A S P.O.V.

A mong my best friends is a small Cessna, which provides the only venue these days where I can watch the world go by, and look upon Middle Tennessee and ponder where we’re going, where we’re going, and my role in chronicling it. We speak our own language up there, a mile high, in unspeakably tranquil refuge from the presur- es of putting out a biweekly newspaper.

I confess to the Cessna, as we die through the win- ter air together, that my biggest, most consuming fear is becoming irrelevant. I’m petrified of not mak- ing a difference, to make a contribution—of accomplishing mere deeds as editor-in-chief of the biweekly Vanderbilt Hustler, but not leaving the campus in May with a lasting and mean- ingful contribution.

My friends whisper of escapism when they talk about my exploits in the air, but I don’t see it that way. I write flying off as a part of my job, because the best writer is he who has accrued the longest, most diverse life history, and I can’t conceive of a better way to see the world—to observe it, to know it—than from an airplane. I fancy myself more an observer than a reporter. I guess it’s natural; I couldn’t be one without being the other. But in many ways, the best reporter is a pilot. He ascends above the fray to make sense of it all, getting the helicopter view from overhead and simpli- fying it for readers who can’t be there to see it for themselves.

As the editor of students’ primary source of information on everything Vanderbilt, I think it’s my job to observe, to analyze, and to know something before I begin even to report a single word.

The truths most vital to any member of the university’s student body are that he is insignificant, soon will be obsolete, was born long after the newspaper’s first issue, and likely will die long before it prints its last paper. That’s particularly important for college news- paper editors to remem- ber, particularly when they occupy their office for, at most, a year’s time, and enter their job knowing they’ll be replaced, trying desperately until then to make a difference, to make a contribution. But I can report only that which happens. If nothing of note happens during my tenure as editor-in-chief, I’ll sim- ply have to be satisfied with being reliable. But I haven’t been so unlucky as to write in a drought of news. On a campus with 10,000 students and more staff members, there’s always news.

The University has embarked ambitious- ly on a path toward its future size and shape, preparing for residential colleges and align- ing itself with the newest incarnation of the ever-changing paradigm of higher learning in the United States.

Vanderbilt, historically the stiff, somewhat high-brow conservative institution of southern legacy, has begun to shed its old skin and forge a new identity. Progressivism is the only ideology acceptable in any intellectual community; Vanderbilt administrators’ decision last fall to delete the word “Confederate” from Con- federate Memorial Hall, a dormitory on the University’s Peabody campus, was a particu- lar high point of the Hustler’s reporting record. We broke the story, which spilled into local, regional and national headlines within days.

In one sense, our reporting of the renaming of Confederate Memorial Hall was rou- tine. It told the story of yet another University-led initiative designed to refocus Vanderbilt’s image as a progressive, some- what urban, somewhat “hot” school that was trying to delete the regional boundaries that have heretofore defined its student body.

But in another sense, the Confederate cov- erage was a reporter’s — and editor’s — dream. It prompted fascinating dialogue about race in America, and conjured memories of Amer- ica’s past racial sins from which we continue to learn. Our coverage had a very real, almost visceral social value, something we don’t always enjoy with reporting on a new greenhouse or on scholarship winners.

Information, if it’s anything, is a business. We are the distributor — the middle man — of information, and our readers are its con- sumers. And as in any business, sometimes it’s difficult, if not impossible, to please everyone.

One student, trying to defend his friend who had been arrested two days earlier while allegedly attempting to break into the Fed- eral Courthouse in downtown Nashville, made an interesting demand. “Your reporter didn’t tell me I’d have to tell the truth once she started asking me questions,” he said. “So if you print the story, I’m going to say that everything I told her was a lie.” His demand was that since he hadn’t been truth- ful with our reporter, we must not use the interview in which he had revealed some potentially damm- ing information about his friend’s night on the town.

Needless to say, he didn’t lie. But my conversation with him, which lasted the better part of an hour, underscored the delica- cy of our relationship with our readers.

On the one hand, we all inhab- its the same community. All of us at the Hustler pay Vanderbilt tuition each year, we all attend class, we all go to weekend parties. And despite its recent growth, Van- derbilt’s student body is still pret- ty small. One of our staff estimated recently that students here are separated by a scant two degrees. Everyone knows everyone else through one friend. Uniquely, it’s a small community.

Almost every story in the Hustler affects at least two people I know, so it’s important that the newspaper institutionalize a spirit of impor- tancy and a sense of personal char- acteristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, larger, metropolitan charac- teristic of more, 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