

## A visit to Frank X. Mullen's University of Nevada writing class

Story by Deidre Pike, UNR faculty



Frank X. Mullen with journalism student Dana Ashburner.

In the first few minutes of a Monday evening course in News Reporting and Writing, instructor Frank X. Mullen tells stories on topics ranging from a crying Virgin of Guadalupe statue to Adam Fortunate Eagle, who'll be speaking on campus Dec. 6.

When writing a Reno Gazette-Journal profile on Fortunate Eagle, Mullen called him a "lunatic" in the lede.

Students look puzzled. Mullen explains that Fortunate Eagle, a writer himself, wasn't offended.

"This is a man who scalped Columbus," Mullen says. "He offered the Pope his ring to kiss."

Scalped Columbus?

During a 1968 Columbus Day reenactment in San Francisco, Fortunate Eagle showed up to pull wigs from the actors representing Columbus and crew.

"He did a war dance and held Columbus' scalp in the air," Mullen says. "The next year, a SWAT team showed up to protect Columbus."

And the pope?

During a visit to Italy, Fortunate Eagle claimed the land for the indigenous Americans. Much publicity ensued, along with an invitation to visit the Pope.

"Adam kissed the Pope's ring and then held out his own turquoise ring for the Pope."

The pope looked stunned, then amused. The cardinals were appalled.

As for the crying statue, Mullen tells students that he hopes to visit the statue during a trip to California.

"I'd like to collect some of that blood and have it tested," he says.

"You think they'd let you do that?" a student asks.

"You'd have to be sneaky," Mullen replies, explaining that, in a similar crying statue incident, the alleged blood turned out to be rust. He wouldn't really steal the substance from the statue, he says. There's a fence around the statue.

"But I heard this story on NPR, and they said 'blood,'" Mullen says. "And that's National Public Radio, not a tabloid. So it's a miracle!"

Journalism student Molli Sullivan, 23, compared Mullen to broadcast pioneer Edward R. Murrow, a journalistic hero she learned about from watching the recent film, *Good Night, and Good Luck*.

"I love that Frank is so passionate about what he does," Sullivan says. "He's so committed to the truth and getting the story."

Mullen, a long-time reporter for the Reno Gazette-Journal, was named the Nevada Press Association's Outstanding Journalist of the Year in 2002 and in 2005. He's received the 2005 Freedom of Information Award from the California Newspapers Association and a 2004 Associated Press News Executive Council Award for public service.

Since 2001, Mullen has pursued the causes of the Fallon cancer cluster. He's broken stories about Nevada doctors involved in malpractice suits, pollution generated by burning live munitions at the Sierra Army Depot in Herlong, Calif., and accusations of animal mistreatment in the University of Nevada, Reno's College of Agriculture.

When he's not raking the muck, Mullen enjoys digging up historic stories about Nevada. His interests led to an innovative multi-part newspaper series on the travels of the ill-fated Donner party and a book, *The Donner Party Chronicles: A Day-By-Day Account of a Doomed Wagon Train*.

The reporter's talents for narration make him a natural for Great Basin Chautauqua performances—where he has appeared in character as Babe Ruth, Benedict Arnold and Albert Einstein.

Mullen was recruited to teach at the Reynolds School of Journalism in 1999 by occasional interim journalism dean Travis Linn.

"I came in to talk to Travis' classes and he said, 'You could do this,'" Mullen recalls. "So I taught [an intro news reporting class] and I loved it."

Mullen enjoys helping new writers learn the tricks of the trade.

"Some of them come in and can't put three words together," he says. "And by the end of the semester, they're pumping out copy. I like the feeling that I've helped."

Instructing students is a useful reflective tool, as well.

"Teaching makes me figure out why and how I interview people, write stories and think about stories," Mullen says. "When you do this for 30 years, you just do it. Thinking about the 'why' and 'how' have made me a better reporter and writer. It also makes it hard to forget the basics, because I have to teach those basics every day."

Dayna Ashburner, 21, calls Mullen "a tough teacher." She hopes to get a B or better in the class. She agrees with Sullivan that Mullen's real-life reporting experience make him a great teacher.

"Frank is always busting this guy or that," Sullivan says.

"He's the investigative reporter to a 'T'," Ashburner says.

Mullen breaks from storytelling for a moment to explain the syllabus. He tells students what to expect for the rest of the semester. They'll be writing a "speech" story after watching a videotaped speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. During an upcoming "lede-a-rama," students will be write 11 ledes, each with a follow-up paragraph, in 90 minutes.

Mullen reminds class members that they need to be working on final projects, stories that should run about six or eight pages long.

He refers to the project's due date as the "Night of the Dead Grandmothers."

"Because that's the day that students' grandmothers mysteriously die," Mullen says. "One student lost her grandmother three times. She had three grandmothers, I guess. So watch out for your grandmother. Keep her in the house. Make sure nothing happens to her."

And if, on the way to class with the writing assignment in hand, students are inadvertently hit by a bus?

"When the paramedics are surrounding you and they're shaking their heads, your last words should be .... " He holds out a quivering stack of papers and rasps: " 'Get this to Frank.' "

During class, students learn a news writing approach, used at Gannett newspapers, called the First Five Graphs. The approach involves covering four key elements—news, impact, context and human dimension—in the first five paragraphs of every story.

Speaking of news writing, students want to know: Is Mullen required to write a story every day at the Reno Gazette-Journal?

Mullen says he spends most of his time pursuing in-depth reporting projects. But the afternoon before class, a structure fire broke out in southwest Reno. Since the police beat reporter who would ordinarily cover such events had the day off, Mullen was assigned the story. He left for the fire at 2:30 p.m., spent two hours talking to evacuees, playing with their dogs and getting quotes from firefighters. He drove back to the office, wrote an eight-inch story and made it to the university with time to spare.

"I've been doing this 30 years," he tells students. "I can pop these out. People, when they first start writing, really suck. I

did. We learn by doing, by writing a lot. .... That's why we write, and that's why we read—to find out how others do it."