

Indians in Media, A Series

La Course leaves his mark on journalism history

by Cynthia Stowell

The biggest news in the next edition of the Yakima Nation Review may not be in the headlines. That issue will mark the end of the paper's second year under the editorship of Richard La Course.

It will also mark the end of LaCourse's editorship.

Leaving deadlines, tape recorders and telephones behind, the 40-year old pro is withdrawing to a writer's garret in Seattle to complete work on a book. But his best effort will go into healing an ulcer - the badge of courage he earned in the demanding world of journalism.

LaCourse's parting shot: "There is an irreducible conflict between the concept of Indian time and news deadlines. I am one of the victims."

Tuned to the frenzy of an urban daily, La Course has brought to Indian journalism a staccato touch, a polished performance that many tribal newspapermen applaud but few have been able to match.

In the decade it took for his body to rebel, La Course's energy molded a tribal paper into an authoritative source of regional and national political news. He gave birth to another tribal paper. And he headed up the Indian's equivalent of AP and UPI - the American Indian Press Association.

Those are the bare bones of his contributions. The flesh is more impressive.

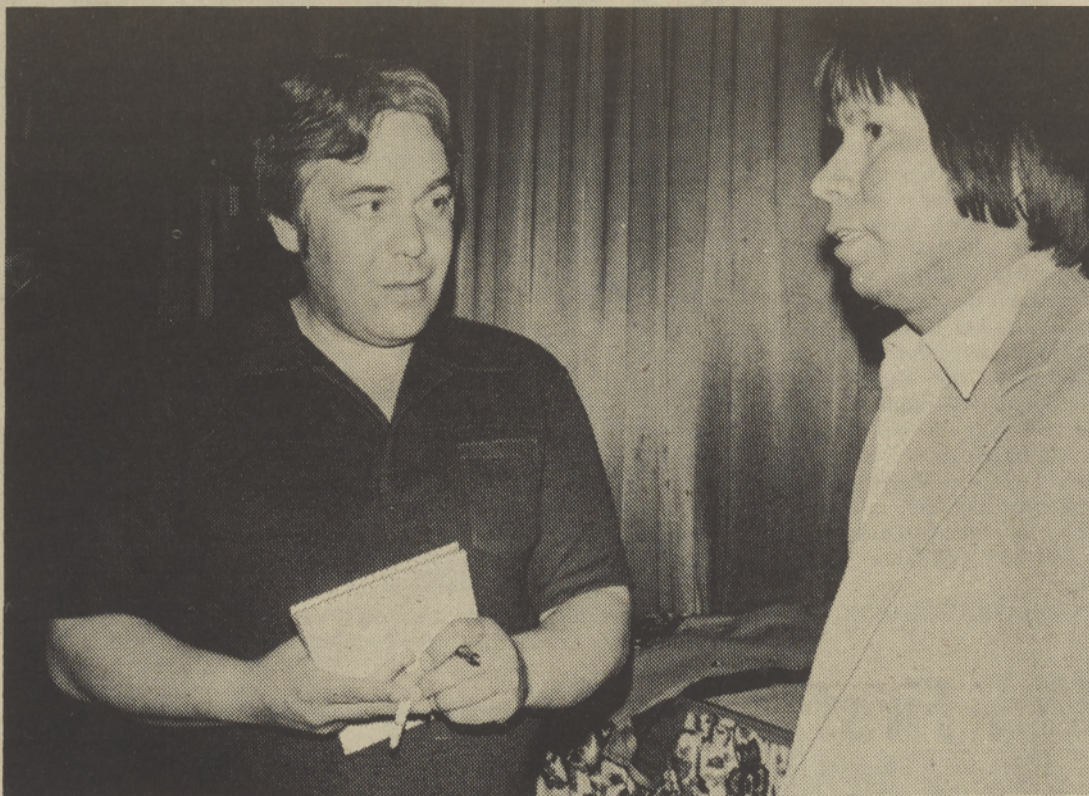
For Indian journalists in the northwest La Course is their link to Washington, D.C. He is the guy with all the facts, the guy with the perspective. He knows those faceless people at the Capitol who pass laws affecting Indians.

Back in the state of Washington his desk might as well be in Olympia, considering his access to state politics and people. If there is a friend or foe, he wants to meet him head-on - to know every line in his face.

"I'll miss the particularity of news writing," said La Course of his withdrawal from the news world. "I don't like having just notions."

"He knew as a professional and also as a Yakima Indian to put a paper together as a factual sheet and not a lot of surmising," said Yakima councilman Russell Jim, whose economic development committee oversees but never censors the Review. "He has an uncanny knack of finding information from sources that we never question."

There is nothing private or privileged about his information. It is free to other Indian jour-



SCOOP - Yakima Nation Review editor Richard LaCourse not only got a story from Michael Smith, the director of the 1978 American Indian Film Festival. He also received this year's Humanitarian Award for his commitment to the furthering of Indian communications. LaCourse is (temporarily?) leaving the news scene for health reasons.

nalists for the asking. Instrumental in the formation of the Northwest Indian News Association, La Course has paid more than lip service to the concept of news sharing and the commonality of Indian issues and affairs.

To his high standards of professionalism the editor has added a flair for drama that has given Indian journalism immediacy - a life beyond Department of Interior news releases and Tribal Council minutes.

When La course took on the news directorship at AIPA in 1971 he was not content to maintain the "distance" between D.C. ("the crossroads of Indian America") and the 400-plus Indian tribes across the nation. He sought instead a "total, accurate upcloseness" that would afford Indians the "dignity" they deserve. That meant a traveling show for the ten staffers, but upcloseness costs. AIPA died in 1975.

La Course's aggressive approach to the news was fostered during his three years with the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, where he was transformed from "a vague writer of no definition into somebody with a focus." At the P-I the greenhorn journalist learned the "knack and the method" of newspaper work. And as "probably the first Indian to work for William Randolph Hearst," he awakened the majority media to minority issues.

Hired straight out of the master's program in English literature at the University of Washington, La Course was relieved to be back in the "nuts and bolts world outside of academia."

He grew up a "B.I.A. Brat" on numerous reservations in the west and had come to know many cultures intimately. The young aspiring writer attached himself to school newspapers early on, in an attempt to feed his "writing bug."

The hot fishing and treaty rights issues of the late sixties led La Course from the P-I frying pan into the AIPA fire. It also took him far from home.

The illness of his mother brought La Course back to the northwest where he founded the Confederated Umatilla Journal in northeast Oregon. The death of his mother completed a circle for him and he "went home" to the Yakima Reservation, which had never been his physical home while growing up.

There he took on the Yakima Nation Review and with the help of a graphic designer "overhauled" the tribal publication and gave it a "permanent skeleton" for display of the news. The Yakima Nation Review today is a slick, departmentalized bi-weekly with some local coverage and a lion's share of regional and national news, most of it original and fresh.

La Course leaves a reporting staff of four to perpetuate the paper but he also leaves dozens of Indian journalists to make the next move.

His advice to his colleagues is simple: be aware and knowledgeable of the history that lies behind all Indian events, understand the "twin bodies of law - American and Indian" that structure Indian affairs, and fight off "self-censorship" - the fear of "telling too much truth."

Indian journalists should devote themselves to establishing credibility in the eyes of the majority media, says La Course. This they can do by becoming an "equivalent peer group of reliable, professional people."

In his semi-retirement La Course will miss having a "sense of purpose . . . and being in touch with the flow of things."

He will no doubt be in his own current, finishing his history of Indian journalism entitled "a Spacious Channel" (from a quote by the first Indian newspaper editor Elias Boudinot). It is questionable whether the proud but humble modern-day editor will acknowledge the enormity of his own contributions.

Perhaps when the body heals, La Course will be back creating material for a sequel.

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