

"I got fired, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt!"

BY TIM BULLARD

In last month's POINT, Tim Bullard wrote a story about a truck stop in Marlboro County suspected of being a bordello. Bullard, a reporter at the Florence Morning News, submitted the piece to POINT after his editor pulled him off the story. After the story ran in POINT, Bullard was fired.

Managing Editor Frank Sayles said that Bullard was fired for violating company policy, since Bullard gathered the information for the story at the expense of the Florence Morning News and gave it to another publication.

Bullard, a certifiably free spirit, worried that he might be terminated for giving the story to POINT, but he felt that telling the story was worth the risk.

"I don't want to work for a paper that is afraid to tell the truth," he said.

The truth in this matter is a tangled web that POINT was better positioned to untangle than was a small-town daily—especially one recently sued for libel.

In retrospect, what POINT has learned since running the story supports the decision to run it. Bullard's thoughts on the matter are reflected below.

Rotting ham hocks masked the putrid smell of two brothers' corpses buried beneath the shack, and the secret of a crack addict, as beer crackled my lid. The murderer had nearly cut off a woman's head after she grabbed at a bag of crack last January. The sheriff had called me to the scene on my day off; the suspect had confessed.

As I sit in the unemployment line, I recall the warmth of my crackling black Rockports the coroner said to burn since a corpse there had AIDS.

I'm here because of "Pro's & Cons," a story that ran in the February POINT.

Primordial tension, shame cloaked in ersatz confidence; a black guy behind me breaks in line ahead of me like there's no tomorrow.



[February 1994]

"Goddamnit! What is this talk back shit!"

There is a big lump in my throat, the one I always get when I'm on the verge of being fired. Swallowing will telegraph weakness. There's a shortness of breath, a constriction of facial muscles and the sphincter. Somebody holding my head below water. Drowning in the Irby Street office of Florence Morning News' Managing Editor Frank Sayles.

I ask why he is cursing me, to hint that continuation would mean trouble. Nobody curses me.

"Goddamnit, because I want to, that's why!"

(Good enough reason, Skeebo, you crimson-checked Jabba the Hut Roger Ebert look-alike.)

"Let me tell you something," he says. "You are this close to me kicking you out of the building. I thought you were a team player. (Long pause.)"

"You're off the whorehouse story. I'm assigning it to someone else. You'll get some credit. But from here on you are to make no more telephone calls and ask no more questions about the Trucker's Motel. You got it?"

I wasn't getting fired after all. He was just busting my chops. Trying to look confident and nonplussed under nihilistic circumstances is virtually impossible, like a blind man trying to cheat at poker. You see, a \$1.5 million libel suit against our paper was in appeals. My head was throbbing like a cam at the Lake View Dirt Track Speedway after a night of drinking and vomiting.

I had called the WBTW TV-13 call-in show Talk Back to ask Democratic gubernatorial candidates what they thought about prostitution, since I was doing an investigative story on it in Marlboro County. This was not Georgetown's Sunset Lodge.

I had first seen a letter from a state prisoner on an assistant editor's desk. Sayles worked with me for several weeks but began to drag his feet when it came to trotting my two stories to the company lawyer for review. Having called the bordello owner, now I was out on a snapping limb my boss was sawing off at the trunk. A photographer had taken a

Florence Morning News publisher John Miller had told me. "The unemployment line is full of comedians."

A blue cap perched on his head, Horace Page of Dillon County tries to smile as I repeat that last sentence, but his mind at 9:15 a.m. is on his former job at Dixiana Inc.

"I'd rather be working. I miss the crowd too. When you get used to a job, you meet a lot of friends. It was a temporary layoff. I never had lost a job."

With 34 years at Dixiana, Page admits to no fancy education. Now he fishes. "My nephew always goes with me," he brags.

A three-year-old's blond hair falls softly as her mother combs it, and Dad's chin is in his hand, leaning over the Employment Security Commission counter. A black dude in shades has a Fighting Irish sweatshirt on.

Groans, 12-deep in line. Ten-minute courtships, fake pine panel decor, long faces, blurring phones, a pregnant woman, a short-staffed elderly clerk taking on acid-tongued jobless. It's like a doctor's office.

Most souls appear calm and quiet, smiles absent, raging brains popping with pathos, angst and pitiful, webbed dignity, proletariat stench, the weary aura of desperate despair and the abbreviated eye contact of caged deer.

Eager to hock my Eagle Scout medal, a Ford Repo Man hovers. A mental health visit; the first \$174 Employment Security Commission check arrives—I pay my landlady. "Got a job yet?" at the bar;

Employment Security Commission sign reads "Disturbing behavior will not be tolerated in this office, violators prosecuted, enforced by the sheriff."

Duty, honor, nobility.

My career strobes.

Gregory Allman's mid-interview powder break; Merle Watson squeezing a cutter, slicing the Watauga Democrat van's stuck foot brake cable outside a mountain studio so I can get the unchecked-out van back; a Jesse Helms interview about a death squad leader; helping EMS on a Boone trucker suicide story; Tiny Tim singing "Tiptoe" over the phone; blowing drunken smoke over Sam Donaldson's on-camera shoulder at Wake Forest's Bush-Dukakis debate; Patient Zero; David Beasley's off-the-record answer about the bordello; the cathouse owner telling me once Randy Travis had visited. False advertising is better than none at all, as business booms.

No one has a franchise on the truth/except a liar! :<

photo by Mark Ochal



color photo. Story tagline: "MAIN STORY. SUNDAY.DNE1\$."

Reprimand: I wrote an editorial column on the killed bordello story. Metro Editor Bob Pepalis said to ask no more questions or "out the door."

Three days after the POINT story ran, I was fired.

"Information on a news story which Mr. Bullard gathered while on Florence Morning News time and while acting as a representative for the Florence Morning News was given without authorization to another publication," Sayles wrote the Employment Security Commission.

I was a bad man after Reprimand #1 and six more warnings.

We were told we could freelance.

"I don't want to see any of this on your expense sheet."