

JB Leftwich Leaves Living Legacy

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July 7, 2011 – Teacher, journalist and community leader JB Madison Leftwich, 91, died yesterday at the Pavilion, surrounded by his family.

He taught at Castle Heights Military Academy for 40 years and left a living legacy of successful graduates who revered him as their mentor and inspiration.

He was also a well-known columnist for The Lebanon Democrat and the Wilson County correspondent for The Tennessean for many years.

He was born in Buffalo Valley, Tenn., on Nov. 26, 1919, and graduated from Cumberland University where he was editor of the student newspaper.

It was at Cumberland that he met his wife of 72 years, Jo Doris (Prichard) Leftwich, who survives.

Mr. Leftwich was advisor to student publications at Castle Heights. The student newspaper, The Cavalier, was the winner of numerous awards and many of his former editors and writers went on to successful careers as newspaper publishers, editors, marketing and communications executives and radio and television executives while others became successful college professors, foreign service officers, businessmen and military officers.

Among the many honors he received over a lifetime, he may have valued the Outstanding Teacher Award from Castle Heights most. He followed the careers of his students with pride and as a former Cavalier editor, Stan Huguenin, put it, "He was the living link and as long as he lived Castle Heights was still there. We all loved and appreciated him."

Son Jim Leftwich in a letter to Huguenin, wrote: "At Cumberland dad was a very good math student, but I think more inspired by Dixon Merritt in journalism. His part-time job at The Lebanon Democrat became more than a job. He became good and life-long friends with many of the people who worked there. I think it was the inspiration and teaching of Dixon Merritt and the relationship with The Democrat that both enabled his work with budding journalists at Castle Heights and provided a creative outlet for his own talent as a writer."

Huguenin wrote in an editorial earlier this year: "The extraordinary educator who literally impacted my future – and those of hundreds of other cadets – was Col. (military school ranking) JB Leftwich.

"Those of us mentored by him in his role of advisor to The Cavalier and The Adjutant, school paper and yearbook, respectively, came to appreciate, admire and respect him as

much more than just a 'teacher' or 'educator.'”

Huguenin became a reporter/columnist and held executive positions in marketing and corporate communications for more than 30 years. He was one of the team that spearheaded the drive to establish an endowed JB Leftwich CHMA Editors’ Scholarship at Cumberland University, the first of which should be awarded this fall.

In his letter to former students of Mr. Leftwich, Huguenin wrote, "Fortunately we have time to show how deep is our love and appreciation for him."

As of this month, \$20,175 had been raised in donations and pledges toward the scholarship goal of \$25,000, Huguenin reported.

David Hall, who was Cavalier editor from 1959 to 1961, was later to serve as editor of four major daily newspapers, including the Denver Post and the Cleveland (Ohio) Plain Dealer.

"[Mr. Leftwich] had a profound impact on a lot of lives for the good, on dozens, if not hundreds, of boys learning to be men," Hall said.

"He brought to a high school environment a professional standard of journalism. He gave us a lot guidance but he let us do the work and make the decisions. The results speak for themselves in the string of awards and honors the paper won. There were a lot of editors but the one constant was 'Coach' – that's what we called him.

"Castle Heights was a very athletic-oriented institution, but the school newspaper was one of our prides and we referred to him as our coach.

"I cannot emphasize enough how much he was a builder of character in young men," Hall said.

"He was the kind of person you can't get out of your mind," said Leonard Bradley, who served in state government under three governors and taught public policy at Vanderbilt University until his retirement last month.

Bradley knew Mr. Leftwich not only as a teacher, but also as a neighbor and friend. He was one of the six Bradley boys who thought of Mr. Leftwich as a "second father," he said.

"He was an exquisite teacher, not only of math but of writing. He was a mentor to a number of people.

"He was a wonderful man ... I wish I could be more like him," Bradley said, adding that in the past seven years he had lunch with him almost every month. At those lunches Mr. Leftwich loved to talk about politics but was interested in and knowledgeable about a wide number of topics, Bradley said.

Democrat Managing Editor Amelia Hipps said, "JB Leftwich was a good friend to me personally and a fellow journalist whose opinion I deeply respected. I thoroughly enjoyed reading, learning from and editing his columns, which seldom had errors. However, on the rare occasions one did, JB was quick to express his appreciation for our catching them.

"We had some lively discussions about the newspaper industry through the years, and while we sometimes had to agree to disagree, I had nothing but the utmost respect for his lifelong experience in this profession we both love.

"I have missed his visits and words of praise as well as his criticism, along with his wealth of knowledge about Lebanon and Wilson County. The Democrat has lost a beloved patriarch of the Viewpoints page, and I have lost one of my first friends in Wilson County."

Sam Hatcher, publisher of the Wilson Post, said, "It is a cliché to say that somebody is one of a kind, but his mark on journalism with respect to this position at Castle Heights left a tremendous impression on so many students.

"He was an excellent columnist himself. He knew so much about community journalism and what makes a good, strong, local story. That was big with The Cavalier."

Hatcher believes Mr. Leftwich will be named as a member of the Tennessee Press Association Hall of Fame at some point.

Former Naval Commander and Democrat Columnist Jim Jewell wrote on his blog when he heard of Mr. Leftwich's death that he "instilled in me the desire to write. He cultivated my enthusiasm for athletics and made me a sports writer and editor.

"He was primarily responsible for my working with Fred Russell at The Nashville Banner. He encouraged me throughout my life to write and abetted my efforts on numerous occasions. In the last four years, he and I have been fellow columnists for the newspaper we both grew up with: The Lebanon Democrat.

"We shared ideas and criticisms of our columns and thoughts about the future of print journalism. We discussed and caught up with other journalists who had passed through The Cavalier offices.

"But most of all JB Leftwich was one of my dearest friends. I could enumerate on the infinite number of reasons why, but I think my last statement pretty much says it all:

"I cannot pick up a newspaper without thinking of him and be thankful to him for what he gave to me."

Sue Vanatta, president of the Lebanon/Wilson County Chamber of Commerce, said. "I

loved reading his columns. He was so knowledgeable."

Vanatta said Mr. Leftwich used to bring flowers out of his garden to the Chamber office – "a month never went by that he didn't bring flowers to me," she said.

A lifetime member of the Chamber, he was president of the board in 1980 and today the Chamber administers the JB Leftwich Nursing Scholarship at Cumberland. The first recipient graduated this May, Vanatta said.

He managed a family real estate business and was active in the community.

He was an active member of First United Methodist Church, serving in many capacities including as chair of the Staff/Parish Committee.

"When we moved here in 1969, the family was real active at First Methodist," said Marie Craighead, whose husband, the Rev. Billy Craighead, was pastor until 1975.

She recalled that he was "on boards at church, involved in the community and in the schools.

"He was a Southern gentleman and a Christian if there ever was one ... He loved life," she said.

The Craighead's son Philip, now mayor of Lebanon, said he was saddened at the news of Mr. Leftwich's death because "I thought the world of him. We lost another good one."

In addition to his wife, Mr. Leftwich is survived by four children, Lynda (Glyn) Newton, Jim (Page) Leftwich, Barbara (Jim) Froula, and Jack Leftwich. He has nine grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

A service for Mr. Leftwich will be at 11 a.m. on Saturday at First United Methodist Church. with visitation from 5 to 7 p.m. Friday night at Sellars Funeral Home in Lebanon and from 10-11 a.m. on Saturday at the First United Methodist Church.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be sent to First United Methodist Church or the Castle Heights Alumni JB Leftwich Scholarship Fund (National CHMA Association, c/o Susan Hosier, 1045 Woodmont Drive, Gallatin.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>