



Deirdre Sykes O'Neil

December 29, 2022

Deirdre Sykes O'Neil, a driving force in New Jersey journalism who guided generations of reporters and editors through the newsroom of The Record with unwavering standards and a comforting personal touch, died Thursday. She was 68.

Sykes, who had battled cancer for a decade, faced that challenge with the same fierce determination and positive attitude she brought to the newsroom every day for 30 years.

She passed away peacefully surrounded by family after a roller coaster battle with the disease. Her beloved husband, Kevin O'Neil, was by her side as he had been throughout her long fight — a rock of loving care and support.

A newsroom leader who worked in various editing roles throughout her career, Sykes became The Record's executive editor in 2016, taking over an award-winning newsroom that she had helped to shape for years through her coverage decisions, hiring practices and impeccably high standards.

Deirdre Sykes, former editor of The Record and Herald News, in 2016. "Every newsroom needs a center of gravity and a standard bearer," longtime Record columnist Mike Kelly said. "Deirdre Sykes was both.

“Deirdre was the one who asked the critical questions that led to deeper reporting or who held us back from excesses and language that could embarrass the newspaper,” Kelly said. “In that role, she was the best line-editor that I’ve ever worked for.”

Sykes’ journalism career began in the typewriter era at the North Jersey Suburbanite, a then-independent weekly newspaper with a deserved reputation for punching well above its weight class — much like The Record. Starting as a reporter whose stories were must-read fare for informed citizens of Englewood and beyond, she quickly rose to the top spot in that newsroom.

She joined The Record in 1987, as a copy editor on the overnight desk, when the paper was still delivered in the afternoon. Through the years, she rose through the ranks of demanding leadership posts — bureau chief, state editor, news editor, chief assignment editor — leaving her indelible mark at each stop.

And while her turn as executive editor of The Record was brief, coming just before ownership was passed from the Borg family to Gannett, many staffers remembered her calm leadership during a period of change and uncertainty.

“Aside from her battle with cancer, Dee’s bravest act was trying to hold the newsroom together in the summer and fall of 2016 as Gannett had staffers interview to retain their jobs,” said reporter Scott Fallon. “It came at great personal cost. I’ll never forget her for that.”

Deirdre Sykes, the editor of The Record, speaks at the 34th Annual Valedictorian Recognition breakfast at The Fiesta in Wood-Ridge on June 7, 2016.

Sykes’ work with reporters was legend.

She was known for taking the same diligence with a 200-word story that she did with a 2,000-word investigative piece, meticulously dissecting each sentence so that no story, no author and no reader was shortchanged.

She was typically among the last dayside staffers to leave the newsroom each night, making sure that all the stories were buttoned-up and the next day had a running start.

Sykes — who served as judge for the Pulitzer Prizes — for years was the clearinghouse for enterprising projects produced by the staff, often conducting the last edit on a story before it was sent to the production desk.

Among them was a 2006 series called “Lessons in Waste” about state-funded preschool that examined misspending.

This series probed the New Jersey early education program and revealed dysfunction so severe that preschool owners were helping themselves to public dollars without punishment. The reporting team uncovered preschool operators driving Mercedes as “company cars” and owners who hired family members for nonexistent jobs and shorted teachers’ salaries while taking out loans for themselves. Their findings prompted an investigation from the state Attorney General and indictments of three preschool owners.

The series won local and national awards.

“Deirdre had a hand in so much of the great journalism that was produced at The Record over the years,” said the newspaper’s longtime investigative journalist Jean Rimbach, who worked on “Lessons in Waste.” “She was so smart and had not only a great sense of news, but of fairness. If there was a hole, she found it. If she said it was good, it meant something.”

North Jersey Media Group employees gather on Friday, Mar. 24, 2017 to say a fond farewell to Deirdre Sykes, who had been part of the newsroom for 30 years.

Sykes was a newsroom leader during the Sept. 11 attacks, helping to position teams of reporters in and around New York City and guiding the coverage of a special edition the afternoon of the attacks as well as in the days and weeks afterward.

For days, she stayed in the newsroom nonstop, sleeping on a cot and making sure that coverage never stopped and never faltered. And while that was true of that fateful day, it also held true in many, many other instances.

“Under conditions of unimaginable stress — 9/11, anthrax, plane crashes, hurricanes — she was unflappable,” said Lindy Washburn, The Record’s longtime health care reporter. “Reporters need that calm in the eye of a storm. I always felt the center would hold if Deirdre was in charge.”

Washburn recalled a time when she was writing about a medical malpractice lawsuit, a story slated for the next day’s paper, when new reporting came to light at the eleventh hour.

“She was not afraid to hold back a story, even when the layout artists had saved space and deadline was looming, if it didn’t seem ready,” Washburn said of Sykes. “The doctor being sued unexpectedly opened up about the case, giving me an entirely different perspective. We delayed publication so I could do an in-depth interview with the doctor, and the story was much better for it.

‘She’d always push for that last interview, the extra effort to get comment,’ Washburn said.

Record political columnist Charlie Stile said Sykes was such a stickler for detail that when she called to discuss his work, the first thing he would ask was “How bad is it?”

“I viewed her more than just an editor,” Stile said. “She was a rigorous, good natured and trusted collaborator.”

Even retired and dealing with her illness, Sykes would serve as a sounding board for reporters, sometimes inviting them to her home in Harrington Park, the north Bergen County community where her family had lived for four generations.

Sykes formed deep relationships with her colleagues, taking part in writing groups after-hours and working individually with reporters and editors as a mentor. She hand-picked editors for her team and set them up for success.

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“She was a guiding hand to the reporters and editors who worked with her,” said Christina Joseph Robinson, who worked for years with Sykes on The Record’s assignment desk. “I am so fortunate to have been mentored by her. I considered her more than a boss or colleague. She was my friend.”

Sykes was never far from journalism. She came back to The Record in an ad hoc capacity to serve as an editor on many of the Loved and Lost tributes to the thousands of New Jersey residents who died during the COVID-19 epidemic. Through that work, she got a chance to mentor a new generation of journalists.

“She was the biggest beating heart in a newsroom that was filled with them, inspiring everyone with her enthusiasm, intelligence, outrage, humor, nose for news, and sense of story,” said former Record Executive Editor Marty Gottlieb. “It would be impossible to number the journalists who count her as a primal mentor, teacher, and moral guide.”

Leadership came naturally, and Sykes embraced its challenges.

“Among her other prodigious talents, Deirdre was singular in her ability to focus on intricate detail while still seeing the big picture,” said former investigations and projects editor Tim Nostrand, a close friend for nearly 45 years. “She welcomed the opportunity to make big decisions and was rarely wrong.”

And all who were touched by her skill and guided by her advice have one memory in common:

Sykes’ unmistakable, contagious, stress-relieving laugh would cause even the most cynical journalist to look up and smile as it echoed through The Record’s massive newsroom in Hackensack and later in Woodland Park.

“Her laughter was infectious,” said Mac Borg, whose family owned the newspaper until 2016 when it was sold to Gannett. “She was very kind and thoughtful, but she was also quite precise in what she wanted. People understood they couldn’t be loose with facts or the language.

“When the time came to replace Marty as executive editor, she was a very easy choice,” Borg said.

Marty Gottlieb, Editor of The Record is honored in a newsroom gathering of The Record and Herald News as staff members thanked him. Mr. Gottlieb was

joined by his wife, Janet, and sons, Ben and Graham, as well as, Malcolm A. Borg, Chairman of the Board, North Jersey Media Group, which owns The Record; Stephen A. Borg, President and Publisher, North Jersey Media Group; and, Jennifer A. Borg, V.P. and General Counsel, North Jersey Media Group. Deirdre Sykes, Dir. of Assignment, presents a framed collage of front pages, then hugs Mr. Gottlieb. January 28, 2016.

Sykes and O'Neil met during his own time working in The Record newsroom.

“You could say Mac Borg was our Cupid,” O'Neil said. “It was in his newsroom 30 some years ago that Deirdre and I found ourselves and then found each other. Sparks flew. She made me the happiest, luckiest man I ever knew.

“When Deirdre, an only child, met my family of 11 children, in short order, my brother Colin told her, ‘The brothers took a vote. If this doesn't work out we're keeping you and getting rid of him!’ And the rest was history filled with love, laughter, brilliance and epic cooking. Thanks, Mac.”

Deirdre Sykes was born on Oct. 22, 1954, the only child of Louis and Frances Sykes (nee Walters), who both predeceased her. She grew up in Harrington Park where she attended the now-closed school at Our Lady of Victories Church, before graduating in 1972 from Holy Angels Academy in Demarest. Her college years were spent at Cornell University, where she received a degree in political science with honors.

Portrait of Deidre Sykes 2007

She and O'Neil were married for 31 years, sharing their beautiful home with their three cherished dogs, Roxie, Daisy, and Ricky — and cats Ollie and Casey, a stray they brought home with them from a Caribbean vacation.

Previous Events

Memorial Visitation

JAN **19**. 4:00 PM - 9:00 PM (ET)

Barrett Leber Funeral Home
148 Dean Dr
Tenafly, NJ 07670
(201) 568-8043
<https://www.barrettleberfuneralhome.com/>

Memorial Funeral Mass

JAN **20**. 10:00 AM (ET)

Our Lady of Victories Harrington Park
150 Harriot Ave
Harrington Park, NJ 07641

Tribute Wall



“ *Sweet Tranquility Basket was purchased for the family of Deirdre Sykes O'Neil.*



January 18, 2023 at 05:28 PM



“ *Emerald Garden Basket was purchased for the family of Deirdre Sykes O'Neil.*



January 18, 2023 at 03:40 PM



“ *Arrive in Style was purchased for the family of Deirdre Sykes O'Neil.*



January 16, 2023 at 01:35 PM



“ *My Funny Valentine, sweet comic valentine, you made me smile with my heart.
Each day with you was Valentine's Day.
XXXOOO
Kevin*

Kevin O'Neil - January 05, 2023 at 08:04 AM