

# My guiding star was known as the Screaming Skull

By Kevin Calvert

She was no glamourpuss. She was the hunchback of the newsroom. She smoked. She drank. She was known as the Screaming Skull.



But boy was she a crusty diamond.

Her name's June Litman. And her words are forever etched in my memory as a journalist. I loved June – and I told her that on the day she retired after nearly half a century at the now-defunct *Taranaki Herald*.

She was the first woman to be news editor of a daily newspaper in New Zealand. Along the way, she crushed many a budding reporter with her demands for accuracy and stories that made sense. Many ended up in tears as their shredded copy was dumped in the rubbish.

I was one of the lucky ones. As an 18 year old barely out of the then ATI journalism school, but already with the benefit of nine months' experience at the *Wairarapa Times-Age*, I joined the *Taranaki Herald*. And in my first week I wrote a story June raved about.

It was one of those yarns you don't balk at as a young fella who never minded a beer or three. An historic hotel, the Criterion, closing. I was assigned to cover last orders at the pub.

Of course, I worked past midnight crafting that story. And

when I returned bleary-eyed to the newsroom several hours later, June was still cackling about it. She'd even written the headline: Time please – and the clock went.

As time went on, June and I got on well. I still got bawled out, just like all the other reporters, when I cocked up. She bailed me up about spelling one of New Plymouth's main streets, Courtenay, wrong. I had checked – but it was an unreliable map. I was pointed in the right direction. She was exasperated by some of my attempts to decipher Taranaki Catchment Commission meetings.

She even snubbed me when I witnessed something that was part of the legend of June. It was often said she started work at 3am and rewrote our morning paper rival, the *Daily News*, before being joined by the rest of the subberly at 6pm. I was there for one of her early arrivals ... embroiled in a card sesh with staff from the "Daily Snooze". I figure she didn't acknowledge my existence because in effect I was sleeping with the enemy.

Yes, she was competitive too.

I lapped up this and other qualities June possessed. I switched to subbing not long before she retired – and sapped

as much knowledge out of her as I could. Even to the extent of often going to her home after work just for a chat. There was always a beer in June's fridge. Behind that caustic tongue was a heart of gold.

Now here's my lament. For me, June was a guiding star. I fear she's a dying breed as newsrooms downsize and inevitably lose more expensive experience.

Will those who are left after the cost-cutting – and we're seeing it at some of our more established news establishments, TVNZ and the *New Zealand Herald* – still have the time and energy to mentor younger staff?

In a multi-media, hi-tech age where there's maybe a

clamour for glamour ahead of substance, I still treasure a piece of paper.

It's a reference from June Litman, in her own scrawly handwriting. And as I reach a quarter of a century in journalism, it's a reminder to keep passing on my scraps of experience to those around me.

**Kevin Calvert is a senior producer for TVNZ's *One News*. He has nearly 25 years experience in journalism. This is his first appearance in *Te Waha Nui*.**

**"There was always a beer in June's fridge. Behind that caustic tongue was a heart of gold."**

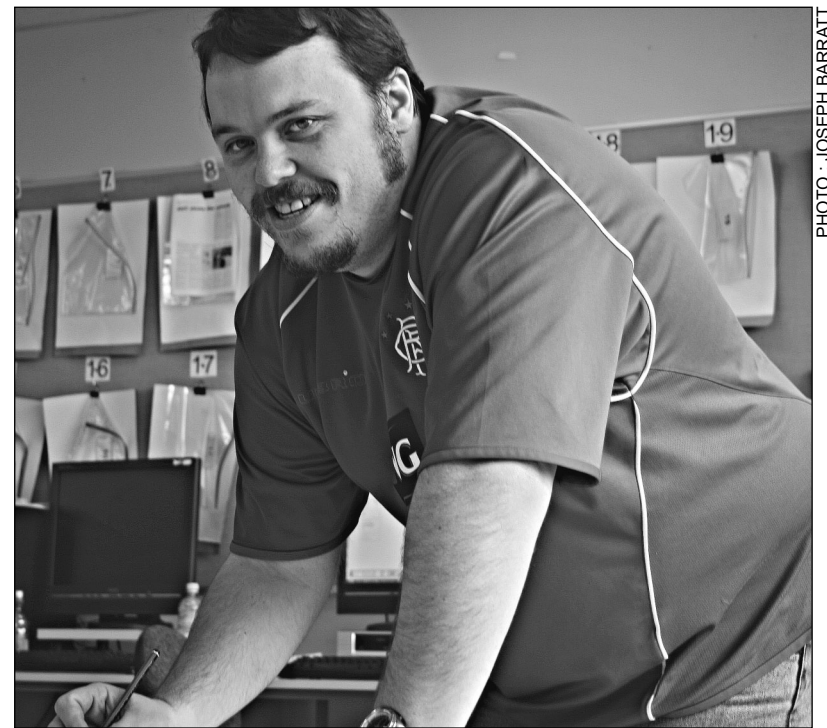


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## Get up, stand up

Editorial - Mike Kilpatrick

This year the *Te Waha Nui* team will use its custodian privileges to highlight important issues ignored by mainstream media (see pages five and six).

The main focus of this edition is the Fourth Estate – journalism and its inherent value to democracy.

The multiple crises facing New Zealand journalism haven't crept up behind us and tapped us on the shoulder – they've been unabashedly in our face and taunting us for years.

But the *Journalism Matters* conference, held at Parliament on August 11 and 12, finally gives hope the talking is finished and action is on its way.

As journalism students, the future of the media is important to us – our careers are on the line. As an editor, I think it's even more important.

*Te Waha Nui* would be failing in its duty to its readers if it ignored the considerable issues facing the media. But we'd also be failing our contributors – our

fellow students – if we didn't take a stand and push for major change.

Harriet Palmer, a graduate diploma student at Massey University, told the conference she could make more money as a waitress than as a journalist.

And *The Aucklanders*' Sylvie Whinray stood nervously to ask the conference when it was going to stop talking and actually do something.

Two examples of young people starting out in the industry who stood up when sitting down was an easier option.

We have a duty to support those brave enough to speak out; to stand with our brothers and sisters, the unionised and non-unionised, the minorities and the majority.

We need to redress the balance between public owners, who lack the commercial pressures of private ownership – those who care only about the bottom line; the newspaper as a commodity, as important as a can of baked beans.

Spread the word. Journalism matters.

# Damn journalism schools – now we know who dumbed down the news

By Eloise Gibson



Perhaps we should thank Chris Trotter for pointing out what's really wrong with the state of journalism.

It's not falling circulations and unchecked commercialism, it's us – the journalists of tomorrow.

Trotter's recent weekend *Dominion Post* column dismisses the "commercial pressures and cost-cutting" cited by the EPMU and suggests journalists, specifically graduate journalists, are to blame for the declining standard of news.

Most worrying, he says, is that so few graduates entering the industry have anything they want to say.

In fact, the almost-graduates in the AUT newsroom had quite a bit to say after reading his column.

The gist of it, in polite terms, was "give grads a break".

The optimism, idealism and passion we felt when we signed up to become journalists is still there.

We know that newsrooms are down-sizing, just when we need to find jobs.

We know wages at the

*Herald* haven't kept pace with inflation over the past 25 years.

We know about the commercial pressures we will face, and we know that, rightly or wrongly, we have chosen to pin our futures on an industry in crisis.

And despite knowing all this, many of us still want to change the

world. So it's disheartening to hear as we embark on our careers that:

"The owners and managers of our daily newspapers ... are routinely astounded by the fail-

**"Rather than wailing about the lack of investigative journalism, how about some role models other than the lonely figure of Nicky Hager."**

ure of our tertiary institutions – including, unfortunately, our journalism schools – to turn out graduates who can think independently and write clearly."

Rather than bemoaning the state of journalism training, it would be nice to see experienced journalists helping new graduates with mentoring and on-the-job training.

Rather than wailing about the lack of investigative journalism, how about some role models other than the lonely figure of Nicky Hager to show us how it's done?

I'm no supporter of so-called journalistic "objectivity" but when an experienced left-leaning journalist holds up Rupert Murdoch as a beacon of the "partisan spirit" missing from young journalists, you know

the industry is in trouble.

When Trotter criticised the standard of young journalists in 2004, he was amply contradicted by the success of graduates like *Listener* feature writer and rising star Matt Nippert.

If his comments spur this year's graduates to similar success, maybe we'll have Chris Trotter to thank.

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