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John Kominicki: Gone But Unforgettable

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John Kominicki in France, where he had a summer home.

John Kominicki burst on the Long Island scene 20 years ago from Texas via Oklahoma. Anointed publisher of *Long Island Business News* by its new corporate owner, Kominicki – he went by one name – introduced himself that night by singing a song he’d just written to guitar accompaniment. No formal speech. One era snapped shut, another began.

In the weeks and months that followed, he engineered a series of changes, starting by walling off editorial from advertising. He hired new writers, introduced new features, supervised a graphic makeover.

As a writer, his columns were humorous, irreverent and insightful. As an editor, he prodded his staff to get out in the field and meet sources. Some writers disliked what they called his “sharp pencil.” Others grew under his wing. I remember reviewing his edit of one long-ago article and seeing his sole comment in caps: “HOW MUCH IS HE GETTING PAID?” The answer caused me to reframe the article. The new piece, far better, was front-paged.

I moved on after two years. Kominicki stayed until 2013, transforming the publication while raising the bar for Long Island business journalism. He trained a generation of journalists to use their brains rather than accept pat answers, to demand more of themselves rather than less of their editors. He became a confidant of business and political leaders even as he shone a bright light on their goings-on. He was a masterful showman and superb live interviewer. Media types and power brokers who agree on nothing else agree Kominicki was our Edward R. Murrow.

His last gig was as executive editor of this publication. Tragically, his life was cut short by cancer Dec. 5. He is survived by his wife Marie and daughter Anja of Stony Brook, mother Alma Kominicki, sisters Stefanie Price, Jennifer Danly and Michelle McLaughlin and brother Russell Johnson. He leaves a remarkable legacy. Hard to believe I won't pick up the phone any more to: "Kominicki here."

– *Warren Strugatch*

My favorite memories of John were discussing politics over lunch at the Sweet Hollow Diner or at one of Paul Tonna's dinner group meetings. He was a political junkie on all levels but truly kept his finger on the pulse locally. He loved discussing how we could address our challenges and capitalize on our opportunities. He was the masterful panel moderator who knew how to guide a discussion and get speakers to open up. John was a warm-hearted human being who touched so many of us. Long Island has truly lost a treasure.

– *John Cameron, Chairman, Long Island Regional Planning Council*

John Kominicki hired me as a writing coach, but was such a brilliant nuts-and-bolts editor that I ended up turning to him for help. A few years ago I was co-editing a multi-story project and my own piece kept growing. It reached about 1700 words. I didn't know if it could be salvaged. Desperate, I called John on Long Island. He was swamped with his own work but he said, 'Sure, send it over.' I did. Two hours later the piece comes back at 800 words. I couldn't see a single cut he made, not one deleted word. He made me sound brilliant, which shows how brilliant he was.

– *Jim Stasiowski, Writing coach*

John Kominicki was an early supporter of Smart Growth and downtown revitalization efforts. He was a mentor, guide, colleague and especially a friend to many of us. I have fond memories of sharing a round of bourbon. We would find a place to smoke and hash out a strategy on the issue of the day. He was deft at identifying who makes decisions, how to cut through the b.s.

and – especially – how to get to the heart of an issue. He had a love of people and good ideas. His sense of humor made any meeting, event or panel that he was MC'ing a fun and unique experience. I hadn't seen anyone like him before and likely never will again.

– *Eric Alexander, Director, Vision Long Island*

John and I were like Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland in the movies: 'Hey kids, let's put on a show!' John had these unique, wacky ideas. My co-worker Joann Buynoch said, "It's like he starts charging up the mountain, and says 'Come on, let's go!' He expects us all to go with him." We worked long days filled with making things up and making them work. John was the essential master of ceremonies, the voice you listened to whether you agreed or not. A date on his over-extended calendar was a prize. There was no prize greater than a late night cocktail and conversation. For 15 years, the biggest event I ran every day was John Kominicki.

– *Marlene McDonnell, Former event manager, Long Island Business News*

Here's what you never wanted to do with John Kominicki: deliberately mislead him. Or fail to show up as a promised guest at an event where he was master of ceremonies. John was one of the few people on the planet who could command to silence a room filled with people intent on closing deals. One year, then U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton was delayed for her scheduled appearance at an Association for a Better Long Island gala. John was master of ceremonies. Waiting for her arrival, he began a series of deliciously wicked, wonderfully barbed asides from the podium. She didn't show; he never relented. It was a public reminder that if you crossed John's sense of decorum there'd be a price to pay. No swordsman ever had a rapier as effective as John at the podium.

– *Gary Lewi, Rubenstein*

I was a young editor at Long Island Business News and John gave me a lot of space. But when I asked for help — whether it was making good headlines and stories great, coming up with ideas, or management advice — what he offered was nothing short of genius. His high expectations and guidance made me a better editor and person. We kept in touch through the years and I wrote for him occasionally. My greatest achievement would now be to impart what he taught me to the next generations of journalists.

– *Carl Corry, Journalism faculty, Suffolk County Community College, former LIBN editor, Press Club of Long Island board member*

John was one of a kind, a brilliant journalist with a dry sense of humor. He was a renaissance man who appreciated music, the arts and of course the French countryside. He introduced me at several events: "And he plays a

mean guitar.” Actually I am not a great guitarist but let him continue to believe I am. So now the secret is out. He will be missed tremendously.

– *Ernie Canadeo, Founder and CEO, EGC Group, Long Island Association director*

John was a generous man when it came to sharing his personality. He enjoyed singing at the Karaoke parties that Long Island Mid-Suffolk Business Action (LIMBA) sponsored and was a dinner guest at the Fazio house that you could count on to contribute to the conversation. We lost an interesting, funny and lovable friend.

– *Ernie Fazio, Chairman, LIMBA*

As LIBN’s publisher, John was never short on ideas. Not all were instant successes. Some were flops, like the cover featuring a photo of a tree festooned with black trash bags. Others only seemed like flops, like the 50 Around 50 Awards, until they caught on. John didn’t bully us into agreement. Rather he won us over through unflappable confidence and unbridled enthusiasm. He made us all want to follow him. By daring us to accompany him out on that limb, he gave us the courage to champion our own crazy ideas.

– *Andrea Jones, On Marketing Manager, Rivkin Radler, former editor, LIBN*

John Kominicki had an enormous impact on Long Island business. He made business events fun. He made the mundane cool. He had so much to offer that you could not help but be drawn to him. While he was a brilliant writer, John was much more than a journalist. His interests were varied and he always had a surprise in store, whether he planned it that way or not. I will miss all that John brought to our lives: his wit and creativity, his ability to tell a story; the collaborations, cocktails and conversations. He leaves a tremendous void. I am grateful to have known him. Until we meet again, John, peace.

– *Laurie Bloom, Marketing director, Rivkin Radler, LLP*

The bar at the old Holiday Inn in Ronkonkoma was John’s second office, the one where he could smoke. This office came with the added bonus of karaoke night. House of the Rising Sun was a favorite. When someone truly needed Kominicki’s ear, they’d turn up at the bar. Here new features were created for the paper and business deals solidified. Ideas were drafted on napkins; John kept pen in one hand, Courvoisier in the other. An endless assortment of

notables from business and government would stream in seeking his help. It was exhausting but John thrived on it. He loved an audience. They loved him back, even when he insisted on telling his Bruno Hauptmann joke, which no one but him ever understood. He so loved history, humor and humanity.

– *Jaci Clement, Executive director, Fair Media Council, former LIBN editor and reporter*

John Kominicki picked up on how Long Island works – and doesn't work – immediately. He detected b.s. better than anyone. At the first LIMBA meeting he hosted back in 1998, he introduced a speaker who regaled the audience with a long-winded tale of how then-Islip Town Supervisor Pete McGowan managed to coax then-CEO of Southwest Airlines Herb Kelleher into bringing Southwest to MacArthur. The speaker celebrated McGowan's leadership skills, attributing his success to bonding over smoking, beer-drinking beer and tall-tale telling. As the speaker returned to his seat, John approached the podium. He paused dramatically. "Up until now," he finally said, "I always figured Southwest came to Islip because it has an airport." I'm grateful as hell he was in my life, however briefly.

– *Michael Watt, Community Manager, LaunchPad Westbury, President, Long Island Inc.*

John was a special voice for and in the Long Island region. He had a challenge to meet: succeeding Paul Townsend, a towering figure over 50 years in Nassau and Suffolk. John knew that but being John, he did it his way and succeeded wonderfully. John was smart, friendly and curious; open to new ways while acknowledging the traditions of Long Island Business News; had a magnificent sense of humor; and was savvy about spotting trends and leveraging. John was a bridge between the old and the new. He will be missed. And remembered. And paid proper homage.

– *Hank Boerner, Chairman and CEO, Governance & Accountability Institute, former LIBN reporter (as Long Island Commercial Review)*

I remember John's unforgettable performance at an HIA-LI holiday luncheon as Honey Bun in the great song and dance number from South Pacific. He brought down the house with his long blond wig and strategically-positioned coconuts, twirling his not-inconsiderable hips with gusto. Truly they broke the mold.

– *Ann-Marie Scheidt, Director of Economic Development at Stony Brook University*

I wish to express my condolences on the passing of John Kominicki. I can't think of anything witty enough that would be worthy enough to commemorate the passing of such a bright light. John used his intelligence, his journalistic ability and his cutting wit to illuminate the dark spots of Long Island while brightening the highlights.

– *U.S. Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-Glen Cove), former Nassau County executive*

As a writer and editor, the best place to sharpen my pencil was under Kominicki's wing. When he hired me for the first time in 2006, I couldn't stand this merciless meddler, this perfectionist with a Texas-sized ego. I ultimately quit. In 2015 he hired me again, this time to write and edit Innovate Long Island. The old man had softened, but also my eyes had opened. This boss drove me relentlessly toward improvement. The ego was intact, but earned through decades of amazing work. In John Kominicki I had found a professional patriarch who bequeathed not only his advocacy-journalism vision but his singular determination, and the knowledge that personal and professional improvement always come from within.

– *Gregory Zeller, Editor, Innovate Long Island, former LIBN editor*

John Kominicki gave me my first break in journalism when he hired me at the Oklahoma City Journal-Record in 1996. I was amazed at how his writing seemed to flow effortlessly, with precision and, when appropriate, humor. I learned from John how to breathe life into business stories. I credit him with helping me start my path in the profession I love.

– *Leigh Jones, Deputy editor in chief, Law.com / former LIBN editor*

All memories with John were great. I knew him for many years and we met many times in different circumstances. No matter what the circumstances, the way he greeted you made you feel you were the most important person he would speak to that day. He was not just a fascinating speaker but a fascinating listener. He will be deeply missed on Long Island and in the business community.

– *John King, Chief Customer Officer, J. Kings*

John was a pillar of journalism on Long Island. When we created the Long Island Journalism Hall of Fame a few years ago, he was an inaugural inductee. If you look at that list of inductees it's a bunch of incredible people who have left their mark on the industry. He was so respected for all he achieved and will forever be a Hall of Famer and recognized by the Press Club of Long Island.

– *Chris R. Vaccaro, Topps Company, Director of Live Operations, President of the Press Club of Long Island*

John Kominicki was creative, dynamic and provocative, one of the most engaging people I've met. Long Island and the world needs more people like him. I learned as much from him as anyone I've worked for or with. I miss the days of perfecting headlines on a wooden bench near the LIBN front door in 40 degree weather. He would smoke. I would shiver. It was all brilliant.

– *David Reich-Hale, Newsday business reporter, former LIBN editor*

John moderated a panel discussion in 2012 on technology commercialization. About 15 minutes before the start he motioned me over. "Jimmy, I have an emergency. I have to leave. Please sub for me." I was totally unprepared and said I feared making a fool of myself. He replied: "Well, it won't be the first time for you. Listen to me. You'll do fine. Just drink a martini, smoke a cigarette and insult a couple of people."

He flashed the famous Kominicki grin: "Everyone will think you're me."

I subbed for John that night. He was half right. I did fine. But nobody thought I was him. Nobody else could be.

– *Jim Morgo, Consultant, former Suffolk County Chief Deputy County Executive*