

Religion Newswriters Association press releases

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Former RNA President Ed Briggs named 2005 William A. Reed / RNS Lifetime Achievement Winner

By Steve Maynard, The News Tribune



He wasn't flashy or flowery. He never won any national contests. But Ed Briggs doggedly covered his beat during 24 years as religion writer at the Richmond Times-Dispatch, chronicling the first ordinations of women clergy and the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention.

For his unheralded devotion to religion reporting, the RNA Board has selected Briggs as the 2005 William Reed / RNS Lifetime Achievement Winner.

"I would never have thought that anyone would have done this for me," said Briggs, 66 who plans to accept the honor at RNA's awards banquet Oct. 1, in Miami Beach. "I am not deserving."

Briggs will be the first recipient to receive a \$1,000 award funded by Religion News Service in honor of former longtime RNS Editor David Anderson.

A former RNA president, Briggs gave hours of his time to the Religion Newswriters Association, and was a friend and mentor to rookies on the beat. A regular at the annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention, Briggs was that guy in bright red suspenders pacing and hovering over his laptop as he crafted his story.

Briggs knew the players in SBC politics and the tough, penetrating questions to ask them. With quick wit and sharp analysis, he always offered sage advice to those trying to understand the vying groups' strategies. Briggs never pretended to be something he was not.

"I was a daily writer," Briggs said. "They wanted something out of me whenever it happened."

Consider his lead for the RNA president's column in September 1989. "Well, summer's over and, if what I hear from the beat is true, most of us were robbed of our dog days," Briggs wrote. "What with Jim and Tammy Faye, the Southern Baptist wars, plagiarism, Oral selling his hospital and home, Catholic black empowerment and NCC problems, not many of us are ready for God to return from vacation and to refill the pews."

But Briggs covered more than denominational politics.

"I always wanted to pursue stories that dealt with where America was going religiously," he said. "I saw an awful lot of folks finding meaning in how they spent money." So he wrote a story about shopping centers as the "new cathedrals"— an approach considered unorthodox in its day. "I had to fight like hell to get it in," Briggs said.

Briggs' journalism career began in 1962, when he worked for a year as a photographer at the Richmond Times-Dispatch. After earning a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of

Denver, he returned to the Richmond Times-Dispatch as a general assignment reporter. He went on to cover night cops, county government and then religion from 1971—until he retired in 1995.

Briggs also labored for years doing tedious legal paper work so that RNA could incorporate and gain non-profit tax status. It was a major step toward RNA becoming a professional organization. And to this day, Briggs maintains that incorporation status in the state of Virginia.

As RNA president, he urged the organization—unsuccessfully at the time—to open its membership ranks to broadcast journalists. And as an RNA leader, Briggs also challenged church leaders—including the nation's Roman Catholic bishops—when they retreated to secrecy.

Briggs lives in Richmond with his wife of 44 years, Janice Briggs. They have two grown children and two grandchildren. Briggs has persevered through a number of health problems in recent years. He had open heart, quadruple bypass surgery a year ago. Despite those challenges, he swims 3 1/2 miles a day.

His advice to reporters today is timeless.

"Don't ever give up. Don't ever stop asking why."

(Steve Maynard covers religion and South King County for The News Tribune in Tacoma, Wash.)

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