

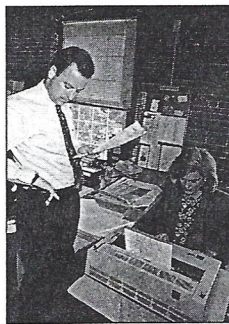
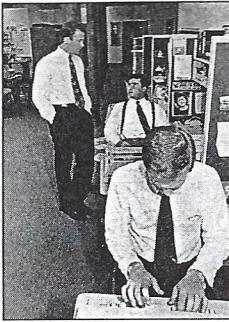
ALUMNUS
REVIEW
STAFF

BREAKING THE NEWS

Alumnus abandons soundbytes for in-depth reporting

Paul Bush

COLLEEN COLES



Jack Heath '82, at right, with WMUR news staff

During that interview, President Bush admitted for the first time in the campaign that America was suffering from a recession

In six minutes the evening news will begin. The reports tonight deal with cuts in the state's National Guard units, a woman's fight with Blue Cross over a bone marrow operation, and a house burglary that netted the thieves two TV sets, a microwave oven, and 153 marijuana seedlings. Police arrested the tenants.

Today, Mike Tyson was sentenced to six years in prison, but the video clip showing him in handcuffs runs for only fifteen seconds. This is WMUR-TV, Channel 9, the only commercial, statewide station in New Hampshire, and local news — New Hampshire News — dominates the broadcasts. Jack Heath, UVM class of '82, is news director here, and he actually had to argue with his executive producer to get the Tyson clip included.

WMUR is a mid-sized station and normally below the notice of the national media, but since Heath has taken over the station's thirty-two-person staff, newspapers and magazines across the U.S. have

written about WMUR. Much of that attention focused on the station's coverage of the New Hampshire presidential primary. WMUR abandoned the television soundbyte, now down to an industry-wide nine-and-a-half seconds, in favor of in-depth reporting that regularly took up half the news show. The station management backed Heath's decision to do it, and the audience ratings confirmed it also was what viewers wanted.

Five minutes to go. Heath, dressed formally in black slacks, white shirt, and subdued tie, sprints across the long, open newsroom heading for the control room. In an instant he's back, this time running the length of the room to the editing bays, small rooms filled with video equipment. "We're breaking the gambling thing," Heath announces to the various reporters and editors scattered about the newsroom. "He got it on tape before the cops got there."

Last Friday, police here in Manchester raided more than twenty sites, seizing video gambling machines and arresting more than one hundred people. Heath issues orders to the video editors, then collects the reporter who was at the scene. "How about this?" Heath dictates to the reporter, who sits at an electric typewriter, trying to come up with the right wording for the story. "Community in state's — no, no. Fallout in community—" Still dissatisfied, he switches places with the reporter.

Hunching over the keyboard, his two forefingers punching the keys, he keeps trying to get the perfect report, reading part of it out loud. "Community sources tell News 9 that some of the targeted locations may have been tipped off — that police were on their way to raid," he adds. "News 9 video shows at least one location, Big Al's on the west side — where a truck loaded with gaming machines is ready to leave before police arrive."

Heath rips the report from the typewriter and sprints down the newsroom once more. He's back shortly.

Everyone watches one of the TV sets at each end of the newsroom. On-screen, Nannete Hansen says, "This just in," and begins reading the report.

The tape runs: a pickup loaded with gambling machines, a shot of the store's sign, no police in sight. What Heath didn't say in the report is that a high-ranking police official is suspected of tipping off the gambling shops. "It's a little story," Heath says, "but if it results in a deputy chief resigning in the state's biggest city, it's a bombshell." The general manager, his immediate boss, walks the length of the room to shake Heath's hand.

In only eighteen months on the job, Heath has made an impact. During the recent presidential primary in New Hampshire, reporters from the national media flocked to the state. In publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *TV Guide*, they wrote about this mid-sized station that "displayed sharper news judgment" than Cable News Network, in the words of one writer.

Each night the station reported on the activities of every major candidate, not just the perceived front-runners.

Instead of taping brief clips, Heath had co-anchors Nannete Hansen and Tom Griffith interview candidates Kerry, Harkin, Tsongas, Brown, Clinton, and Buchanan for three to four minutes at a time. Overnight surveys showed the station was capturing a third of the state's viewers each night, 100,000 people in 65,000 homes.

Heath even got an unrestricted interview with President Bush. It took four months to arrange it, and, as the date grew closer, it was increasingly apparent that administration staffers expected a public

relations feature, not a serious interview. Heath's frustration grew until, after the fourth aggravating phone call in an hour, he said, "Why don't we just bag it," and hung up.

"I got a call back in minutes," says Heath. By the end of the conciliatory call he was told, "Tomorrow, report to the so-and-so gate at the White House to check in your video equipment." "The interview wasn't Sam Donaldson," he concedes, referring to the contentious national reporter, "but it wasn't fluff either." During that interview, President Bush admitted for the first time in the campaign that America was suffering from a recession. He also made the "we care" comment that was to be oft-repeated in the election season.

Heath didn't get his start in television until several years after graduating from UVM. He spent his first year selling posters with Mark McKenna '82. The two had dreamed up a line of full-length posters of such things as "The Anatomy of a Hangover," while chipping golfballs in their room at Delta Psi. ("No damage to the room," says Heath.)

When McKenna got a job with a Boston ad agency, Heath began writing part-time for a weekly paper in his hometown of Swampscott, Massachusetts. Soon he was taking broadcast courses at night. On weekends, he worked for free as a sportscaster for a local cable station.

By the end of 1984, he was working for WABI-TV in Bangor, Maine as a news reporter, covering politics and crime. There, Heath developed his reputation as "a crackerjack reporter," in the words of one colleague.

While in Bangor, Heath met Patricia Larson. They married in 1986, just before leaving for Manchester, New Hampshire and his first stint at WMUR as a news reporter.

On-screen, his reports impressed more than just local

audiences; in mid-1988, a station in the larger Boston market hired him. There, he scored several coups, including being the first reporter at the murder scene the night Charles Stuart killed his pregnant wife, Carol. However, two years into a three-year contract, Heath did something unthinkable for most broadcast reporters: he returned to the smaller, less visible station, WMUR.

"My marriage was being stretched uncomfortably," he says. "I did the seventy-five-mile commute from Manchester on top of twelve-hour days." He and Patty had just had a baby, Margaret, and Heath found himself saying, "The job's great, but I'll be single if I don't watch it." When WMUR's management offered him the job of news director, he took it.

These days, he gets up at six in the morning, runs three miles, and has time to spend with Margaret before making the ten-minute drive to the station for the 8:30 editorial meeting. After the day's reporting assignments are made, administrative duties take up much of his day, including fielding phone calls that begin with him saying, "Senator!" or "Governor, how are you?" as he did in the hours leading up to today's newscast.

The news is over. The opening sequence of "World News Tonight," with Peter Jennings replaces the local show on the newsroom TV sets. Anchor Tom Griffith is finishing some work at his desk, Nannete Hansen has gone out to dinner. Both have to do the eleven o'clock report, when the gambling story will be featured again. Jack Heath talks with his executive producer, who has been in the control room throughout the evening. In half an hour, Heath will go home. Tomorrow, he'll be back, tackling that day's news.

Paul Bush is a writer and teacher. He lives with his wife and children in New Ipswich, New Hampshire.

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