

Michael Hibblen's remarks for Ron Breeding's memorial service, Saturday, June 28, 2014, at Moore's Jacksonville Funeral Home Chapel.

Ron gave me my first real radio news job 21 years ago at KARN. Five years ago, he hired me a second time, enabling me to return to Arkansas after 12 years away to work for him at KUAR.

Ron was a mentor for more young up and coming news people than I think he ever realized. He sometimes told me that he couldn't always remember all the people who came through KUAR. Being on a college campus, we would sometimes have several people interning each semester with many then being hired on as part-timers. It's real easy after a few years with so many people coming and going that they become a blur. But I guarantee that they, especially those who went on to have careers in news, as well as those who learned it wasn't the path for them, they never forgot Ron. And that was apparent from the reaction we had and comments when we reported his death on our website or on Facebook.

Ron could be blunt. He didn't hold anybody's hand for very long. He'd give an introduction to what was expected, show an example as he prepared a story, demonstrating in a very bare-bones way how to conduct an interview, pull the best cuts, then write the story. While there are a lot of nuances in the news business, that – at its core – is what being a radio reporter is all about. Getting the sound, then packaging it.

And he'd throw people in, sink or swim. Within a few days he'd have people cranking out stories and learning, SOMETIMES FOR THE FIRST TIME even after years of journalism classes, what it was really like and whether this was indeed the career for them.

When Ron hired me the first time, it was May 1993 at KARN, which also operated the Arkansas Radio Network and at that time was heard on 65 stations around the state, which would air four and a half minutes newscasts at 55 minutes after the hour or two minutes at the top of the hour.

I'd been working in radio five years by then as a DJ for mostly small town stations and had just returned to Little Rock after spending that spring interning in Washington at the C-SPAN Cable Network. Three of the stations I'd worked for had been ARN affiliates, so I was used to running their newscasts and was familiar with the names and voices I'd hear.

At that time, it was still locally owned by Ted Snider and by today's standards had a huge news department. It was highly respected, had run off several competitors, including a competing state radio network run by channel 7 called the A-Net, where Ron had worked earlier in his career.

When I moved back to Little Rock, I was in awe of KARN and I can't tell you how excited I was when a day or two after I'd dropped off a tape and resume, I got a call from Ron, who I'd never talked with before. There wasn't anything formal as I thought there would have been, he just said "I need someone to anchor Saturday afternoons and all-day Sunday, and it looks like you've got some experience."

And slowly after I started, he began giving me tips and suggestions for how I needed to improve myself, sometimes in rather blunt language, but they were just honest assessments when I'd make mistakes.

One of the three hourly newscasts I'd do was at the top of each hour. It was only two minutes and designed for music stations, mixing brief state and national stories. Because we only had 10 or so stations carrying that newscast, Ron told me not to put too much effort into it. We had a lot more stations carrying the other newscast. So, I'd just take the national Associated Press news minute and read two or three stories from it, then mix in two or three state stories. I rarely proofread the national stories because they were always well-written.

One Sunday not long after I'd started, the top story was about a huge flood in Iowa. I guess I'd never had to read the name of the city on the air before because when I read the copy live on the air it looked odd, but I just pronounced it phonetically, talking about flooding in *(MISPRONOUNCE)* dez-moan-eez. I meant to look up a pronunciation when I got off the air but got sidetracked and an hour later was doing another newscast and again talked about flooding in Des Monies. As soon as I got off the air, the 800 number at the back of the newsroom for affiliates to call was ringing. It was the station manager from the station in Clinton, in north Arkansas, yelling at me 'It's Des Moines.' He also called Ron the following day, who then, the next time I saw him, just shook his head, halfway amused, and halfway annoyed, and said, "really? Dez-moan-eez?"

But he let me learn from my mistakes. I don't think the general manager, Neal Gladner, especially cared for how I sounded, but Ron was content as long as I was making it in for my shift, following format, and steadily improving. He gave me a steady trickle of suggestions.

He told me I was letting people just state dry facts in soundbites and that I needed to try and get people to share emotion, opinion or something I couldn't say for myself on the air.

He took great pride in having covered an Arkansas governor who became president. Bill Clinton was serving his first year in office and he brought a lot of Arkansans with him to Washington. Ron hired a stringer reporter to serve as our Washington correspondent and seek out Arkansas angles to national stories.

But soon Republicans called for investigations into Clinton's former business dealings in the failed Whitewater development. The day Ken Starr arrived to take over that investigation, Ron sent me over to the Office of the Independent Counsel and was extremely pleased to see me on national TV that night chasing Starr down a hallway, with my KARN mic flag in his face the whole way. He loved getting the station mic flag on TV and in the newspaper.

Later it was reported that one of Clinton's former business partners, James MacDougal, who by then was ruined and living in a mobile home owned by a friend, had agreed to cooperate in the investigation. We'd been speaking regularly with MacDougal and would call him at home. But that day, MacDougal didn't answer repeated phone calls, so Ron wanted me to go down to Arkadelphia, where MacDougal was living then.

We didn't have an address, and I was a little unnerved when Ron told me to just drive down there and start asking around at convenience stores. He said everyone in town probably knows where he lives. And sure enough, the first store I walked in to they said 'oh year, he's in a mobile home just off highway 67 after you pass the stadium...'

Everything Ron told me to expect at stories always ended up being correct.

I was sad when he lost the job at KARN and he struggled for a few years but was eventually hired back there.

I wanted to live radio dream of working at stations in different markets, so I moved away in that time, first to Richmond, Virginia, then Miami, Florida. But every time I was back in Arkansas, I'd always met up at least one night with Ron. I'd run by his house on Thayer, then we'd go to Pizza 'D.

I was thinking about the many great stories I heard Ron tell over the years. He was a great storyteller, especially when he was talking about his radio career.

Like how he met Ray Lincoln — I think when he was in college or maybe high school. He asked Ray Lincoln how someone could pursue a career, and I forget the exact wording, but was essentially told "don't waste your time, it's a dead-end job, do something — anything else." But Ron was undeterred and was eventually working with Ray.

I also remember him talking about working at KEZQ-FM 100 when it was still an easy listening station and located off highway 67 on the way to Jacksonville at the transmitter site. He'd babysit the automation, which ran music off of big reel-to-reels which only needed to be changed once every several hours. So, it gave him time to sleep, but was such a swampy area that he said snakes would get inside the station, so he'd sleep on a desk. And he recalled such detail, like that the station insisted on having four seconds of silence between each element on the air.

But it was doing news where Ron really came into his best. He enjoyed challenging people, especially those in power. He was incredible. I'm still in awe of how he could question people, slowly chipping away with question after question until he got people to give an honest answer without the public relations spin, so that he'd have a great soundbite for his story. When he was on his game, he was the best.

I was really pleased when he was hired on at KUAR when it established a real local newsroom after years of doing rip and read newscasts straight off the AP news wire. I'd done some work with KUAR while taking classes at UALR in the mid-90s and was excited to see what he was doing on a public radio station that gave him a lot more freedom and airtime to really dig into interesting stories that didn't work on the short soundbite world of commercial radio. It's where he spent the final 12 years of his career.

As I said earlier, he hired me to work for him a second time in 2009, giving me an opportunity to return to Arkansas after 12 years in Miami.

I'm eternally grateful for the opportunities Ron gave me over the years and for what he taught me. And — as I said — I'm just one of many people whose careers he started. While he sometimes shrugged off accolades he'd be given, I know he took great pride when people would give him the due credit he deserved. And I'm so glad to see many people came out today for this final tribute.