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Feuerherd, NCR editor in chief and publisher, dies

by Arthur Jones



NCR publisher and editor in chief Joe Feuerherd in October 2009 (NCR photo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Joseph Feuerherd, NCR editor in chief and publisher, died this morning after an 18-month battle with cancer. He was 48. Funeral arrangements are pending.

Feuerherd died at 8:41 a.m. Eastern time at the Montgomery Hospice's Casey House in Rockville., Md. His family was at his side.

Following is an appreciation of Feuerherd written by Arthur Jones, who as Washington correspondent hired Feuerherd as an editorial intern in 1984. Their professional and personal lives were closely entwined since.

The kid climbing over the fence to get into the Belmont Park racetrack in Long Island, N.Y., was betting first on not getting caught, next on finding some adult who'd place his bet for him, finally, that he'd win. And every now and again, Joseph Anthony Feuerherd, age 13, did bring home the proceeds from his exacta. From then on, whenever he had a bit of money in his pocket and couldn't get into the park, there was always the local off-track betting office.



A few teenage years later, in the summers away from studying history at The Catholic University of America in Washington, Feuerherd worked as a counselor at a Pennsylvania summer camp for handicapped children. As did his brother David. As did Rebecca Bartron from small-town Montrose, Pa. Joe and Becky were soon in love, but Feuerherd was still only a 19-year-old student. So he did what he'd done before, which was play the horses. His trifecta hit, gave him a several-hundred-dollar payout. He then brought Bartron to New York for dinner at the Four Seasons, a proposal and an engagement ring.

It was the teenage wedding that defied the odds, a romance that endured. Feuerherd had given up the horses and won what he wanted, but he and Becky pulled off a final trifecta: Zachary in 1986; Bridget in 1988, today a recent marketing graduate with her CPA mother's flair for numbers; and Benjamin in 1990, now a junior in history at St. Francis University, Brooklyn, N.Y. It was a fine romance that would see Becky clamber across their king-sized bed without kneeling on any of the nasal oxygen tubes that were keeping Joe breathing, to kiss him on the forehead, and be kissed on the forehead, before she went back downstairs to head for the grocery, the pharmacy for more drugs, or just to the kitchen. It endured as the family, of an evening, carried the dinner upstairs and had their nightly family meal around the bed. Joe and Becky knew the odds with cancer in the Feuerherd family were uncertain.

The Feuerherds of Garden City, Long Island, were numerous, and Joe was "the near-caboose of a large rambunctious family," said brother Peter. Victor and Lillian (Dolan) Feuerherd were parents to Victor ("Rick" to the family), born 1952; Elizabeth, 1954; Peter, 1957; David, 1958; Stephen, 1961; Joe, 1962; Mary, 1966, who died as an infant; and Matthew, 1967. "Joe was in charge of the caboose, with Matt, who is deaf, and five years younger, tagging along." Stephen died at age 3 of leukemia. Among the storms Joe and Becky weathered was the fear that son Zach's leukemia mirrored Stephen's. It didn't: Zach is a cancer survivor. He is also campaign manager for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

The families on both sides were New Yorkers, but the newspapering genes came from the Dolans. Grandfather Peter Dolan was an editor at the old New York Sun. His son, Peter, also became a newspaperman -- as did Joe's brothers, Rick and Peter.



Joe's dad, Vic, served in World War II, and became an accountant

and corporate executive, latterly with SCM, the typewriter company. In a famous Feuerherd family incident involving an infamous situation, Vic and Lil Feuerherd moved lock, stock and family to South Dakota, where Vic had been named chief financial officer of a local corporation. When the company expected Vic to cook the books, he promptly quit and, jobless, moved the family back East, initially into Grandma Lillian Dolan's Brooklyn brownstone. There were some tough times in Brooklyn and then in Garden City until the family got back on its feet.

At the family table, journalist-to-be Joe was a listener. He took everything in: all the discussions and arguments among his older brothers and sister and parents. He adored his father, and adopted his reading habits and preoccupation with politics -- the precociously political 13-year-old knew the blow-by-blow of Mo Udall's 1976 presidential campaign. A few years after that, teenager Feuerherd decided he was old enough to drive (he wasn't) and took the family car for a night out with the boys at the beach. He was

discovered only because a neighbor with a gun saw a "burglar" (Joe) entering the Garden City house through a window and called the police.

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After two years at Archbishop Molloy High School in Queens, the young Feuerherd transferred to Garden City High School, played basketball, struggled with math and science, and excelled in the humanities. The parents worried about him when he headed to the wilds of Washington, D.C., as a freshman in history at Catholic University, also attended by brother David. In political Washington, Joe was in his element; what he needed was entrée. In 1984, "wet-behind-the-ears" (his own words) college junior Feuerherd became a *National Catholic Reporter* Washington intern.

"It was a joy," he wrote. "I was raised in a journalistic tradition. ? Still, it came as a revelation that a future could be made interviewing cardinals and members of Congress, peace activists and conservative supporters of the contras, mandatory celibacy opponents and Latin Mass advocates." In January 1985 he was bumped up to "political affairs reporter" at "the princely sum of \$100 a week, and spent more time writing and reporting for *NCR* than on my history studies." Most of his professors were reading his *NCR* copy, "resulting in some generous grading."

One of Feuerherd's Long Island high school friends was John Moyers, son of Bill Moyers, previously Lyndon B. Johnson's press secretary. (Feuerherd loved engaging Moyers senior in political discussions.) At the time Feuerherd was preparing to graduate from Catholic University, John Moyers was interning in the Capitol Hill office of Long Island Congressman Tom Downey (at that point the youngest member of Congress, elected before he was old enough to be seated, with his legalizing birthday coming just before he was sworn in).

John Olinger was also on Downey's staff and recalls young Moyers saying he had a Long Island friend interested in working on the Hill. Downey's press secretary had recently left; Feuerherd became the new press secretary. Said Olinger, "We had press guys who always wanted to get Tom national press. Tom could get his own national press, the job really was getting the weekly column written for the weeklies, handling the local stuff, the local firemen and Great South Bay and oysters -- Joe understood that mentality. He also understood the role of the weekly, and every village had one, all owned by a few people who were not, primarily, our friends."

In addition to press secretary work, as Olinger became chief of staff, Feuerherd took over Olinger's work on the House Budget Committee -- Downey was a key member. As Downey became more interested in welfare reform, Feuerherd hit his stride and consolidated what became his style when faced with any topic: He read deeply, did the research, and in this case Joseph Califano Jr.'s *America's Health Care Revolution: Who Lives? Who Dies? Who Pays?* became his bible. "But Joe was a newspaper guy," said Olinger, "interested in the way things got covered, the way stories were pitched."

Typically, Feuerherd developed a keen understanding of House of Representatives operations, knew the players and cared about the institution. He became the political junkie he would remain or, as Olinger said, the kid from Long Island became a Washingtonian. Feuerherd took Downey's office into a difficult field, housing, and became a minor authority on housing and its interplay with poverty, unemployment and transportation. He applied the Long Island housing issues to the larger national canvas and would twice make career moves into the housing field. "Larger policy questions became a major piece of his critical apparatus," said Olinger, "but once he and Becky started their family that became for him the focal point of everything."

By 1988, after a stint as a weekly economics report editor, Feuerherd was back at *NCR*, as Washington bureau chief. Steve Askin had been bureau chief when Feuerherd was an intern. Askin described most journalists as "pretty acerbic" and most interns as generally "brash, full of themselves and really ignorant. Joe was calm and sat down at the desk and started work as if that was what he was there to do." Later, when Feuerherd was bureau chief and Askin had left journalism for activism with the Service Employees International Union, Feuerherd "did the best, most precise reporting on what I was spending my life on -- abuses of workers in Catholic hospitals," Askin said. Later, with a colleague, Askin tried to persuade Feuerherd to work with the union, "but we realized we could not get him from the position of observer to activist. He was suited from day one to being the journalistic observer, the guy passionate about what he was writing. That was his trade."

In 1991, housing issues still beckoning, Feuerherd left *NCR* for the Montgomery County, Md., Housing Opportunities Commission, where in 1997 an element of Feuerherd family history repeated itself. The commission's executive director, Bernie Tetreault, described how, after 24 years, when "I was unceremoniously fired from HOC, Joe was the community relations officer, a senior staff position that reported directly to me. When the board asked him to spread falsehoods about me and my departure he refused, and resigned. For that the staff nicknamed him 'Saint Joe.' "

Like his dad before him, Feuerherd now needed a job to support his wife and family. He became a newsletter editor -- until he returned as *NCR* Washington bureau chief for another stint (2002-2007). He'd never stopped writing for the paper; he'd provided political analysis, editorial drafts, and book reviews.

Becky, a math and special education teacher, had returned to teaching, and was also now a certified public accountant. For Feuerherd once more it was housing issues that called: the Washington-based Council of Large Public Housing Authorities. Tetreault provided an insight: "As community relations officer, Joe had had the unenviable job of meeting with neighbors and neighborhood groups that were unhappy that we were socially and racially integrating their neighborhoods. We placed public housing residents in scattered site individual units," Tetreault said, and Feuerherd, with his calm and kind demeanor, "did an admirable job in helping the homeowners accept these very acceptable residents." Feuerherd was once more drafting local knowledge on a larger canvas.

Meanwhile, he'd decided on a longer-term goal: He would become a historian. He enrolled in American University's graduate history program to work with Professor Allan Lichtman, a historian and authority on quantitative methods. (Using quantitative methods, Lichtman early, confidently and publicly predicted Barack Obama's presidential victory -- and now confidently predicts his re-election.) Historian Feuerherd knew he had found an enticing niche. Lichtman said Feuerherd was "not your typical student -- he had a life of accomplishment behind him. I was tremendously impressed at how committed he was at this stage in his life to pursuing a career in academia as a historian. He had a great feel for history, and it was not easy to blend his practical political experience with historical issues. His essays were first-class. I thought his political instincts were right on the money."



The lure of *NCR*, however, remained. In late 2008 Feuerherd

became *NCR* publisher and editor in chief. His output and range since that time speaks for itself. As publisher he crisscrossed the country; as editor he firmly and generously crossed swords with many public figures on contentious issues, and heartily applauded others. He had strong opinions, but a moderate approach; he was a centrist who heard people out.

That was the professional Feuerherd, but his attributes there were simply magnified on a personal level with colleagues and friends: a kind, unflappable, caring person; a *decent* man, in every definition of the term, one with a quietly wicked sense of humor.

Joe and Becky did make a final trip together a couple of months ago, nasal oxygen tubes and all, to see son Ben installed at St. Francis in the National History Honor Society.

It is not the norm, in an obituary, to give the decedent the penultimate lines, but what the heck, this is the *NCR* family.

Feuerherd, in a much-read article on his cancer (Cancer's unknown country *NCR*, Oct. 21, 2010,), thanked "our children ? [who] have spent nights in hospital rooms, sterilized and cleaned the home front, and been there whenever we've needed them. Not sure where all that came from, but we're delighted it's there. ?

"My wife, Becky ? has, at least temporarily, given up a good career, and forsaken more than I can describe to fight with bill collectors, oversee medication management, negotiate with doctors, and tend to my wants and needs. All out of unconditional love. Thank you, Becky."

For Joe the race is over. The romance lingers on.

-30-

(For those unfamiliar with print journalism lore, reporters wrote -30- at the conclusion of their newspaper copy. It is used still, at the National Press Club, to mark a journalist's death.)

[Arthur Jones is a past publisher and editor of *NCR*.]

Editor's Note: For more photos of Feuerherd, take a look at the slideshow below. We'll be adding more from our archives over the afternoon.

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