

## A Memoir from Mike Levy

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary February issue of TEXAS MONTHLY is the 601<sup>st</sup> of The National Magazine of Texas, which I founded and was its publisher for 35 years.

With the words that follow, I will try to express my profound gratitude to the ever-so-many people who made it possible for this remarkable success to happen, and I'll also throw in a very personal semi-history from this member of the cast.

I was 26 in February 1973. My ignorance was a plus. If I knew then what I know now, there would not have been a first issue. It really was the impossible dream.

And TEXAS MONTHLY is a product of The American Dream.

Without the financial and emotional support of my mom, Florence, and my dad, Harry, TEXAS MONTHLY would not exist. My family truly represents the ultimate of The American Dream. Mom's parents immigrated to America from Hungary. She died in 2009 at the age of 95. Dad immigrated from Poland with his mother, Toby, father, A.Z. (who was a blacksmith and fought in the Polish army), and sister, Anne. His brother, Meyer, was born later. Both Mom and Dad had many relatives who were lost in the Holocaust. Dad was a plumber and an entrepreneur with a small, four-truck repair operation in Dallas. He was a Master Plumber, the highest certification from the Texas State Board of Plumbing Examiners and was proud to have been able to maintain his license (#431) until his death in 2005 at the age of 93. My parents made it possible for me to graduate from St. Mark's School of Texas in Dallas where I grew up, The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Texas School of Law.

Mom and Dad believed in me and in the magazine and in its staff. They entrusted me with their savings to start TEXAS MONTHLY.

I had three major forces that got me down the path that led to TEXAS MONTHLY:

Mom and Dad taught me by example that if I really wanted anything of significance, I'd have to work very, very hard.

During my four years at St. Mark's (member of The Great Class of '64), Ludlow North was my English teacher. Mr. North was much like the Robin Williams character in the *Dead Poets Society*, and he instilled in me a passion for print and the written word.

I was confirmed at Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, one of the largest Reform congregations in the country (I remain a third-generation member) with a tradition of rabbis who have been great preachers. When I was being confirmed, we had to sit through Sabbath services. And a core message of the legendary Rabbi Levi Olan that stuck in my teenage mind was that if you have the ability to make a difference and you choose not to, it's wrong. You could even call it a sin. His mandate was reflected in my vision both of the power of TEXAS MONTHLY as a journalistic force and of its commitment to service in the non-profit arena.

My concept for the magazine: Texas is a big expanse of geography, but it's a very cohesive place because so many of us share an attitude, a history, and a community of interest. We self-identify as Texans. The "city" is Texas, and the "neighborhoods" are Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, El Paso, Marathon, Amarillo, Tyler, Laredo, and all places in between. To achieve success, to become The National Magazine of Texas, the publication had to be as good as any national title, the product primarily of staff writers rather than freelancers, led by strong editors, packaged with superb photojournalism.

After the first copies of TEXAS MONTHLY's February 1973 issue came back from the printer, founding Editor Bill Broyles and I were more than fearful our magazine would not make it to February 1974. Because we were so small, the printer forgot to send us a bill for six months. If it had, we would have been bankrupt. Our offices were in a walk-up on the

northeast corner of 15<sup>th</sup> and Guadalupe in Austin that had bats flying around and gas coming through the heating system that gave us headaches. I had the small copier on my desk so I could make sure it was not overused.

After only a few issues, we began putting out an excellent editorial product. During the last 50 years, the magazine's journalism has been recognized with 14 National Magazine Awards, our industry's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize, starting with one for Editorial Excellence after just our first year of publication, the only time this has happened. The result has been the magazine enjoying over the following years the invaluable trust, loyalty, respect, and time of 2,500,000+ readers each month.

Through the years, every member of the staff understood that excellence is primarily the result of a shared commitment and passionate dedication to excellence and to greatness, which was seen on every page of every issue of TEXAS MONTHLY.

During my 35 years as publisher, I had only three editors: Bill Broyles, Greg Curtis, and Evan Smith. They deserve the most credit for making my ideas actually succeed. I may have been at the top of the staff box, but it was their magazine, and they operated with independence.

Bill, Greg, and Evan each had his own unique vision of how to turn mere ideas into a great magazine, with each sharing the mission to inform and to entertain and to surprise our readers. And they did.

After talking to around 300 people in my quest for TEXAS MONTHLY's first editor, I found Bill, which proved to be the very best decision I made. (I'll never forget meeting Bill's parents, Betty and Bill, at their home in Baytown. They, along with my own mom and dad, became our most inspirational cheerleaders.) A Rice University graduate and a Marshall Scholar at Oxford, Bill came out of Vietnam as a Marine captain with a Bronze Star. Because of his DNA and his passion as a fifth-generation Texan, along with his brilliant mind, his ability with the written word, and his charismatic leadership skills, Bill took my ideas and, over a decade, gave them life and the form and the essence that have carried TEXAS MONTHLY for 50 years.

Greg was Bill's roommate at Rice and was our first hire as a writer. Greg took the magazine Bill handed him, and, during his 19 years as editor, raised it to an extraordinary level of excellence. He best can be described as a true Renaissance man, becoming at least semi-skilled in the fine arts of boxing, the saxophone, magic, and the French language, culture, and history. I have always thought of Greg as a journalist who was a part-time editor; each of his "Behind the Lines" columns was a masterpiece of solid reporting.

Evan is a major journalistic talent and was a force throughout the magazine. He pushed the voltage of TEXAS MONTHLY's excitement from 110 to 220 volts, always imagining possibilities and seeing things that were happening in Texas that others could not and that he believed had to be put on our pages. Evan increased the presence of the magazine with his PBS interview show, *TEXAS MONTHLY Talks*.

TEXAS MONTHLY was foremost a writer's magazine, a home for skilled journalists who were given the time necessary to get all the facts and to earn the trust of their subjects who often would self-disclose in ways they would not have with any other journalist. And they had to have the wisdom to understand what they had learned in their discovery process—its true essence, the critical points for their pieces. Then the hardest part: being storytellers who could put their words down on paper to be so compelling and intriguing that they brought readers into the tent, not able to leave from the first letter of a piece until the very last period. The writers' work product then went to a group of fact checkers and copy editors who worked hard to try to make each piece perfect, not really caring if the writers' egos got bruised in the process.

Bill, Greg, and Evan were the magnificent leaders of their bands. They brought out the very best in each of their writers and the supporting editorial staffers.

Executive Editor Paul Burka and Senior Editor Gary Cartwright were their secret sauces whose intelligence, wisdom, and experience were reflected in their own work, which became the gold standard for the magazine, and their mentoring of young writers were true gifts. John Broders, longtime assistant to Greg and Evan, was the linchpin for Editorial.

And one might say TEXAS MONTHLY started incubating when Bill, Greg, and Paul, along with Senior Editor Griffin Smith, became close friends while at Rice. Their coming back together was the initial editorial force of this new magazine.

The experiences at TEXAS MONTHLY of many of our editors and writers allowed them to journey on to other important career accomplishments.

Examples:

Bill became editor of *Newsweek* and then was the screenwriter for several movies, including Tom Hanks' *Cast Away* and *Apollo 13*. Greg's books were acclaimed: *Disarmed: The Story of the Venus de Milo*, *The Cave Painters: Probing the Mysteries of the World's First Artists*, and *Paris Without Her: A Memoir...* of his time in Paris with his late wife, Tracy, whom he met when they were TEXAS MONTHLY staffers in our early years. Evan co-founded and was CEO of *The Texas Tribune*, a nationally recognized model for non-profit digital journalism that has become a major force in Texas. Editor Jake Silverstein came to TEXAS MONTHLY from a professional journey that began with the *Marfa Sentinel* (population 2,539) and is now the Editor of *The New York Times Magazine*. Editor Brian Sweany runs a major public affairs firm. Executive Editor Nick Lemann went from TEXAS MONTHLY to *The Washington Post* to *The Atlantic* to *The New Yorker* and retired as Dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, writing many nationally lauded books along the way. Senior Editor Stephen Harrigan, in addition to screenwriting, has written several award-winning books, including *Big Wonderful Thing—A History of Texas*, *The Gates of the Alamo*, and *A Friend of Mr. Lincoln*. Senior Editor Lawrence Wright went to *The New Yorker*, where he received two National Magazine Awards. His book about the rise of al-Qaeda, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, was published to immediate and widespread acclaim. It has been translated into 25 languages and won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction.

TEXAS MONTHLY could not have survived and prospered without the staffers in Circulation, Advertising Sales, Marketing, Accounting, Production, and General Administration/Human Resources. They made the magazine work professionally at the same high national level as Editorial to achieve a strong operational and financial foundation, without which TEXAS MONTHLY could not have existed. Everybody on the magazine staff was equally important, although we all knew that the staff writers were a little more important.

Southwest Airlines began flying in 1971; TEXAS MONTHLY started in 1973. We basically grew up together. I remember when SWA founder Herb Kelleher, president Colleen Barrett, and I were at dinner one night at Al Biernat's Steakhouse in Dallas, and they told me they had two customers: their passengers and their employees, and both were equally important. I smiled because we ran our shop the same way. Our cultures were almost identical.

TEXAS MONTHLY did not have a "glass ceiling." Most of my direct reports were women, as were most of the staff. Example: Elynn Russell rose in the ranks from being my assistant to president of the company. Compensation was based on contribution and longevity and equity, set by my direct reports in a room working together, with the idea that if the salary sheet was accidentally left on the copier and was circulated, each staffer's could be justified, understood, and appreciated. I got some bonus points each year because we obtained for the staff and their families a group of 400 seats in front of the center ring at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Part of the magic of TEXAS MONTHLY was its culture and the degree to which staffers bonded into a community of great friends.

Bill Broyles tells of the day he walked into an editorial meeting, looked around, and said to himself, "I really do like all of these people." Suzi Sands, who was the magazine's promotion director from 1976 to 1987, wrote me to say one of the rewards of working at TEXAS MONTHLY is that her best friends today are people she worked with back then.

Terry McDevitt, who was PR manager from 1991 to 1993, told me if she had not gotten the job, she would still have put the interview process on her resume. Most of the interviews for a candidate were with future peers to make sure the individual would not be sand in the gears but would add to the laughter and collegiality and work ethic and commitment to excellence that filled our offices. Money was only one reward; pride of association was another. People could look at colleagues on their left and on their right and know they were among the best of the very best.

Because of its stature, there were many important things TEXAS MONTHLY was able to accomplish outside of its editorial pages, including...

Back in the '90s, Mary Beth Rogers, the president of Austin's PBS station KLRU, came to my office to say *Austin City Limits* was at great risk unless they could find a principal underwriter. I turned in my chair and called the regional sales manager for Chevrolet, a major TEXAS MONTHLY advertiser, and made a pitch for \$50,000. He immediately said yes. All I did was make the phone call that lasted maybe two minutes, max. His decision was primarily because of the respect Chevy had for TEXAS MONTHLY and the importance of Texas as the major market in the country for SUV and light truck sales. He saw a natural link between ACL's music and TEXAS MONTHLY and his Suburbans, Tahoes, and Silverados. Mary Beth recently told me that Chevrolet coming in as a major underwriter was extremely critical to the stability of ACL at that point in time. The company remained as the show's partner for several years.

Nancy Brinker, the founder of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, which she started in the memory of her late sister, has often said that TEXAS MONTHLY played a critical role in taking the organization from being a local Dallas charity to having a major national presence. Our staff, the largest percentage of whom were women, understood the importance of Nancy's mission. My mom, her mother, my mom's two sisters, my dad's sister, and my sister were all victims of breast cancer. Nancy said no company wants to get attached to cancer. I explained to her that it was not just about cancer, that it was about women. This enabled the magazine to bring to Komen as its initial marketing partners Evian, Neiman Marcus, Pier One, Levi's, and BMW. In a recent e-mail to TEXAS MONTHLY's current owner Randa Duncan Williams, Nancy wrote, "The need to fund more research and develop a path for women and men to not fear getting treatment early grew as a result of the boldness of Mike and his team. If Texas Monthly had not taken this position at publicizing the importance of the growing incidence and death rates, the progress would never have happened. Mike was one of the first magazine publishers who had the influence to lead such societal change, support us and helped us grow to the largest global breast cancer organization."

TEXAS MONTHLY has had a close working partnership with the MD Anderson Cancer Center. For many years, the magazine ran an annual eight-page, four-color, heavy stock advertising unit so MD Anderson could tell the story about how its patients benefit from compassionate care and the newest in research-based healthcare. We made the connection between MD Anderson and Stan Richards of the Richards Group in Dallas, with whom TEXAS MONTHLY had a long relationship. Stan is one of the most brilliant and highly respected leaders globally in advertising and marketing. He and his colleagues invested in much research and came up with the remarkable "Making Cancer History" tagline that has directed a multitude of patients to MD Anderson where they have been given a greater opportunity for a more positive outcome than they would have received elsewhere.

One Friday night, Bill Broyles and I took *Esquire* editor Clay Felker to Gilley's. The impact of the experience on Clay's sensory apparatus was so great that upon returning to his hotel room, Clay immediately called writer Aaron Latham, a Texan, with the mandate to get down to Houston to do a story for *Esquire* on Gilley's. By Sunday, Clay had sold the story's film rights for what became *Urban Cowboy*.

In 1988, Dow Jones, publisher of *The Wall Street Journal* and led by its president Ken Burenga, bought a minority interest in TEXAS MONTHLY. The two partners shared the same commitment to serving their readers with powerful and honest

journalism. In 1998, Dow Jones and I sold TEXAS MONTHLY to Emmis Communications which was led by its founder and CEO Jeff Smulyan. Ken, Jeff, and I had the same journalistic and cultural values. Ken and Jeff are two of the smartest and most decent men I have ever known. I remained publisher until 2008 when I retired.

It had been a great 35-year ride.

Gratitude must be expressed to the extended TEXAS MONTHLY community of family and friends who gave all of us their enthusiastic support and infused us with their energy.

Most important: My own family. I have three amazing daughters: Rachel (who is also turning 50 in February), Tobin, and Mara, each of them having the talent, intelligence, wisdom, beauty, and great heart and great soul of their mom, Becky; Rachel's drop-dead gorgeous daughters: Sophia and Lily Goldberg; and the world's greatest son-in-law, Michael Goldberg. I really wish I had been half as good a father and a husband as he is. And I wish I could be as good a person as are my first cousins, John Broude and his wife, Judy, and Sonny Friedman and his wife, Carolyn. My sister, Jean Karotkin, is an accomplished photographer. Her stunning, evocative photographs of other breast cancer survivors were collected into a spectacular book, *Body & Soul*.

Pam Keller, my assistant for 25 years, controls my life, my calendar, and my checkbook. Pam refuses to tell me where my checkbook is; she calls it job security. Seriously.

Emmis eventually sold TEXAS MONTHLY to Paul Hobby, who was assisted in the transaction by his friend and well-known communications/PR executive Jack Martin. Paul decided to break the line of succession of TEXAS MONTHLY editors who, as longtime staffers, had maintained and strengthened the magazine's journalistic DNA. That line started with Bill Broyles to Greg Curtis to Evan Smith to Jake Silverstein to Brian Sweany. With "a plan to bring new ideas," Paul hired as editor Tim Taliaferro who had been the editor of *The Alcalde*, the UT alumni magazine. After Tim, Paul then put in place as editor Dan Goodgame, who came to the magazine after a decade as a communications/PR executive with Rackspace Technology following his respected work for national publications.

Fortunately, Paul sold the magazine to Randa Duncan Williams, who is the masterful operating chair of Enterprise Products Partners, a major pipeline and energy company founded by her legendary late father, Dan Williams. (If there were five people who made Houston the town it is today, Dan Williams was most assuredly one of them.) Randa, another Rice graduate, is recognized in Houston as an active, involved, and generous philanthropic leader, much like her dad.

Randa has been a longtime reader of TEXAS MONTHLY and is passionately committed to the magazine. Dan Goodgame's mandate from Randa is to give Texans a magazine with important journalism that makes a difference and that generates discussion, aka "yak," throughout the state. With the invaluable contributions of legacy TEXAS MONTHLY writers Patricia Sharpe (started in 1974), Steve Harrigan (1974), Mimi Swartz (1985), Skip Hollandsworth (1989), Katy Vine (1997), John Spong (1997), Michael Hall (1997), Courtney Bond (1997), and David Courtney (2005), all of whom became master storytellers in the exciting Broyles/Curtis/Smith era, Dan and Deputy Editor Jeff Salamon are on the course not just with ink on paper, but also with a robust digital platform, developing journalistic stars such as Christian Wallace. With her talented staff, Creative Director Emily Kimbro is doing a beautiful job of packaging the magazine's journalism with photojournalism.

President Scott Brown has assembled a remarkable business-side organization, including my colleagues Vice President, Development David Dunham (1979), Vice President, Research Robert Davila (1993), General Manager Lorelei Calvert (1987), Chief Operating Officer Carolyn Chavana (1983), Texas Sales Director Sunday Leek (2006), National Sales Director/Custom Publishing Anita Zmolek (1986), Senior Production Director Stacey Van Landingham (2001), Vice President, Audience Development Emily Rosenthal Allen (2006), Account Directors Elda Arellano (1985), Cheryl Schuldt (1994), Kristin Belt (1999), Kim Todd (2003), and Cindy Kerley (2006), Sales Resource Manager Karen Burke (1996), and Chief Revenue Officer Jalaane Levi-Garza (1987). In the 70s, TEXAS MONTHLY was one of the first publications to establish representation with the motion picture industry to exploit the work products of its writers. Scott, working with the

magazine's current Hollywood agency, Creative Artists, has several stories in development. Examples of stories that have already been produced: Richard Linklater's *Bernie*, based on Skip Hollandsworth's "Midnight in the Garden of East Texas" and the HBO Max limited series *Love and Death*, based on a pair of articles by Jim Atkinson and John Bloom that appeared in the magazine and the TEXAS MONTHLY Press book *Evidence of Love: A True Story of Passion and Death in the Suburbs*. Scott also managed the company's acquisition of the long-running TV series *Hill Country Reporter* led by Bob Phillips.

To everybody I've mentioned, and the multitude whom I have not but have played key roles in this play that has run in Texas for 50 years, thank you for taking a few mere ideas and turning them into TEXAS MONTHLY.

Now for some self-indulgent, personal parts of the story:

Some of my other life experiences that most assuredly led to my success as a magazine publisher: When I was 14, I sold magazine subscriptions door-to-door in 100<sup>+</sup>-degree Texas heat—Who coulda/woulda known? During summer vacations from college, I drove a Yellow Cab and worked as a Dallas County jailer. I booked bands for fraternity parties and events while at Penn. I worked for United Press International's Dallas bureau as a copy boy and as a freelance UPI reporter while going to college in Philadelphia. While in law school at UT, I had my first exposure to sausage making: I worked during the 62<sup>nd</sup> legislative session for the infamous state Senator Oscar Holcombe Mauzy, where I was able to watch the show and to hear the oratory of other political greats, such as Senators Barbara Jordan, Babe Schwartz, and Charlie Wilson.

In 1976, four phenomenal, "old guard" Austin physicians—neurosurgeon Don Patrick, orthopedic surgeon Joe Abell, general surgeon Bob Tate, and cardiologist Archie Robinson—along with RN Mary Campbell and I were appointed to the oversight committee for the development of the new Austin/Travis County Department of Emergency Medical Services, which evolved into a model system for other communities around the country. The experience with a life-saving organization, the association with dedicated paramedics, the exposures to the human condition most others cannot imagine, and the failures of our local government were transformative and made me a better publisher and certainly a better person.

My publisher's job allowed a little boy's fantasies to come true...

I've always been fascinated by trains and planes.

The Union Pacific put Paul Burka and me in the cab of a freight-train locomotive from Austin to Taylor, where we got off and had lunch at Louie Mueller's, my favorite barbecue joint, after which we caught a south-bound freight back to Austin.

The Navy's Blue Angels took me up for an hour in an F/A-18C Hornet (click [here](#) for YouTube video of me passing out two to three times.) The USAF has given me rides in an RF-4 Phantom, a T-38, and an F-16 (in which I took 9Gs and also passed out), and I rode in the instructor pilot's position of a B-52 for a mid-air refueling over Kansas, a simulated bombing run over Denver, and a (very!) low-level terrain-avoidance mission in West Texas. With the high-performance jets, when we landed the public information officers of the bases were always there to meet us, amazed I had not lost my cookies. What I never told them was that I had not come close to food or water in the prior 12 hours, although I will admit to having had the dry heaves. I have also "flown" in various Southwest Airlines multi-axis 737 flight simulators with digitally generated, realistic external views, including the "sim" for the 737-700W series with a heads-up display which gave me the ability to "land" at LAX. (Grandma sitting in the back most likely would have been very unhappy with my landing.)

Airbus' products have always had tiny winglets to make their wings more efficient. Boeing's only product before the 737-700 series that had winglets was the 747-400 series. I knew fuel would be saved and range would be extended after I talked to a pilot at the Farnborough International Airshow outside of London in 2000. He had just flown in with the Boeing Business Jet 737-700 that had a 700-series body and 800-series wing with winglets. I asked, why the winglets? He said when they first started taking orders before they built their first aircraft, they promised certain specs, including fuel efficiency and range. But the first copies off the manufacturing line couldn't meet the specs, so they added the winglets, and the planes just blew way past the original fuel efficiency and range specs. So, I started nagging and moaning and

groaning (something my late, great momma taught me how to do very well) to Kelleher that he should get Boeing to put them on all of their new deliveries to SWA. I'd see Kelleher at a dinner party and have a waiter take over to him a napkin on which I had written "winglets." For its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Southwest Airlines put together a list called "40 Lessons to Learn from Southwest." Number 36 was "Listen to advice, then celebrate it. For years, Michael Levy, the founder and former publisher of Texas Monthly magazine, bugged the Southwest brass about the fuel-saving advantages of putting winglets on aircraft—those little triangles on the ends of wings. In 2003, Southwest took the suggestion. For a month, a set of the new winglets bore Levy's picture" (scroll down). Kelleher was always telling me, "Levy, I really do hate your perceptivity." And now Boeing has winglets on all their product lines.

Being TEXAS MONTHLY's publisher got me accepted into the Texas State Cemetery—Statesman's Meadow, Section 1(E), Row R, Number 18. A big deal, and I consider it an honor to TEXAS MONTHLY as well as to me. Eventually, I'll be an eternal member of a most distinguished community of fellow Texans. My tombstone by my late friend and sculptor Damian Priour is already in place. The dates and the epitaph, "Nobody ever died from using common sense," will come later. Former TEXAS MONTHLY Vice President, Marketing Marilyn Carter said the magazine should partner with a non-profit to sell tickets to "Come Dance on Mike Levy's Grave." The line would be a long one. Big bucks for a worthy cause. Kelleher is already nearby. The ongoing conversations will help pass the time and entertain our neighbors.

Bill Broyles eloquently and perfectly tells our story in the February issue: "How to Create a Great Magazine Out of Thin Air" (Click [here](#) for article.)

Also in this issue is Steve Harrigan's beautiful take on our history: "How to Keep a Great Magazine Going" (Click [here](#) for article.)

And, as with all of their other work over the years, these two pieces are more than worthy of your time.

Not only did we make it to February 1974, but in February 2023 TEXAS MONTHLY is celebrating with issue #601 its 50<sup>th</sup> year as The National Magazine of Texas, in large part because I was able to surround myself with so many phenomenal people who were smarter, more capable, and certainly much nicer than I, and because of the support of my late, great mom and dad, Florence and Harry Levy.

Mike

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