Gilbert L. 'Gil' Watson III

Gil Watson III, who led the Baltimore Sun's metropolitan staff during a period of groundbreaking watchdog reporting, has died. (JED KIRSCHBAUM, Baltimore Sun)

By Frederick N. Rasmussen
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Gilbert L. "Gil" Watson III, a former longtime Baltimore Sun editor who led the metropolitan staff during a period of groundbreaking watchdog reporting in the 1980s and 1990s and also was assistant managing editor of Sunday and daily features, died Saturday at Shore Medical Center in Chestertown of pulmonary fibrosis. He was 70.

"Gil may not have had the title of managing editor or executive editor, but in many ways, he was the center, the heart and soul, of the newsroom universe," said Jan B. Warrington, a former Sun features editor who worked closely with Mr. Watson and is now a Baltimore County psychologist.

"In fact, his influence was felt throughout the paper, in many departments other than the newsroom. He knew everyone in the building and was in perpetual motion," said Ms. Warrington. "He was a natural, leader, a dynamo — fierce, demanding, competitive — who had impeccable news judgment, a larger-than-life personality, and an infectious laugh."

She added: "So many of us owe so much to him. He was, simply, the embodiment of The Baltimore Sun. I consider myself fortunate to have had him as a supervisor, mentor and friend."
David Michael Ettlin, who worked on The Sun's rewrite desk before becoming night editor, was a friend of Mr. Watson's.

"What I really liked about Gil Watson was that he was passionate about what he did," recalled Mr. Ettlin, who retired from the newspaper several years ago. "He was passionate about the newspaper and its mission. He took it very seriously, and he found great joy in doing it. Whenever there was a big story to cover, he rose to the occasion. He was the kind of boss where you wanted to do as much as you possibly could to do the best possible job."

The son of Gilbert Loren Watson 2nd, founder of The Chester River Press in Chestertown, and Marie-Louise "Mal" Watson, an educator, Gilbert Loren Watson III was born in Chestertown and was raised on his family's farm in Quaker Neck overlooking the Chester River.

He was a graduate of the Hill School in Pottstown, Pa., and earned a bachelor's degree in 1966 from Williams College, and a master's degree in creative writing from the Johns Hopkins University.

Mr. Watson, who was also known as "Gibby," worked briefly at the News American before joining The Sun's copy desk in 1968. Four years later, he was promoted to news editor, with principal responsibility for the newspaper's front page.

In addition to his other duties, during the 1970s, Mr. Watson, who was a bicyclist, wrote the Wheeling column that was published in The Sunday Sun.

Named metropolitan editor in 1979, Mr. Watson oversaw the reorganization and expansion of the newspaper's Maryland coverage.

He supervised a number of major reporting projects including the "Shadow Government" investigation during the administration of Mayor William Donald Schaefer that operated a multimillion-dollar development loan bank with non-elected trustees. From 1979 to 1981, Steven M. Luxenberg served as city editor under Watson.

"When we were doing the 'Shadow Government,' it was basically Gil, Steve Luxenberg and me," recalled C. Fraser Smith, the City Hall reporter who wrote the investigative series under the direction of the two editors, now news director at WYPR. "Luxenberg and I joined forces, but Gil was the leader. He was attentive to all of our needs. He was always attentive to the needs of reporters. He found the essence of the story in the weeds of the story."

When John W. Hinckley Jr. tried to assassinate President Ronald W. Reagan in 1981, it was Mr. Watson who directed The Sun's extensive coverage of the would-be assassin's activities before the assassination attempt.

"Gil had the ability to get people to do things, make extra phone calls, and was always revved up on breaking stories. He could cajole people into doing it. He made you feel as though he was there with you," said Rebecca L. Corbett, former Sun city editor and later assistant managing editor, who is now an assistant managing editor with The New York Times.

"He was always there with the troops, pushing you to go deeper in your reporting and exhaust every possibility. He pushed people to excel while making it fun," said Ms. Corbett. "He gave editors responsibility and autonomy. He made you feel as if you were a part of an incredibly exciting endeavor and that you would come back tomorrow and do it over and over again."

Mr. Watson was named assistant managing editor for features in 1982 but returned to the news side in 1992 as metropolitan editor.
"This was a man of such charisma and energy that an entire newsroom of reporters would work into the night just because he was sure we could land the story. And no one was going home if Gil thought we could get that story on the front page," said Sandra A. Banisky, a reporter who eventually became The Baltimore Sun’s deputy managing editor for news.

"‘Just one more call,’ he’d say. ‘One more call.’ He’d sit next to you. He’d pace. He’d offer to dial the phone. When you did get that source to confirm something, when the story did come together on deadline — and he’d already have called the composing room to plead for more time before the presses rolled — he’d be there shouting praise as if no other reporter in the world had ever produced a front-page story this wonderful," recalled Ms. Banisky, who now teaches journalism at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Mr. Watson’s post-deadline exuberance often took the form of jumping onto a chair and throwing his arms in the air.

"He had a great love of a story of any kind. His genius was that he could get you excited about it," said Mr. Luxenberg. "He had his favorite phrases when talking to reporters. He’d lower his head and look eye-to-eye at the reporter. ‘I can dig it, can you dig it?’ or ‘Here’s a question for you. Tell me what you think.’"

"He was defined by motion and always worked at least 12-hour days," said his wife of 18 years, Ellen Uzelac, a former Sun reporter. "He’d say, ‘You can sleep when you die.’"

At the time Mr. Watson left the newspaper in 2001, the former Otterbein resident was the newspaper’s weekend editor.

It was always Mr. Watson’s plan to return to his beloved Chestertown. An accomplished carpenter, he spent his time renovating old houses. He also became a world traveler.

He also took part in civic affairs and served as a member of the Chestertown Planning Commission and a vice president of the Chester River Association.

"He taught me about teamwork. He taught me that no work could be more wonderful than working with great colleagues on great journalism," said Ms. Banisky. "We were lucky to have worked in that time in that newsroom, all of us together, with him."

Plans for a celebration of Mr. Watson’s life to be held in Chestertown in the spring are incomplete.

In addition to his wife and mother, he is survived by two daughters, Molly Watson of Atlanta and Loren Watson of Brookline, Mass.; four sisters, Marcia Goldberg of Cockeysville, Durrie Chisholm and Molly Mears, both of Chestertown, and Helen Collison of Chadds Ford, Pa.; and four grandchildren. An earlier marriage to the former Joanna Pinder ended in divorce.

_Baltimore Sun reporters Colin Campbell, Joe Burris and researcher Paul McCordell contributed to this article._

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