

Hall of Fame photojournalist loses job at Columbia Daily Tribune in last round of Gannett layoffs

Donald Edward Shrubshell never married. Perhaps the constant squawking of police scanners in his car and home had something to do with it.

For all of his working life until just recently, Shrubshell was a newspaper photographer. In August he reached the pinnacle of his career, learning he would be inducted into the Missouri Photojournalism Hall of Fame.

Just days later, in a bitter ironic twist, he was told during a video call that he was being laid off from his job as the lone, fulltime news photographer at the Columbia Daily Tribune.



Brian Kratzer, an MU journalism professor, holds up t-shirt "Free Don Shrubshell" at the Hall of Fame presentation. (Photo courtesy of J.B. Forbes)

Describing the conversation he had with a Des Moines-based Gannett human resources person, Shrubshell said he was told,

“This isn’t anything that you’ve done wrong. This just all has to do with, you know, the financial situation.”

It was not a total surprise. In early August, Gannett reported second quarter results showing a loss of \$54 million. Layoffs were coming at USA Today and at 200 of Gannett’s regional daily newspapers that included the Tribune.

Beginning on Aug. 12, Gannett began telling roughly 400 employees including Shrubshell they no longer had jobs. [Gannett also informed its staff](#) that an additional 400 vacant positions will go unfilled.

Shrubshell, who will turn 67 in November, received a nine-page severance letter that said he’d receive his salary for the next six months. He believes those who told him he was out of a job knew about his forthcoming photojournalism honor.

Scott Swafford, a former assistant city editor at the Tribune, nominated Shrubshell for the Hall of Fame in April. He said he had been trying to get Shrubshell to go along with the idea for the past three or four years. He deserved to be inducted, Swafford said, because of his longevity (41 years), diligence and “intense curiosity.”

“You can’t teach that; you have to have it,” said Swafford, a former professor at the University of Missouri School of Journalism. The selection committee’s approval of the nomination was unanimous.

Swafford said it was “preposterous” that a newspaper would lay off one of the best photographers in the state. Tribune Managing Editor Kevin Graeler directed questions about Shrubshell’s departure to Gannett’s corporate public relations office.

A Gannett spokesperson wrote by email, “As a matter of policy, we do not discuss personnel or former employees.”

A memorable image

Perhaps the most famous photo Shrubshell has captured, or at least the one that has been seen by the most people, came very early in his career, when he was just 25 years old and working his first job at the Maryville, Missouri Daily Forum. It was July 10, 1981, and the angry townspeople in the village of Skidmore, 15 miles west, had taken the law into their own hands.

In front of dozens of onlookers, Ken Rex McElroy, a violent local troublemaker, was ambushed in broad daylight in the cab of his parked pickup. The public vigilante killing of Skidmore's town bully would later be recounted in books and movies because to this day no one has identified McElroy's killer or killers. The case remains unsolved.



Homeless men Jimbo, right, and Rick drink after holding signs asking for food or money near the highway 63 and Interstate 70 intersection Jan. 6, 2004.



Maryville police officers and spectators look over the murder scene in front of the D&G Tavern in Skidmore, Mo. July 10, 1981, where Ken Rex McElroy was shot to death while sitting in his pickup truck with his wife Trena.

That day Shrubshell had been dispatched to photograph a woman who had won a golf tournament when he heard police on his scanner calling for an ambulance in Skidmore. It took some time for him to convince his editors to pursue what had happened, and to this day Shrubshell believes he could have gotten better photos if he had arrived sooner.

What Shrubshell photographed was McElroy's bullet-riddled Silverado with window glass shattered and blood staining the cab's bench seat. Seen through the truck's broken window is the sign for the D and G tavern where McElroy had just bought a six-pack. As he snapped the shutter, Shrubshell heard the sheriff say, "Goddammit people, you didn't have to blow him away!"

In the years that followed, when the story was recounted, Shrubshell's image appeared in publications like the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and others. Do an Internet [search](#) today of "Ken Rex McElroy" and you can find Shrubshell's picture. But he gets no credit.

"I happened to be at the right place at the right time," Shrubshell recalled. "It never won any awards. I never sent it in for a contest for anything back in those days."

The Missouri Photojournalism Hall of Fame was established in 2005 at the suggestion of Bill Miller Sr., publisher of the Washington Missourian. Miller believed the workers who put images of the news into newspapers deserved some recognition.

Since its founding, the Hall of Fame has inducted 74 photographers, living and dead. The Missouri Press Association is in charge of it, and the photographers' work is on display at the State Historical Society of Missouri's Center for Missouri Studies in Columbia.

Dark Room work

Shrubshell grew up in Maryville in northwest Missouri and as a high school senior he got a job at the Daily Forum through a program called Cooperative Occupational Education. He started as a janitor and worked in the mailroom, the print shop and the camera room where page negatives were created and burned onto aluminum press plates.

Soon he found himself in the dark room and enjoyed it. It wasn't long before he was shooting house fires and car wrecks and selling them to the newspaper for \$2.50 each.

"I didn't have any formal journalism experience," Shrubshell said. "I couldn't string two sentences together but I could take pictures. I basically learned photography by shooting hundreds and hundreds of rolls of black and white film and reading everything I could on photography."

Four months after he took the famous McElroy photo, Shrubshell became a full time news photographer at the Arkansas City, Kansas Traveler. While working full time, he obtained an associates degree in journalism at a junior college.

After working nearly ten years at the Traveler, Shrubshell moved on to newspapers in Hutchinson, Kansas and Cape Girardeau, Missouri. But he wanted to get closer to his Maryville roots. Each November, when he would drive to

northwest Missouri to hunt deer, Shrubshell would stop at the Columbia Daily Tribune to inquire about openings. In 1998, there was one.

“Nobody worked harder than he did,” said Jim Robertson, who was managing editor at the time. “The magic about ‘Shrubby’ he was always there. He lived with a police scanner. I think he beat the cops there sometimes.

“He knew all the cops. And they knew him,” Robertson said. “I think he probably got some consideration that other newer guys didn’t get. He was a great community photographer.”

Shrubshell would patrol Columbia’s streets, parks and the university campuses scouting prospects for a feature photo. He sought out homeless people, befriended them and managed to photograph them in their camp.

One photo shows two men, Rick and Jimbo, in the hovel they had built out of plywood in a wooded area near the intersection of U.S. 63 and I-70. Shrubshell got the picture after drinking a beer with the two men.

“They started laughing just because I took a drink with them,” Shrubshell said. “I was in with them right then.”

Free Don Shrubshell

In January 2005, Columbia police officer Molly Bowden was fatally shot by a motorist during a traffic stop. Shrubshell arrived on the scene and was doing his job, when police expanded the size of the crime scene and erected yellow police tape behind him. A police officer tackled Shrubshell and arrested him for being inside the crime scene boundary.

Police confiscated Shrubshell’s equipment, which was later delivered to the Tribune’s offices. A newspaper columnist had a t-shirt made up with the words “Free Don Shrubshell.” The charges were eventually dropped. Bowden’s family later thanked

Shrubshell for a photo he captured of an officer saluting Bowden during a public visitation in the Mizzou Arena.

Years of experience gave Shrubshell confidence to know what it takes to create a remarkable photo. When Willie Nelson came to Columbia in 2009 to perform at a downtown festival, Shrubshell talked Nelson's stage manager into allowing him to use a stepladder to capture an image from behind the performer with a packed crowd watching.

While on assignments for the Tribune in Columbia, Shrubshell would sometimes encounter students from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism. "It's not too late to change your major," Shrubshell would advise them.

Shrubshell has a son, Brody, 22, who is on his second tour as a wheeled vehicle mechanic in the U.S. Army. "I don't think I would tell my son to go into journalism," Shrubshell said. Now that he's unemployed, Shrubshell says he might seek part time work different from journalism or photography.

After a lifetime of hunting news pictures, Shrubshell searches for words that describe these two concurrent developments: a journalistic honor and a forced departure from his craft. He realizes that the opportunity to choose a career path like he did might no longer exist.

"People were photographed because life happened to them," Shrubshell said. "Documenting people in a small town is important, but that's not happening. There's always going to be journalism but it's changed a lot. And it's sad."

Will there be news photographers in the future to be inducted into a Hall of Fame? With Shrubshell gone, the Tribune's remaining reporters take photos with their cell phones.

Terry Ganey is a former St. Louis Post-Dispatch investigative reporter and former St. Louis editor for Gateway Journalism Review.