



COURTESY OF THE O'BRIEN FAMILY

'Bud' O'Brien, former newsman

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KNOWN AS MENTOR,
TOUGH JOURNALIST

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By Donna Jones

Santa Cruz Sentinel

James Edward "Bud" O'Brien, a former editor of the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian and mentor to numerous young reporters, died Wednesday at Dominican Hospital in Santa Cruz. He was 80.

Mr. O'Brien worked at the Register-Pajaronian for more than three decades before retiring in 1995. As a reporter in the 1970s and 1980s, he covered Santa Cruz County government at a time when bitter debates over growth dominated the headlines. He was city editor during a tumultuous cannery strike in Watsonville in the mid-1980s and was named the newspaper's managing editor in 1989, as court-ordered district elections began to change the face of the city's politics.

He was known as a tough, honest journalist, respected for his intellect and admired for his affable nature. He dug for stories but never forgot he was writing about real people.

"Bud was a guy who just really loved the news business and had as strong a feel for all the aspects of it as anybody I've ever known," said former Register-Pajaronian editor Mike Wallace.

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Before California

Mr. O'Brien started his newspaper career at the Alamosa Valley Courier in Colorado, chronicling the local high school football team's ascent to the state championship while earning a degree on the GI Bill.

After college, he worked at the Redding Record-Searchlight as a reporter and news desk editor. In 1962, he transferred to the Register-Pajaronian.

Nicki Pecchenino encountered Mr. O'Brien through her duties as chief of staff to county Supervisor Robley Levy. She recalled being grilled as he reported stories, yet said he was never mean.

"He was one tough reporter. He didn't give an inch," she said. "But he could always make you laugh. We never walked away enemies."

Marilyn Liddicoat, a conservative who served on the board of supervisors during Mr. O'Brien's tenure on the county beat, said she often disagreed with him. Mr. O'Brien, she said, was a liberal. "Some of my decisions he disagreed with, but we could talk it out. Not that I could change his mind, but we could agree to disagree."

'Brilliant'

Ken McLaughlin, a reporter and editor at the San Jose Mercury News, went to work for the Register-Pajaronian as his first job out of college in 1975. Mr. O'Brien mentored many young reporters, and he was the person people would go to when they made a mistake or needed advice, McLaughlin said.

"Bud was probably one of the nicest, most brilliant people I've ever met," McLaughlin said.

Elizabeth Schilling, co-director of the Live Oak Family Resource Center, covered the cannery strike in the 1980s for the Register-Pajaronian.

She recalled how Mr. O'Brien backed her the day cannery owners came in and demanded she be fired. "He said, 'You know you're doing a good job when everybody's mad at you,'" she said.

Mr. O'Brien cared about his reporters and worked to cultivate their strengths, she said. He was a principled man, and a stickler for grammar and style.

Two decades later, his lessons resonate in her life.

"He's going to live forever in my mind," she said.