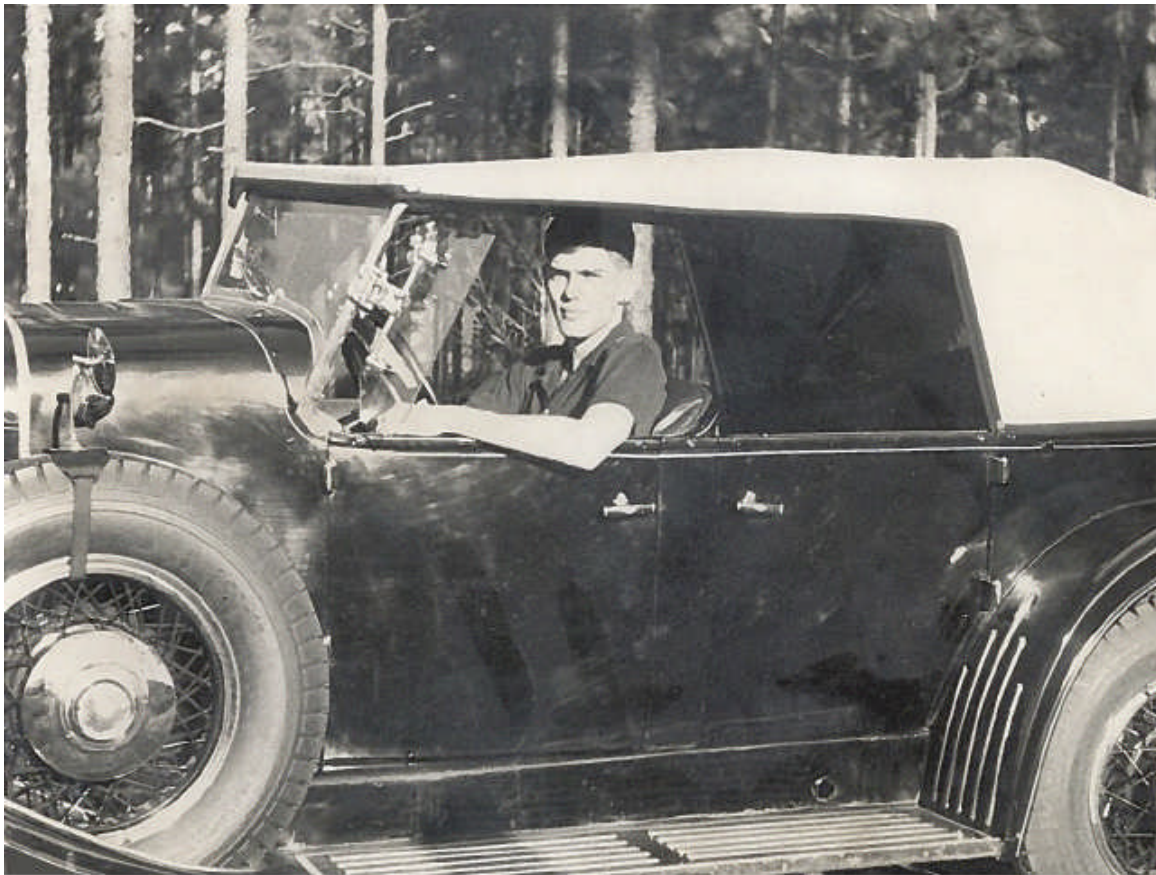


Memories of Jim Leeson

Compiled by E. Thomas Wood, May 2010

Further contributions from those who knew Jim are welcome and will be added to this document as updated versions are published. E-mail them to tom@the-wood-family.org.

Version #7 – May 12, 2010



Leeson in the 1937 Duesenberg he remodeled as a young man. Photo courtesy of Alex Heard.

LIFE WITH LEESON IN 3 PHASES

Jim Leeson taught me how to cuss, smoke cigars, appreciate scotch whiskey and to avoid loose women. (the Armistead brothers' list is even longer)

I knew him as Jimmy growing up, because that's what his mother called him. Mrs. Idabelle Leeson joined my grandfather as office manager at his Seven Up/Dr. Pepper Bottling Plant in Gulfport, Mississippi in 1961 when I was 4 years old. When my grandfather died in 1964, my Dad, Sam Alman III, took over the business, but Mrs. Leeson was still in charge. On occasion, Dad would ask for money out of the petty cash for expenses for the hour long car ride to New Orleans to visit the 7 Up bottler there. She would not give it to him. She was on to his visits to Galatoire's and the side trip to the Fairgrounds track.

If you knew Mrs. Leeson, then you know where Jim came from. I knew her before I got to know Jimmy. I would hang out at the plant sometimes doing odd jobs and visit with Mrs. Leeson in the air conditioned office. My older sister, Candy, and I would go with our mother to visit her at her home in Long Beach, MS. No kid wanted to go with their mama to visit old lady widow friends of the family. Any visit to see Mrs. Leeson, though, was always a pleasure. She made you feel special. She always kept a bag of Nestle chocolate chips in the refrigerator and at some point of our visit she would let us go get "just a few" to eat. Or she would have a desert prepared from one her recipes, later made famous to those of you visiting Big East Fork or Old Trace Farm. She would let us get the treat or would show us how to cut the desert to serve ourselves. There were antiques she would entrust us to retrieve from a shelf to bring over to her and we would be fascinated by the story she would tell about it.

I developed a fondness for antiques from Mrs. Leeson, my mother, Jimmy and his sister, who he called Sister, Idabelle Glascock. She also lived in Long Beach. THEY could have been the original cast of experts for Antiques Road Show.

Food and recipes took up the rest of the conversation when two or more of these four gathered together. I remember eating in restaurants when my mother and Jimmy would have the ingredients for each dish figured out before the end of the meal. Jimmy would say something like "Beverly, I believe that's got a little basil in there to give it that flavor." If they couldn't figure it out, Jimmy would coerce it out of the waiter. Hanging around them gave me an appreciation for cooking and eating food and I regret it now that my metabolism has gone to hell! My dad, who is 3 years older than Jim, never got into all that detail. To him "If it tastes good, it is good."

On occasion Jim would come to the Coast to visit his mother and Sister. If you knew Sister (not the horse), Idabelle Leeson Glascock, you knew which sibling got the "feisty" genes. (Jim would not deny this) Sister had a gentle and gracious intellect that is shared in her daughter, Jim's niece, Joan. His other niece, Rebecca, is full of life, like Jim.

Mrs. Leeson moved to Franklin after "Camille" swept her house away in 1969. My family would drive up to visit and stay in the log house in the early 70's and I would go to see Jimmy during college in the late 70's. That was Phase 2 of life with Leeson. The phase of cigars, scotch whiskey, loud music, books, those big damn Kilpsch speakers, Loveless Café ("It used to be good" as he would say about a lot of places), Station Inn, books and magazines, good neighbors, Meek's Beach, Mr. Elam's hams, figuring out what life was all about, D-Con, books, Pete, Eric and even Sarratt

Tunnel. My memories from those visits mirror most of the experiences expressed by those in these pages put together by Tom Wood. Most of us could tell the same stories with our name plugged in.

Phase 3 brought marriage, starting a clothing and outdoors store and two wonderful children. They adored Jim as much as I ever did. We all want our children to experience life larger than we did. For those of us with children who were lucky enough to be mentored by Jim, we had a good baseline to start from. Teach them what he taught us. I am truly blessed to have a “slick” son “full of piss and vinegar” that got to hang out in middle Tennessee on Old Trace Farm, travel with him to faraway lands of this world and learn from the Master.

I thank God I was born into a family that shared such a close relationship with the Leeson family and I thank him for Jimmy Leeson. The sting of his loss will subside, but I don't think it will ever really go away. “Son, you just gotta' deal with it” I can hear Jim say. Just a funny memory or two will have me smiling again.

I look forward to hearing a few more memories at the Overlook next Thursday. Maybe we can gather there every May 13.

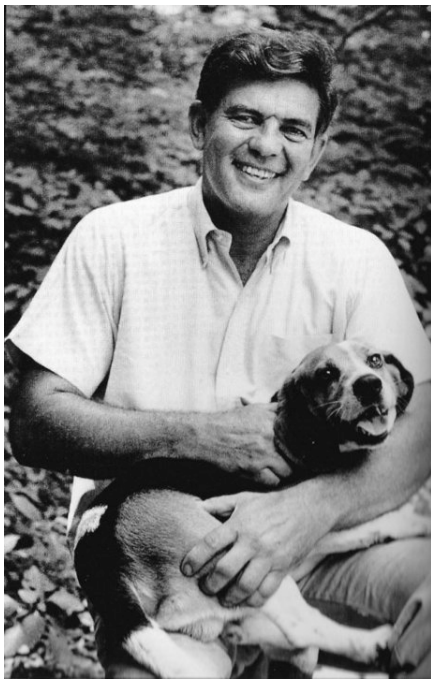
Well, damn, my cigar is down to the nub and my pewter julep cup is down to only ice. It's off to bed for sleep and haunted dreams of editor Leeson suggesting a comma move or it's too many words. It's a daunting task for this retailer to write so many words on pages shared with so many editors and real writers.

As Leeson would say when departing: See ya!

— Ferrell Alman, Sr.
Gulfport, Mississippi

Jim Leeson was a great man and helped my mother raise my brother, Bob, and me. He was always there for advice and counsel to us. He was a mentor to so many people. I came to realize thru Jim, as a child, that not all adults did the right thing on a regular basis and I should not take their word at face value. I was very privileged that Jim was the advisor to all the publications at Vanderbilt when I was a law student there and I was able to see him more often than usual. He helped me to learn to make decisions for myself. I spoke to Jim the night before he died and he seemed to be fine. I will miss him and his wisdom. Thanks.

— Bill Armistead, Nashville
Vanderbilt Law graduate, 1976



Jim with one of the many dogs he had over the years. Photo courtesy of Robert Black.

He changed my life. It is that simple. That is the way this story starts and ends. He was a mentor. He taught me to mentor others. He taught me how to give of myself fully, to commit to a project, a person, a cause. And more than anything else, how to be humble in all things from the gifts I possess to the work we must do together.

Two memories that I carry with me every day.

On our first meeting, we clicked. I was a freshman in college. Jim was the mentor of writers' past. I got directions out to his farm. We sat and drank absinthe over ice on his porch in the evening. He said, "What music you into, kid?" I said, "I like it all, but especially Gregorian Chants." He smiled. "Follow me," he said. We walk a short distance to an old log cabin, opened a dry, creaky door and went in. It was dark inside. I could barely see anything at first. There was a strange blue, green glow in one corner. Then the leather couch came into view. He lit a match and touched it to a candle. The room came clear out of the darkness. Behind the couch, the ranks of albums and CDs in neat trays. Then, the CDs stacked up beside the couch, the chair, like tiny side tables. Like a wizard in his lab, he pulled one record and put it on the stereo. The cabin boomed. Gregorian chants filled the room, the farm, the world. It went on for hours like that. Record after record. CD and sounds. He giggled like a schoolboy when the deep tones shook the cabin walls and sniffed the air like a proud bear surveying his territory. I was transported. I reveled in the musical travels from chants to organ music, reggae to afro-pop, electronica to acoustic folk. I had made a friend for life. We sat in the cabin with those sounds ringing in our ears from midnight to seven a.m. I left after breakfast, griddle cakes and eggs. "Come on back now, ya' hear?" He said as I put the car in reverse.

Going to Jim's was a world away, a refuge from civilization and school. It was a chance to consider things that troubled me in a new light. Jim didn't give advice. He gave you the opportunity to figure it out for yourself. I called and said I'd like to come by. He said, "Fine. But I've got a fence to build up on the Natchez. You can come along if you like." So, I drove out. The smell of manure and milkweed on the way to Jim's was one way you knew you had found an escape. When I got there, he was already out in his driveway, loading his dog and some tools into the back of his pick up truck. He sniffed at me. Smiled and said, "Git in." The organ music blared out of his truck in tinny scratches and muffled bass tones. We drove a ways into the woods, up a steep hill where he had just built a road. "There's gonna be a house right there and over there," he yelled over the music, pointing at two clumps of trees on either side of the road. We stopped at the top of the ridge. He left the diesel running. He got out. I followed in turn. He took out a long iron pole, a hole digger, a hammer, some 10 penny nails, some rough hewn wood posts and 2 by 6 boards and stacked em in a neat pile to the side of the road. He pointed down the line of the ridge in both directions. "The fence goes right along here," he said. Then, he reached back into the truck and brought out a brown paper sack. "There's a fifth of bourbon in there." He said, sniffing and smiling. "You got two choices. Build me that fence or drink that bottle. Either way, I'll be back in a few hours." Then he got in the truck and drove off.

— John Atkins

Vanderbilt graduate, 1989

Principal, Deep Dive Marketing, Providence, R.I.

He was a great counselor regarding interpersonal and organizational affairs. He was hospitable to all, and among the great highlights of my time at Vanderbilt were the wonderful, day-long picnics he would host at the “ranch” on his land in Williamson County.

— David Barie

Vanderbilt graduate, 1981

Senior research analyst, *Washington Post*



Jim with Eric Etheridge, who went on to be an editor at The Nation, Harper's, 7 Days, Rolling Stone and the New York Observer. He is the author of Breach of Peace: Portraits of the 1961 Mississippi Freedom Riders (Atlas, 2008).

At the risk of repeating what some have already written, and at the greater risk of sounding like Lulu in “To Sir, With Love,” here goes. (As Lulu sang, it isn't easy but I'll try):

In retrospect, it's hardly surprising that the first time I met Jim Leeson was also the first time I got a “shit, son” lesson from him — what we'd now call a teachable moment. Having just signed on to write for *The Hustler*, I stopped by Jim's office in Sarratt. Unsure of his title and credentials, I greeted him with something like: “Hello, Dr. Leeson, I'm looking forward to working with you.” He laughed that high-pitched, nasal laugh and said something like: “Doctor? Shit, son, I'm no doctor. And any sumbitch who walks around crowing about how he's a doctor ain't gonna be worth a shit anyway.” It was my first brush with Jim's lack of pretense and his feelings about that quality in others.

Four years of shit, son lessons ensued. He taught me the difference between a one-fart farmer and a little shit, and between fiddle-fucking around and playing cat-and-mouse-and-asshole. The overarching theme: It's all bullshit.

He was gloriously profane and funny beyond words, but focusing on just the humor and barnyard epithets risks turning one of the most complex, layered, engaging people I've ever encountered into a caricature. He was a master at solving his boys' problems — the real ones, the ones they imagined, and the ones he imagined — using a blend of wisdom, sophistication, common sense and country sensibilities.

Jim welcomed into his circles students who were not mainstream Vanderbilt or Nashville — teenagers who often felt like misfits — and made them feel more than okay about being different from those around them. Apart from Vanderbilt, his flock also included fatherless children and other young ones who needed and would benefit from having a mentor/father confessor such as Jim. We saw some of that in action — and the results — but I'm certain that even more was hidden from public view. The lessons and sheer kindness got many of his Vanderbilt boys through four difficult years that would have been so much more difficult but for Jim's presence. Of course, some of the larger life lessons didn't really sink in until long after we left, but that's the enduring legacy of a man who was iconic to so many people.

About his death: Feeling as he apparently did about his physical and cognitive state, and fearing loss of control over his life, he could have chosen no other path. It was the next logical step in the arch of his life. He walked the walk and had the courage of his convictions right to the very end. In some ways, I respect him more now than ever before. I hope I'm not being Pollyanna or unduly optimistic and naive, but his suicide doesn't strike me as an act of despair or even defiance, but the final act of the self-determination and fierce independence that made him unique in all the world. There's a nagging part of me that would have liked to have told Jim all that he meant to me and to so many others, but that would have made him uncomfortable enough to change the topic in a hurry. Shit, son, it's all bullshit.

One of us wrote earlier that he would have liked for him to stick around a while longer. We all would have liked more time with Jim, but for me, that would work only if the longevity was on his terms. I'm sad and sorry he's gone and grieve his death, but to celebrate his life I have to believe that of far greater importance is that he died as he lived — on his terms. He was truly one of a kind, and he will be missed.

— Dave Brooks
Media Relations Specialist
Herrick, Feinstein LLP
New York

Jim Leeson was the official “Father of the Tunnel.” While I truly respected his VSC advisory role, I thanked my lucky stars everyday that he was a print expert and not a radio consultant! As a result, he made it a habit to step back and let us program WRVU Radio our way, provided we stayed within the boundaries of the FCC. But if an issue ever did arise, he was always there for me and my staff. And he always made it a point to stand up for and defend his VSC kids.

— Fred Buc

WRVU general manager, 1978-1979

VP/general manager, WRLT-FM (Lightning 100), Nashville

Mr. Leeson was a friend of my family all of my life and I don't remember ever not knowing him. When I was a little girl, he seemed to me to be a larger than life presence. Once I was grown up, he taught me to cook (I will never give away his "secret recipe" crab bisque) and taught me how to do metal work (he was even brave enough to let me use a blowtorch while standing right next to him, although every time I started it up, I'd scream, to which he finally said "Now that's going to have to stop".) When we were renovating a log cabin on our farm for me to live in, he was called upon to give advice, and thanks to him it turned out to be far grander (by log cabin standards) than my dad had ever intended for it to be.

I was proud to be his friend.

— Anna Carr

I've known Mr. Leeson about as long as I've been alive. When I was a child I lived in fear of his booming voice, until he charmed me by taking me to a mule pull. I have lived in awe and near-reverence of him ever since. He was a true Renaissance man who lived a life of the mind without sacrificing the craft of his hands, which he demonstrated with superb cooking, metal-working, and carpentry.

Mr. Leeson was a very compassionate man, despite his sometimes gruff exterior. The last time I saw him, he had just given money to a woman at an East Nashville grocery store (it was the holidays). My family has a small scholarship program in rural TN, and Mr. Leeson was a tireless member of the selection committee. He was very diligent in reading the essays and interviewing the students, and regretfully declined to participate this year because, in his words, "those kids deserve a fair shot" that he was worried he couldn't give them as he aged.

His life was truly one of example—intellect, craft, compassion, and passion.

— Ellen Carr

Jim made an extraordinary contribution to the campus community during the many years that he served as Vanderbilt's first consultant journalist. This was a position created to strengthen Vanderbilt's independent student media, and he was accountable to those media rather than the University. His strategy was always to encourage diligence, fairness, and a focus on the facts. As the title of his position implied, he had no authority. Accordingly, his effectiveness was entirely a function of his credibility, personal persuasiveness, and the respect which he commanded with students. Given our different missions at Vanderbilt, it puzzled both Jim and me that we became such close friends. He became, and remained, a member of our family. That friendship, however, never got in the way of Jim's expert coaching of student journalists in sticking it to us when we needed to be stuck.

— Jeff Carr

Vice chancellor and general counsel, emeritus, Vanderbilt University

I connected with Jim's "artsy" side (in addition to the rustic side of pre-cooked bacon, chicory coffee, pickup truck): the appreciation of antiques, making a great Old-Fashioned, booming Bach fugues out of the truck en route to getting barbecue in Franklin. What an enigma, that this fellow would travel to Bayreuth for Wagner festivals. He really had a great eye for architecture and loved to talk about it. We talked about the rebuilding of Berlin, he loved to show me and talk about his own house, which he designed and built himself, and Jim raved about my DC Metro Canopy design which was a modern structure unlike anything along the Big East Fork. So, though I'm not a journalist, I considered him a mentor and dear friend also, and an amazing source of enthusiasm, wisdom and humor.

— Richard Chenoweth '79

Dedication page, *Vanderbilt Review*, 1985:

The *Vanderbilt Review*, making its debut with this issue, was the brainchild of Jim Leeson, the former consultant journalist of Vanderbilt Student Communications. Last spring, Leeson suggested that the *Scrivener*, *Poetry Review* and *Photography Review* pool their small budgets and combine into a single magazine. A single literary magazine, he argued, would be more eye-catching and more palatable a format than the drab pocketbook-like one being used by the three publications. In their old format, all three publications were rarely read. As a matter of fact, one editor, shortly after being elected, noticed several issues of the current *Scrivener* being used to prop open a dormitory door.

Once the three editors agreed to combining their publications in a single magazine, they began trying to fill it with the best short fiction, poetry and photographs created by the Vanderbilt community.

And so began the process of soliciting submissions, having them judged and then editing them. To add an earthiness to the magazine, we conducted interviews with a prominent photographer, a rebellious poet and a neo-Agrarian author.

Doing anything for the first time fills one with a weird mix of exhilaration and dread. In many ways, editing and especially laying out *The Vanderbilt Review* was like washing up on a foreign shore. You find yourself in a place you've never been before, looking at strange vegetation and land formations. Everything is new. And there is no roadmap advising you what to indulge in and what to avoid. So you explore: you walk around trying everything, having some successes but many more failures. And you learn.

Somehow, after weeks of working late into the night, when the office is a wreck of ill-typed submissions, No-Doz, and half-empty beer bottles, it all comes together. An idea became 96 pages of very fine creative writing and wonderful photographs. Not only for giving us the idea, but for his guidance and understanding, we dedicate this first issue to Jim Leeson.

— Mike Cornwell '86

I learned a lot from Jim Leeson, and much of it stuck.

Leeson taught me how to handle a shotgun and how to calm a horse so he could give it an injection with a whacking big needle. I can drink — and enjoy — chicory coffee because of him. And he showed me where the Battle of Franklin took place. As he pointed beyond the strip malls and fast-food joints to a line of trees in the distance, I could almost see the Confederate troops coming out of the woods to charge the Union lines.

Leeson also taught me not to take myself too seriously, a lesson I desperately needed when I was 20. He believed in something like original sin. “Son,” he said, “people are gonna steal.” As a result, I learned to be careful about who I put on a pedestal. He taught me not to be surprised when people failed, nor to judge them too harshly. In his humor, his wonder, his honesty and his tolerance there was a largeness of spirit I’ve never seen anywhere else.

One big lesson came when I worked in the Nashville bureau of United Press International. Once, after I screwed up or missed some story, the admonition rolled out of UPI New York, down to the Atlanta regional office, to the Nashville bureau chief and finally onto me. It seemed to pick up speed and mass on every leg of the trip. I later told Leeson it flattened me. As the guy at the bottom of the company, I felt like I didn’t have anyone I could turn to and dump on. Speaking low, Leeson said, “You remember that when you’re the editor in New York.” Ten words. But nothing had a bigger impact on how I supervised reporters.

After the softball game in 2000, I was helping Leeson do some chore and I told him that story, told him how I valued the advice. He said something like, you know, you guys come back and tell me things that I’ve told you, and how much it meant, and sometimes I don’t remember any of it.

And why would he? He wasn’t making speeches, and he wasn’t on stage. He was just being himself. For us, that was Jim Leeson’s greatest gift of all.

— Richard Danielson, Vanderbilt Class of ‘84
Reporter and editor, *St. Petersburg Times*

He was a singular figure, a man virtually unknown publicly yet loved and hated, admired and feared by a broad swath of the rich and famous, poor and anonymous multitude. In the 45 years I knew him, he never did anything except on his own terms. That was his way, no exceptions. I guess death was no different. It would have been out of character for him to go the way most of us go — quietly, with all the unspoken protocols and formalities predictably observed.

— John Egerton

Author of *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Knopf, 1994; winner of Robert F. Kennedy Book Award) and many other works

There is no way to capture Jim Leeson's kindness, toughness, integrity, curiosity, and sheer intelligence in a brief remembrance. He taught me how to stand on my own legs, how to help people, and how to think for myself. When I needed kind words, I got them. When I needed a kick in the ass, I got it. When I needed the wisdom of years, I got it. Most of all, when I needed an image of what a man can achieve, he gave it to me. My gratitude is bottomless. Let me recount two quick stories.

A few weeks before graduation in 1982, Jim asked me if I planned to go to the senior retreat to the Jack Daniel's distillery. I said no, I didn't have the money. He said he'd always wanted to go and he'd pay for both of us. I said no. He later asked again and I said no, and that was that. The night before the J.D. trip, I stayed out late with friends. At 7 in the morning, there was pounding on the door of my crummy off-campus apartment. "Euchner!" the voice said. "Get the f--- up!" I opened the door, and there was Jim. He bought the tickets for us and had come over to pick me up. "Shit, Euchner, you look like hell. Get dressed so I can feed you breakfast." He took me to Steak and Egg and then we caught the bus to the distillery. It was a great day. After the tour (boring) we went to the next county and had a great picnic with all kinds of food and drink.

A few years later, Leeson visited New York and a bunch of us met for dinner. We debated what was happening to journalism. Me and one or two others argued that the old-fashioned idea of objectivity was dead. I said that I respected writers for publications like *The Nation* and *National Review* more than reporters for *The New York Times* because at least they revealed their biases honestly. Jim stubbornly argued that the ideal of objectivity was essential and possible. I went home with his words still spinning in my brain. He had given me bound volumes of the *Race Relations Reporter*, which offered the only complete coverage of the race crisis in the South in the 1960s and 1970s. When I got home I opened one of the volumes and read it all night. Damn! He was right. This paper that he edited was inspiring proof that journalists could — and must — work their damndest to tell the story with as much objectivity as possible. I wish every journalist could read this stuff. It's journalism at its best. I immediately wrote to Jim, telling him he was right and I was wrong. He graciously wrote back to say thanks and he never doubted that I "got it."

This was the most amazing man I ever knew. He filled holes that my father — like so many fathers of so many of us — left. But he met my father two or three times and respected him and always encouraged me to honor him. In short, Jim never pretended to be anything he wasn't. That's the greatest lesson of all. He was authentic to the core. I am devastated that he's gone and trying to absorb his loss as yet another great lesson. We loved you, Jim. You'll always be with us.

— Charles C. Euchner

Vanderbilt graduate, 1982

Author or editor of nine books, including *Nobody Turn Me Around: A People's History of the 1963 March on Washington* (Beacon Press, 2010) and *Extraordinary Politics: How Protest and Dissent Are Changing American Democracy* (Westview Press, 1996).

For many of us who spent time in the VSC Tunnel, Jim Leeson was someone special. Not a teacher or a friend of our parents, but an adult who treated us like adults, and possibly our first adult friend.

It was always especially gratifying to be able to please him, and to introduce him to music or a book that we students were into. When an experienced guy like Jim could appreciate the same things we students did — in my day, new-wave music like Elvis Costello and (oddly) OMD, and new journalists like Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe — it made us feel more sure of ourselves. It was like we were on track to becoming more like Jim.

I rode his horses, and never climbed on his fences. I played his music boxes, and downed his Jack Daniels. The time I spent with Jim produced some of the best memories of the most vivid period of my life.

— Steve Freitag
Vanderbilt graduate, 1983

What I recall about Jim and his mentoring most vividly from our days and nights in the Tunnel was he was wise and gracious, when we were too young and brash to be either. He made us all better for it.

— Richard Gazala

Vanderbilt graduate, 1983

Attorney, Washington, D.C.; author of *Blood of the Moon, a Thriller*



VSC picnic at the old farm, April 8, 1984. Heads in foreground are Richard Quest and Brian Bomstein. End of row on right: Wendell Smith.

As I type this, Jim is very vivid in my mind — I can see him clearly — although I never felt close to him the way a number of my friends did, especially the guys. I think I thought of Jim and his circle as a bit of a boy's club, although that could be simply my perception at the time.

I was just on the phone to my mother in New Orleans, trying to describe Jim. I said “He was a type, you know, although there are not that many left, a scholar and a gentleman with a sharp tongue, very opinionated but also protective to friends, and he relished the role of mentor.” Those are the memories of a twenty-something girl. I regret I also did not take the opportunity to add to my memories, perhaps correct or adjust some perceptions as I grew older.

— Regina Gee

Vanderbilt graduate, 1986

Assistant professor of art history, Montana State University, Bozeman, Mont.

When I heard what happened, I thought Jim must have thought he was in decline, and despaired about it. So sad, and my prayers are with him, and his dozens of friends. I will always remember him with a smile, because he knew how to encourage the student journalist crowd, without laying it on thick. He enjoyed nothing more than quality conversation, and/or a good ribbing about a serious topic. Despite his gruffness and cackling laugh, he had a strong moral sense, and the Gregorian Chant incident described by John Atkins is so apropos.

I told Allen Boyer last night about a lady friend who noticed him as students in Rand were paying him court, and she asked, “who is that distinguished looking man?”

Despite my three or four visits to the farm, I never realized the Natchez Trace was so close to Jim’s residence. Jim must have appreciated every drive up to Vanderbilt, as he followed “the Devil’s Backbone” path, which was so important to Southern history, up to campus on his way to work. When I read the VUSC alumni magazine issues, I could not help but notice all the alumni who thanked Jim publicly for his good advice and encouragement over the years.

Last October, I was driving to a funeral of a lifetime friend, Michael McQueen, the AP bureau chief in New Orleans, and stopped in Hattiesburg to dine, and to think about Jim Leeson, as rain poured down. I will miss most the hospitality, the upbeat greeting, and his willingness to give us his time.

I am not surprised about Bill Armistead’s story about Jim helping Mrs. Armistead raise her two boys; I suspect there are many instances of kindness involving Jim we will never know about, but which the Almighty knows well.

I hope I can make it down to the Deep Woods Overlook on May 13, so we can gather as VUSC staffers one more time on a spring afternoon on his property, and honor a man of honor who must have suffered much at the end, after doing his part to relieve other’s suffering.

Rest well, Mr. Leeson, and know we will never forget you, and will never fail to remember your sacrifices for us. Let’s name that Sarratt tunnel after Jim, and perhaps have a quality sculptor like Richard Weaver, VU ‘80 of Charlottesville, make a bust of Jim which we can put in the hallway, right outside where his office door was always open. Then, fifty years from now, VU students will wonder who “that distinguished looking man” was.

—Daniel M. Gray
Vanderbilt graduate, 1978

Jim had a tremendous impact on me and many of us that worked in Vanderbilt Student Communications. It breaks my heart to hear this. All the time I spent in his office, and at his house. We students were his family, and he was certainly my mentor. I can't think of anyone who had a bigger impact on me at Vandy.

When the VUSC alumni newsletter asked for all-stars, Jim immediately came to mind. They were probably looking for students, but Jim held a special place for all of us. He cared, he fought for us, he mentored us, he stood up for us, and he looked after us. And, he was a friend. I hate to see him go.

—Charles Hailey
Vanderbilt graduate, 1986

I can't make it to Nashville next Thursday, although I would dearly love to walk Leeson's farm one more time. I will, however, have ready access to libations and a damn fine view at hand, and I will stop at some point in the evening and raise a toast to Jim's independence and his foresight. Vanderbilt was a better place, and many of us were better people, because of him.

— Jim "Hawkeye" Hathaway
Class of '79

My book on the Willie McGee case is dedicated to Jim. The most obvious reason for that is simple: I never would have heard of this story without him. The original nudge came from the tape recording Jim made of a local radio-news broadcast that went out on the night McGee was executed in Laurel, Miss., on May 8, 1951. The recording is an amazing historical and cultural artifact, and it's no accident that the young Leeson (he was about 20 when he made it) was the person who bothered to capture it for posterity. He was an intensely curious young man who developed his own photos, tape-recorded church music and political speeches, and was already writing newspaper stories for *The Hattiesburg American* while still in college.

But the dedication wasn't really about that. It was meant as a thank-you for all the knowledge and wisdom Jim shared with me and dozens of other students during his Vanderbilt years — and during the decades that followed the end of his tenure there, when he was an incredibly generous and entertaining host to so many of us. (And, of course, the best cook I've ever been around.) He always taught us things with a sense of humor worked into the mix — I don't think I'm alone in recalling pithy journalistic maxims such as "Son, it's all bullshit" — but the takeaway was quite serious. The exposure I got to his style of critical thinking — along with his insights into the complexity and nuance that often lie under the surface of events — has been infinitely valuable for me, as I'm sure it has been for everybody who got to know him. He was a great, hilarious, cranky, eccentric, one-of-a-kind guy. I still can't believe he's gone.

— Alex Heard

Vanderbilt graduate, 1980

Editorial director, *Outside* magazine; author of *The Eyes of Willie McGee* (HarperCollins, 2010)



Adam Wood and Jim Leeson, 1984.

Years ago I gave up trying to analyze Jim or describe him to others. I found it impossible to do so with any real effect, impossible to capture the man so that others could see him too. Maybe my tools are too limited. Maybe I spent too many hours with him downing toddy's and listening to organ music and hearing stories of things I'd otherwise never know. Living in Nashville provided many opportunities and a chance to grow close to Jim. He was truly *sui generis*, though he'd laugh at that and tell me I was full of shit.

So I'll stick to what I know: I loved Jim dearly. Not like a father or a brother or a Dutch uncle. Like a friend, special and unique like no one else can ever be. He had an enormous impact on me and on my life, though I don't know how to explain it exactly. But others will know and understand. He affected the lives of so many of us in this way. Indeed, his reach was deep, his influence great, his impact lasting. I should be so lucky to live a life that has such a fine impact on so many. We all should.

I always knew he'd control the manner and circumstances of his departure. Jim at his essence. Still, I wasn't aware that he'd reached that point in the journey. I don't think any of us were. But that, too, is Jim at his essence. Hard headed. I miss him already.

— Tom Jurkovich

Vanderbilt graduate, 1979

Senior vice president, VOX Global Mandate; former director of Mayor's Office of Economic and Community Development, Nashville

Jim always thought of himself as an educated country boy. He did not always let you finish your thoughts and I thought that it was him being arrogant and knowing it all. In reality, he was wise enough to see where you were going and in collapsing timelines get to the point rather quickly. He imparted this skill on many of us and taught us to discern the nuances of various situations. For example, after not getting my way at a VSC meeting, Jim counseled me to bide my time. By then, my senior year, I learned to listen. Jim followed this up with an invite alone to his farm to enjoy life, dinner, a beer and some quiet reflective time. I have never forgotten that as we both misread each other. He thought I was the spoiled son of a former Vice Chancellor and I thought he was Machiavellian in some of his orchestrations. Jim was fiercely loyal to his tunnel rats... so much so that it led to his premature departure from the position. He defended us often when we did not deserve it (and often did not know about it). To our faces he could be friendly yet stern. Yet once you graduated from school, Jim remained loyal. I ran into him several years after graduating and of course he invited me back to the farm. It was the best time I ever had with him. The stories he told post graduation only strengthened the view that although his means may have been very different from mind his end was far nobler and better that I could have ever have envisioned. And believe me through his vast network of friends and acquaintances, he kept abreast of the accomplishments of many of us very much to my surprise.

Alas, I too lost touch having last seen Jim back in 1996 several months before I got married. I was driving in the area of the farm on 96 after visiting some high school friends from BGA and decided to drive by his farm. Of course, I caught him at home, and being quite hospitable he invited me in offering what food and drink he had. The conversation was as though hardly any time had passed even though we hadn't seen each other in almost nine years.

Like *Mr. Holland's Opus*, that last conversation with Jim touched on his legacy and being so modest Jim thought he had little to know legacy/influence. You could not argue with Jim and win so you won by listening. Afterwards, despite my protestations, Jim never wavered on his limited if any influence. His many "tunnel rats" and their accomplishments and successes (and failures) would fill volumes and he shares in those. By being that tough but fair teacher/advisor/mentor he made us all better. And in that way we all have made the world a little better and have hopefully paid forward the many gifts Jim Leeson gave us. In my religion, at the end of a funeral, we say in English, May His Memory be Eternal!

— Stephen Kaludis

Vanderbilt graduate, 1985

Senior project manager, Integreon/Capture Discovery, Potomac, Md.

I won't be able to be there with you on Jim's favorite outlook, but I'll be there in spirit.

Jim's death came as a shock, but not so much as a surprise. The man lived and died by his own rules.

When John and I moved from Hollywood, CA into Moon Lake Hollow on Fire Tower Rd., Jim was the first one to welcome us into his beloved piece of heaven on Devil's Backbone Ridge, the Natchez Trace Park. The day we arrived, he had a party at his barn where we met just about everybody living in the neighborhood and made friends with. For 17 years he was watching over us. Whenever John was on the road, Jim made sure to come by in his truck with first Sargent, then Pete and then Repeat to check up on me to see if I was alright. He taught this newcomer much about the South, the history and all the wonderful, often eccentric, characters in it. He also warned me about the not so wonderful ones ;-). He knew everybody, had an opinion about everybody. You didn't want to incur Jim's wrath and I am very grateful that I never did.

Truly a man with many sides. We could tell stories about him forever. He loved traveling to Europe, visit cathedrals and play the organs, go to "Italy" so savour food and wine, listen to Wagner at the Bayreuth Festivals, blast his stereo system through the woods while working. I will always treasure the many sundowners on the lookout, the wonderful dinners at his house. Art, literature, music, travels, food and drink.....he loved it all.

May you now rest in peace, Jim...you are deep in our hearts. Our years together were some of the best.

— Jutta and John Kay

PS Jim's ashes being scattered from his truck on the Trace is perfect. He'll be there forever.....

I first met Jim when my family moved to Tennessee in 1981. I had been invited to live and work with Howard and Jan Dickinson, a close friend of Jim's, while Howard built our family house. I had yearned since I was a small boy to live in the country, and the summer of '81 would be the most formative of my adolescence. I cannot think of that time without remembering both of these funny, quirky, generous men. Howard died last fall, and that had a profound impact on Jim.

That summer was the first I had a full time job in construction. Jim thought I needed some distraction, and he invited me to his farm. More to the point, he thought to give the Dickinsons a much needed break from a 15-year-old boy. At the time, Jim had another boy, James David, working on his farm. JD was one of several boys with an absentee father whom Jim, throughout the years, would personally mentor, and provide a home away from home. JD and I hit it off and spent a lot of time working Jim's cows, riding his horses, shooting guns and collecting ginseng. At the end of these days, we would retire to his office, drink (for us, it was coca cola in the small bottles), and shake the cabin with Willie Nelson and David Allen Coe, the guinea hens squawking outside. My love of Tennessee would develop that summer as Jim, JD, Howard and I would take long rides aimlessly exploring the ridges and the cool hollows. Howard and Jim would slash through the thick brush with machetes, their horses unflinching. Jim would also arrange for us to go it alone. We set out on a ride from his farm on Big East Fork up to the land he owned where he would eventually move. He instructed us how to hitch the horses up for the night, and care for them if something happened. (As a father, I find that I instruct my girls in a similar way. I let them attempt whatever they wish, and tell them of potential pitfalls, giving them responsibility and providing a safety net.) The next morning, he met us at Nelson Elam's pond for an early breakfast, fishing, and a long ride back to his farm.

On one occasion, he took JD and me to buy boots and a cowboy hat which I still have, now adorned with a rattlesnake skin, and informed us that we were going to a rodeo in Nashville. On the way, we stopped by a Versus party at Vanderbilt, and Jim introduced us to his students. I was struck by the way we were included by Jim's students. I have wondered what was going through the minds of these college kids when Jim showed up with us. He was uniquely proud of his students and wanted to make connections between those for whom he cared. My decision to go to Vanderbilt was an easy one. He would give me shit every time he would see me on my skateboard, or doing one of a myriad of stupid things on campus. Jim received great joy in watching people grow into their talents, and participating in the process. This is how it was with Jim.

Since that first summer, Jim had been a presence in my family in an intimate way. He was a great friend to my mother and father for many years. He always provided a welcoming place for my family. For Jim, the little things made a difference. He gave me his recipe for tanning a rattlesnake that I shot, helped me buy my first truck, horse, shotgun, and chainsaw. He taught my father and me to fence in a pasture. He took me to my first organ concert. He attended my college graduation, my mother's piano concerts, my grandfather's funeral, my mother's funeral. My wife reminded me that on one particular visit when I brought out my wife and two girls, Jim had admonished me to remember that I had three girls to pay attention to. Ever observant and wanting me to get it right. He made himself available for all of the significant moments in my life, and for the times I just wanted to shoot the shit and drink scotch. There are few people who can give so much to so many people, but there is no one like Jim. Going home is always a treat for me, but now it is more bittersweet.

As a personal aside, I would go on to do many things that were not terribly conventional. After studying philosophy at Vanderbilt, I would start a construction company. I would climb Mt

McKinley. I would receive a Masters in Architecture, work for a brilliant architect in Germany, train polo ponies and play in Germany and England. And finally, end up in the middle of the Green Mountains of Vermont with a wonderful family and an interesting and challenging career which I am just figuring out. So my debt to Jim, and to Howard, is great. My repayment is to continue exploring, attempting, questioning for as long as I am able, and pass a little of that on to the people I can touch.

So it would go for many of Jim's friends. As I read other's remembrances, I feel confident to say that Jim's booming voice resonates through an army of loving, loyal friends who shape their own world, overlapping with others, creating a force that will change the world in some significant way. Who knows what that will be or look like, but that is the power that is Jim Leeson.

— Sandy Lawton



Leeson in 1981. Photo by Sandy Lawton.



Leeson in 1987. Photo by Sandy Lawton.

I have known Jim since he came to Nashville. He rented a house on the farm of Dr. and Mrs. Yeomans, on Old Natchez Trace, near the farm my family lived on. He was always entertaining, knowledgeable and did not suffer fools, gladly or otherwise. His mother and my mother were very good friends after Mrs. Leeson came to Franklin.

When he visited my family one summer in Highlands, N.C., my father was in poor health and Jim built a window box for the house, cut out some overgrown paths and mounted a sundial on a rock for him.

Jim once said to me: “There are two kinds of people I can’t stand — those I don’t like, and those that don’t like me!”

We had been at a dinner party with him some 2-3 weeks ago and he did mention his birthday, but he seemed in good spirits and actually said the B-12 shots had helped his health. I am just so saddened and shocked.

— Rachel McAllister, Nashville

My family moved across the street from Jim around '88. From that time on, he was one of the most important people in my life. From teaching me to drive at age 10 to picking me up when I had "run away from home" and so on. I would spend my summers planting trees, cutting grass, and clearing trails on his farm among other things, all the while learning how to be a man. In the past few years I have made it a point to see Jim once every couple of weeks. It was always a beer on the porch and the local neighborhood gossip, followed by his interest in what I was up to. I recently began writing a blog about live music and he seemed so proud and interested in my writing. His favorite post was, not surprisingly, the one about the pipe organ recital we went to together last fall.

I've always been proud of my relationship with Jim. I would take every opportunity to introduce my friends to him, especially girlfriends. Anyone who got to meet him instantly knew how much of an influence he was on me. I guess I picked up his predilection for profanity and his ability to give someone as much hell as they could take without punching me. I'd like to think I'm a lot like him in many ways but I also know how unique he was.

Mr. Leeson always encouraged me to better myself and would tell me what I needed to be told, no matter how much it hurt, but he was always right. He taught me that sometimes you have to put fear aside and do what needs to be done, whether it was riding a horse full throttle through the creek or driving the old truck on a steep grade in the woods (both occurrences before I had even reached puberty). There isn't a day goes by that I don't use something he taught me or quote one of his old sayings. I thank God every day that we moved in across the street from him. I would not be the person I am without his influence, nor would the rest of my family, immediate and extended.

With his death, I hope to honor Jim by doing things that I know would make him proud, make him laugh, and even take great pleasure in doing some things that would totally piss him off.

— Jesse Meeks

Nashville via Big East Fork Road

By no means do I believe my voice “needs” to be in your story. I mostly want to push you to give the memory of my lifelong friend and mentor, Jim Leeson, the attention it deserves. I am just one of who knows how many people whose personal and professional lives were enriched by knowing him.

I was editor of the *Vanderbilt Hustler*, 1974-75. Jim was a vaguely defined “adviser” to the student media. Eventually the Vanderbilt administration found the definition too vague, and Jim too unwilling to control the kids he counseled, and they let him go.

Many times during that period (and several times thereafter), I visited him at his farm in Franklin (which he eventually sold to singer-songwriter John Hiatt) and then at his new home on Backbone Ridge, which he furnished and refurbished so lovingly.

From his birthplace in North Carolina to Mississippi to Tennessee, Jim embodied the history of the South and its race relations. The Race Relations Information Center in Nashville, which he directed after a career as a reporter for the Associated Press, became arguably the best depository of the record of that important chapter in American history.

This all sounds so stilted. Jim was a rip-roaring storyteller, both profane and courtly. He could connect with a cynical college kid and he could charm the underpants off your parents, all in the same evening of drinking and eating his homemade ice cream. He was independent, politically and intellectually, and his greatest gift to me was validating those qualities.

Like so many others — not just the “Leeson diaspora” of professional journalists, but also everyday friends and neighbors — I loved him dearly and will miss him.

— Irv Muchnick

Attended Vanderbilt through 1976

Author of *Chris & Nancy: The True Story of the Benoit Murder-Suicide and Pro Wrestling's Cocktail of Death* (ECW Press, 2009)

On the Occasion of Jim Leeson's Death

Likely more as an indulgence to myself than for the benefit of any others, I wanted to write down some of the thoughts and memories that have come forth since hearing of Jim Leeson's death a couple of nights ago.

Monday night I was at my home computer, around 10:30, exhausted and crabby because of a work project that wasn't yet done. The home phone rang, and my 16-year old son took the call from Dave Brooks, a college friend of mine who is still a close friend. "I can't talk to Brooks unless it's an emergency," I barked at my son. "If no one important is dead or dying, I'll call him tomorrow." So that's how I found out. Someone important had died.

I first encountered Jim as a college sophomore in 1974 when I was a writer on the *Vanderbilt Hustler*. In 1975 I became editor, so my close relationship with Jim began more as part of his job, where he was counselor to the college journalists, than on account of anything he or I had chosen. As it happened, though, at the time I became editor, my mother had died a few months earlier, and since my father was an abusive alcoholic, my relationship with Jim almost instantly became one of parent and son. I knew even then that this was not unique to my circumstances, as he played that role simultaneously and serially for many young people.

During those years on the newspaper, we certainly needed Jim's guidance. Each *Hustler* era was different, but my era was marked by reckless irresponsibility interspersed only occasionally with journalistic endeavors. Our group saw itself as outsiders tasked with bringing down the corrupt status quo while as a happenstance also being burdened with getting a newspaper to print twice a week. Whenever we were short on news, we just made it ourselves. Our main cause célèbre was that we convinced ourselves that journalists, and the general public, had the right to access to the closed meetings of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust. So we crashed the meetings, tried (and failed) to get arrested, and covered it all in the paper. Shortly after my term as editor expired, our group pushed the next editor, who somehow had mistakenly assumed that his job was merely to publish a newspaper with actual news, to put the paper on strike in support of some press freedom cause that I can't remember.

We had expected Jim's support in these questionable endeavors. After all, he had been a crusading journalist himself. That didn't happen. Jim didn't see it as his role to encourage or discourage us. He saw it as his role to let us make our decisions and deal with the consequences, and to help keep us out of the worst of the trouble that might be looming. From time to time when he knew we were about to fall off of the cliff, he would arrange a meeting with Al Knight, whom John Seigenthaler had made available to us for free libel advice. Otherwise, Jim's substantive influence on the actual printed word was minimal. I would often seek out his praise on the Tuesdays and Fridays when the paper came out if I thought we had done something praiseworthy. In those instances he was more likely to point out some of the many typos we hadn't caught, before closing with some backhanded compliment. I think this was mostly just his style, but likely also reflected that there wasn't much that was particularly praiseworthy in the *Hustler* those days from a journalistic standpoint. We were just kids who happened to be putting out a newspaper, and he took more interest in helping us through the pains of becoming adults than in fixing our writing flaws.

Jim exerted his influence much more by welcoming us at his farm. During those years we spent most Friday nights out at his farm (what later became known as "the old farm"), staying up all night, drinking, talking about the pussy we weren't getting (it really was an all-guys group back

then, especially with Jim), playing with his animals, and listening to his stories with the stereo cranked up full blast in the background tuned to whatever classical music or opera Jim had put on that night. Three of us were Jewish (Irv Muchnick, me, and Dave Brooks), and we became known to Jim as JB (jew-boy)1, JB2, and JB3 respectively, while Jim himself was simply JB. These nicknames have somewhat stuck throughout our later lives, both among the 3 JBs and with Jim. The farm was an exotic place to me as a city boy. The smells, the stars, and the restful calm are still with me today. I don't remember us talking about *Hustler* things very much if at all those nights. It was just a place to get away under what could only loosely be called adult supervision, a safe place where we could explore who we were without the pretenses of being Vanderbilt students or *Hustler* people. We'd haul our hungovered-selves up the next morning, Jim would cook us eggs fried in the grease of some thick-cut bacon, and we'd haul our sorry asses back to Nashville to fight whatever self-created battles awaited our attention.

Since the *Hustler* was an extracurricular activity, most of us weren't headed for journalism careers. My first love was politics, and the summer after my *Hustler* editorship I hooked on as a writer and press person with Jim Sasser's first campaign for the U.S. Senate. Again, given Jim Leeson's civil rights background, I had thought he would think my work in politics was wonderful. But Jim didn't really like or trust any politicians. If he had ever been a liberal, which I still don't know, by that time Jim was just a contrarian. He certainly knew and liked many of the Sasser people, but that was about as far as it went. I continued to spend many nights out at the farm and stayed in close touch with Jim.

When candidate Sasser became Senator Sasser, I moved to Washington and really became much more of a Tennessean than I had been as a Yankee college student. On my frequent trips back to the state I would either stay at the farm or visit. Jim continued to take an intense interest in my growth as a young adult but not in the particular work I was doing. On occasion he would pull out maps and show me the work he was doing on the Natchez Trace, but he never lobbied me or asked me to help him at all in getting Senator Sasser's support. Our conversations were always about more personal things, and he'd fill me with stories about whatever young person he had had staying at the farm. Those stories followed a familiar arc: so-and-so was a no good shit, his family was white trash and they didn't know shit, so-and-so would never make any good of his useless self, but somehow after Jim showed so-and-so how to shoot guns and drive his pickup truck at the age of 9, so-and-so started turning his life around. I believe Jim wasn't just bragging because I know that he did influence people positively this way.

The thing about guns was always an interesting aspect of our relationship, and takes on more irony given the ending. The only time I ever shot a gun was at Jim's farm. When I became a state legislator in Minnesota years later I was on the "gun control" side of the debate. Jim had given generously in my early campaigns. When my fundraising letters started being signed by Sarah Brady, the financial contributions dropped off but the friendship didn't. We'd talk about it occasionally and without argument. He didn't preach. I knew that guns were a part of his way of life. He felt he needed them, living in the country. I listened to him, but I never knew whether some incident had occurred that prompted his insistence on constant vigilance, or whether it was just a Tennessee farmboy type of thing. It didn't really matter, as this was just a footnote in our relationship. When my son visited in the later years, Jim showed him how to shoot.

After I married and started having kids, we visited the "new farm" maybe half a dozen times over the years. He always welcomed us with warm hospitality, good food, good music, and many stories.

Though I had told my family about Jim's early years as a journalist during the civil rights days, I could never get him to open up about that. (To this day I don't know whether he regretted those years for some reason he never discussed with me, or whether it just wasn't his nature to talk about his accomplishments. This will always be a mystery that I couldn't solve for myself, but I would certainly be interested in getting insight from others about this.) On those trips, Jim showed great interest in my kids, taking them on horseback rides, "teaching" them to drive the pickup dangerously at a ridiculously early age, and shooting fireworks as well as guns. To our Minnesota sensibilities, he was very sexist in a loving way with my daughter, calling her "little precious." He continued to tell stories about the no-good-shit young people he was mentoring, always with the same theme of tragedy and potential redemption. Occasionally I could get him to tell stories about his opera trips, but he just wasn't much interested in talking about himself unless it was in the context of his mentoring of others.

Jim's relationship with my middle child, Ross, was especially poignant. It happened that we visited Jim two years in a row when Ross was around five or six. On the first visit, Ross became good friends with Jim's dog. On the second visit, as soon as we got out of the car, Ross went to pet the dog, who was under one of Jim's trucks. The dog was apparently startled and attacked and bit Ross' face severely. We all took Ross to the emergency room, where they stitched up his face. Jim had to put the dog down a few weeks later. It was a very sad episode all around.

When Ross was 14 or so, and very interested in music, I took Ross for a visit from Minnesota to Memphis to learn about jazz and blues and eat barbeque. We made a side trip to Franklin before flying home. Jim was gracious as always and very focused on Ross' development as a young man. He insisted Ross stay in the guest house by himself so he would have some privacy. He shared some of his vintage early blues tapes with Ross. My best memory of that trip is that Jim took us out for a white tablecloth steak dinner in Nashville, gave Ross \$100, and commanded him to pay the bill and figure out the tip. "Son, if you ever want to get you some pussy, you need to know how to do these things." Indeed, not much had changed since my early meetings with Jim when I was 19. His concern for others, and his advice to them, was timeless.

Since that trip in 2004, I don't believe I have been back to the new farm or seen Jim. He was good about responding to my Christmas cards every year, sending a gracious handwritten note, inevitably in all caps. If he ever got comfortable with email, I didn't benefit from that.

Jim was a towering figure who played a central parental role at a critical part of my life. He remained a friend, to me and my family, in later years. As I knew him he was a man who played an important role at a critical juncture of our country's history and who traveled the world seeking out great opera, but who as far as I knew him mostly shunned the larger stage, preferring the details of Williamson County real estate and the individual relationships he forged. I understand that my view of him is a set of personal snapshots and that others could well see this very complex man very differently. I loved him, I benefitted immensely from his mentorship, and I was lucky to know him as a friend.

— Howard Orenstein
Vanderbilt graduate, 1978
Assistant county attorney, Hennepin County (St. Paul), Minn.

I was never an official student of Jim Leeson's *per se* (he had left his job at Vanderbilt shortly before I became an undergraduate there in 1984), but I was nevertheless his student and admirer.

His reputation as a trusted advisor to an entire generation of Vanderbilt's aspiring journalists, writers and media types drew me to him via mutual friends. He took great pride in the careers of those who had been under his close tutelage, and I was jealous of those who belonged to that chummy fraternity of letters.

Over many wonderful conversations and encounters, Jim came to represent something bigger than Vanderbilt or an advisor for me. He was the learned man living on the ridge, a rare species that only Middle Tennessee seems to still produce in any significant number. He lived in the woods in a rustic home near the Natchez Trace. People who thought they were on a road deep in the wilds of the Tennessee woods were actually within earshot of his home.

To spend time with Jim in his element was to drink good whiskey from a silver cup while knocking the mud off your boots. You could sit on a porch admiring antiques and debating the National Magazine Awards or global politics. Jim had the rare quality of being grounded in a place, and fully vested in it, but also being a man of the world.

That spiritual duality was what I think so many of us learned from Jim, and it's what deepened my admiration for him as the years wore on. In a world of relentless modernity, Jim preserved an eye for the enduring things in his life of the mind.

It was therefore thrilling when he contacted me several years ago en route to Berlin. He was coming to see the full Richard Wagner Ring Cycle at the Berliner Staatsoper, and his enthusiasm was infectious. I managed to catch *Siegfried* with him, and it was great to see his unbridled pleasure at being there for a glorious production where Siegfried slew his dragon, drank its blood, and suddenly understood the woodbird's song.

And now, years later, what terrible courage it must have taken for Jim to ride into the woods and end his days by his own hand. What a dark and dramatic final act. What a terrible feeling of sadness and loss for those he leaves behind. And what emptiness we feel at not being able to thank him personally for his guidance and friendship.

I hope Jim heard the call of the woodbird on his last journey into the woods. It hurts to know he's no longer up on that ridge.

— Clark S. Parsons
Vanderbilt graduate, 1987
Managing director, Berlin School of Creative Leadership

I arrived in Nashville. Young. Precocious. And never having lived away from Britain. Thankfully there was Jim. He was the sort of person, the like of which I had never met before. A friend, a mentor and a guide. I would pop into his office and grumble about the “American ways” that I didn’t understand.

For those of us who went onto work in the media that he loved, we owe him dear. He helped kindle my real love of journalism and the art of telling people what is happening. I know I owe him dear.

— Richard Quest

Vanderbilt international exchange program participant, 1983-84
Anchor/reporter, CNN, London

Vanderbilt Student Communications, Inc. Board



Mike Weekley

Row 1: Marianne Savalli (secretary), Julie Yates (Scrivener editor), Mary Catherine Tubbs, Meryl Root (Commodore business manager), Scott West (1984 Versus editor), Michael Moore (undergraduate-at-large), Mark Woods (Hustler editor), Dr. Franklin Brooks (chairman), Rob Courtney (undergraduate-at-large), Dr. Richard Peterson (faculty board member). Row 2: David Vanness (WRVU station manager), Steve Presnell (Photography Review editor), Susan Bouvier (Commodore editor), Brian Rosmaita (undergraduate-at-large), Jim Leeson (consultant journalist), Mark Pearson (WRVU general manager), Mike Weekley (Commodore editor-elect). Not pictured: Eric Fleischauer (Poetry Review editor), Hoss Craft (Undergraduate Review editor), Pete Wilson (1983 Versus editor), Regina Gee (WRVU business manager), Liz Malin (1983 Versus business manager), Buster Olney (Hustler business manager).

This is selfish. I just don't want to be left out.

(Make sure you read the remembrances of Jim posted on the web by some real writers, in particular, Alex, Geof, Charlie, and Tom Wood.)

It was a privilege to know Jim, and an honor to be able to count him as a friend. He was unusual and eccentric but in a genuine way. His entire being radiated authenticity. He was a human being in the best possible sense of the term.

I knew that at some point he'd no longer be around — "father dies, son dies, grandson dies." But it's sad that that day is here. I already miss him.

Leeson had eclectic but discriminating taste. His favorite blues musician was Hound Dog Taylor, who famously said, "When I die, don't have a funeral — have a party." So let's all celebrate the life of James T. Leeson, Jr., a truly great man.

— Brian Rosmaita

Vanderbilt graduate, class of '84

Hustler and *Versus* staff writer, 1980

Hustler, co-news editor, 1981

Versus, Jah Dread Guide Managing Editor, 1982

VSC Board, undergraduate at-large member, 1983

Commodore, staff writer, 1984

WRVU, Radio Ethiopia host, 1985

Friend o' Leeson, 1980-

funny, but most of the best stories i have of time spent with leeson have to do with firearms — the first three presidential elections in which i voted, i cast a write in vote for leeson for president based on his story about a then-recent purchase of a fire-arm, during which he was asked by a teen-aged clerk to sign a pledge that he (leeson) would not use the gun to overthrow the government of the united states.

“son,” replied leeson, before leaving, firearm in hand, pledge unsigned, “if i could overthrow the entire U.S. government with one gun, i would sure as hell do it!”

— Gregory J. Rosmaita

My favorite Leeson anecdote: once I got him to talking about his days as an AP correspondent in Washington. When I asked him what it was like he said, “Wendell, you would not believe how many star-fuckers there were in that town. There is a certain class of people for whom power is the strongest aphrodisiac.”

This was ten years before anyone had heard the name Monica Lewinsky.

— Wendell P. Smith

Vanderbilt graduate, 1987

Assistant professor of Spanish, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pa.

Jim Leeson was such a figure, a force, a presence. He educated and helped shape so many of (us) young, naïve wanna-be journalists who traipsed through the Tunnel. And over the years he watched our careers from afar, even when we didn't know he was looking.

I last saw Jim in Rome in 2006. He came for a holiday, declining my invitation to stay in my apartment (“don't want to impose”) and instead staying at a little hotel by the Spanish Steps that his “travel gal” found for him. He reminisced about his first visit to Rome, in 1956 as a young naval officer, when he had wandered through the Colosseum and the Forum without a single tourist. He liked the idea of avoiding crowds and long lines. For this trip he was deciding between the Etruscans and modern architecture. It was up to me to pick the restaurant we would eat at. Before he'd arrived I'd written him an e-mail asking if he liked pasta; I knew of a pasta-only place undiscovered by tourists. “I love pasta,” he wrote back. “Will they mind if I spill pasta on the tablecloth and on my shirt? Get ready!”

Ciao, Jim.

— Tracy Wilkinson, Class of '80
Foreign correspondent, *Los Angeles Times*

Mr. Leeson was like a third grandfather or great-uncle to me as long as I can remember. Whenever he went on a trip, he would bring me back a souvenir. Once he got me an exquisitely painted turtle necklace, which I wore every summer after that year, and I still own it today. Another time, he brought me back a silky, detailed box containing two marble-like spheres with gold patterns on them that rang two different pitches and harmonized with each other. I could keep naming things he brought me, and he even made me a lamp once, out of a wine bottle and some sand. It sits beside my bed now and I still use it. He was a very caring and devoted man.

Mr. Leeson would come by our house periodically to drop off the New Yorker magazines he had finished reading and chat with my parents. Sometimes he would bring books or other gifts for me too. He was a cheerful, funny person, so I always looked forward to his visits. I also looked forward to the gatherings he held at his house sometimes. He was full of interesting stories and news, and he surprised me every time I saw him. I am lucky to have known Mr. Leeson, because there aren't many people like him at all.

— Eloise Wood

Student, John Trotwood Moore Middle School, Nashville