

FACULTY OBITUARIES

“All That Was Good in Journalism”

Jim Thistle, director of broadcast journalism, remembered as local TV legend and valued mentor for nearly three decades

By Vicky Waltz

FOR MARC JACOBSON (CGS’97, COM’99), Professor Jim Thistle remained an advisor long after graduation. Thistle, a professor of journalism and director of the College of Communication’s broadcast journalism program, was always available to review a contract or a résumé tape, offer advice on how to deal with management, or keep an eye out for job opportunities.

“Whenever there was good news to report in my television career, or bad news, he was the first person I always called,” says Jacobson, a reporter for WJRT-TV in Flint, Michigan.

Thistle died on July 29, after a year-long battle with throat cancer. He was sixty-six years old.



A Boston journalism legend and a television news pioneer, Thistle (COM’64) was at various times news director for all three of Boston’s major network affiliates. He began his career at WBZ-TV (Channel 4) and later worked at WCVB-TV (Channel 5), where he remained for eight years, and at WHDH-TV (Channel 7). He joined the COM faculty in 1980, and in addition to directing COM’s broadcast journalism program, he chaired the journalism department for two years during the late 1980s and was acting chair of the department in 2000.

“Jim represented all that was good in journalism education and the news industry,” says Tom Fiedler (COM’71), COM dean. “He was a great teacher and mentor to his students during his nearly three decades as a professor teaching broadcast journalism and ultimately as the director of that program.”

Fiedler says Thistle was “always available at any time to advise students and graduates, guiding them as they progressed in their careers. Even as he struggled with his illness, he continued to be a mentor, answering e-mails and making phone calls. He will be greatly missed by his students, colleagues, and the many alumni inspired by his love of teaching and the craft of journalism.”

Jacobson says that as a student, he wouldn’t have missed Thistle’s class. “Nobody in their right mind would willingly sign up for an 8 a.m. Friday class during the second semester of senior year,” he says, “but if you were serious about making a career out of TV news, you made sure to be a part of Professor Thistle’s Enterprise Reporting section. We had a cutthroat group of ten or so in that class that hung on every word he said.”

He remembers the words Thistle wrote on the board the first day of class: honor thy photographer. “He explained that without your photographer you have no video, and you are nothing,” Jacobson recalls. “Carry his tripod, buy him a cup of coffee. That simple advice

was a reminder that nothing in this business is beneath me, to appreciate the responsibilities of others, and overall, to just be a good person and treat others with respect.”

Known as a staunch believer in hands-on learning, Thistle always made it a point to get his students out of the classroom and into the action, says Susan Walker, a COM associate professor of journalism, who also worked with Thistle at WCVB and WHDH. “Each presidential election year, he would take busloads of BU students up to New Hampshire to cover the primaries, just as an exercise,” she recalls.

Thistle, who began running the trips in 1992, believed the experience was invaluable for journalism students. “There is nothing like covering a presidential campaign, especially while

there is still a full field of candidates,” he told the University’s weekly newspaper, the *B.U. Bridge*.

Walker adds that Thistle was “the best boss anyone could ever work for. I don’t

think it’s any exaggeration to say that most broadcast journalists in Boston owe their careers to him, in one way or another. He was responsible for teaching and maintaining the highest of standards in training tomorrow’s broadcast journalists.”

“He always strived to do the best for the news and for the people who worked for him,” says Sasha Norkin, a COM associate professor of journalism, who previously worked with Thistle at WHDH. “Despite the pressures of business, he held to the highest ideals and covered the news in the best way possible. He stood for what was right, no matter what.”

The Thistle family requests that donations be made to the Jacobson-Thistle Scholarship Fund, which was created to honor Thistle and his long-time colleague at WCVB-TV, Natalie Jacobson. The fund annually provides two awards to COM students majoring in broadcast journalism. Donations can be mailed to the Jacobson-Thistle Scholarship Fund, Boston University College of Communication, 640 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02215.

See the College of Communication’s tribute to Jim Thistle at www.bu.edu/bostonia.