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« The Biz

Peter Jennings' "Dedication" Remembered in New Book

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It's been more than two years since ABC News anchor Peter Jennings succumbed to lung cancer. Yet his presence in TV news was so powerful, it's hard not to expect him to show up when a big story breaks. Within two days after Jennings died on August 7, 2005, the news division that he dominated went to work interviewing his friends and colleagues. Those voices have been collected in a new book from PublicAffairs called *Peter Jennings: A Reporter's Life*. It brings back memories of Jennings' warmth, dedication and even his ability to stress out coworkers with his intensity. Kayce Freed Jennings is now a partner in the Documentary Group, which evolved out of her late husband's production company. She recently shared her thoughts about Jennings with the Biz.



Peter Jennings and Kayce Freed by Jemal Countess/WireImage.com

TVGuide.com: It's been more than two years since you lost Peter. I think people want to know how you've been doing.

Freed Jennings: My life is good. He left me with a lot of good things. He's still with me all the time. I hope and assume he always will be. We were almost inseparable for 10 years. So he's not going anywhere. He made me a better, smarter and more courageous person.

TVGuide.com: What helped you deal with the grief after his death?

Jennings: The way we refashioned Peter's company (PJ Productions) into the Documentary Group helped a lot. The fact that his children are very much a part of my life helped a lot. The book, which I didn't want to do for the first year, was hard at times, but has also been sort of wonderful, because the book brings him to life.

TVGuide.com: This book came out of the TV interviews done with Peter's colleagues in the days after his death. But there are a lot of his words in it, too.

Jennings: I felt strongly that it was missing Peter's voice. So we went back and pulled quotes from Peter's letters, interviews, speeches he'd given and transcripts. We wove his voice through the narrative.

TVGuide.com: When you meet people today and they find out you were married to Peter, what do they tell you?

Jennings: People say they miss his presence. They trusted him. They needed him. They watched him every night. But then there's the other side — people I meet on the streets, or in a store or in a taxi who met Peter on the street and not as a newscaster. When I gave my credit card to a woman in a store and she saw my name, she told me a story about how Peter had seen her carrying heavy bags and walked her home with her bags. There are people who remember Peter's small, generous gestures, people who never met him and never worked with him. In a way that's more moving. It is very gratifying to know that he had an impact on people, not only as an anchorman but as a human being, as a man.

TVGuide.com: Was there anything you've learned about him that surprised you as you were putting the book together?

Jennings: There are individual stories I didn't know, wonderful and intimate stories from out in the field. One of my favorites is how longtime cameraman Rupen Vosgimorukian talks about being under fire with Peter [in Sarajevo during the late 1980s]. In the middle of it all, Rupen turned to Peter and said, "You don't have to do this anymore. Why don't you stay back in New York and stay safe?" Peter didn't answer him until several hours later, when he sidled up to Rupen and whispered in his ear, "To inform." But what I've learned most was the sense that people knew him. They understood him and saw what I saw in him.

TVGuide.com: How are Peter's son and daughter doing?

Jennings: They're just great. They both live in New York. They have the very best of Peter: They have his passion, they have his compassion, they have his sense of adventure. Chris works at *The New Yorker*. Lizzie is in graduate school at Columbia.

TVGuide.com: You're contributing the earnings from this book to the Peter Jennings Foundation.

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Jennings: It's a small, family foundation Peter and I started several years ago. In Peter's life, fairness was very important. So what we try to do is support organizations that do their best to help level the playing field by giving opportunity to people who are underserved.

TVGuide.com: Who benefits from it?

Jennings: Public education. Homelessness. Early childhood programs for underserved communities.

TVGuide.com: What projects does the Documentary Group have in the pipeline?

Jennings: We're doing two films for ABC. We have the film *Steep*, the last project we started with Peter. It's a theatrical release about mountain skiing and the skiers who do it. That's going to be released in theaters on Dec. 21. *Operation Homecoming*, which Richard Robbins produced, is based on letters written by soldiers who served in Iraq. It has already been seen, but it's opening the International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam later this month. We're working with PBS on a series about the history of prime-time television. We're doing a film on Marquis de Lafayette. We're continuing work on a series of educational films funded by the Annenberg Foundation about constitutional issues.

TVGuide.com: Documentary work was very important to Peter. When you work on these films, do you find yourself asking yourself, "What would he have done?"


Jennings: I don't find myself asking — I find him telling me. I don't have to stop and think about it. And I hope that I can do it. Sometimes I can't. He was much braver than me in many ways. But he gave me more courage than I had before.

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