



Les Crystal, a guiding force behind NewsHour, dies at 85

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“Gentle.” “Calm.” “Generous.” If you ask someone to describe Lester Crystal, who helmed the PBS NewsHour as executive producer for more than 20 years, you’ll hear those words again and again. He died at age 85 on Wednesday after a battle with brain cancer and pneumonia, but in his long career as a leader in broadcast journalism, he stood out to his colleagues as a font of singular kindness, fortitude and grace in the hectic business of daily news.

“Les Crystal was a great journalist, leader, and advocate for the NewsHour and public media. But above all else, he was a warm and generous friend to all,” PBS NewsHour’s executive producer Sara Just said.

Whether he was giving instruction to a reporter in a war zone or just sitting and chatting, “he was always a rock of stability,” special correspondent Charlayne Hunter-Gault recalled.



Les, as he was known to us, arrived at the NewsHour at a critical moment, when the 30-minute The MacNeil/Lehrer Report expanded to an hour in 1983 — the first national newscast to do so. He helped create and steer the show's new model for telling more stories in depth each night.

“The NewsHour would never have been launched and sustained as successfully as it has been, and become the institution in the nation's journalism that it has, without Les,” former NewsHour co-anchors and company founders Robert MacNeil and Jim Lehrer said in a statement at his retirement a decade ago.

He ended his tenure as executive producer of The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour in 2005 and retired as president of MacNeil/Lehrer Productions in 2010, carrying on as a consultant for several more years. But his guiding force shaped generations of journalists still working at the NewsHour. “His decency elevated us all,” managing producer Patti Parson said.

Born in Duluth, Minnesota, on Sept. 13, 1934, Les earned two journalism degrees from Northwestern University's Medill School. He served as the executive producer of NBC Nightly News from 1973 to 1976 and president of NBC News from 1977 to 1979. At that network, among many other roles, he also supervised the coverage of two election nights and witnessed President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China.

While Les helped us create what we think of as the NewsHour family, he also had a loving family of his own — he was husband to Toby Wilson, father to Brad, Alan and Liz, and a grandfather.

Below, we share some of our memories and lasting lessons.



Les Crystal, former executive producer of The MacNeil/Lehrer Report, works in the newsroom along with then-deputy executive producer Linda Winslow.

Charlayne Hunter-Gault, special correspondent

One of the things that stands out for me was when Nelson Mandela was about to become president, he was speaking to a large crowd inside a hotel in downtown Jo'burg. And we had filmed that and sent it to the show. Les had used it in the top of the show. But all of a sudden, halfway through the program, the producer said, “Look out, look out the window!” And it looked as if all of Johannesburg if not South Africa was coming to the hotel. And I called Les and said, “Les! You've got to get this on!” He said, “We're halfway through the show!” I said, “Les, this is amazing!” And I told him and he said, “Get it done.” I got it done, and it was on the show before it

was over. I mean, that's how calm, cool, collected [he was], but with great editorial sensitivity and judgment and support for us in the field. Les was an amazing man.

Linda Winslow, former executive producer

He had an amazing ability to relate to other people as human beings, not as whatever their job description said they were. Our staff was one big extended family as far as Les was concerned. He shared our joys. He attended our weddings. He made our baby smile. And he mourned our losses. He was, in a word, a real mensch. And I'm going to miss him dearly.

Jeffrey Brown, correspondent

Les was a role model as a journalist, as a leader, most of all as a decent human being. He took me under his wing long ago, first as a mentor and then as a colleague and for many years as his friend. Everyone in the NewsHour family loved him and appreciated him. And how often can you say that about your boss? Well, we all did. Les, we love you and we thank you.

Paul Solman, economics correspondent

He was infuriatingly scrupulous, poring over scripts like a Medieval scribe. In league with MacNeil and Lehrer, even-handedness was an article of faith, never to let lapse. And look, he created the hourlong show — on a shoestring after years of commercial budgets — and set an atmosphere of honesty, accuracy, occasional flights of fancy, and loving thy neighbor unlike any enterprise I've ever heard of, much less had the privilege to work in.

Annette Miller, vice president of NewsHour Productions

In a business where nice guys finish last, Les was the notable exception. He was a brilliant TV news producer and a gentleman, but he was also a gentle man. Les was an amazing boss who cared about everyone who worked for him. I'll never forget when I had to leave my 1-year-old with her aunt and uncle while I worked on NewsHour's coverage of the Democratic convention in 2000. Despite the burden of overseeing our coverage, Les would stop by my desk every day to ask how the baby was doing. When my sister reported that the baby seemed quite distraught, Les immediately sent a car to pick her up and bring her to me. He was more than a boss; he was simply a wonderful human being.

Lee Koromvokis, producer

As I am sure nearly everyone who worked for him will attest, he was all you could wish for in a boss: kind, fair, even-tempered (also super smart and funny). As a bonus, he personally passed along Les's Rules, to which I still adhere: when and how much to L-cut, judicious use of dissolves, mainly to denote passage of time, and most important: no lip flap! But unlike almost everyone else, I had the great good fortune to continue working with Les Crystal for seven years after his retirement, when, as a consultant, he raised money for my little corner of the program, and became part of the Making Sen\$e team. There wasn't a script or a grant-related document that I didn't run by him, and that he didn't improve. I would say he cared as much about the work as I did, but I think he cared more. He was such a giving person — giving of his time, his energy, his patience, his wisdom — long after almost anyone else would have said enough, deep into what turned out to be his final illness, which he bore with such grace. I will miss him so much.

Anne Davenport, senior coordinating producer/CANVAS Arts and Culture

Les had the kind of presence that could calm nerves even in the most frenzied of newsrooms. This "I'm here to support you" demeanor was most unusual in a business often known for 'screamers.' He also never had a bad word for anyone. That, too, was remarkable. After viewing a piece, he would often affix a sticky note to the tape case (yes, we used videotape) with a compliment, and sign it. I collected those because it meant so much to know that Les believed a report was well-done. In looking for video and stills of him today, I found precious little because, though Les was a hugely influential leader, he didn't favor the spotlight. He focused his energy — and left his ultimate mark — by helping the program grow and evolve. And, for that, we can all be thankful.

Morgan Till, senior foreign affairs producer

I remember being brought to interview with Les, Jim Lehrer, and Linda Winslow in the summer of 1998. I recall marveling at the pictures of him with Nixon in China, in the era when network commercial news mattered. He was a serious man, and bent on the service of Public Broadcasting. We do this for a reason, and he instilled that in everyone with his baritone voice, sense of purpose, and grace. I am also sure I'd never met a cooler customer than Les Crystal. Were I a poker player, I'd have hated playing against him; he could tell you there was an alien attack on the planet with the same look and aspect as if he'd told you the Pope was Catholic. Cards, close to the vest. He was never, ever, quick to anger, though I incurred his understated and forceful wrath on more than one occasion. The thing I admired most about him — among the many, and endless: his integrity. It was like a force field that emanated from him; a

bright light that shone from within. I recall a lovely moment when we hosted the author of a biography of Sandy Koufax, on what was then The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer. The author, Jane Leavey, a fine journalist and biographer, told Les and me, and Terence Smith – for whom I worked – that she would make a heartfelt effort to get the legendary — and legendarily reclusive — Southpaw to give the NewsHour an interview. It was as if you'd told a giddy child that Superman was gonna land at their birthday party on the Fourth of July: I had never seen Les as joyful, anticipatory, happy. But, as luck would not have it, the mighty Koufax politely declined. Wait till next year, as ever. Years later, we would go to lunch occasionally and he would marvel at what I had become, and how Margaret Warner and I had survived yet another death-defying trip somewhere. "I'm not sure how you do it," he'd say. Les, I learned it from you. Your enduring memory is a blessing, and we are a better republic for your astonishing work. Say hi to Jim and Gwen for us all.

Murrey Jacobson, senior producer for national affairs

As a friend and former co-worker texted me today, what the world needs is more Les Crystals. I'm not sure how he was able to carry the weight of a nightly news program, manage the fires of never-ending deadline pressures and somehow, as everyone has said in their own way, deal with you as if you were all that mattered for that time. He was astoundingly calm and composed in every situation, gentle, kind and wise in equal parts. He also had a wry sense of humor that served us well. I remember as a younger producer when I was producing a tape piece about the sequencing of the human genome — a major scientific breakthrough — and he reminded me how difficult it would be to do a substantial piece: Remember, he told me, there's no footage of a piece of DNA having breakfast that you can film, no DNA protests or strikes that you can write to, no strand of DNA playing catch with a kid that can cover part of your track. He gave me some ideas about how to deal with that, smiled at me, gave me a gentle pat on the arm and then went off to do about 20 other tasks that lay ahead of him that day.

Lorna Baldwin, general assignment producer

Les Crystal was the executive producer when I began my NewsHour career as a lowly desk assistant. I watched in awe back then as he corralled the news into an hourlong program each night, all with a level of kindness and generosity that I've yet to see duplicated. He led our newsroom through some of the most turbulent times – 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the economic collapse of 2008 – and again, there was always that warmth and kindness at the heart of every meeting and every interaction, no matter the gravity of the story. During the Iraq war, I'd made it to the position of tape producer. As he did many nights, Les would sit in the newsroom watching the program and comment about pieces as they aired. We'd all listen in for his softly spoken opinion and then furiously message each other with what Les thought because it was that important. When my first big tape aired, Les said: "She gets it." Les never knew how much those three little words meant to me. They meant the world.

Diane Lincoln Estes, producer

Producing live television is often stressful and the pressure can bring out the worst in people. Les was always gentle and kind even under the most tense circumstances. He could not have been more patient with me as a young producer finding her footing. For that, and for his useful advice (e.g. don't over-use dissolves!), I'll be forever grateful. I'll miss you, Les.

Dave Coles, deputy senior producer for national affairs

Les Crystal was a consummate television news professional and a gentleman, a guiding force at the NewsHour and for many of us who worked for him.

Jeffrey Kaye, former correspondent from KCET

I'll always be grateful for the opportunities he provided me. I will also never forget his supportive and disarming manner and his uncanny ability to make it sound that even when he was delivering bad news (generally around financial issues), you could come away thinking it was a compliment.

Mike Rancilio, senior vice president and general manager

I had the great fortune of working closely with Les at MacNeil/Lehrer Productions beginning in 2012. He demonstrated exceptional intelligence, kindness, decency, and generosity each day spent together. In a relatively short period of time, Les had as great an influence on me — both professionally and personally — as anyone I've known. I expect to continue to draw upon my experience and relationship with Les. And I doubt I'll ever meet a more thoughtful and kind person. My condolences to his wonderful wife Toby and their wonderful children and family.

Chris Lane, vice president, WETA technology & engineering

Les Crystal was a consummate professional. As the NewsHour EIC & Director of Operations, I worked with Les on a daily basis until he retired in 2010. Whether it was a political convention or a sit-down interview with the president, Les was calm, controlled and very much in charge. Even when we had technical challenges, Les would remain composed in the moment, instilling a mindset of excellence and trusting the staff around him to get the job done.

Debra Butler, archivist, media assets

I am heartbroken to hear about the passing of Les Crystal. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with Les during his time at the NewsHour. He was wonderful to work with and was very kind and easygoing. My thoughts and prayers go out to his family. He will be sorely missed.

Kathleen McCleery, former deputy executive producer

He was the quintessential executive producer. Not many journalists master the art of management, but Les did. He would offer criticism by buffering it with a compliment first and follow with a direct (never personal) critique aimed at improvement. He wasn't a micromanager. Assigned a task, we knew we were trusted to fly on our own. He taught me a lot. He was a mentor, a colleague, and a friend, and I'm forever thankful.

Mike Mosettig, former foreign affairs senior producer

I cannot imagine what my life would be but for Les. We had 40 years together at NBC and then NewsHour. Terribly sad for me. We shared many stories and journalistic adventures together but there is one that is etched in my mind. My mother died in England in 1984. After the funeral, I was in London and there was a phone call where I was staying. "It is for you," the person said, and I thought who even knew I was here at this number. It was Les calling to ask how I was doing. One rarely has that special a moment of a boss.

Toni Hamner, production comptroller

My sincere condolences go out to Toby and his family. Les was kind, thoughtful, and a wonderful person to work with. He will be truly missed.

Ghada Mashamoun, WETA — director, Office of the President & CEO

I worked with Mr. Crystal briefly as a NewsHour intern at MacNeil/Lehrer Productions. He was authentic and sincere in mentoring those around him. He was a valuable anchor and guide through the times when we all needed someone to point us in the right direction. He had the ability to see someone's potential and he was an expert in bridging communications between younger and older generations. To Mr. Crystal: Sir, with my utmost respect and admiration — thank you for all the valuable lessons you taught me along the way. Thank you for laying the foundation for what the NewsHour is today and for generations to come.

Travis Daub, director of digital

Les Crystal was a broadcast pioneer and revolutionary, and the PBS NewsHour wouldn't exist today without him. Les had a passion to see the NewsHour evolve and expand across television and digital platforms, probably rooted in his earliest work to create the first hourlong national TV broadcast. That same passion pushes our journalism forward today. But most of all, Les was gentle, wise and generous as a colleague and leader. He will always be missed.

Leah Clapman, executive director of PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Labs

I was lucky enough to work with Les on the 6th floor. He'd stop by my office to get updates on Student Reporting Labs, talk about his children and grandchildren and keep up with my own children, who he's known since they were born. The way he talked with enthusiasm and urgency about education and our fledgling student journalism program always gave me a boost of needed confidence. He was humble and soft-spoken, and yet his vast experience and wisdom shined through, all the time. He introduced me to big funders and always treated the staff and students he met with genuine interest, kindness and an infectious optimism about the future that I will do my best to carry forward.

Patti Parson, managing producer

I find I am beyond words to describe what Les meant, as a boss, colleague and friend. I am thinking of all he taught me, not just about journalism but about leadership, generosity and graciousness. Even when he had to do a layoff, the person affected told me he was so gracious and kind, they couldn't get mad at him. His decency elevated us all.

By — Molly Finnegan