

Journalism

CONGRESS SHALL MAKE NO LAW
RESPECTING AN ESTABLISHMENT
OF RELIGION, OR PROHIBITING
THE FREE EXERCISE THEREOF,
OR ABRIDGING THE FREEDOM
OF SPEECH, OR OF THE PRESS;
OR THE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE
PEACEABLY TO ASSEMBLE, AND
TO PETITION THE GOVERNMENT
FOR A REDRESS OF GRIEVANCES

s fast lane

Story by Steve Weinberg

Photo by Sam Kittner

WASHINGTON — Peggy Engel planned much of the content of the recently opened Newseum. Meanwhile, she continues to direct a foundation that grants prestigious fellowships to journalists. One woman. Two big jobs. That's life in journalism's fast lane.



Margaret "Peggy" Engel stands in front of the Newseum, an interactive news museum in Washington. As managing editor, Engel helped develop and plan many of the museum's exhibits.

When a gigantic museum devoted to the history of journalism opened in April 2008 in Washington, Margaret "Peggy" Engel could take credit for a job well done. Her acquisition skills account for numerous Newseum artifacts, such as the charred automobile where *Arizona Republic* investigative reporter Don Bolles was sitting in 1976 when a bomb planted by his enemies exploded, wounding him fatally. Engel's encyclopedic knowledge contributed to exhibits about individual journalists, such as Ida Tarbell, whose exposés during the first decade of the 20th century led to antitrust measures against

Standard Oil Co. and the ruination of tycoon John D. Rockefeller's aura. As usual, Engel deflected praise at the opening of the 250,000-square-foot Newseum. Engel, BJ '73, is one of the most influential individuals in contemporary American journalism — and not just because of her role in creating the Newseum. Think of her as "Journalism Central," the hub of many networks. But Engel is a paragon of warmth and modesty rather than imperiousness and braggadocio.

The Newseum is controversial because of the prime real estate it gobbled up (on Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the U.S. Capitol), its astronomical construction cost (hundreds of millions of dollars) and its contents (it does not shy away from controversy, but seems overly celebratory). Engel managed to avoid the glare of the spotlight most of the time while soberly documenting journalism's history. She also retained her directorship of the Alicia Patterson Foundation. The foundation gives annual stipends of \$40,000 to journalists who want to research and write book-length projects. It is one of the most prestigious and lucrative fellowships available to reporters and photographers. If anybody should know about Engel's influence and modesty, I should. We became acquainted in 1976, both having joined the reporting staff of the *Des Moines Register*, then one of the

most dynamic newspapers in the nation. Three years ahead of Engel at Mizzou, I had never met her at the journalism school. But she had already carved out a reputation as a first-rate young reporter at *The Journal* newspaper in Lorain, Ohio. I could tell within

Baseball, especially experienced as words on the radio, permeated the Engel household as Peggy grew up.

an hour of meeting her in the Des Moines newsroom that she would become a star in the journalism firmament and that I would learn from her professionally. I was correct on both counts.

A chronological telling of Engel's career would fall flat as a narrative because so much is happening simultaneously in her professional and personal lives. It sounds clichéd, but it seems like there must be a half-dozen Peggy Engels functioning on any given day. Here is each of Engel's primary personas, separated for reader ease.

Engel, to journalism born
One of five children, Engel grew up in the Cleveland-area town of Chagrin Falls, Ohio. Words permeated the household. Her mother, Eleanor, worked as a librarian. Her father, Jack, a World War II veteran, owned an advertising agency. Baseball, especially experienced as words on the radio, permeated the Engel household, too, and would come to permeate Peggy's adult life.

"Herb Score announcing the Indians game on the radio was a summertime constant," Peggy recalled. "The late, lamented *Cleveland Press* used to give students 16 pairs of Indians tickets if they got straight A's in the last marking period." Peggy and her identical twin sister, Allison, "would turn on the juice for the last 10 weeks." Engel says it was safe enough for the 12-year-old girls to



ride the rapid transit downtown to watch a game in cavernous Municipal Stadium on Cleveland's lakefront.

Leaving Cleveland was not easy after high school. But Engel wanted to study journalism at the University of Missouri. Allison also headed west, to study at Iowa State University, where their father soon after joined the journalism faculty and wrote a textbook, *Advertising: The Process and Practice*, published in 1980 by McGraw-Hill. Eleanor purveyed words as a librarian on the Iowa State campus.

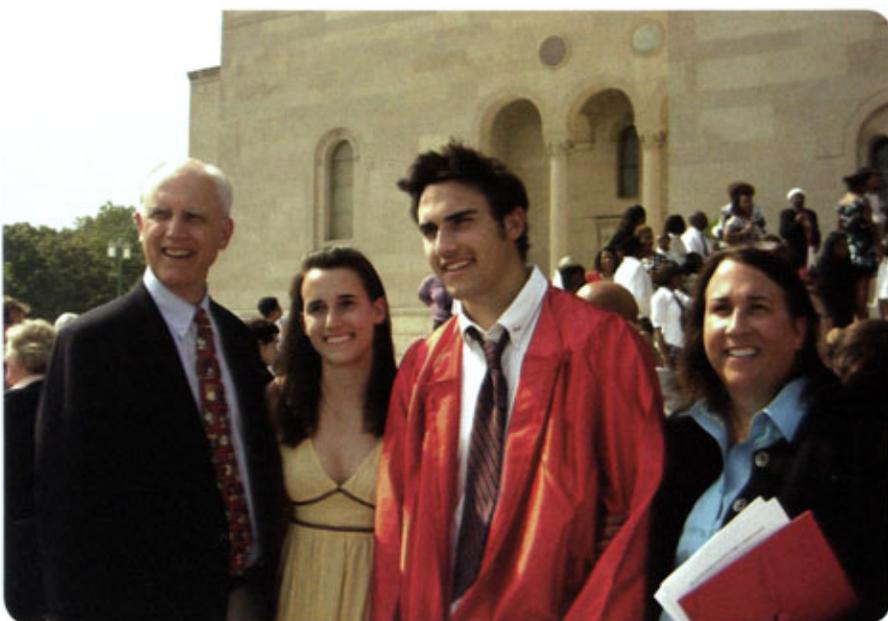
After college, Peggy returned to the Cleveland area to begin a newspaper reporting career. Allison became a journalist, and so did younger brother Jonathan. At one point during the late 1970s, Peggy, Allison and Jonathan reported for the *Des Moines Register* and *Tribune* simultaneously, making the Engel byline familiar to readers across Iowa. The two sisters who did not become journalists, Joan and Melissa, relied on words also, as public school teachers — Melissa in Kentucky and Joan in the Virginia suburbs of Washington. Joan later wrote restaurant reviews for the *Washington Post*.

Wife, mother — rising journalist

Before reaching age 30, Engel moved to Washington to join the *Des Moines Register* bureau there, the first woman to achieve that status. Washington correspondent is a coveted position in journalism; Engel's quick promotion reflected her talent as a reporter and writer. She told important and often unusual stories; she tended to zig when other reporters zagged.

In Washington, Engel met Bruce Adams, a Potomac, Md., native, author of learned tracts about the political process and elected county politician who had grown up devoted to the Washington Senators baseball team, and later to the Baltimore Orioles baseball team. They fell in love and married.

No profile of Engel can aspire to thoroughness without mentioning the pervasiveness of baseball in her life. Both children she and Bruce brought into the



Engel celebrates her son's graduation June 6, 2008, from St. John's College High School in Washington. From left: Engel's husband Bruce Adams, daughter Emily Adams, son Hugh Adams and Engel.

world became baseball prodigies. Emily just completed her junior year at Washington College in Chestertown, Md., where she is a left-handed pitcher and first baseman on the softball team, plus an accomplished student. Hugh is starting his freshman year at Florida Atlantic University, a 6'5" pitcher on an athletic scholarship.

Before the children had reached double digits, they visited the Baseball Hall of Fame, toured the Babe Ruth museum in Baltimore, attended major league baseball games and met Cal Ripken Jr., the record-breaking shortstop from the Orioles.

In addition to his paying jobs, Engel's husband developed the Bethesda Big Train baseball team. ("Big Train" is the nickname of Walter Johnson, a Hall of Fame pitcher who lived in Adams' Baltimore neighborhood.) The team now competes in a baseball league composed of college athletes from around the nation who reside in the Washington area during summers.

Part of Adams' overall baseball program is a Field of Dreams opportunity that bundles the sport, reading literacy and values instruction for inner-city elementary school students.

Always the journalist, Engel started writing about baseball as life and life as baseball. After a trip with her family to baseball stadiums across the nation, Engel wrote about the food aspect. At the Anaheim Angels' stadium, for example, she approved of the "salads, fruit and even sushi. I love hotdogs, but enough is enough."

Newspaper reporter and magazine writer

The best journalists find themselves in demand. Those in mid-career try to recharge by applying for the prestigious Nieman Fellowship at Harvard University. It means a year on the Cambridge campus, expenses paid, to study whatever seems interesting. Receiving a Nieman before age 30? No way, until Engel received one in 1979 at age 28. A couple of years later, the *Washington Post* hired her away from the *Des Moines Register*. She wrote stories investigative and humorous, long and short, for the broadsheet newspaper and its slick Sunday magazine. She seems especially proud of exposing a network that bought human kidneys; the exposé played a role in the U.S. Congress approving legislation to restrict such unsavory activity.

Engel began freelancing, too, as a way to grow professionally. Ziggling instead of zagging, she teamed with Allison to investigate the “death industry,” a topic often ignored by journalists despite its universal applicability. The twins received an assignment from *Esquire* magazine. “We know it’s morbid,” Peggy told friends, “but we’ve always found the combination of hucksterism, sociology and taboos to be an engrossing side of Americana.”

Book author

For a writer devoted to uncovering Americana, it made sense to write about local foods and baseball. Engel’s first book carried the title *Food Finds: America’s Best Local Foods and the People Who Produce Them*, with Allison as co-author. It appeared in 1984, published by Harper, with updated editions in the following decades.

In the book, they noted, “The complaint is that you can eat the same predictably (bad) food from Maine to California. We have a different map of America. It wanders from farmsteads to bakeries to small factories and smokehouses, stopping at the thousands of American food makers creating unique products. Most of these products — barbecue sauces, cheeses, candy bars, smoked fish, preserves and more — have been made for decades and have legions of loyal followers. They operate simply, below the radar screen of national ad campaigns and costly grocery store promotions.”

The Engel sisters created a television program, *Food Finds*, based on the book, for cable’s Food Network.

Engel wrote her next book, *Baseball Vacations: Great Family Trips to Minor League and Classic Major League Ballparks Across America*, with her husband; their children served as researchers. The family traveled about 50,000 miles in 45 states to visit 110 professional baseball stadiums for the guide. The first edition appeared in 1997, published by Fodor’s.



Engel and her husband, Bruce Adams, share their passion for baseball at Shirley Povich Field in Bethesda, Md., built for the Bethesda Big Train baseball team. As president and founder of the team, Adams was a driving force behind the creation of this baseball field. Engel has written three books on America’s best baseball parks.

Foundation director

Countless journalists recognize Engel as director of the Alicia Patterson Foundation. Every year, she oversees the competitive process that ends with funding maybe half-a-dozen journalists (the number varies depending upon income) to investigate society’s problems and solutions. Fellows are digging into coal mine safety, exploitation of foreign workers by U.S. multinational corporations, abused immigrant children and discrimination against progressive Muslims.

In 1997, with Engel’s guidance, I received an Alicia Patterson Fellowship to study deceased journalist Ida Tarbell, then draw lessons from her remarkable writings for contemporary reporters and editors. Like so many other fellows, I parlayed my yearlong stipend into a book, *Taking on the Trust* (W.W. Norton, 2008).

Engel helps direct money and other resources to needy journalists through other avenues, too, where she serves as a board of trustees member or as a judge, including the Fund for Investigative Journalism and the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards.

Angel of journalists

Engel does not return to Columbia often. But her presence is felt at the journalism school because of her connections and her generosity when asked for help finding jobs or fellowships. She speaks to national assemblages of groups based at the school, especially Investigative Reporters and Editors. She knows just about everybody who matters in journalism. Journalists who do not matter much yet in the big picture, especially students, receive her good advice, too. When twin Allison calls Peggy “Journalism Central,” she is not exaggerating. ■

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