Cathy Panagoulias 1953-2024

Dan Margulis 05/05/24 #34009

A few weeks ago we lost a person who's had a great impact on this list, without being a member of it; who edited every one of my books without knowing anything about color or Photoshop; who is the parent of the PPW; and who incidentally was one of the foremost newspaperwomen of her time.

She also had a great impact on my life, because we lived together for nearly 50 years, and we traveled the world together. Many members of this list knew and admired her, for which reason I'll write at some length.

As some of you are aware, our marriage did not survive the pandemic, in fact it devolved into a nasty litigation that will continue after her death.

It looked like we might be nearing closure after a day-long court hearing in January, after which Cathy behaved strangely. The family supposed that this was caused by the stress of the proceedings, but in fact it was a brain tumor. By the time it was diagnosed she had only a few weeks left.

Three bad years cannot outweigh a lifetime of personal and professional achievement. She spent her entire career at The Wall Street Journal, and had a tremendous impact, and many devoted followers, particularly among the (then) young people that she mentored and championed, and who are now among the leaders in their profession.

https://www.weremember.com/catherine-panagoulias/5a1h/memories
https://talkingbiznews.com/media-news/panagoulias-former-wsj-deputy-me-dies-at-70/

Her name is particularly associated with "diversity", which has become a politically charged word in the United States. There was nothing political, though, about Cathy's views on that subject. Her influence on Journal hiring began in the mid-1990s. Her position was that it was becoming a global newspaper and that not every story in other countries could be covered adequately by a staff consisting only of Americans. She began recruiting and sponsoring candidates from all over the world, particularly Asia, India, and the Middle East. Many of these people did not speak English adequately enough to work for an American newspaper.

Cathy was not deterred, saying that languages can be taught, but intelligence and drive cannot. And she won out. Every year at U.S. Thanksgiving, we'd serve the traditional turkey etc. at our house, but the guests would always be Journal hires from all over the world.

Much of this interest in other cultures came from a lucky break in 1975, when she was a senior in college. China was just beginning tentative contacts with the West, in the aftermath of President Richard Nixon's groundbreaking trip. Mao Zedong believed that the first non-diplomatic visitors to his country should be student leaders rather than businesspeople, because they would be more "revolutionary".

Cathy was part of the first group invited, and spent a month in a country where almost nobody had ever even seen a westerner. She became enchanted with the culture, and the calligraphy of its language. Her luck held, in that the university she was about to graduate from hosted a program called FALCON, the Full-Year Asian Language Concentration. It was reputedly sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency, which had discovered it didn't have enough people who spoke those languages.

So Cathy studied nothing but Chinese for a year, making little progress, because learning new languages has never been her strong point. But it got her a job, again with considerable luck. She read that The Wall Street Journal was about to launch an Asian edition based in Hong Kong. She wrote them a letter partially in Chinese, suggesting they might want to hire her. The newspaper took the bait, not grasping that the Chinese Cathy had studied (Mandarin) was of limited use in Hong Kong, where the population spoke Cantonese, and understanding still less that it would probably be preferable to hire someone whose *first* language was Chinese.

When she returned from Hong Kong in 1980, I started looking for a job in New Jersey. Luckily, it was just becoming possible to edit images on a (very expensive) workstation, so color separators were desperate for anyone with both a graphic arts and a computer background. I got a job with the biggest separator in the U.S., and moved in with Cathy, who was commuting to her job at The Journal from Hoboken.

As she moved upward in the organization, she discovered that her choice of roommate was a useful one. At that point, the WSJ was doing something that no other newspaper had been able to implement: they were transmitting pages nationwide to their network of presses. It was an impressive accomplishment, and caused some to think that the organization itself was technologically advanced. In fact, the newsroom operation was very backward. Reporters were still composing their stories on typewriters, the telephone system was unreliable, there was no electronic means to communicate with colleagues.

Some of the editorial staff tried to fight back, but the IT department specialized in excuses for why it couldn't be done, full of meaningless geeky phrases. The reporters and editors weren't capable of cutting through the jargon and explaining how it *could* be done, but I was, and Cathy was my mouthpiece. She thus became known as the person who had the best grasp of production technology, which led to the period of her greatest success, again owing somewhat to luck and to misunderstandings.

By the early 1990s the WSJ began to notice the existence of a phenomenon called "the internet". Its reporters, parroting whatever their CEO sources in big companies had to say, took the position that the internet was interesting as an intellectual exercise, but it had no future in commerce, owing to this, that, and the other problem that could never be solved. Furthermore, it was clear in reading their stories that they didn't understand the terms they were using or the technology they were talking about.

Enough others were telling management the same thing that it was decided a change was in order. As they imagined that an editing terminal and the internet were essentially the same thing, and that Cathy was the savviest person around about them, they summoned her and asked what she thought of the WSJ's internet coverage. She recited back what I had told her, that it was a disgrace that seriously underestimated the forthcoming commercial impact.

And thus it was that The Wall Street Journal appointed a new Technology Editor who wouldn't have known a URL from a cancelbot. This lack of sophistication wasn't lost on two of the reporters, who attempted to baffle her with techspeak. She politely asked them a favor. She told them that her husband was very confused about these things and she would really appreciate it if two of them could find it in their hearts to sit down with me and straighten me out.

The carnage was dreadful, as she expected, for I had a reputation for dealing with recalcitrant subordinates in, shall we say, a highly motivational way. I suspected that this would not be the last time I had such an interaction with reporters, but I was wrong, because Cathy proved that she was even more persuasive than I am.

One of the online tributes to her accurately described her as "a force of nature." Much of her effectiveness with others came from her general appearance as a sweet, giggly, airhead who could suddenly be transformed into a raging wolverine, with a vocabulary that would shock a gunnery sergeant, and a propensity to make sexually demeaning comments that would have gotten her fired instantly today. Anyone on the receiving end of such a chewing-out would find it easier to take than a milder reprimand from a male supervisor, because Cathy would be so out-of-control that it was actually funny.

Whatever the cause, the results were miraculous. In five years, the WSJ's internet coverage grew from laughably bad to being by far the most accurate and comprehensive of any major news outlet, being right on top of the shift to on-line commerce. This is not just my opinion: by the middle of the decade the WSJ tech coverage was the envy of the journalistic establishment.

With that track record, when the biggest editorial job of all opened up, that of National News Editor, Cathy was the natural candidate. It was a notorious burn-out job; people usually held it for two years. Cathy held it for five. The turn of the millennium came, and she moved into corporate management, taking charge of personnel, thinking her days of running a newsroom were over. There was, however, an unanticipated encore.

Those who knew her know that she was not a morning person. Woe betide the reporter or bureau chief who sassed her before she had several morning cups of coffee. When she moved into upper management, in principle her work hours should have begun at 08:30. After several frightening experiences her bosses decided that, for their own safety, it would be better to have her arrive at 10:30.

At 09:30, therefore, on a lovely sunny Tuesday, she was walking out the front door of our New Jersey house, on the way to catch a train to the NYC office of the WSJ, when I called her back, saying there was something on TV that she needed to see.

This was September 11, 2001.

Had she left the house 15 minutes earlier, she could not have returned. If she had not been so involved in production decisions, she would not have known where to go at that point, which was to the WSJ IT headquarters around an hour south of us in New Jersey, the editorial headquarters being across the street from the World Trade Center and thus inaccessible. If she had not already been in charge of personnel she wouldn't have had the files to put together a task force when half of the staff was incommunicado. If she had not been National News Editor for five years she wouldn't have been able to step in for the current one, who was stranded in the city. And all of this would have been for nothing if she hadn't known how to put ink on paper. If she had not been one of us, more or less, she would not have known how to cobble together a pagination system capable of driving remote platemakers.

In short, in the recent history of journalism, if there had ever been the right person in the right place at the right time, this would be it.

The 2002 Pulitzer Prize in Breaking News Reporting, which normally goes to one or perhaps a few individuals, went instead to: "Staff of The Wall Street Journal, for its comprehensive and insightful coverage, executed under the most difficult circumstances, of the terrorist attack on New York City, which recounted the day's events and their implications for the future."

The Pulitzer board's recognition of the entire staff as opposed to individuals was absolutely the right call, it was a colossal team effort. But if the award had to be limited to one individual, well, there was only one person whose role was absolutely indispensable.

She went back to her day job as head of human resources, eventually with the lofty title of Deputy Managing Editor, which also gave her the freedom to travel more. By yet another lucky fluke, this was exactly the time when I was getting offers to teach in other countries. Canada, Costa Rica, Ecuador, England, Finland, Italy, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru, Puerto Rico, Russia, Spain, Switzerland: our passports got dog-eared quickly—and Cathy made lots of new friends, perhaps because she and my students had a common enemy.

These trips always had a week or more tacked onto them, so that we could see more of these countries. And we usually returned to them, even if no class were scheduled. For legal reasons I had to put together a list of our travels during this century. It would have impressed even Rick Steves: nineteen trips to Italy alone, for example.

One consequence of all this was the PPW. I often tell the story to audiences, who think that I am joking, but this is how it happened: one day in 2003, I printed up some photos I had taken with my glitzy 1.4 megapixel Nikon, and presented them to Cathy. She gave them a critical eye and said, "I thought you were supposed to be, like, the best color person in the world!"

I replied that I was certainly glad I wasn't supposed to be the best LOVER in the world, and married to her. But that was the catalyst: I realized that these cheap new digicams didn't produce anything worthy of the hour of correction time that traditional workflows might call for, but there was still a demand to make images look better. So I began to think in terms of developing a much faster workflow, discarding all non-crucial steps.

Another consequence was lasting friendships, especially people from other countries, to some of whom she became almost a mother figure, as she had with so many at the WSJ. We sponsored two major get-togethers: in March 2009 I taught a couple of Superadvanced courses in San Diego, which drew several students from across the oceans. We decided that it would be an optimal time to show these travelers something uniquely American, the southern California desert, which had had more rain than usual over the winter and was in full bloom. We coordinated rentals of housing, and had some great photo opportunities over three days.

That trip was so successful that we wanted to schedule something similar, but in Italy, to celebrate my semiretirement. So in the spring of 2012 Cathy and I rented a huge villa in Tuscany for a month, and we invited all our friends to share it, offering each a week of free lodging. We also arranged tours of the area, and brought in a professional chef every week. American visitors who were unfamiliar with the country had the spectacular good fortune of having our Italian visitors serve as guides.

Several of these Italian visitors happened to be at difficult moments in their lives where certain decisions needed to be made. They, too, were the right people in the right place at the right time. They found it soothing, if that is the word, to hang around the villa for most of the month, sleeping wherever they could find room, and cementing long-term relationships with Cathy and me. By then, they were calling her la principessa, a name that stuck with her thereafter.

This reminiscence has gone on long enough, so it's time to sum up. Cathy profoundly influenced the lives of many others for the better. She was extraordinarily qualified for what she did. She was also, as described above, extraordinarily lucky. As we look back on her rich life, we must sadly acknowledge that one never knows when one's luck will run out.

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