

Richard Baker and Me

After all of us had arrived at the Journalism School in the Fall of 1962, we had an orientation lunch where we each introduced ourselves. When it was over, Professor Richard Baker came over to me and said in a low, ominous voice: "Saltzman?" I had no idea who Professor Baker was, but I acknowledged I was Saltzman. He said, "I just wanted to see what the student who got the lowest score on the grammar test of anyone ever admitted to the School of Journalism looked like," and then walked away.

A few weeks later, I went to my mailbox -- we all had mailboxes in the front of the large newsroom that is now the Lecture Hall -- opened it and saw an "A" on one of my first news stories. I felt someone hovering behind me so I turned around and stared into the face of Professor Baker. He looked at the grade and said, "Good work, Saltzman, especially for someone who got the lowest score on the grammar test of anyone ever admitted to the School of Journalism," and then walked away.

About a month later, I got a rare "A" on a paper from the infamous John Hohenberg. I was walking down the hall when I heard what was now a familiar voice shout out, "Saltzman. Congratulations on getting an A from Hohenberg," Baker said. "It's even more surprising to me since you got the lowest score on the grammar test of anyone ever admitted to the School of Journalism."

I finally asked Professor Penn Kimball, who had become my mentor, why Baker always mentioned that damn low score on the grammar test. Kimball gave me that familiar mischievous smile and told me that Baker had voted against me because of the score and had argued strenuously that we couldn't admit anyone who was that poor in grammar. "Now you're proving him wrong and me right," he said.

Graduation day came and I was lucky enough to finish fourth in the class, which meant I won the Robert Sherwood Traveling Fellowship and was named an alternate to the Pulitzer Fellowship. Professor Baker came up to me and shook my hand. "Congratulations. You did very well here and we're all proud of you. It's an amazing achievement for anyone who got the lowest score on the grammar test of anyone ever admitted to the School of Journalism."

It would be 13 years before I would see Professor Baker again. I was back at Columbia University because I had won the du-Pont award for "Why Me?" acknowledged to be the first TV documentary on breast cancer, a program that was credited with saving thousands of lives and changing the way breast cancer was being treated in America. At the reception, I saw Professor Baker making his way towards me. He came up to me and uncharacteristically gave me a hug. He looked at me and said, "Your documentary is quite an achievement. I've watched it several times and it's the kind of journalism we hope our graduates will someday do when they leave Columbia." I waited and waited and waited for him to finish his statement, but when it became apparent he was not

going to add that familiar refrain, I smiled and told him, "Not bad for someone who got the lowest score on the grammar test of anyone ever admitted to the School of Journalism."

He smiled and I noticed that there were tears in his eyes. I said it seems to me my documentary affected you more than I thought, and he told me that someone close to him had seen the program, and because of the program, had scheduled a mammography and that they discovered a small lump in her breast before she could even have felt it. He said the doctor told her that coming to see him so early probably saved her life. I thanked him for sharing the story with me.

We hugged again, he shook my hand harder than ever, gave me a smile, turned and disappeared in the crowd.

Six years later, I heard that Professor Baker had died, and this Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism alumnus, who got the lowest score on the grammar test of anyone ever admitted to the School of Journalism, broke down and cried.