A Tribute to Andy Brigham, 1939-2015

By Larry Price

He had been out of television news for many years—and many young journalists will not know his name—but if you had the honor to work with him, you will always remember him.

Andrus (Andy) Brigham—beloved husband, father, grandfather and long-time broadcast journalist in Syracuse, NY and New Orleans—tragically passed away Friday July 24 on the eve of his granddaughter’s wedding in San Diego, CA. He is survived by wife Janice, son Christopher, daughter Stephanie and her husband Kevin, and grandchildren Amanda (husband Amos), Alexandra, Brian (wife Katie), Ty and Liam.

Andy’s career was marked by aggressive reporting and television news management skills in Syracuse and New Orleans during a nearly 30 year broadcast journalism career. Andy Brigham was a one-of-a-kind individual, who combined the interview skills of a Mike Wallace with the investigative talents, and rumpled appearance, of that fictional detective Colombo to break many hard-hitting investigative stories. Colleagues remember that Andy never sought fame or fortune.

I worked with Andy at TV stations in Syracuse and New Orleans. For Andy Brigham, it was always about telling the story, finding the truth—and it was never about Andy. He had so many sources and he was tough, but always fair. He was serious about his reporting, but he also had a keen sense of humor, often delivering quips in between news stories pounded out on a keyboard with the fastest one-finger typing on the planet.

He was born Andrus (Andy) Brigham on July 1, 1939 to parents Ruth Andrus Brigham and Harlow Robert Brigham in Rochester, NY. After attending Brown University, Andy began his journalism career in 1962 at WGVA radio in Geneva, NY and later moved to WTLB and WIBX radio in Utica, NY.

In 1966, he moved to television at WHEN-TV (WTVH-TV) in Syracuse as reporter and weekend anchor. He later was assignment editor and eventually news director at the station, but always continued his first love, reporting. As news director, he mentored many young aspiring journalists who remained his friends throughout their careers. One time co-worker Nick Lawler, now with Frank Magid Associates, recalls, “Andy was always available to listen,” after he greeted you in his deep baritone voice with his familiar “Hey babes.”

Andy had a keen ability to recognize talent and a built in BS detector. He gave NBC Today Show weatherman Al Roker his first job in television, hiring him as a college sophomore to do the weather on WTVH-TV. When he heard of Andy’s passing, Roker tweeted: “Andy Brigham’s best wisdom to me: ‘No matter how hard you try, you can’t chrome plate crap’ … a great news director, Syracuse’s Lou Grant.”

Andy launched many careers in the business. Jay Newman, current VP and GM at WJZ-TV in Baltimore, was first hired by Andy. When Rich Isome graduated from college, he called Andy almost every day urging him to hire him for a reporter/sportscaster opening. Admiring Rich’s persistence, Andy finally said, “Kid, if you get here by Thursday, you can have the job!” This week, Rich commented “Andy was a
true original and by far the best boss I ever had. I’m so fortunate he hired me and taught me what real journalism is all about.” The list could go on and on.

Andy worked long hours in the newsroom. And when he finally did go home, he would scoop up a large stack of papers for “bedtime reading.” We didn’t believe he actually read all that stuff. To find out, one night, we slipped a large phone directory into the stack. Andy dutifully picked up the pile under one arm and left. The next morning, he asked the newsroom, “Who’s the wise guy that put the phone directory in my stack?”

In 1979, Andy moved to WTVH-TV’s competitor WIXT-TV (Channel 9, now WSYR-TV) as news director and helped moved the station’s newscast ratings. He was recognized by the Syracuse Press Club for his reporting in 1980, 1981 and 1985 and won New York State Broadcasters’ Association Awards in 1981 and 1983. He was president of the Syracuse Press Club in 1986 and named to its “Wall of Distinction” in 2003.

In 1986, Andy left Syracuse to become my assistant news director at WDSU-TV in New Orleans. Later that year, I left to accept another news director position. Andy never failed to humorously tweak my guilt about bringing him to New Orleans and then “abandoning” him. He also later confessed he wouldn’t trade those years in New Orleans for anything in the world. He loved his time in New Orleans, earning the respect of the staff and making friendships that endured throughout the rest of his life. Former WDSU-TV investigative reporter Richard Angelico offered high praise for Brigham: “When you worked for Andy, it was a reporter’s Nirvana!”

Andy left broadcast journalism in 1989 to join a consulting firm in Charlotte, NC where he taught crisis management to companies which wanted to learn the art of media relations.

In 1991, Andy returned to his beloved Syracuse to become public information officer for the Onondaga County Resource and Recycling Agency where he helped tell the story about better ways to recycle trash, winning the respect of new government colleagues and old media friends. In 2008, Andy and wife Jan retired and moved to Concord, North Carolina, near his daughter Stephanie and her family. His legion of fans still called from time to time to seek his advice or get a dose of his humor. Now we all wish we had called more often.

Andy Brigham was old school, reporting long before the social media and digital age of today’s TV newsroom, but he would tell you that no matter how it is delivered, it is still all about the story-telling.

Former WDSU producer Paula Pendarvis remembers: “Andy keenly understood what stories deserved the airtime and which ones didn’t. ‘What does this mean and why do I care?’ he would bark to anyone who came to the morning news meetings. And despite the endless hours he spent in the newsroom, he deeply loved his family and wanted to spend more time with them, and made sure they became part of the newsroom family. He is the kind of guy you won’t find in a newsroom—or nearly anywhere—anymore. He was as soft on the inside as he was crusty on the outside. He filled the newsroom with laughter. Our world won’t be as much fun without him.”
And that is what Andy’s passing means to me and why we care.

Andy Brigham was 76.

The family is planning a public memorial service to celebrate Andy’s life on Friday September 25 at 4:30 p.m. at DeWitt Community Church, 3600 Erie Blvd East, in Syracuse, NY 13214, near the suburb of DeWitt. Andy’s friends and colleagues are invited to attend. When scheduling the service, the church hesitated about the scheduled time and told Andy’s daughter Stephanie that there is one problem: A drum corps competition slated at the church right after that time. Through her tears, Stephanie smiled and said, "Well you might not understand my Dad’s sense of humor, but I just heard him say, 'see ...I told you I'd go out with a bang!' "