



SOAPBOX

VIEWS, OPINIONS AND INSIGHTS

The First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

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Myrtle Beach Herald

The Myrtle Beach Herald is published every Friday by Waccamaw Publishers, Inc., 2510 Main Street, Conway, S.C. 29526

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\$38 in county \$60 out of county

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the Myrtle Beach Herald
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give your address and a daytime
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"I have big plans for the Herald and would love to have you be part of our team."

Steve Robertson wrote those words to me in an email on March 6, 2009. A month later, I would leave my job in Rock Hill and return to my hometown to work for him.

It was one of the best decisions I've made.

Yet at the time, I wasn't so sure about coming back to the beach. My wife had just lost her job as a school psychologist during the recession-induced layoffs. She'd also just given birth to our first child. Suddenly, we were a family of three without health insurance, moving across the state during a terrible economy and needing to sell a home in a sluggish housing market.

On top of those issues, the paper itself presented some, well, challenges.

I remember my first day at the Myrtle Beach Herald. Back then, the newspaper's office was in a mobile home behind a porn store. When I walked in, the page designer told me to be careful because she'd recently received a call at the office from some guy who said "I see you in there" and then proceeded to breathe heavily into the phone.

Clearly, I'd made a brilliant move.

I also soon learned that my competition, The Sun News, boasted a staff with dozens of journalists, including two top investigative reporters, a breaking news crew and even an entertainment reporter who made videos highlighting the upcoming concerts and festivals in Myrtle Beach.

The Herald's news office consisted of



RAMBLE ON
Charles Perry

the page designer, me, a few freelancers and whoever the creep was in the parking lot.

Yet Steve remained optimistic. And I bought into his "big plans."

Steve possessed this easygoing confidence, the type of certainty that made you think you could pull off the impossible. It was a trait he'd honed over the years, ever since he left the county's established news outlets to launch the Horry Independent in 1980. Forty-three years later, the company still publishes the Independent every Thursday — along with multiple other papers.

I started writing for the Independent as a college student. I covered the Galivants Ferry Stump and Carolina Forest High School's graduation. I learned how to coax sources into talking to me. I learned how to write quickly.

I hadn't planned on returning home after college, but a mutual friend encouraged me to speak with Steve about working for my hometown paper. We started emailing and I was intrigued. He made me think this tiny news team had a chance. Despite the recession, despite the limited resources, he could see something special here. It would take time, he told me, but we could compete. We could break big stories. We could give readers meaningful journalism. We just needed the right team.

I started going through those old emails five months ago after Steve's death from a heart attack. I'd saved the messages — I'm what you'd call a digital pack rat — and others he had written to me over the years.

They reminded me of his kindness, and his impact on my life.

"Just finished your beautifully-written piece on Donna Major," Steve wrote on May 8, 2019, in response to a Mother's Day story about a beloved bank teller

who had been killed during a robbery. "It's one of the best stories I have ever read. You are an outstanding journalist and I feel blessed to have you on my team."

I reread some of those messages again recently as I've prepared to leave Waccamaw Publishers, the company that has employed me for more than a dozen years. Other than a brief stint at The Sun News, this has been my professional home since I moved back to Horry County.

My wife and I now have five children. That oldest baby who would get passed around the office in 2009 will start high school in the fall.

Along the way, I've covered hurricanes, presidential candidates and more high school football games than I can count. I also watched Steve hire a fantastic team of journalists, folks who told amazing stories that held politicians accountable, won national awards and built trust in the community.

Yet everything comes to an end eventually. I'm leaving the company to take another job. I hope this will allow me to have more time with my family, though this hasn't been an easy decision.

Walking away from this place, and from the people at this paper, feels unnatural, as though I've fallen short of Steve's big plans. Yet looking around the newsroom, seeing the journalists chasing the next scoop, preparing for another edition, it's clear those big plans are still playing out.

Readers, thank you for being so kind for all these years. I've enjoyed your praise, your criticism and the fact that you took the time to read our stories and drop us a line.

Please continue to support the paper and its journalists.

You're part of the team, too.



It's been a great ride