

# D'Anna: A great reporter hangs up his notebook after 45 years

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*Longtime Republic reporter Gary Nelson is retiring after 45 years in the news business.*



*(Photo: Republic file photo)*

Friday was Gary Nelson's last day at the paper.

He's retiring after 45 years in the business and didn't have to be carried from the paper feet first, which is a cause for celebration.

I had the privilege of being Gary's editor for four years.

In truth, he made my job really easy because rarely, if ever, did Gary make a spelling error or a grammatical mistake.

In fact, his copy was so clean that I sometimes found myself changing his ledes (what newspapers call the first sentence of the story) just to prove I'd done some actual editing.

That amounted to sacrilege because Gary took great pride in crafting the perfect lede.



**Gary Nelson** *(Photo: Tom Tingle/The Republic)*

Some examples:

"It was hard to know what was louder — the Red Mountain High School jazz combo or the sound of Mesa's buttons popping with pride."

That was from a story on Mesa getting a \$3 million grant from the Gates Foundation.

Or how about this gem from a story about the lack of amenities in some city parks:

"The person who posted the rules at Golden Hills Park could easily have saved a little ink.

"The parts about not swimming or using boats? No problem — there's no water.

"The part about not burning anything but charcoal? Superfluous — there's no place to have a picnic."

Gary was blessed with a super writing talent and the ability to sit through hours of bureaucratic gobbledeygook and come up with a story that readers can actually relate to.

No journalist took his role as a guardian of democracy as seriously.

I often handed Gary some of the toughest assignments in our newsroom. One was an exhaustive profile of Russell Pearce, still the best story I've read about one of the most divisive — and complicated — political figures Mesa has ever produced.

Gary also covered the historic recall election that unseated Pearce, earning him the enmity of Pearce supporters, but to his credit, they were never able to point out a single factual error.

**LAST WEEK:** [Mesa parks more wreck than rec? \(/story/news/local/mesa/2014/06/06/danna-mesa-column-mesa-parks-wreck-rec/10078887/\)](http://story/news/local/mesa/2014/06/06/danna-mesa-column-mesa-parks-wreck-rec/10078887/)

Not long after Mayor Scott Smith was first elected, Gary recognized his political talent and ambition and did the first in-depth profile of him.

At the time we had a hard time convincing some editors that Smith was the real deal, so we turned it into a three-part series and ran it in the *Mesa Republic*.

That story is now required reading for the folks covering Smith's latest campaign. For governor.

Beyond all the political and government stories, Gary's legacy is truly his humanity.

In 2011, he did a story about a 96-year-old Jewish woman who swam in the 1936 Olympics. And last November, he did a story on a 93-year-old woman who survived Kristallnacht, Crystal Night or the Night of Broken Glass, in 1938 Germany.

Both stories served as poignant reminders of why it's important for us to remember history and to stand up for what's right.

I checked the newspaper morgue (what normal people call the library) and found that Gary had nearly 3,600 bylines in his 10 years at *The Republic*.

When you figure that a person works about 250 days a year (even newspaper people get weekends off) that's about 1½ stories a day.

Thirty-six hundred stories, and you could probably count all of his typos without taking your shoes off.

Heck, I'm lucky if I can get through a single column without a typo.

But let me just say that, Gary, I'm going to miss you.

**End of watch:** Sad to hear that Sgt. Paul Springall died last week. I knew him from my days covering the cop beat in Mesa and later as the head of security at Mesa Community College.

He wasn't flashy or a macho tough guy, though he did serve as a Marine rifleman in Vietnam.

No, he was just a good cop who did his best to keep his community safe.

Rest in peace, Sergeant.

*John D'Anna's column appears every Friday online and in print on Saturdays. To submit an item, if you find a typo in this column, e-mail him at [john.d'anna@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:john.d'anna@arizonarepublic.com). Follow John on Twitter @azgreenday.*

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