

Industry Pioneers

The free-paper industry has a rich history. And, many people from the Midwest played an important role in its development and growth. The caring, sharing and support members offer each other make this an industry like no other. In this section we will share features from people past and present who helped create the unusual dynamic we enjoy today.

If you know of a person or company that should be featured, please contact Lee at director@mfcg.org

This month we are featuring Bill Welsh



Memories of Bill Welsh

*Elevator incidents, wedgies and
yellow leather suits*

By Shane Goodman

I knew Bill Welsh for a number of years before I ever worked for him at Maverick Media in Syracuse, Nebraska. Like many of you, I got to know him at free paper industry conferences, and he made me smile and laugh more than anyone else I would see. I can't think of a time when I didn't look forward to seeing Bill.

Bill was a salesman at heart, but he was a good business operator, too. He understood that relationships were integral to any successes, and he was a master at making people feel good.

I desired to gain experience in managing a printing plant, and I wanted to learn from Bill. To be honest, I don't know that I learned much about printing presses from Bill, but I learned a whole lot about life.

Bill didn't encourage me to get involved in free paper associations; he required it, and I am glad he did. We were able to travel together on our trips to conferences and board meetings, and he introduced me to some incredible people whom I continue to have strong relationships with today. Like some of you, I was also the recipient of a number of his jokes. Let's start off with one of his classics.

When the two of us would be alone in an elevator, he would pass gas right before he would get off on his floor, leaving me with the aftermath and the awkwardness of meeting people on the next floor who jumped on.

Bill also liked to walk up behind me, grab my tucked-in shirt, and give it a strong pull upwards. Although this wasn't a true wedgie, the results were quite the same. Years later when I no longer worked for Bill, I decided to return the favor. But when I gave his shirt a strong pull, nothing happened. He told me he stapled his shirt to his underwear — and he might have.

Another time while we were waiting for our flight at an airport, a man strutted by in a yellow leather suit. I jokingly asked Bill if he ever had one of those. "Don't laugh," he said. "I had a closet full of them." Prior to working in the publishing business, Bill ran a men's clothing store in Forest City, Iowa. That was the 1970s, and Bill apparently had quite the disco-era wardrobe.

Bill had many great one-liners and phrases that I continue to borrow today. He had a strong mile-high sense of financial numbers, but he didn't like to get caught up in the fine details. "Figures lie, and liars figure," he would tell me. And when meetings were running long, and people were struggling to get to the meat of the discussion, Bill would cut through the B.S. and say, "Let's call a spade a shovel and get moving on this."

My prior bosses had a regimented system of weekly update memos and projection reports they expected from me. Not Bill. I supplied him with similar reports the first few months I worked for him, until he told me, "Just tell me what the hell is going on, and make sure I am the first to know." And so I did. I never received an email from Bill in the five years I worked for him. He preferred to talk, and it took me a while, but I learned how to keep him properly posted... at his pace.

Most mornings, Bill would fill up a cup of coffee from the breakroom and make his way into my office for a short conversation. He seemed to only drink about half of the coffee, as he spilled the other half on my desk. He would say "oops" with that familiar grin and wink, but I think he did it on purpose, just to rattle my cage. It worked.

Bill and I would go out for dinner together often, and he would regularly ask me to toss spaghetti sauce on his shirt before we started to eat so he wouldn't have to worry about making the first stain. As tempted as I was, I knew better.

Bill loved to golf. He would say, "Where else can I drink, smoke and gamble all at the same time?" The answer to that question was one of his other favorite places to be — the casino. Bill's father was a county sheriff, and Bill said he learned to play cards as a kid with the jail tenants. They taught him well. Bill didn't talk too much about his father to me, but when he did, tears of love would often run down his cheek.

The stories go on and on, from the time when Bill was a city councilman in Forest City and took it upon himself to dynamite a flood levee, to him inviting his son, Skip, to join him on top of the garage to get a better view of an approaching tornado.

Bill truly loved his family, his kids, his grandkids and his dear wife, Ruby, who were all, at one point or another, the recipient of his jokes. Many of you reading this likely were, too, and that means he loved you as well. He also loved this industry and all those whom he was able to connect with.

Bill left this world all too early on Nov. 2, 2014, but I would guess he is still pulling a few pranks by the pearly gates, and the good folks in heaven are smiling along with him, too.

Shane Goodman is the publisher of CITYVIEW magazine and the president of Big Green Umbrella Media in Johnston, Iowa.