

Raymond Henry Welch

Died: June 24, 2007

Ray died at age 68 of cancer at his home in Bristol, Rhode Island on Sunday, June 24, 2007.

Our Green Book dutifully reports that Ray came from Gloucester, Massachusetts, and went to Gloucester High School, where he was on the school newspaper, magazine, and yearbook, and was on the football, rifle, and track teams.

The Aegis says he majored in English, and became a member of Gamma Delta Chi. It records that during his freshman year, Ray was in the canoe club, the outing club, on the dormitory committee (he reportedly dwelt in Hitchcock), and played football. He was in Green Key, it says. And as we all knew, during all four years, Ray was on the Jack-O-Lantern, becoming its editor his senior year.

Those are the bare details of his life before and during his years at Dartmouth, reported in the only formal way our college knows how to chronicle such matters, and that's the way most of us knew him.

But there was much, much more to Ray. Our classmate Tom Conger seems to have understood Ray's overall mission and attitude towards life. "Welchie, to my knowledge was the only '61 who left Hanover intending to be a writer — and then was one," As for the attitude thing, Tom got it, writing in WWW after Ray died, "an inveterate wiseacre, Ray could never resist poking fun at himself — and nearly every other living and/or inanimate thing he came in contact with."

Ray was a true character, and the narrative of his entire life — from high school through college, and long after, even to the days before his death — was as character-driven as any movie plot one could imagine.

When Ray died, the New England media had a field day. The June 29 *Boston Globe*, for example, carried a huge 1,129 word profile obituary about his passing ("Ray Welch, 68; ad man was voice of Hub radio commercials," read the headline of the piece by a guy named Bryan Marquard). Our classmate Bob Conn called it, "the most compelling obit I've ever read."

True to Ray's spirit, about the *Globe's* obituary, Ray's wife, Gail, quipped that its author must have enjoyed talking with all his sources, including Ray's former advertising partner Geoff Currier, because "they ended up giving Ray more ink than the former prime minister of Japan."

Gail, by the way, met Ray when she applied for a job with him as a copywriter in the early 1970's. They married in about 1974, and had been married about 33 years when he passed away.

There was more posthumous reportage. *The Gloucester Daily Times*, of the town where Ray went to high school, carried a 1,000 word obituary in its July 9, 2007, edition, written by Richard Gaines, that the high school reproduced on its own website. It too was evocatively entitled: “Legendary voice in Boston Advertising, Ray Welch GHS Dies at 69,” (its headline got Ray’s death wrong, he was 68, just another example of Ray morphing into legend).

Another obituary, a copy of which can be found in college archives — unsourced, unattributed, and very long — is dated June 27, and headlined, “Ray Welch, copywriter and voice talent, at 68.” It opens, predictably enough, informing the reader that Ray, a “legend in Boston advertising for decades back when it was fun” died “after a valiant battle with cancer.”

The amount of press commentary about Ray, especially in New England, swelling the legend of his life before and after Dartmouth, makes one wonder if Dartmouth and all its various ways for recognizing talent among its ranks, didn’t maybe miss something, or if we didn’t, when we were together on campus in the late 1950’s. Whether that’s true or not, the reporting after his death informs our understanding of him now, after his passing.

The chronology of Ray’s career after Dartmouth is straightforward. Following graduation, Ray shopped his talents to several advertising agencies in Boston, and worked successively at shops with names like Atlas, Harold Cabot Advertising, and Ingalls. He broke away sometime in the early ‘70s, and went freelance for a while, evidently among the earliest to then do so, to focus on writing and consulting. In 1979, with Currier (who was a copywriter), and designer Tyler Smith, he created Welch Currier Smith.

For more than a decade that shop dominated the Boston area advertising scene, becoming known for its creativity. In the early 1990’s he closed the shop, and turned again to free-lancing. He and Gail moved to Bristol in about 1997.

Ray’s accomplishments are something else. His writing reaped scores of awards in the advertising industry. Currier, who worked with him for years, said his writing was “crisp, smart, funny, it just naturally flowed from him.”

His voice-over ads were state-of-the art. He had a gravelly sound, roughened, or so they say, by nights of smoking and drinking and playing pool and poker. It was called avuncular. Bryan Marquand from the Boston Globe said Ray’s voice “familiar and friendly, pours from the speakers as smooth as aged Scotch into a glass.” It was called a non-announcer’s voice, and was familiar all over Boston. Once a telephone operator he called for a phone number recognized his voice, and told him so. It was referred to as “the voice that ate Boston.”

Marquand also reported that Ray's "greatest talent was for friendship, an art he practiced deftly on a level few reach" — as Dartmouth friends can no doubt confirm. In another, Ray's old colleague, Currier, recalled the countless times he and Ray would pull off the highway for gas only to find Ray rediscovering a friend at the pump or behind the counter.

Ray wrote a book about copywriting, that teachers of the subject routinely list as required reading and as one of a small number of go-to books about the subject. It's entitled "Copywriter: A Life of Making Ads and Other Mistakes" (hardcover, November 25, 2002), and is available online from amazon.com.

In praise of Ray's book, one online reviewer, Jay Rose, writes, "For close to 20 years, ending in the late 1980s, Ray Welch dominated New England advertising awards. He was the Woody Allen of the industry, writing self-deprecating (but hilarious and strategically spot-on) ads, and later becoming one of the area's most effective voice-over announcers. He was also one of the most well-liked personalities in the community — I should know, I was there."

What made Ray a character, however, was the color of his life, the affection he had for people, and for creating good stories. Take high school for example. The anecdotes about Ray *before* Dartmouth abound, and none of them of course could find their way into The Green Book. Richard Gaines caught the flavor of Ray's life as a teenager in the obituary he wrote for The Gloucester Times.

"Young Ray worked briefly as a lumper shoveling fish, and hustled pool from a Main Street hall. Invariably, recalled his Gloucester friend Skip Ross, "he made money." He freelanced for the Gloucester Daily Times, covering the high school football team; won poetry prizes; learned to play the piano, guitar, accordion and harmonica; swam, dove, hunted, fished, skied, climbed mountains; ran track and played junior varsity football; and managed to win scholarships at Dartmouth, Harvard and Bates, according to a resume on file at the Times.

He fast-tracked to encyclopedic literacy, Ross noted, by consuming plot summaries of the great books rather than the books themselves, and specialized in acidic put-downs. This explains why "he got into a lot of fights," Ross said. But "he always made up."

Somehow, he also found time to dictate into a tape recorder an entire dictionary.

At the time, Welch was working at Rockholm Lodge as a companion of its proprietor, Danny Carveth. A Korean War veteran who had been blinded in combat, Carveth wanted a dictionary he could hear."

Other obituaries report that, during high school, Ray dreamed of playing billiards and poker and took up smoking Camel cigarettes.

The end for Ray had to have been more difficult than the press was reporting. He had left the Boston area advertising world, and the media claque that followed him around, and retired, if you could call it that, to Bristol, Rhode Island, a chic little waterfront town with a gritty working class edge and a strong Portuguese-speaking and Italian community.

There he held forth, played some golf, and hung out at a local pub called Aidan's, which became endowed with a quasi-celebrity status, but is pretty small in fact.

Our classmate Glenn Gemelli was one of those who was a friend of Ray's at the beginning and also near the end. "I knew him well early in our college days," Glenn writes, "and reconnected by e-mail in his last year or so. With so many searching for their special place in life, it's reassuring to note someone finding his — a homey pub in Rhode Island."

Conger wrote about Ray in WWW shortly after Ray died. The two had evidently exchanged some e-mails and other communications. Here is what Tom wrote about Ray's battle with cancer:

"He'd kept these headquarters apprised of the situation as he underwent treatment, but was gentle enough to not hit us with the grim reality of his condition. Like, back in February, we got: 'Still no hard news, other than the golf ball in my neck is indeed a metastasis of a cancer lurking elsewhere in the body. On the PET/CT scan, hot spots appear in the sternum and elsewhere — but not, defying all odds, the lungs ... I think I'm in good hands. The surgeon I met today didn't introduce himself as 'Doctor Ruhl'; he said, 'Hi, I'm Charlie.' I can trust a Charlie. Will keep you posted.' Then in early May, after completing an eight-week siege of treatment in the hospital: 'Mine was the only cancer suite with an ashtray and a private bar. Now I suppose everyone will want one.' "

It was at Aidan's in fact where the swirl of affection for Ray, and all the words, and wit, and irreverence, boisterous humor and stories, and character-based drama of his life — all of it came to an end. After his death there was to have been a gathering at the pub, a kind of celebration; it was well advertised and billed as the alternative to any kind of service.

After hearing about Ray's death, our classmate Gim Burton e-mailed Conger, with some thoughts of his own about Ray, and Aidan's. In edited form, Gim wrote:

I just read the WWW report of Ray's passing. Thanks for the kind words. Ray and I were pretty close, and I will miss him a lot. You may recall he and

I roomed together at Dartmouth for two years. As they say in the *Reader's Digest*, he was an 'unforgettable character' — a smart SOB, fun guy, witty as hell, lousy golfer. You should probably send the WWW to Gail. She is a dear person, also a copywriter, and would appreciate it. By the way, I have been to Aidan's a couple of times, and I don't think it was the model for Ray's story about the Portuguese Club. It could have provided the impetus, but not the inspiration. It's a blue collar, white guy place, but in a Portuguese neighborhood. I suspect the Portuguese club story club had its genesis in Gloucester where Ray knew many such characters. For sure Rhode Island is full of the Portuguese club types, but it was not Ray's first encounter with them. Aidan's is a small joint, a typical New England pub that holds about thirty people, with twenty more outside. The food's okay, the drinks are better. We always sat outside because Ray had to be able to smoke. Always those f***ing cigarettes. I can't make the celebration at Aidan's, but I'll bet the rent money that they will have a turnout beyond belief. I hope local TV covers it. We were a generation that deserved to live forever, and it's up to us now."

Ray was survived at his death by his wife, Gail, and had four daughters, Samantha, Claudia, Brodie, and Casey.

Ray's closing comment in our 25th Reunion Yearbook in 1986 resonates as well now as it did then: "The world has treated me kindly. I try to reciprocate."