

Policies

help ensure unbiased coverage for newspaper and yearbooks

By BRADLEY WILSON CJE
Editor

The death of a student, faculty or staff member is tragic. But, if high-school publications across the nation are any indication, not all deaths are treated equally. In one newspaper, a student who had died in a hunting accident was “immortalized” in a double-page spread. No one on the staff knew the student. Apparently, few others did either because the copy was a series of vague testimonials that told the reader little about the victim.

Another school dedicated the yearbook to students who had died during the year by including dominant photos of them on the title page of the yearbook without any explanation.

Other schools choose to say nothing about the deaths. Still others write a factual news story and include some details in the yearbook.

Advisers across the nation agree that how an individual school treats a death depends on the circumstances. Clearly the criteria for news dictates that deaths may be covered differently depending particularly on the timeliness of the coverage and the prominence of the person who has died. Advisers also agree that the best way to prevent emotional entanglements is to write a policy to detail how deaths will be covered in both the yearbook and newspaper.

“Personally, I think ‘In Memoriam’ and a name demeans a life by reducing it to a list. If we’re teaching journalism to both our students and their readers we have to face the challenge and report lives and deaths as we report all else,” Wayne Brasler of University High School (Chicago, Ill.) said.

Such policies help prevent unbalanced, biased coverage.

Judy Knudtsen of Alberta Lee

James E. Hodges Jr.
October 30, 1957 - October 18, 1998

“Our Friendly Giant”

The gymnasium as Superintendent Shores (Dedson) broke the news of Principal James E. Hodges' death on October 18, 1998, after complications from surgery.

“I envy the class of 1998 because when they walked across the stage last June, it was Mr. Hodges standing on the other side, graciously smiling and eager to give them their diplomas. I wish it was his hand that I would shake in June of '99,” said senior Laurie Stephens.

Teacher Don Coker reminisced, “There were days when things were going badly for me, that he would come in and give me a laugh. He was a very positive person, a ‘people person,’ a ‘bouncer,’ and so compassionate.”

Hodges always had time for students and staff. He was consistently seen talking to or assisting the students. He also supported many of the school's athletic events.

“He was there,” senior Jeff Hickman recalled. “He attended all of my wrestling matches.” Jessica Cliff said, “Last year we didn't have a class for the freshmen class, and I didn't know what to do. So I asked Mr. Hodges about it, and he said that he would let us use his truck. We decorated it with balloons and streamers and went third place. Who volunteers their vehicle on the spot to students? He did because he was trusting and eager to help out. I will really miss him.”

For senior Lesmie Pitts, the one word that describes Hodges was “encouraging.” Pitts said “I remember it was his first year here and I was doing the play *Field of Dreams*. Afterward, in school he came to me and said, ‘You're a really good actress. You will go onto do better things in the future.’ He believed in me, and I'll miss him.”

In an effort to pay tribute to principal Hodges, a visitation was held at Bennett Funeral Home in Mechanicsville on Tuesday, October 20, 1998, and funeral services were held on Wednesday, October 21, 1998, after school was dismissed early at 11:30am.

All our memories of Mr. Hodges are different because he touched us in so many different ways, but they all say the same things about him. He was an encouraging, caring, person, man to say the least, and that's why our hallways will seem a little quieter, and school a little emptier without the familiar presence of our “friendly giant.”

by Venita Gresham

Student & Staff Thoughts and Memories

“He was friendly, outgoing, and gentle to all the students.”
-Nadia Trachtenberg

“Mr. Hodges was an inspiration to the entire class, and we all will miss him dearly.”
-Clarice Sparlock

“He was helpful and listened to me whenever I needed him. He went out his way for the convenience of the student.”
-Lacey Allen

“He was down to earth and approachable, and you felt comfortable with him.”
-Kelly Phillips

“Mr. Hodges was a gentleman who encouraged us to follow our dreams. He will be missed dearly by all the students and faculty.”
-Tomekia Thompson

“He meant a whole lot, he was fair and understanding, and he will be missed.”
-Theodore Trachtenberg

“He would always tease me and call me ‘Rudy’ for being short.”
-Dawson Hill

“He wanted us to follow our dreams, and would try to help us to achieve them.”
-Jackie Hedson

“It was a tragic loss of a young man dedicated to the youth of America.”
-Roger Brooks

“Mr. Hodges was a friend, he supported the cheerleaders. He came to games with us and was a great asset to our school.”
-Tina Reed

“When I would pass him in the hall, he would always take the time to ask how I was doing.”
-William Dandridge

“He was caring; when I got mad one time, he started to talk about Oprah Winfrey to make me laugh, and I'll never forget that.”
-Lisa Huffman

“He was a very genuine person who truly cared for the students and faculty of this school.”
-Stacy Beard

An Angel

Suddenly, as I turned around,
I saw an angel standing before me,
Happy and jolly without any pain—
eyes full of joy and happiness,
directing students to their classes.
The bells toll quietly,
The angel stands with his walkie talkie,
telling students they're late,
joking with them,
asking how they are.
I follow him as he walks into his office,
bright and cheery, full of life.
He walks a young girl to alleviate her problems,
The man asks, “What can I help you with today?”
I see a mannaple,
Gold and engraved.
It reads James E. Hodges, Jr.

Michelle Dean

Tribute to Jim Hodges by P. Holmes & L. Pitts

▲ Some schools, such as King William HS (Virginia) (*Cavalcade*; Laura Farley, editor; Vicky Cline, adviser) devote significant space to staff members who die. Their school principal died from surgery complications.

(Minn.) High School said her staffs established a procedure to deal with student deaths after a couple of “problems.”

“If we had a picture of the student, ... we printed it in alpha order with the class. (We also had) the counselors contact the parents in what would have been that classmate's senior yearbook and ask if they would give us the most recent photo – if we didn't have it We printed

it slightly larger, not much (maybe 9 x 12 picas instead of 8 x 10), put the name and birth and death date only under it, and put a two-point black border around it. Period,” Knudtsen said. “Our rationale – what we do for one we do for all and unless we're prepared to do a full obit for everyone – student, custodian, faculty, etc. we do it for no one.”

Brasler said their policy is to cover the death as another story deserving


Exercise

Yearbook policies

SAMPLE :
Should a student or faculty member die any time during the current coverage period, the staff will treat the death in a tasteful manner. A short obituary with the individual's name, school activities, date of birth, date and manner of death (if appropriate) and any other pertinent information shall appear in the news section. This treatment will provide an adequate testimonial to the individual for those closely associated while not over-emphasizing the death for other readers.

Yearbooks throughout the nation have different ways of dealing with student deaths and major news events that impact their school because of the untimeliness of the yearbook. If a student dies at your school, what is your yearbook's policy for publishing information about that student? Why is this the policy?



In Memoriam



I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of his friend. He referred to the dates on his tombstone from the beginning...to the end. He noted that first come the date of his birth and again of the second with tears, but he said that what mattered most of all was the dash between those years. For that dash represents all the time that he spent alive on earth, and now only those who loved him know what that little line is worth.

Otto G. Macklin
February 14, 1982 – December 31, 1998

▲ From Buckingham County (Va.) HS *Excalibur* • Crista Couch and Erica Goldman, co-editors • Robin Smith, adviser



Jarrell Devon Opie
1981 - 1994

Sebron Earl Kitchen
1980 - 1996

The Class of 1999 wishes to remember with affection two friends who should have been here to walk across the stage with us.

▲ From Churchland HS (Portsmouth, Va.) *Trucker* • Kelly Fleming, editor in chief • Susan Yearby, adviser

of publication. He said that poetry and other “cliché” artwork can do more harm than good.

“We have no written policy, but we cover deaths journalistically – we give the facts emphasizing the contributions a person made, why people will miss him or her and the circumstances of death handled with taste and kindness,” Brasler said. “We would never print poetry about someone who died, or picture birds on the wing silhouetted against a sunset. We feel those kind of clichés can be a real insult to the value of a life.”

Usually, such policies and precedent come about after years of experience or hearing stories from other schools.

For example, Ellen Kersey, a second-year yearbook adviser at Camarillo (Calif.) High School, said she is learning from the reaction to the death of a student last year.

“We had a student who would have been a junior die early last school year. Unfortunately, the yearbook did nothing,” Kersey said. “Dad kept calling – me, the principal, the superintendent after the book came out. The staff and I decided we would do something this year.”

But that “something” became a dilemma.

“This week I called and asked for a color photo of the young man, who would have been a senior this year, as we’re putting his ‘memorial’ in the color senior section. Lo and behold, I am informed they have paid several hundred dollars to have ‘the page’ done by a graphic artist. And on the page is a poem written by a cousin. My first dilemma is that they have assumed we are doing a ‘page.’ My second dilemma is that there are two errors in the poem. When I pointed that out to the family, the response was ‘But that’s the way our cousin wrote it, and we don’t want to make changes’ and ‘it would cost us a couple of hundred (dollars) to have it changed.’ Anyway, I now see that if we had had an obit policy, I could have told them ahead of time what we would and would not accept.”

Vicki Reneé of The Colony (Texas) High School revised her 2-year-old policy after three

accidental deaths (a drowning, a hit-and-run and a car accident) during her first two years on the job.

“Our obit policy reads: ‘Should a student or teacher die while the yearbook is still in production, a four-block space designed and produced by the yearbook ads manager will be placed in the personal ads section in honor of that person.’ We sold full personal ads pages to students wishing to purchase the space,” Reneé said.

“However, we wrote the policy to cover students who did not have friends with enough money to purchase a full-page ad. Last year, with a suicide (and two more this year) my principal requested that the policy be revised so the yearbook staff was in complete control of the information so as not to ‘celebrate’ this type of death. This policy will be revised again this year as we will give ‘space as available’ to students who have died.”

A policy, however, may not avoid all interest from administrators and community residents as Edie Leo of Reynolds High School in Troutdale, Ore. discovered.

“Our policy has been ‘when students or staff members die during the course of the school year, their names will be placed ... in the closing section of the yearbook.’ (Our principal) wants us to give one-page memorials (free of charge) to anyone who dies,” Leo said.

“His interest was triggered because we have sold commercial ad pages to interested students who wanted to immortalize the memory of their friends. In the past, these students have applied for funds to pay for such ‘ads’ and have then submitted photos and text to the staff. It has kept us out of the legal tangle of who you do what for...murder, suicide, drive by, multiple deaths, as well as accidental or illness.

“This was a decision of the staff, but now they are being told to decide where they will have this coverage and who will do it and what will go on these pages.” ■