all but non-existent in our current multi-second media society. He did not accept first assumptions, listened to the reply of a guest instead of sticking to whatever plan he had carefully forged, and, consistently produced award-winning journalistic reports, interviews and fascinating stories about Chicago's rich and colorful history.

John looked up from the chaos of the Pritzker Military Library on that afternoon and said: "If you can finish this thing and get it on line by October 23rd, good sir, I'll recommend that you be sent to Iraq to clean up that mess!" We did...but the call overseas never came.

The service call never came for John Callaway as a young man, either. But he came on board enthusiastically for our opening and then joined us on what would be a nearly six-year run of Front & Center with John Callaway at the Library – his 55th program held earlier this month. In our interview together when the Library honored him with their Founders Award two years ago, he recalled his boyhood memory of the bombing of Pearl Harbor that thrust us into World War II, the fear he felt for the future and the understanding that the train set he would receive for Christmas that year might be the last toy he received for many years to come. And it was.

He would spend his early professional years in a family of writers and publishers, sold newspapers on the street as a boy, developing as a journalist, arriving in Chicago "with 71 cents in his pocket", a story he freely admits was more prose than proof and, through some classic twists of fate and good old hard work, landed a job at the City News Bureau which helped shape his writing and reporting skills and forged some serious life-long relationships with the greats of

Chicago media. Those early years were difficult, but stimulating and when he would speak of them, there was a glow in his eye for a time and Chicago gone by. Callaway would earn his reputation as a beat reporter, covering the intense stories of the turbulent sixties with skill and compassion, always living the line, “If your mother says she loves you...check it out!”

He would be known for many things, but radio loved his voice...and so did we. John Callaway took his skills to the ever-expanding network market, in New York with CBS and the back to Chicago where he would ultimately become the first television host of Chicago Tonight where he covered all the news and interviewed everyone who was anyone who came to the City.

When I met John, he had left Chicago Tonight and was arguably in the twilight of his extraordinary broadcast career. While he was producing the second of his two brilliant one-man theatrical shows and making the Chicago Stories features on WTTW, he wanted to do more. We asked and he gladly committed to host a monthly public affairs panel on military topics at the Library with Libbet serving as producer. From the very beginning in January 2004, John’s professionalism raised the bar at our programs, which were the only long format programs being broadcast on the internet at the time – pre-dating YouTube or podcasts. At the time, the shows looked a little like an early version of television, but very quickly, we solved major production problems and secured a broadcast spot on WYCC in Chicago, our television broadcast home for the past three years.

Leading the way, John Callaway’s program was nominated for a local Emmy award in 2008 – the first time a library has ever received such an honor. It was a proud moment for all of us at the Library. But it was all about the man, our friend, John Callaway, who was always leading the way, challenging our thinking, trying to move the program up the cultural ladder with more insightful debates and controversial topics.

In recent years, he had been busier than ever, leading a wonderful weekly interview program called “Friday Night with John Callaway” on WTTW. In the middle of his 52nd year in this business, he left the way he would want to, planning for another interview and developing a panel on the challenges facing combat journalists in this economy.

John once told me “I was born to interview”. I will never forget that.

John Callaway will leave a tremendous void in the creation of intelligent, learned debate in our business. He was funny, direct, extremely well read and one of the most decent men I have ever known. I love him and I’ll miss him very much.

John...thank you, and good night.

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