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The Inspiration That Was Peter Jennings

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When Peter Jennings's name comes up, the editor of The New York Sun likes to tell his colleagues about one glorious fall day in Princeton when a post-picnic soccer game was formed on a friend's front lawn. Half a dozen adult men on either side of the editor's second son, who was all of 6 years old at the time, took the field. Suddenly, someone booted the ball so robustly down the lawn that, when it caught the 6-year-old in the solar plexus, it knocked him several yards down the field, depositing him at the feet of a tall, handsome player who turned out to be Jennings. The editor watched from the sidelines as the great newsman scooped up the lad, helped him get his wind back, and, rather than escorting him out of the game, set him up for the next shot, making sure he neither quit nor got run over.

Well, it turns out that Jennings inspired and encouraged an enormous number of people over the course of his life, as illuminated in a new book, "A Reporter's Life" (PublicAffairs), edited by Kate Darnton, Lynn Sherr, and Kayce Freed Jennings. The book offers a collective portrait, weaving an oral history of this debonair figure who died of lung cancer in 2005.

Colleagues, friends, and family gathered Thursday to celebrate the new book at ABC Television's Times Square studios, as screen images flashed of Jennings's career. ABC News's president, David Westin, said the book brought together a lot of facets of Jennings's life. Publisher Peter Osnos told the crowd that Jennings had been an investor in PublicAffairs. "We were his second personal investment," Mr. Osnos said. "His first was in a failed salsa company." The audience laughed.

As a youth, Jennings showed early on-air talent, and he hosted a radio music show for children before becoming a bank teller. He failed as America's youngest anchor in 1965, before heading to the

Middle East to gain experience as a foreign correspondent. He returned to the ABC anchor desk in 1978, where he remained for more than a quarter century. A jazz radio announcer, Sheila Anderson, told the Sun how at charity events at his home on Long Island, the ABC anchor would describe how his broadcaster father used to host parties where the local butcher and prime minister came, and that Jennings wanted the same. This book reception, too, had a cross-section, with jazz musicians, for example, rubbing shoulders with the schools chancellor, Joel Klein. A Fox News host, Bill O'Reilly, said he liked Jennings's candor. Senator Mitchell, a Democrat of Maine, and his wife, Heather, recalled how Jennings spoke at parents' night at St. Bernard's School the day before Jennings received his cancer diagnosis.

Filmmaker Mark Obenhaus told the Sun that Jennings was one of the last television journalists who could legitimately call himself a documentary filmmaker. ABC's chief investigative correspondent, Brian Ross, said that for Jennings, who began in radio, sound was important to the story. In the book, Jennings recalls learning how to cover a funeral from his father, "who used to say to me, be sure we hear the horse's hooves" as the carriage goes by.

Readers encounter entertaining anecdotes, such as how during commercials Jennings would answer e-mail messages or call a neighbor to ask, "Do you want sausages for the cookout this weekend, or should we have hot dogs?" Jennings anchored in his pajama bottoms the initial night of the Iraq war. Public relations strategist Tom Goodman recalled the time Jennings was stuck in the elevator minutes before the show. While covering the events of September 11, 2001, Jennings moved the nation by famously suggesting that if viewers had children in some other part of the country, that they call them up and see how they're doing. Cokie Roberts perhaps overall captures Jennings best: He was, she noted, "the voice of civilization on television."