

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: So Long and Be Kind to Each Other

January 6, 2019

Where did the time go? After 27 years in Madison media, I prepare to move closer to my two adult children who work for the same company in St. Petersburg, Florida. I am actually in St. Pete Beach as you read this, enjoying a five-day break before returning to the frozen tundra for a little while longer.

My first day at work as a reporter for WMTV-TV (Ch. 15) in July of 1992, Ross Perot dropped out of the presidential race before re-entering later.

Madison Democrat Dave Travis was the majority Leader in the Assembly, while Wally Kunicki of Milwaukee was speaker. David Helbach was Senate majority leader. Boy, have things changed in 27 years. I covered the Legislature in those days when a young Scott Walker was the representative from Wauwatosa. He was the go-to guy on conservative social issues such as abortion.

Tommy Thompson was in his second term as governor and seemed to love his job every day, and most people seemed to love him back. He was even endorsed by the Wisconsin State Employees Union. Those days of bipartisanship are long gone.

After eight years at NBC 15, I moved to state service as then-Attorney General Jim Doyle's communication director for a year. I'm not cut out for government work long term. One victory was getting my boss on three major networks to give people hope after being ripped off by Publisher's Clearing House. His lawsuit against the company was successful. John Laabs of the Wisconsin Broadcasters Association and I hatched an idea to get Wisconsin police and media to track abducted children through Amber Alerts. It's now policy.

After learning through past reporting that Wisconsin technical colleges had long waiting lists to get into their various fields of study, I flew around the state with Doyle as he linked tech colleges to financial self-reliance for graduates. Media consultants loved it, and in his first budget as governor -- a budget filled with spending cuts -- tech colleges were spared.

Fourteen years of talk radio followed on conservative WIBA-AM (1310) and progressive WXXM-FM (92.1 The Mic). I learned that political tribalism has been around long before Donald Trump. The difference is that President Trump fires back at his critics far more savagely than past Republicans. He calls them out and smears them on Twitter. President Richard Nixon would curse them in private. What my progressive fans don't understand is that Trump loyalists hate his critics as much as his critics hate Trump. That has made holiday gatherings less peaceful.

I'm grateful to Brandon Scholz for gathering financial support for me after my stroke through the Friends of Mitch Campaign. Insurance didn't cover acupuncture, and Dr. Zhou brought back my speech. I also thank friends in the business community for keeping the show on the internet after WIBA, and then after 92.1 FM switched to music in 2016.

And thanks to friends such as Gus Paras and his wife, Mary. I would repair to their old restaurant, Kostas, after the 11 p.m. news. Maybe I can tell some of you stories in private. But here's one: One night I walked in with a date I had met at a different establishment. I somehow made it behind the bar to help gather drinks and tell stories to the late Concourse manager Cal Worrell and a gaggle of late-night regulars.

At some point I noticed my date was missing. Gus said he would go check. He came back minutes later and said in his beautiful Greek accent, "She leave."

For years when I would see Gus after that, he would simply say: "Meech, I lock the back door."

To my friends, thanks for being there, and I will continue to be there as well. To my longtime manager Jonathan Little, computer expert Vladislav Gorbich, broadcast engineer Bob Abella and our staff, I can't thank you enough.

I would urge you all to be kind to each other in 2019 and beyond. Life is far too short to stay angry too long. As actor Jack Lemmon's father told his son from his death bed, "Spread a little sunshine." Sunshine is better than darkness. That's why I'm moving to St. Pete Beach.

And to the Wisconsin State Journal, thanks for putting up with my columns and video commentaries. The paper clearly does not reflect many of my views. But the last time I checked, the First Amendment isn't needed for popular opinion. So, make a difference, but have some fun doing it.

I part with a quote from the late Hunter S. Thompson: "When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro."

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