

# Edward R. Bradley, Jr.

## My Friend

What made him such a consummate reporter was that he loved the profession and he loved life and each complemented the other. **By Charlayne Hunter-Gault**

**E**d Bradley wasn't famous when we first crossed paths in 1969, but he did dream that impossible dreams were possible.

What drew us together was that we were both following the same dream—to be a part of “the action and passion of our times,” as Oliver Wendell Holmes once put it. We didn't think of ourselves as journalists—in those days, you had to EARN that title. And while ours was the first generation of black journalists to take our place in the newsrooms of mainstream media—I at *The New York Times*, Ed at CBS radio—we happily called ourselves reporters, proudly accepting the additional responsibility of bringing black people and their news into mainstream media for the first time, in ways that were recognizable to themselves.

And even as his reporting repertoire expanded to include the world, Ed never forgot or apologized for who he was and where he came from, telling the adoring audience at the National Association of Black Journalists last Fall, when he was honored with its Lifetime Achievement Award:

“I grew up in Philadelphia rather

protected from life in the South... Emmett Till and I were the same age when he was killed, and that was my introduction to the reality of life in this country for a black person in the mid-50's. When we were awarded an Emmy earlier this year for this story, I said it was the most important Emmy I had ever received. I would say the same thing about your recognition tonight.”



Bradley with the Emmy he was awarded in September, 2006.

From the very beginning, Ed showed the kind of enviable ingenuity that would, in fact, earn him not only the title of journalist but would make him a journalist's journalist and an icon who was a down-to-earth human being. In the first blush of that journey, he showed up at local CBS radio in New York, after working part time as a disc jockey and reporter in his native Philadelphia. Although he had the grit to go for it, he didn't have a critical ingredient: an audition tape. But when the request was made, he quickly grabbed that day's newspaper and identifying the most easily accessible newsmaker, the same day produced an audition tape and was off and running.

And run he did—from Harlem to Battery Park and beyond, he inhaled New York and its people, not only their stories that made news, he also inhaled their culture, which made New York New York. Music, art, poetry, food—Ed packed them all in the bags he carried and added to as he made his way to the top—walking the walk and not just talking the talk—from New York to Paris, where he packed in the language and its culture, not least its jazz and fromage, if not foie gras. From Paris, where he didn't succeed in writing the Great American novel, but eventually signed on as a stringer for CBS News, he went to Vietnam, where he did the kind of stellar work that added to his expanding repertoire and growing reputation, at one point, dropping his notebook and his professional distance to aid Vietnamese struggling to get on shore through treacherous waters; at another, showing grace (and a tiny tear) under fire as he was felled by flying shrapnel. Wherever he was, as former President Bill Clinton recalled during the Riverside

Church celebration of his life, Ed “always sang in the key of reason.”

Over the next two decades, we would

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see incarnations of Ed Bradley all over the world and his own backyard, at the White House or behind the anchor desk, on the convention floor and many other places, likely and unlikely, with an earring added along the way—from the Khyber Pass, to Africa and the Middle East, China's forced labor camps to little towns in America and big ones, into prison cells and psychiatric hospitals, on the basketball court with Michael Jordan and the golf course with Tiger Woods, onto the stage as the “fourth Neville brother,” or as Teddy Badley, a name given to him by musician Jimmy Buffett, who invited Bradley with a tambourine onto the stage sometimes and who recalled that Ed had more than a little Mardi Gras in his life. And I think that's what made Ed such a consummate reporter—he loved the profession and he loved life and each complemented the other, adding balance to a life of many parts, to a man his wife, Patricia Blanchet, thought of as a “complicated melody” of the India.Arie's tune.

Ed was a good reporter because he loved the excitement and the challenge of the work, but he stood out in the profession because he also packed in his bags the respect for people he learned at his beloved mother, Gladys', knee. He might be interviewing one of the world's most disgusting villains, like Jack Henry Abbot or Timothy McVeigh, or a vixen whom he adored like Lena Horne, or



Ed Bradley reports on the sub-Saharan AIDS epidemic for the Peabody-Award winning *60 Minutes* II documentary, "Death by Denial."

cooking in the kitchen with Aretha Franklin, but he treated them all with the same respect. And that's why they let him into otherwise forbidden spaces. They trusted him. And he talked and, more importantly, *listened* to them, not on behalf of Ed Bradley, but on behalf of the people he also respected who were his audience.

As much as I remember bumping into Ed on assignments for our respective news organizations in the early days, I also remember Ed by night. A cool-as-you-wanna-be Pied Piper leading a motley crew of us downtown to the Lower East Side, to Verta Mae Grovesnor's house, where she was beginning her long journey to becoming one of the country's most gifted culinary artists. Her apartment was tiny in size, but large on hospitality, where she fed an ever-growing crowd

of New Yorkers like us—wanna-be's and getting-to-be's in journalism and jazz, poetry, philanthropy and polemic. And we got to witness a Teddy-in-the-waiting at another East Side haunt, the funky Filmore East, where we would sit for hours on end, grooving to the mellow sounds of the likes of Taj Mahal, Nina Simone and Isaac Hayes—Ed's all time favorite artists.

And Ed loved sharing his passions with his friends. Another was sports. The fact that playing basketball at Cheney State ruined his knees that would cause him pain for life did not daunt his love of the game. One of my favorite times was when Ed used to broadcast half-time color from the New York Knicks games at Madison Square Garden. We used to gather in his one-bedroom high-rise apartment on New York's Upper

West Side, with its expansive view of the Hudson River and listen to his broadcast, but more eagerly await his arrival back at the apartment where he regaled us with locker room stories that he couldn't put on the air. And Ed always took his friends with him, in one way or another, not least because we relied on each other to help us through the challenges we faced as what some would later call black pioneers.

Even as Ed got his foot in the door of CBS News, wearing a suit and looking smart, big hair, big beard and broad shoulders, my soon-to-be husband Ron Gault and I would take time out from our respective "serious jobs" and meet regularly on a big rock in Central Park, watching the Dawning of the Age of Aquarius, sharing deli sandwiches, and bolstering whichever one happened to be fighting professional or personal demons at the moment. As it was, though, we shared more jokes and laughs than horror stories and tears. And could Ed laugh—a big, deep baritone roar that was infectious.

But after that hour was over, it was back to work and working hard at being the best we could be.

Although Ed was an intensely private man, he never walked alone. Friends from Philly days, from New York days when hardly anybody knew his name, friends from Paris and Vietnam and Aspen and Sag Harbor, CBS friends and friends who were big names and unknown names, and friends who found out they didn't have to ask when they were in need. I knew some of the many charities he helped, and I knew there were many individuals he helped, including some wiped out in the New Orleans Katrina disaster, and one who created a program for AIDS orphans in South Africa for which he provided

seed money and ongoing support, but I knew very few of the names of the people close and not so close he helped. Ed's support, like that stare over the rim of his glasses when an answer from an interviewee didn't ring true, was not for show. It was for real.

But Ed's largesse was not limited to money. He kept his arms around friends like my husband, Ron, and me. We shared our honeymoon with him in Paris, and many years later, I performed the ceremony in which he married his long-time companion, Patricia Blanchet. She took her marriage vows seriously and walked his best and worst miles by his side. And when we went to live in South Africa where they didn't show the TV programs we all loved, Ed would tape them and *60 Minutes*, and once a month, we'd get a FedEx box from him that would keep us in front of the tube late into many nights.

But what I admired most about Ed and the accolades and awards was another of the defining things about him: No matter the heights to which his talent and celebrity justifiably took him, and no matter how proud he was of all those achievements, including Emmys (a record 19!) and the highest awards in Broadcast Journalism—Peabodys and DuPonts among dozens of others—Ed never rested on his laurels. He was always trying to go himself one better. He had competition all around, but the stiffest was the Ed inside his own head.

I could almost hear that little man when Ed fought to come back after his quintuple bypass a few years ago and as he fought to overcome his latest medical challenges.

"One more river to cross," was what he said when I first approached his bedside during his struggle to hold on. And when

my husband followed me, he was even more graphic: “I’m going to beat this mf,” he told him. I knew then, the Ed we knew was, as we used to say, still on the case.

And thus it was Ed, himself, who got us through the worst of times. He used to make fun of some of us when we reverted to habits we should have long discarded by quipping: “Nothing changes but the date.” And as he walked that last mile, I thought of his quip in a different way. Despite his diminishing health, Ed was still the Ed I had always known and in the most important way, nothing had changed but the date. Ed made us hold

on to hope, inspired by the faith and the courage he had in himself—even though sometimes he was the last to realize what a strong man he was.

At his bedside, I started to quote from Sterling Brown’s poem, “Strong Men,” and as I whispered to him, “Ed, ‘Strong Men’...” he whispered, “Keep a comin’ on.”

I hope his example will inspire young men and women coming into our profession, and those who are not so young and already there, to embrace his values and keep a comin’ on.

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