

To Whom It May Concern:

Passionate. Versatile. Storyteller. When I think of Tom Henderson, these terms come to mind. I have worked with thousands of journalists in my career, there are a few that stand above the rest. Tom is one of them.

My name is Nancy Hanus. I’ve had the pleasure to work alongside Tom in three different newsrooms from 1996 to 2017, and to see up close Tom’s skills as a writer, mentor and journalist. As Tom’s editor, I was privileged to simply clear the way for the expertise of his writing and the magic of his storytelling. I met Tom in the mid-1990s when I was Features Editor at The Detroit News, back when there was space to fill and a decent freelance budget to spend. Among the many stories Tom pitched to me was one about 90-year-old Jim Ramsey, who was training for the Detroit Free Press Marathon. Ramsey, Tom told me, started running in his late 60s after a heart attack, and had run several marathons, starting at age 73. His wife of 70 years, Julia, had passed away two months earlier, and Jim wanted to run the marathon one last time in her honor. I, of course, was hooked. Ramsey was worried he couldn’t finish the race within the 6-hour time limit, but after Tom’s story ran it was clear no one was going to let that race end until Jim Ramsey crossed the finish line. There were people lined up along the race route, cheering. Ramsey completed the race four days before his 91st birthday and remains, 23 years later, the oldest marathoner to finish the race. Only Tom saw the power in that story, and had the tenacity to get it published in the place where a half-million readers would see it.

When I left The Detroit News in 1999 to help build the startup website iCan.com, Tom agreed to join our team. While at iCan, Tom singlehandedly covered two Paralympic Games, in Sydney, Australia, in 2000 and in Salt Lake City in 2002. When I say “singlehandedly” I mean 16-hour days, visiting multiple venues a day, then sending stories and photos back to his editors, for the entire 11 days of the games. In covering the Sydney games, Tom wrote about 70,000 words, doing the work of an entire media team with stories of triumph, defeat and unparalleled passion. Our paths crossed again in 2012, when I joined Crain’s Detroit Business and had the opportunity to work alongside Tom as he did what he always does: Go beyond the numbers to help readers understand through context and great writing. He also found time to write a blog that I still use as a college instructor to illustrate to students how one reporter can connect and make a difference.

The final area of intersection for Tom and me has given me the chance to watch Tom engage with others as a mentor. While sitting 20 feet away in the Crain newsroom, I watched Tom as he took interns and young reporters under his wing. Tom would take them out on interviews, or to Belle Isle for a run. Always, there were pearls from Tom, bits of history and lots of storytelling. I’ve also taught college classes over the past 11 years, most recently at University of Michigan Dearborn. Many of my students have told me that of the four or five speakers I bring in each semester that Tom is their favorite.

Often, in the years after Tom’s Herculean efforts covering the Paralympics, I heard him tell people how those individuals with disabilities were among the most talented and passionate athletes he’d ever covered. Tom’s reaction to those athletes and their passion for sport mirrors my own feelings about Tom as a journalist. Skill. Passion. Excellence. Storytelling. The elements that allow the elite in their field to be at the top of their game.

Often, journalists go deep in one area, as a longtime editor at one publication or as reporters who doggedly covers beats so well they become legendary for it. Tom, in his near half-century as a reporter and writer, goes deep on everything he does. In the end, the stories he tells are the ones I remember. I am pretty sure that’s the way his writing affects the millions of readers he’s reached over his career. And with that kind of legacy, who could be more deserving of entry into the best of the best in Michigan journalism?

Sincerely,

Nancy Hanus

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