

I had the opportunity to meet him and get to know him. He was a born storyteller, and during his 50 years in Bay Area broadcasting, he did it with class.

## Soundbites



*Soundbites* is a new Q&A-style feature introducing you to the people of the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Each month, *Off Camera* editor **Kevin Wing** features a one-on-one interview with a broadcast professional working on-air or behind-the-scenes. If you would like us to consider someone for a future *Soundbites* column, please drop a line to us at the email address below.

This month, we chat it up with multi-award-winning Bay Area consumer editor, **Tom Vacar**, of KTVU Channel 2 in Oakland.

### **Where did you grow up?**

In Salem, Ohio, an industrial town of 12,000, halfway between Cleveland and Pittsburgh.

### **Do you have siblings? If so, are you the oldest? Youngest? Middle?**

I have one older brother.

**When did you first realize, and at what age, that you wanted to work in television news?** I guess I was in my mid-20's, and I knew a very funny guy who was a reporter who seemed to love his job. I was just finished with night law school and was practicing contract and consumer law. I really didn't like many aspects of it, so I looked to journalism.

### **Who has inspired you in your career? As a person?**

I was one of the first wave of "Nader's Raiders", and though Ralph Nader was looking out for the interests of all those not imbued with great wealth, fame or power, I, like many Baby Boomers, was inspired by the likes of the **Rev. Martin Luther King**, the **Kennedy** brothers, the astronauts and the U.S. space program and great movements like the Civil Rights struggle.



### **Before KTVU, where did you work before?**

WJW in Cleveland (1978-79 as a freelancer) - KGO TV, AM & FM from 1979 to 1985 - KCBS TV & KNX Radio from 1985 to 88, KTTV & KNX Radio from 1988 to 1991, and KTVU 1991 to present.

### **As a journalist, every day at work is different from the one before it. Can you describe**

### **a "day in the life of Tom Vacar"?**

About 7 a.m., I write a little newspaper (*TV Tommy Tribune*) that has major business and consumer stories from a wide array of media sources, plus three enterprise ideas. In work by 8:30 to 9. At 9:30, I pitch those stories in our morning meeting. By 10 or 10:30, I have an assignment. I start organizing and go into the field. I write in the field and submit a 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. and/or 7 p.m. story by 3 to 4 p.m. and execute it on the air during the early news block. Within that fairly rigid construct, is a whole world of discovery and experience.

### **What are your favorite types of stories to report on? Your least favorite?**

Favorite -- when I can explain complicated issues to viewers in plain English, or demonstrate how a product, service or process works and affects viewers such as gasoline pricing, air traffic control, etc. Least favorite -- stories that have no moral or purpose other than to recite straight events without putting them into context or perspective. Specific achievements: getting 1.5 million Chrysler, Dodge and Plymouth vans recalled for dangerous steering defects, amassing evidence to get several con artists put in jail for robbing people of their savings and homes, earning a reputation for making complex issues and stories understandable and taking many stories people overlook and developing them for what they should be.



### **What's your favorite ice cream flavor?**

Chocolate

### **What do you enjoy most about your work?**

The chance to impart information to people about things truly important to our viewers such as why the bridge bolts really failed, why a certain amount of bridge corrosion is inevitable, how we build infrastructure and why so many claims by special interests (e.g. oil companies, healthcare industry, financial institutions, etc.) have to be taken with a large grain of salt. They

already own the legislatures. And, though we must be fair, we should not be taken in, either by them or their counterparts.

### **Do you have any mentors, and if so, who? Who do you look up to?**

At my age, I'm often the mentor now. However, I've been extremely lucky to work with some of the true legends of our business such as **Dennis Richmond**, **Belva Davis**, **Van Amburg** and **Bill Stout**. I have extreme pride in working in the field with great photographers who make it fun every day. They are all my mentors and role models.

### **What do you do to relax? What hobbies and/or activities are you involved with?**

Still photography, producing movies of trips I've taken and, of course, travel.

### **What do you like most about working at KTVU?**

Because it's privately-owned and benevolently-owned, it is not a slave to Wall Street, venture capitalists or other non-media forces that hamper so many other so-called media companies. I suspect that's why we've not had mass layoffs nor a head-long plunge into VJ-ism (though it's coming) or other things that cut into our real role: find, produce and report news.

### **Where do you see yourself in 5 years?**

Given my age (64), I hope to still be working, since it's still a lot of fun to go out and report every day. I also want to travel more and take lots more pictures.

### **Who is your favorite television journalist? Is there anyone in the business who you emulate?**

Any reporter who is given the tools and time to do good stories and takes advantage of that to do the work and not abuse the privilege. I can't stand those who let others do their work for them and then take credit for it.

**Who is your favorite author?**

The wires.

**New York Times, or USA Today?**

The internet which includes the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, Associated Press, Reuters, Bloomberg and *USA Today*, and so much more.

**Personality-wise, are you more of a goof than you are serious?! Tell me about your singing..**

Because I've been at it for many years, I come from the old school of "Work Hard, Play Hard." I take the work seriously but never myself. I love being out in the field with the photographers and we make sure to have fun while we're getting the job done. Some of my past non-work exploits are legendary.

**If you could do it all over again, is there anything you would change about your life?**

In retrospect, I might have tried for more overseas work for the experience. But, to have lived in California, especially the Bay Area, has been an extraordinary experience on every level. I would have married my wife sooner.

**"The Great American Toy Test" is your brainchild. How did this come about?**

An executive producer at KGO back in 1982, **Larry Rickel**, said I should buy some toys and test them. We bought \$50 worth and took them to an elementary school. By the time the Great American Toy Test ended 28 years later, we were placing huge sets of toys in dozens of markets nationwide and airing the results on more than a hundred stations. Changing news directives and the advent of video games and other electronics ultimately ended the project... for now.

**Any words of wisdom for the next generation of broadcast journalists, especially those who would like to specialize in consumer news?**

The business is NOT dying, merely changing. There have never been more venue to practice our craft than there are right now. So, don't always look to traditional "one employee/one station" opportunities. Figure out what you're good at and then follow your bliss. In the future, journalists may have many employers or be self-employed vendors who sell their wares to many outlets in TV radio, the Internet and God knows what else is coming our way.

Technology has democratized media in a way that a person with something to say, who can earn trust and who means to succeed, can. Remember, radio was going to kill off stage performances. TV was going to kill radio and the movies. The VCR was going to destroy theaters. The Internet was going to kill off everything. And yet, all live on, constantly changing and adapting to a changing world. There's plenty of time and room for everyone who wants to work for it.

**Giants, or A's?**

If I want to root for a private, for-profit corporation, I'll take those businesses, big and small, Clorox to the corner store, Penney's to the Port of Oakland, who employ real people doing real jobs. Hearing millionaires argue with billionaires over who's going to get what slice of the league pie and have to pay \$8 for a stadium beer is not my "cup of tea."

**Favorite vacation destination?**

I'm fascinated with wild Africa and Australia. The Caribbean is a ton of fun.

**During your career, has there been a story that you've "owned" that, up to now, has defined who you are as a journalist?**

It's fair to say that I "owned" the California Energy Crisis of the early 2000s because I took time to learn how power generation and financing work. In the 1980s, I owned the pre-stressed concrete defects story that first surfaced when the Antioch High School auditorium roof collapsed. If anything, I have great pride in taking so called "consumer reporting" to wider levels. The majority of "consumer" reporters solicit and handle complaints and that is their

choice. But, as I see it, if it comes out of your paycheck, it's a consumer issue. Whether it's a product you buy or something the government taxes you for, it's a consumer issue. That's why things like the recession, the electricity crisis, the bridge, earthquakes, infrastructure, technology and a million other things are as or more important than one person's transmission complaint to a wider media audience. If an individual consumer complaint can shed light on the greater issues that affect many, then the effort is worth it and that is how I have remained a consumer advocate from my first days as a Nader's Raider in the late 1960's, to this day.



**What's the most favorite thing about your job? Least favorite thing, if anything?**

Favorite -- seeing the wide array of things, meeting people and going places that no other job encompasses, and then passing it on to a large group of viewers. Least favorite -- doing a story simply because it appeared in another news venue, especially when I proposed it days, weeks or months before. Increasingly harder to do -- getting "man or woman on the street" (MOS) interviews because so many people just don't want to be bothered or quoted. Most in need of change: crime story after crime story, without taking a serious look at the gangs that hold whole communities hostage and hold up those cities and neighborhoods to ridicule day after day after day. One knowledgeable man who works with gangs tells me that some of the shootings and violence are done by young folks who want to get their crimes "on the air."

**Favorite music? What's in your iPod (if you have one) or collection of CDs? Favorite TV show (besides *The Ten o'clock News*)? Favorite movie?**

iPod - America, Motown, 60s soul across the board, Jimmy Buffett, James Brown, Eagles, Michael Martin Murphy, Aboriginal chants, Cajun/zydeco, Joan Baez, Judy Collins, The Band, Bee Gees, Indigo Girls, one-hit wonders, Paul Simon, a lot of Big Band stuff, Sinatra, light jazz etc. ad nauseam.

**Favorite TV show?**

*NCIS*, *House of Cards* (Netflix) *The Newsroom* (HBO)

**Favorite movie?**

*Scarface*, *Forbidden Planet*, *The Right Stuff*, *Australia*, *Out of Africa*, sci-fi, etc.

**Wine tasting, or a cold bottle of beer?**

Beer, plain old American beer (Bud, Miller, Pabst, etc.); a holdover from the days I worked in the steel mill and railroad.

**What's the craziest thing you've ever done?**

Went into a tavern in a South African "township" to talk to locals about the pending invasion of Iraq and racism. The white South Africans I was staying with thought I was crazy. I think they learned something when I showed them the video I recorded. The other crazy thing: surviving the 60s, 70s and 80s. (Especially the "anything goes" 80s news media golden age.)

**From a journalistic standpoint, how would you prefer viewers to see you?**

As a guy who loves the work but is not full of himself.

**Favorite spot in the Bay Area?**

I get around so much, I have to say: all of them.

**What do you like about social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus? Does**

### it help bring in new viewers?

Social media is a powerful force, but still very much in its formative stages. It can help attract viewers, but it can also turn them off if its purpose is to do teases without providing some real information. Because it is so much in its formative stages, even so-called experts say they don't fully understand its potential, its drawbacks and how much of it is destined to be discarded as other things come up or older forms recover.

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**Stay tuned:** Next month, meet **Lonni Rivera**, a Sacramento reporter who works at Capitol Television News Service, loves golden retrievers and has a smile that will light up a room.

If you would like *Off Camera* to feature someone in *Soundbites* (or, even yourself!), please send an email to **Kevin Wing**, *Off Camera* editor, at [kevin.offcamera@gmail.com](mailto:kevin.offcamera@gmail.com).

## The Health Reporter

# the Health Reporter

by Karen Owoc



## Preparing for the Emmys Celebrity Slimming Secrets

Ever wonder how your favorite A-list celebrities maintain their million dollar bodies? Or snap back into silver screen shape so quickly post-pregnancy? Here are some of Hollywood's favorite health strategies that really work and a few that you should avoid.

**1. Invest in Sweat Equity:** Many celebs like Pilates, yoga and running to get fit, flexible and firm. To lose fat fast though, your choice of physical activity needs to be sustained at a higher intensity or for a longer duration. Long leisurely walks around the block or on the beach are great for de-stressing and innervating muscles, but won't knock off 10 to 20 pounds anytime soon.

To boost weight loss, you need to increase your volume of exercise (i.e., your minutes per day and number of days per week). Start out with a minimum of 30-60 minutes per day of moderate exercise per week (150 minutes/week), then gradually progress to 50-60 minutes/day (250-300 minutes/week). For some of you, however, 60-90 minutes of daily exercise may be necessary to diminish stubborn fat. Before starting, consult with your physician and an exercise physiologist. For some *Fit Tips*, go to: <http://TheHealthReporter.tv>.

**2. De-bloat:** Fruits and vegetables provide an abundant supply of vitamins, minerals and antioxidants and eating them is a natural way to flush out your system. Before a high-profile event like the Emmy® Awards, celebrities nibble on foods with a high water content, such as lettuce, watermelon, melons, celery, cucumbers, and oranges. On the flip side, they avoid gas-producing foods that can result in bloating and gas such as, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, Brussels sprouts in addition to onions, beans, apples, and prunes.

**3. Choose Raw AND Cooked:** Thanks to celebrities who embraced the raw food movement, it definitely stirred up a buzz (and a whole lot of hype). The raw food culture stands by their belief that cooking destroys valuable enzymes in food and practices eating uncooked food and non-pasteurized dairy products. It can promote weight loss primarily because high-calorie cooked foods, such as cookies, pizzas, and pastries are shunned, and low-calorie raw fruits and vegetables are desirable. However, heat breaks down the thick cell walls of plants which release some of the nutrients that are bound to their surfaces. Cooking makes antioxidants like cancer-fighting compounds, such as lycopene, beta-carotene, and indole, more available for