

Remembering Dirk Koning 1957-2005

BY TIM GOODWIN

He stood six feet eight inches tall and he was dressed in a T-shirt with a slogan on it and his name was Dirk and he loomed over me to ask if I had a few minutes to talk about public access TV. Sure. Hell, yes. As soon as my pulse rate returned to normal. As soon as I could stop wondering whether I'd get to keep my credit cards. Actually, once I realized he did not intend to carve a zodiacal sign on my abdomen with the rusted edge of an Indiana license plate, I sort of welcomed his company."

So began Pulitzer Prize-winning media critic Ron Powers in his July 1986 column in *GQ* magazine following the annual meeting of the National Cable Television Association in Dallas. Of all the 13,148 "bust-my-buttons bidnisspeople" there, he found Dirk's rap on community media the most compelling.

Dirk Koning was a big man! "Five-foot-twenty" he often would tell people who invariably asked. Overseas he would

answer "two-meters plus." Height was his most obvious feature, and it served him and the community media mission well. Inevitably, it found its way into scores of articles (this one no exception) and in most of the eulogies that followed his death February 10, 2005 from an often-done heart procedure gone fatally wrong.

Physically big that he was, Dirk was absolutely huge in our movement. He was, I would tell him, the best thing I ever did for community media, an honor I had as founding chair of the Grand Rapids Community Media Center when we hired him as executive director in 1981. It was a choice between public access television or the U.S. Peace Corps for him. Hiring Dirk was also one of the best things I ever did for myself. We became best of friends, soul mates, and fellow travelers along this path of democratic communications and free speech. Then as now, it was all about the mission, this philosophy of building community through media.

"Every man a king, Huey Long once said," Powers concluded in that 1986 column. "Access television is beginning to promise that every man can at least be a Ted Turner. Or a Dirk Koning. Eat your heart out Dallas. The hour of Grand Rapids approacheth."

Dirk defined the very meaning of community media. The medium was never the message. It was never just television. Never just radio. Never just the internet. It was all those things and more.

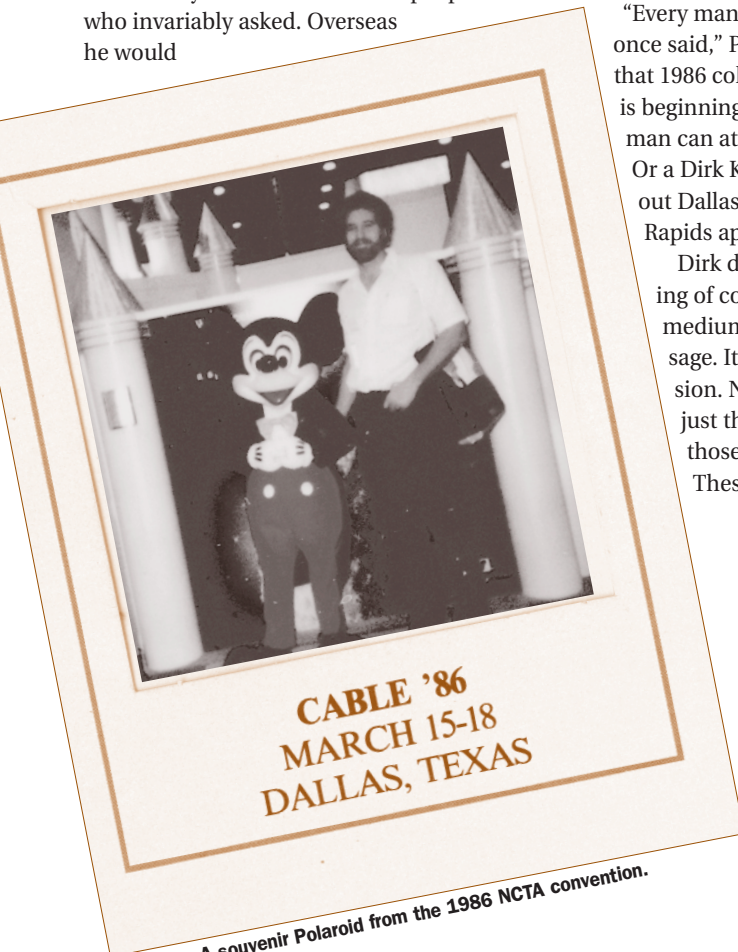
These were just tools to

Dirk. He was, he said, a "community organizer, around the use of media to share information." Maybe you'd expect no less from this son of a missionary who began life on a Zuni Indian reservation in New Mexico.

Dirk understood early where the technology was heading. "It seemed to me such a natural evolution—convergence of all information into digital transmission," he said, "Voice, video and data would not necessarily be independent worlds any longer, either in the media or the methods." And then he set out to make it so at the Grand Rapids Community Media Center, which today exemplifies the community media center model with its public access television, FM radio station, nonprofit internet service provider, computer access, and media literacy institute. Dirk saw long-term survival in providing all things media to the community, and he had a knack for keeping his eyes on the prize.

"We have an old fashioned co-op with a new tech twist," he told me. "There's a sound bite for you!"

And Dirk is largely the reason you're reading *COMMUNITY MEDIA REVIEW* right now. For many years, up until his death, he was chair of the CMR Editorial Board. His byline appears in CMR more often than anyone else. He was guest editor-in-chief more often than anyone else. During some tenuous times for the Alliance [then NFLCP], he managed to rescue CMR [then CTR] from obscurity. He prevailed on me to become managing editor in the early 1990s, and again when I returned from Russia and the Peace Corps in 1997.



A souvenir Polaroid from the 1986 NCTA convention.



The world's biggest executive director in the world's smallest office as Amsterdam's Ruud deBruin remembers him.

Neither of us could refuse the other.

He was huge too in the hearts and minds of those who knew him, and his death has left a bigger void in our spirits than his physical presence ever did in our material lives. To know Dirk was to be his friend, as I, and many of you in this movement, had the great joy to know.

Dirk was a citizen of the world with a keen sense of justice, not unlike his personal hero, Albert Einstein, whom he admired as much or more for his humanity as for his science. Dirk carried this seed of liberty we call community media to far corners of our planet, from South Korea to South Africa to South America, Europe and hundred stops in between, maybe one of them in your own backyard. To Dirk, these were seeds of peace and understanding. To understand each other was the first step to respecting each other, a prelude to peace, whether it was neighborhoods or nations. He used the tools at his command and his own unique presence and gift for story telling to make the case. The world is richer for it.

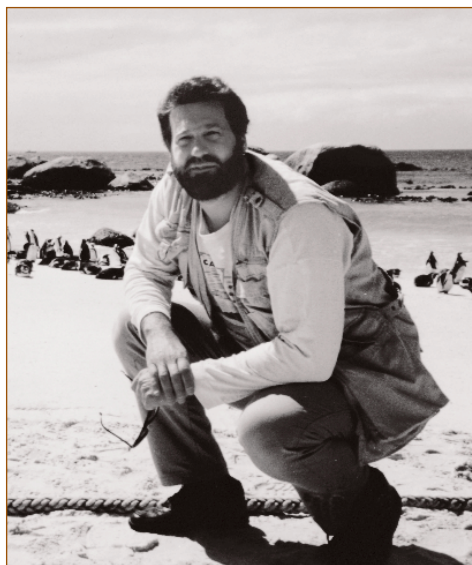
So it was no surprise that people came to his memorial services from three continents and from across the United States on Valentine's Day 2005. It was a measure of the respect and love in which his peers held him. You just didn't expect death from someone as serendipitous as Dirk Koning, though.

At the time of his death, he and his wife Ginger were considering their next moves in life. Wherever it might have led, it never would have been too far from community media. The future seemed bright. 2007 was to be that seminal year. The kids, Shaun, 20, and Kelly, 16, both would be in college. Another capital campaign would be completed, this time for yet another expression of community in the rescue of an historic neighborhood

theater from a struggling nonprofit. But it just wasn't to be. A procedure to correct a condition of atrial fibrillation went awry, and Dirk became a one in a thousand statistic.

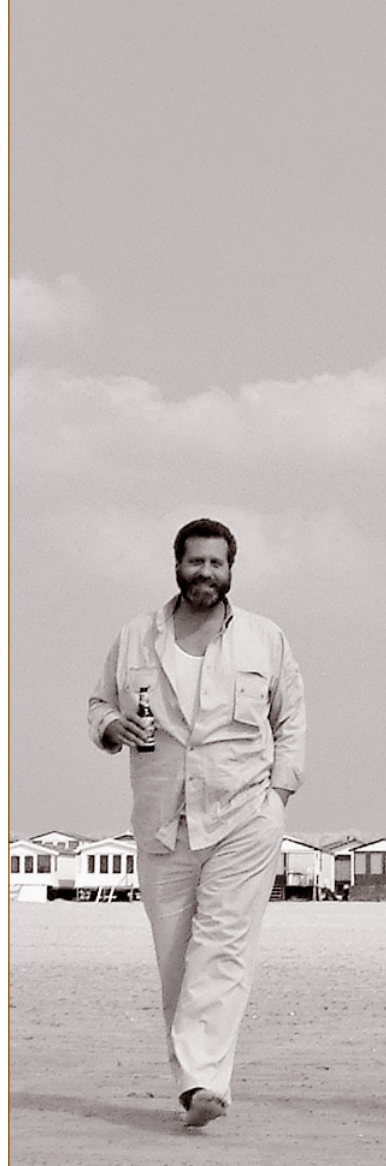
We mourn our loss. As City of Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell paraphrased Wendell Berry in his eulogy to him, "Dirk, we are you, inheritors of what we mourn. You have, indeed, given us a rich inheritance. May God make us worthy to walk in your way, strong to stand against resistance, and unflinching in our commitment to justice."

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Above, on the shore of the south Atlantic Ocean near Capetown, South Africa.

Above right, pep step and brew on the north Atlantic coast of the Netherlands.



At home on Big Crooked Lake in northern Kent County, Michigan.



Peace pole meditation along the banks of the Jordan River at Riparia in northern Michigan.