

Featured Member

NBC/TV News Correspondent, George Lewis, Retires after 42 Years

Our featured member this month is George Lewis, 68, who just retired—sort-of—after 42 years as a correspondent for NBC News. George’s job has taken him to all 50 states and the far corners of the Earth—thirty some countries at last count.

Many of those places were trouble spots, starting with Vietnam in 1970. George was working as a reporter at the local NBC outlet in Los Angeles when he got tapped to join the network. “The bosses proclaimed, ‘here’s your ticket to Saigon,’ and I went,” George said.

His initial tour of duty was 18 months in Vietnam but George returned later to cover the fall of Saigon in April of 1975 as communist forces from the north converged on the southern capital.

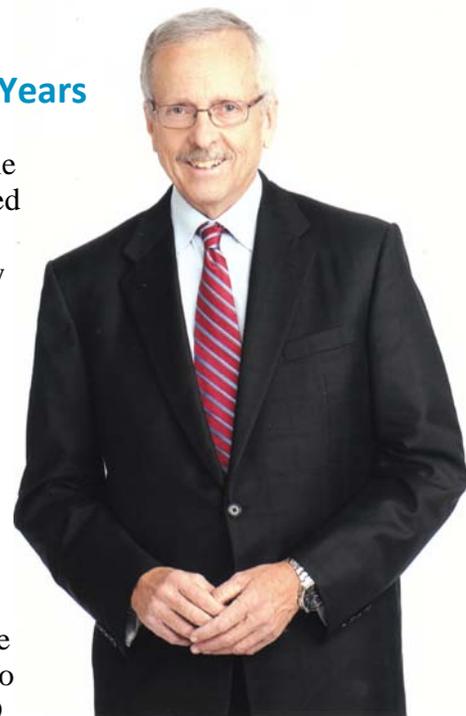
“I remember that evacuation flight out of Saigon very well,” said George. “We boarded a bus that we thought would take us to the U.S. Embassy, but there was a mob around the compound trying to get on the evacuation choppers. The Marines decided it was too dangerous to let us off there.”



April 29th, 1975: George (in foreground) and other journalists preparing to leave Saigon during the American evacuation

Instead, the bus took George and other American evacuees to the airport, where they discovered the place was being shelled by North Vietnamese artillery. “The shelling let up just long enough for us to get out of Dodge,” said George.

His other memorable assignments included the hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Iran when 52 Americans were held by Islamic radicals for 444 days. George was there for 66 of those days until the Iranians kicked all the foreign journalists out of the country. He was also present for the 1989 student revolt in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square that ended in a bloody massacre by the Chinese army.



December 31, 1979: George (back row, center) with NBC News crew in Teheran at NYE party. They were toasting with no glasses because the Islamic Republic had outlawed alcohol.

Domestic assignments have included coverage of the O.J. Simpson case in Los Angeles and the Olympics in L.A., Atlanta and Salt Lake.

George spent a couple of years in Washington, D.C., where he covered the State Department and the Pentagon. Naturally, he also covered politics,

traveling with George H.W. Bush running for Vice-President on the 1980 ticket with Ronald Reagan.

And what was the scariest thing George Lewis has had to face in his life? “Though I’ve been shot at in Vietnam, El Salvador, Lebanon, Romania, and other combat zones,” George said, “The scariest thing I ever confronted was my prostate cancer diagnosis in 2008.”

True to his calling as a journalist, George started researching the disease and the treatment options, doing a lot of reading, phoning doctors and prostate cancer survivors, asking lots of questions.

One of the books he came across was Bob Marckini’s “You Can Beat Prostate Cancer,” describing Loma Linda University Medical Center’s proton therapy program. George had actually been on news assignments at Loma Linda, documenting lifesaving work that the medical center was doing with small children.

“I was impressed,” said George, “with the caring attitude the staff at Loma Linda exhibited toward their patients. They really believe that stuff about ‘making man whole.’”

The next thing George did was to track down Bob Marckini and call him at home. “Bob was tremendously generous with his time,” said George, “and he kept telling me, ‘you’re not about to die from this disease. You’re going to get it treated and you’re going to be OK.’”



George with Bob near Bob’s home in Mattapoisett, MA

According to George, Bob also said, “Proton treatment is absolutely the best option. but don’t take just my word for it. Talk to other guys who’ve been through the program.” And with that, Bob sent George a list of prostate cancer survivors who had undergone proton therapy.

As George called around, he said the verdict was unanimous: the men he talked to were enthusiastic about their experiences. Their cancer was in remission, their PSA scores were great, and the side effects of the treatment were minimal.

So, that sealed the deal for George, who enrolled in the proton therapy program a few weeks later. George went on disability from his job at NBC News in Burbank and rented a room a short distance from the medical center.

A couple of weeks into his treatment, George said he hit upon the idea of doing a story about his “radiation vacation,” as his fellow patients referred to it.

“Some of my female colleagues in journalism have done stories about their breast cancer experiences,” said George, “as a way of increasing public awareness about the need for early detection. I thought it was about time that some guy stepped up to the plate about his prostate cancer treatment.”

When George first pitched the idea to his bosses at NBC News, they were concerned. “One of them told me, ‘hey, man, you’re being treated for cancer, shouldn’t you cool it?’” George said. “I told them I’m feeling great, I’m staying active and I’m ready to do this.”

What came out of that was a pair of reports on the Today Show and the NBC Nightly News documenting George’s time at Loma Linda. You can view these on our website, www.protonbob.com.

“The most gratifying part of that,” said George, “Was the response from other guys facing prostate cancer.” George said that when he returned to Loma Linda six months later for a checkup, a man approached him in the lobby and asked, “Aren’t you the NBC guy?”

“Guilty as charged,” George replied.

“I just want you to know,” the man said, “that you’re the reason I came here.”



George in his custom-fitted pod at LLUMC

George says the most satisfaction for a journalist is being able to make a positive difference in the lives of others. “And this time,” George said, “I felt I’d done my job.”

Now in retirement, George is about to take off for South America with his lovely Cecilia, a native of Ecuador. “Neither of us has been to Patagonia,” said George, referring to the rugged countryside in the south of Argentina and Chile, “So we’re going to spend some time exploring the place.”

George is also enjoying the time spent with his two daughters, Sarah and Katie and with his grandson Carter, Katie’s son. “I am truly blessed,” said George. “Life is good.”

George says he has drawn great inspiration from Loma Linda’s **Dr. Lynn Martell**, who tells patients, “I’m going to keep living until I die.”

“That’s my new motto,” said George.

And, because he can’t completely break off from being a reporter, George plans to return to NBC News for occasional assignments after taking six months off to enjoy life.

“I’m a news junkie,” George said, “A man at my age has to have at least one remaining vice.”