

Bob Wesley: long time public affairs professional, part 2

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Continuing with Mike Shepherd's memories of his mentor, long-time supervisor and close friend Robert (Bob) Wesley, a pacesetter for video production in Oak Ridge Department of Energy sites and one of the giants in the public relations field.

Mike said, "Perhaps the most useful thing I learned from Bob was how to navigate corporate politics. I had no clue of the vagaries of working for a large corporation like Union Carbide and would have done a virtual shooting of my own foot many times had he not pulled me aside gently and told me how things really worked around Oak Ridge. He knew every department and division head, their background, where they had come from, and their experience.

"Back then, many of these folks had come with the original Manhattan Project and were pretty much old school and all business. It was a minefield for a young impulsive producer. But Bob knew that well. He taught me how to behave around certain personality types and when to shut up as well as when to offer suggestions.

"Bob became much more than my supervisor; he became a teacher and mentor like no one else I had ever known. As I got to know him in depth during those 10 years when we worked together daily, I found out how devoted he was to his family and how much he loved them as well as what a dedicated Christian man he was. He loved singing in the choir at his church and we often heard him humming his part for next Sunday's cantata or a solo when he was around the studio or office.

"Often when we needed kids for a safety video we were doing or a mom and kids, Bob's wonderful wife Doris and his three very cooperative children Steve, Michael and Cindy would play those parts. It kept us below the budget and we didn't have to hire actors. (Did I mention he was really good with money?)

"Bob was quite the visionary and innovator when he combined Public Relations and Video Services together in his mind. He developed the first 'Video News Releases' in the country and marketed them to local and regional news outlets.

"He would write a story and have it reviewed and blessed by Classification and Technical Information for public release; we would then go videotape the scenes, the narration, and the 'stand-up' open and close and edit them together into a one to two minute segment. Bob was on camera for many of them, and he also put me in front of the camera for many as well. They played well and our counterparts at the Department of Energy's Oak Ridge Operations Office really liked the positive publicity for ORNL, Y-12 and K-25.

"The television stations aired them just like a part of their regular newscasts for a few years. Then Bob came up with the idea to furnish just the story and the footage, and that went over just as well. As a matter of fact, shortly after we started doing those 'VNR' segments, several other companies and organizations started producing them; but Bob was the first.

"After 10 years being mentored by Bob, he and Harvey decided to let me become the supervisor of our small staff of video assistants and producers. Bob moved on to become an Assistant Director of Public Relations and had a greater scope of responsibility for day-to-day operations. We had fun, but basically it was time for him to kick me out of the nest and see if I could fly.

"Then a couple of years later, a new contractor came in to replace Union Carbide. Martin Marietta took over the contract and Bob became the PR operations manager for Y-12, a position he held until 1996 when he retired.

"I lost track of Bob for the next few years except when he surfaced as the spokesperson for the Oak Ridge Retirees (CORRE) group. I would run into him and Doris every couple of years at the mall and we'd exchange stories. Most recently, I encountered Bob at the funeral of a co-worker we both had great affection for and I discovered he was a medical miracle. Bob had suffered with Myasthenia Gravis for about 25 years. This condition is caused by a breakdown in the normal communication between nerves

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and muscles. It weakens the muscles to the extent that eventually the patient is bedridden. Most people might live for five to eight years, and some longer but the disease is eventually fatal in the short term. Bob apparently didn't believe that.

"Although he walked with a cane and couldn't go long distances without resting, he survived the disease for longer than anyone his physicians ever knew. He was 84 when he died, but he was from very tough stock and it took a lot to even slow him down. I can always look back to the many things we did together and how much we shared with fond memories. There just aren't going to be any more like him and I will miss him.

Thanks Mike, for a sincere and heartfelt stroll down your memory lane with Robert (Bob) Wesley! As you can tell, Bob made a substantial contribution to the communications and especially the video services efforts of all the DOE facilities with which he was affiliated and left those of us who knew him some fond memories. I like to think he even encouraged us to do more effective public affairs work. Like Mike said, Bob will sure be missed.

One last closing insight into Bob as told me by his friend Charlie Kuykendall who attended church with him. It seems that the church music director came to see Bob not long before he became ill enough to have to go to the hospital.

When asked what the director could do for him, Bob replied, "You can play the piano" indicating the piano in the living room. Bob continued, "I want you to play, Take my hand, precious Lord"

So, they sang the song together and Bob's daughter-in-law recorded it. She played the recording of that song as Bob passed quietly away, humming along. When the song ended, Bob breathed his last! Thank you Charlie for sharing that touching story.



Mike Shepherd and Bob Wesley in an early television control room located in Building 9766 at Y-12

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Bob Wesley, Mike Shepherd, Kathy Barnes (ORNL Graphic Arts) and Chuck Jones (the second video assistant hired) on location at Y-12 near one of the old "Engineering Row" buildings on location doing a shot of some work on a building



Bob Wesley, Mike Shepherd and Chuck Jones with an unidentified technician in the old "Mouse House" at Y-12 setting up for a shot in the field