

Good evening. My thanks to Stan Chess '69 for bringing us together for yet another Cornell Daily Sun anniversary dinner.

Since graduation, I have remained active in alumni affairs. But I rarely have been involved in Cornell events that generate as much enthusiasm and goodwill as these get-togethers.

That's a tribute to The Cornell Daily Sun—an institution we all served and an institution that served us. I suspect the Sun experience, in addition to being great fun, helped shaped many of you in important ways at a formative stage in your lives.

That's certainly true in my case, given that I have devoted the past half century to journalism, both in print and online. So, rather than offer yet more deep insights into the state of journalism in the digital age, I would like to spend a few moments musing about the role the Sun has played in my professional and personal life.

To be honest, it wasn't something I thought about in my twenties and thirties when I was shaping a career, first at the New York Times and then at The Wall Street Journal, and starting a family. Back then, there were too many stories to chase, too many jets to hop and too many personal responsibilities to meet. And not enough time to reflect.

However, around the time of my 25th reunion, we were asked to sum up our lives—in 500 words or less—for a reunion yearbook. Pondering the role Cornell had played, I concluded: “Cornell gave me a profession, journalism, that has proved engrossing and rewarding; a wife, the former Neil Ann Stuckey '63, with whom to share all life's experiences, and the tools and self-confidence with which to compete in the world beyond Ithaca.”

Six years later in 1993—at a dinner in Philadelphia to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Cornell-Penn football game—it became even clearer. Dick Schaap—the late, great sportswriter, author, broadcaster and Sun alum—was the master of ceremonies that evening.

He began by introducing himself, which was hardly necessary in that sports-mad crowd. “I’m Dick Schaap,” he began. “And I majored in the Cornell Daily Sun.” That simple declarative sentence, which I’ve since heard from others, was a spot-on description of how I’d spent my time in Ithaca—four years as a dedicated journalist and indifferent student, at least in a formal sense.

Between 1958 and 1962, in the grubby, grimy but oh-so-romantic Sun newsroom at 109 East State Street, I figured out what I wanted to do. In addition, I picked up some invaluable lessons in life as well as journalism. Which was fortunate, because I spent a lot more time there than in the classroom or the library.

The first lesson was that you have to make hard choices and set priorities. In my first weeks on campus, I was simultaneously competing for the Sun and trying out for the tennis team. I was passionate about both but soon came to realize I could manage only one major extracurricular activity.

Figuring that I was better writer than tennis player, I focused on the Sun, made the staff and was elected sports editor in my sophomore year.

In that position, I learned the hard way something invaluable about newspapering.

In the fall of 1960, George Kepford “Lefty” James was in his 14th year as Cornell’s head football coach and 25th on the staff. The team was struggling in the still-new Ivy League, with its highly publicized commitment to de-emphasize football.

Still, Lefty was under a lot of pressure, which I witnessed up close as I covered the season for the Sun. Going into the traditional last game against Penn, at Franklin Field in Philadelphia on Thanksgiving Day, the team had won only two games and lost six.

I had good sources. And on the Tuesday night before the Thursday game, I learned that Cornell was going to fire James for not winning, despite the Ivy League’s new focus on building the character of student athletes. It was a big story, a national story. I had a clean beat. And I blew it.

I let Robert Kane, the distinguished, legendary athletic director, talk me out of publishing the news in the Wednesday Sun, by arguing that to do so would be harmful to the team's morale. I was teen-aged undergraduate reporter who made a big mistake.

Kenny Van Sickle, the veteran sports editor of the Ithaca Journal—who was to become a close friend, boss and mentor—cleaned my clock. He broke the story in the Wednesday afternoon paper. It was immediately picked up by the Associated Press and, in today's terminology, went viral.

I of course couldn't get into print in the Sun until the following Monday, since there was no paper the Friday after Thanksgiving.

The lesson I learned was that the responsibility of a newspaper is to publish news, not to worry about team morale. That's the coaching staff's problem. I believe the sole exception is when premature disclosure could jeopardize the lives of American troops in combat, a rule I lived with comfortably years later reporting the war in Vietnam as the Journal's military correspondent.

The Sun experience also taught me the importance of all deadlines, not just newspaper deadlines. I had fallen into a bad habit of ignoring academic deadlines. I frequently failed to submit term papers on time, taking an incomplete rather than a grade in the course and then spending the early part of my summer grinding out papers.

That is until the late Duncan McIntyre, a tough-minded ILR professor who headed the Sun board, stood me up in his class one day and said simply that he'd flunk me if I didn't submit papers on time, "Levine," he admonished, "in the newspaper business you can't put the Tuesday newspaper out on Wednesday."

Beyond these lessons, there were many other gifts the Sun provided. The opportunity to be in print five days a week enabled me to become a better writer. Reading some of my articles when the Cornell library started digitizing the Sun, I realized that I really had mastered the basics of my craft during those thousands of hours working on the paper.

Then there were the invaluable contacts and connections I made through the Sun.

It was in the newsroom that I first heard about the Newspaper Fund, a new foundation started by Dow Jones and The Wall Street Journal to encourage college kids to consider careers in journalism by providing paid internships. My internship was at the Ithaca Journal, where I earned 75 bucks a week as a sportswriter and telegraph editor the summer between my sophomore and junior years.

My work on the Sun also helped me land an interview in Ithaca with the managing editor of the Wall Street Journal. And that led eventually to 44 terrific years with Dow Jones, where today I oversee the renamed Dow Jones News Fund as president of the board of directors.

Decades later I remain grateful to the Sun for getting me out of washing dishes for meals in various fraternities on campus, a job I absolutely hated. The Sun sports editorship gave me a big leg up in landing a coveted campus stringing job for the New York Times sports pages.

And Cornell's isolation and Ithaca's lousy weather made a good gig better. Times sportswriters weren't eager to make the long trek to western New York State, and that meant yet another assignment and more copy in the Times.

Jim Roach, the Times sports editor was explicit about what he wanted. "When we ask for 500 words, kid, file 500 words— unless the coach breaks a leg or elopes at half time."

There was also a part-time job spotting Ivy League football games for the great Jim McKay, who went on to television fame as host of ABC's Wide World of Sports. And another job working for Life Magazine photographers eager to avoid going through the university's PR office to get access to the campus.

After Cornell, Dick Schaap provided helpful guidance as sports editor of Newsweek. A few years later, he hired me as a weekend reporter and rewriter at the New York Herald-Tribune where he was the city editor in the paper's dying days.

But the greatest gift the Sun provided was a bright and beautiful movie critic, the aforementioned Neil Ann Stuckey.

We fell in love at the Sun, an improbable romance between a sports writer and a classics major, abetted by the fact she was able to stay out beyond curfew on her nights in the newsroom.

We were married on campus in Anabel Taylor and held the reception in the old Statler. I hired the Sun's photography editor to take pictures, which wasn't a good move. He had a bit too much champagne. And, as a result, as my wife has reminded me for the past 47 years, we don't have a single wedding picture that is in focus.

It's the one legacy of my Sun experience I could live without.