

Deborah Howell, Trail-Blazing Newspaperwoman, Dies in Traffic Accident

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Courtesy Washington Post

Deborah Howell, a prominent and trail-blazing newspaperwoman in both Minnesota and Washington, D.C., has died after being struck by a car in New Zealand while on vacation with her husband. Howell was a top editor in Minneapolis and St. Paul before coming to Washington in 1990 to head the Newhouse Newspapers' Washington bureau. From 2005 to 2008, she was the ombudsman for *The Washington Post*.

Her stepson, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, [told the Minneapolis Star-Tribune](#) that Howell, an avid hiker, was fulfilling a lifelong dream to visit that picturesque country -- a trip that ended in tragedy Friday when she stepped out of her car and was struck by another vehicle on a two-lane road near the town of Blenheim on the South Island. She was traveling with her husband, C. Peter Magrath, former president of the University of Minnesota. Howell was 68.

News of her death swept through journalism circles Saturday morning, as friends and former colleagues remembered her journalistic vision, indomitable spirit, and the example she provided for other women journalists:

"She was a source of inspiration, having made her way up in this business at a time when the newsroom was hostile territory for women who didn't want to spend their careers writing wedding announcements," [Time reporter Karen Tumulty wrote this morning](#). "Because of her, it was a lot easier for those of us who followed, both in the city rooms of newspapers around the country and here in Washington."

In an email to the staff, Washington Post executive editor Marcus Brauchli and editorial page editor Fred Hiatt recalled Howell as a wry colleague and "fabulous gossip" who "could be as

pedantic as a schoolteacher, but swore like a stevedore."

"It's a little hard to get your arms around," said a stunned-sounding Robert Hoderne, who knew Howell for four decades and worked with her both in Minneapolis and Washington. "As slight as she was and as frail as she looked, she also seemed indestructible."

In this day and age, however, nothing is indestructible, not even the news business that Howell loved. And news gathering was literally in Howell's blood. Her father, Henry Howell, was a well-known Texas newspaper reporter, editor, and broadcaster. Her mother, Mary Dell Williams, had been editor of her high school newspaper. Born in San Antonio, Deborah Howell was fond of saying that her path in life was probably determined when her parents met -- in a newsroom.

She earned an undergraduate degree at the University of Texas in Austin and did stints at two Texas dailies before heading north to join the *Minneapolis Star* in 1965. Robert Hoderne recalled first meeting Howell in 1970 when both were reporters on the old Minneapolis Star, "when she was Debbie and I was Bob." Howell was covering state politics and state government -- quite aggressively -- before being named city editor and then assistant managing editor at *The Star*. She was lured across the Mississippi River to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in 1979, where under her tenure the smaller paper won two Pulitzer Prizes, and earned Howell a national reputation.

In 1990, she left the Twin Cities for Washington to head the sprawling Newhouse bureau. Among her first hires was her old friend and colleague Hoderne, who had also done a stint as a Washington correspondent before going into editing himself -- and who, like Howell, had taken to using the more formal version of his first name. But there was nothing traditional about the way Howell or her deputy ran their bureau. "She was a helluva journalist, and had a whole different idea of how to cover Washington," Robert Hoderne recalled Saturday. While Newhouse had beat reporters assigned to the White House and the Pentagon (including Politics Daily's incomparable David Wood) Howell also oversaw the creation of beats on gender, race, religion, aging, American history, and -- after 9/11 -- an evocative beat called "the American identity."

"She was cantankerous, funny, imperious, exacting, tireless and a fierce protector of her reporters," recalls David Wood of his 15 years working in the Newhouse bureau while Howell ran it. "I admired her deeply and we fought almost constantly, about things that mattered...She was ruthless in demanding the last bit of shoe-leather to get a story perfect. For a Korean War 50th Anniversary story I was writing on how little warfare has changed for infantry soldiers, she sent me to Korea, on a 20-mile nighttime march through the mountains with American GIs so I'd get the details right."

Along the way, her bureau earned critical acclaim, along with occasional head-scratching from some of the Newhouse chain's more traditional editors. But Howell's instincts often proved to be ahead of the curve, particularly with regard to providing in-depth coverage of religion; Howell also was instrumental in persuading the Newhouses to buy Religion News Service, and attaching it to her bureau. The irony is that Deborah Howell's vision proved stronger than the newspaper

business itself: The Washington bureau she led did not survive the current crisis afflicting American newspapers – it shuttered its doors in 2008 – but Religion News Service lives on. So, too, does Deborah Howell's memory.

In 1975, she married Nicholas Coleman, a prominent Minnesota Democrat who was the majority leader in the state Senate. Although Nick Coleman died six years later, Howell remained in the life of Coleman's son Chris, now St. Paul's mayor. Upon hearing of her death, [Chris Coleman told the *Star-Tribune*](#), "She played a very important role in my life after my dad died, right up to editing my speeches." Coleman added that he had spent the day preparing for his Monday inauguration when he got the news about Howell's death. "The last thing I had yet to do was to send her my remarks for her edits," he said.

Among those she inspired to enter her chosen field was his daughter, he added, who plans to major in journalism at the University of Missouri.

Deborah Howell married Peter McGrath in 1988. In retirement, the two were known in their Glen Echo neighborhood for their long joint walks each day down to the towpath along the Potomac. "She and her husband were very close – you could see that just by the way they walked together," said neighbor Carlotta Anderson, who struggled to keep her composure as she recalled her image of the couple. "She was always very bright, and cheerful, and vivacious. No pretense at all."

Howell's writing reflected this down-to-earth quality. In the first column she wrote as *The Washington Post* ombudsman, [Deborah Howell wrote](#): "My values simply are these: Journalism should be as accurate as human beings can make it and it should be enlightening, fair, honest and as transparent as possible. Mistakes should be acknowledged and quickly corrected. When you finish reading *The Post*, you should feel more informed than when you began. I truly believe a democracy can't operate without a free press. But I also can't live without 'Doonesbury' or 'Opus' on Sunday."