In Memoriam: George W. Ridge Jr.

School of Journalism
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Professor Emeritus George W. Ridge Jr., who, as the School of Journalism [1]'s only two-time director, helped establish many of its cornerstone programs, died April 24 in Tucson. He was 86.

Ridge was a reporter at The Arizona Republic, city editor at the Arizona Daily Star and an assistant attorney general for the state before beginning his career as a UA journalism professor in 1968.

"George Ridge taught me journalism when that word was universally respected?a calling with ethics and tenets, not for hobbyists," said UA journalism professor of practice Mort Rosenblum. "In the mid-'60s, George was my city editor at the Arizona Daily Star, ruthless with hard facts, full of ideas, and attuned to 'human angles' that connected readers to real news that mattered."

As department head from 1972 to 1978, Ridge secured a deal to let students produce The Tombstone Epitaph, a newspaper covering the southeastern Arizona town.

"At the time, we were the only journalism department publishing a community newspaper 70 miles from campus," said Ridge, who received a congratulatory letter from President Gerald Ford in 1976 for using the newspaper as a teaching tool.


"George had a deep understanding of the role of the press from his work as a journalist and an attorney, and focused on ensuring the school's curriculum reflected the challenges and opportunities that students would encounter in the real world," said Sharkey, school director from 2000 to 2011.

When Arizona Republic reporter Don Bolles died in a car bombing in 1976, Ridge ensured the school was heavily involved in the media investigation that followed.

"Students rotated weekly investigative shifts in Phoenix, working side by side with professional journalists," said Deborah Whitaker, one of Ridge's four children and a 1979 UA journalism graduate.

The school's Don Bolles Fellowship, which allows a student to cover the state Legislature every spring, was a direct result of Ridge's work, Whitaker added.
In 1978, Ridge was named Teacher of the Year by the Arizona Newspapers Association, and in 2003 he was inducted into the Arizona Interscholastic Press Association Hall of Fame.

"He was a mentor to many students who went on to make their own marks as journalists," Whitaker said. "He also was an innovator who was always ready to assist and support other journalism professors with their initiatives."

Ridge oversaw the establishment of an internship in the office of U.S. Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz., and expanded the school's photojournalism program. He introduced a course on law and ethics and helped start the Pretentious Idea, a student-run media review.

"He was a champion of the school's cross-cultural initiatives," said Whitaker, pointing out that Ridge taught courses at the Autonomous University of Guadalajara and helped establish an exchange program with the school. He also helped organize a program designed to inform Latin American journalists about journalism in the United States through courses and internships at U.S. media outlets.

To keep his skills current, Ridge spent his summers working in The Denver Post sports department and as a copy editor at the International Herald Tribune. For several years, he wrote a weekly travel column and restaurant reviews for the Arizona Daily Star. He served as an expert witness on First Amendment issues, and he gave presentations at U.S. embassies overseas on press freedom.

"When I edited the (International Herald Tribune) in Paris, George brought me back for brief courses for students eager to cover the world for themselves," Rosenblum said. "George was a loyal, lifelong friend, a wonderful family man, and we'll all miss him terribly."

At the UA, Ridge also was secretary of the faculty from 1984 to 1990 and chairman of the UA Committee on Academic Privilege and Tenure from 1976 to 1978.

Ridge was born on March 26, 1933, in Alexandria, Louisiana, and graduated from Glendale High School in Arizona. He began his professional journalism career while in college at Arizona State University, when he was hired by The Arizona Republic as a copy boy and obituary writer.

Soon, he moved to sports, where his coverage of the 1954 Michigan State-UCLA Rose Bowl game was recognized by the Arizona Press Association as sports story of the year.

After being drafted and assigned to Germany, Ridge began working for the Stars and Stripes military newspaper. As a news editor, he covered the construction of the Berlin Wall, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and the downing of Gary Powers' U-2.

After seven years at Stars and Stripes, Ridge returned to earn a law degree at the University of Arizona while also working full time as city editor at the Arizona Daily Star. He served as an Arizona assistant attorney general from 1966 to 1968.

Although Ridge retired from the UA in 1994, he continued to work as a journalist and as a public affairs consultant to the U.S. Army, familiarizing officers with the news media and traveling to bases in the U.S., Korea, Japan, Germany, Italy and Africa. And in 2016, he started a travel blog, hoboshoes.net [2], with his family.
Ridge is survived by his wife, Earlene; daughters Carole Hale, Ellen Brown and Deborah Whitaker; son, Jim Ridge; nine grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

Services are pending.


"George had an infectious laugh, and he loved a good laugh," Professor Emeritus James W. Johnson said. "He was one of the best teachers the department has had — and that includes some very good teachers."

A version of this article [6] originally appeared on the School of Journalism website.

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[1] https://journalism.arizona.edu/