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FROM THE IRE OFFICES

Editor's love of business reminds us of importance of supporting our mission



BRANT HOUSTON

I met Mike Levine two years ago at a workshop on watchdog journalism at the Poynter Institute in Florida.

Mike was the executive editor of the *Times-Herald Record* in Middletown, N.Y., a mid-sized newspaper with a reputation for both hard-hitting and compassionate journalism.

He was at Poynter with about 30 other editors and publishers to talk about the importance of watchdog journalism, to listen to investigative reporters talk about how it's done and to discuss how to do it better. He was easily one of the most enthusiastic and energetic participants.

During those three days in May 2005, the group concluded that watchdog journalism was our profession's "franchise," that it was a big part of our future in this time of traumatic industry change. At the same time, the initiator of the workshop, Rick Rodriguez, the executive editor of *The Sacramento Bee*, announced a new collaboration between IRE and the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

New seminars, called "Unleashing the Watchdogs," would provide training for mid-level editors on how to encourage and carry out investigative stories with their reporters. The seminars were scheduled to start in the fall of 2005.

Levine didn't want to wait until the fall. He wanted to be the first to host the series of workshops. Any scheduling difficulties would be overcome; he would make it work.

It was inspiring to have an executive editor pressuring us to get that training to his staff. Within weeks, we had arranged for a watchdog workshop for his editors and his reporters.

We were in Middletown last August with IRE's training director, David Donald, and several volunteer IRE members doing sessions for three days.

Shortly after the training, I heard from Levine again. He was pleased. He wanted me to know his staff was already using what they learned. He wanted to stay in touch, and he wanted to keep working with IRE.

Over the following months, he or his staff called us about stories they were working on, looking for resources, tips, or other members who had done similar work. When they completed an investigative piece, they told us about it and sent us copies.

It was a model workshop with model results.

In January, Levine died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 54.

There was an immediate and incredible outpouring of grief and admiration for him from not only his staff, but also many of those he had worked with over the years. He had not just been an editor, but a coach, a mentor and a guide.

They noted the fine work Levine had done, winning awards at the *Times-Herald* as a columnist and editor before going to *ESPN the Magazine* as a senior editor. They recalled that he returned to the *Times-Herald* as executive editor in 2002 to lead the newsroom and to win more awards.

But, beyond the awards, they spoke of his contagious love for the news business and of how he reminded them of the importance of journalism and why they cared.

"Mike was one of the best newspapermen I ever knew, full of passion for our poor, imperfect craft. He wanted to make everything better – the paper, his own work, the work of the young and the region in which his work shone so brightly," wrote author and columnist Pete Hamill.

For IRE, Mike's drive for doing public service journalism was what we always hope for in our newsroom leaders. We looked forward to working with him in the coming years and to bringing him to speak at our conferences, to join with our top editors to keep investigative journalism alive and thriving.

We will miss him. We will especially miss his intense passion for the journalism that we do.

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