

**by John Scharfenbeger, from Kentucky Alumnus, Fall 1999,  
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In the first minutes of the reception, a kind of hush filled the room. “That’s Jack Smith... can you imagine?” whispered one staffer. “That’s tremendous for Angelo,” said another. The chairman of the board and CEO of General Motors is not an infrequent visitor to the posh Detroit Athletic Club. But the sole purpose this evening was to congratulate Angelo Henderson, a 1985 graduate of the University of Kentucky School of Journalism, a rising star with the Wall Street Journal and the most recent winner of the Pulitzer Prize, journalism’s crowning achievement conferred each spring by Columbia University.



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John F. Smith Jr., chairman and CEO of General

Motors, chats with Angelo Henderson

Soon the high-ceilinged, wood-paneled, first floor room of the historic club would fill with other executives from auto makers and auto suppliers, still this city's hallowed industry. They mingled with Wall Street Journal staffers from the Detroit bureau, executives from the newspaper's New York office, representatives of local office-holders and Angelo's Detroit friends and Kentucky family who drove in for this special evening.

The scene was a bit incongruous by Detroit corporate standards, yet it did not seem out of the ordinary for those who have followed the career of Angelo Henderson.

This story begins in Louisville, and a childhood fondly remembered by Angelo. He is the last of five children born to his mother, Ruby, and his late father, Roger L. Henderson, both of whom worked at General Electric's mammoth Appliance Park, a refrigerator, washer and dryer manufacturing facility that was Louisville's largest employer for decades. His siblings had long since left the next when Angelo arrived.

"I had the benefit of parents who had been through the process several times," he said. "They didn't get stressed out over things that may have bothered them with my brothers and sister. It was great for me because I got to share in what was important to them."

Beyond the family, church was most important to his mom. “She like lived and breathed and did everything at church,” said Angelo, who almost always tagged along. “That (attention to religion) rubbed off on me.”

From his dad came curiosity. If the water department was working on the street, his dad was there, watching intently, looking like a supervisor. He would follow- ambulances and fire trucks.

“At one time, he had a police scanner and he would try to figure out the codes and find out what was happening where,” Angelo said. “Dad loved detective shows on TV and would try to figure out who the murderer was.”

And so this 36-year-old reporter got his love of God from mom, his writer’s curiosity from dad. It’s a combination he relishes.

His first opportunity as a writer came with the Male Traditional High School yearbook, where he also was section editor. His work caught the attention of teachers and editors at the Louisville Courier-Journal and he was awarded a scholarship to attend a summer workshop at Northwestern University. His first assignment was to cover a parade in Evanston, Ill, home of Northwestern.



Helping Angelo find a milk route in the office file is Linda Givens, Detroit friend of Angelo.

“I remember walking around this mother and her son, wondering how I was going to approach these complete strangers and ask them questions. I dreaded it. I hated to have to bother them. I felt like a pest or something.”

“But I got over it, did the interviews and wrote the story,” he said. “And it was at that workshop that I really learned what journalism was about.”

The next summer he attended the Urban Journalism Workshop at UK, sponsored by the university and The Louisville Courier-Journal. He was hooked on journalism as a career.

The workshop led to enrollment at UK in the fall. He became active immediately. He joined the Black Voice campus gospel choir, pledged with the Phi Beta Sigma black fraternity, was a student advising counselor and began working for the Kentucky Kernel, the independent student newspaper.

A teacher, Maria Braden remembers, “If I were to put a finger on one characteristic (that would forecast greatness) it would be that he loved newspaper work. He loved working for the Kernel.

Braden hints that his personality outpaced his attention to classwork. “He was such an engaging guy. He had a great approach for life . . . a real zest.”

Angelo also appreciated Braden’s teaching technique and style. She was a former Associated Press reporter whose attitude was, “Take no prisoners.” This past spring, he let Braden know when he was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

He says that UK journalism students who worked at the Kernel were “like a family,” and he maintains friendships today as a result of those experiences. Classmates included John Voskuhl and Liz Cara Petros with the Lexington Herald-Leader, Andrew Oppmann, managing editor with the Montgomery (Ala.) Advertiser and his best friend in school E. J. Mitchell, executive editor of the Salem (Ore.) Statesman Journal.

He said going away to college was a big part of the positive experience at UK. “It helps you develop as a person, define what’s important, experiment with limits - learn what things you can’t do too much of. &quot;

During a part of his time at UK, Angelo was in a work-study program in the office of Chester Grundy, who remains in charge of African-American Student Affairs. It was here that Angelo filled out an application for a summer internship at the Wall Street Journal after his junior year.

He was hired by Paul Ingrassia, then head of the Cleveland bureau who now heads up the Dow Jones Newswire. At the Journal, Angelo quickly learned that business news was more about people than numbers.

Ingrassia says one of Angelo’s first assignments was to cover a building topping-out ceremony. Select executives were picked to accompany the chairman of the board to the top of the building. Reporters were kept downstairs, but Angelo struck up a conversation with the CEO that continued to the building’s pinnacle. A bit later, speaking of Angelo, he told another exec, “He’s a nice young man. What does he do for us?”

He was a full-time reporter for a major daily newspaper before he had graduated from college. During his senior year at UK, an internship at the Herald-Leader would evolve into a full-time position the second semester when he had only a Spanish class left to complete requirements for a bachelor’s degree.

He went to work for the St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times for a year and a half before joining the business desk of the Courier-Journal for a three-year stint. In 1989 he went to work as a business writer and columnist for The Detroit News, focusing on trends and issues affecting small and minority-owned businesses in Michigan. His writing once again caught the attention of the Wall Street journal, and in 1995 he was approached and hired in the Detroit office by Bob Simison, who today describes Angelo as “a journalist with a heart.”

Ken Wells, senior special writer for Page One and Angelo’s direct editor, says editors were most impressed with Angelo’s ideas. “Angelo works to stay in touch with the people on the street as opposed to relying on his Rolodex,” said Wells. “If ideas are gods, then Angelo is Moses.” He labored for the journal for several years, assigned first to non-U. S. auto manufacturers, then to

Chrysler. It was a unique experience for corporate executives and Angelo alike.

“The corporate world wasn’t used to seeing anybody who looked like me—African American, ponytail, sometimes with an earring,” he says. “They were like, ‘Who is this guy? What is he about?’ But after all, I was with the Wall Street Journal I told them they had two choices. I could guess or they could help me.”

A few years after joining the newspaper, Angelo was promoted to deputy bureau chief, occasionally “running the ship” in Simison’s absence.

In October 1998 he was named one of four senior special writers for Page One of the Journal. Angelo is the only one working outside New York City.

In addition to his ideas, it is clear that Angelo’s personality and religion play major roles in his philosophy of reporting. He says that objectivity is essential to keep stories from becoming biased. Yet, he says, every reporter has a different perspective.

“I need to take the reader to the places I have been, through my lens but without me there,” he says. “My lens is different than others’ and religion is part of that lens. I embrace this influence and I believe this philosophy helps me find stories in places where you would least suspect. “In a shopping mall, he noticed the large numbers of young African-American males in wheelchairs – but unconventional wheelchairs - a new, high-tech variety. He reported on, “Rolling Revolution: The Wheelchair Turns Hip as New Generation of User Demands Style.”

One day in church, it occurred to him that more of the traditional church hand-held fans featured non-traditional sponsors - McDonald’s and auto dealers, as well as the more traditional funeral parlors. The newspaper headline read, “Pitching Used Cars on Church Fans Isn’t Holy Inappropriate.”



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