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'Give Light and the People Will Find Their Own Way'

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'Give Light and the People Will Find Their Own Way'

By Rick Brunson
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, June 10, 2015

Amid the flotsam of a journalism instructor's desk at the end of a hectic academic year – strewn business cards, papers never picked up by students, memos, meeting notes, neon pink paper clips and half a pack of Ice Blue breath mints – lies a stub of a burned-out candle.

“Every journalist has talismans,” says my good friend Tim Lynch, a longtime editor at the Los Angeles Times who now teaches writing at Cal State.

That stub of a candle is my talisman – an evocative reminder of what's really important amid the day-to-day hustle of an academic life teaching journalism. It reminds me of a night this past year that I'll never forget and that I hope we never have to repeat. That September night we circled around the campus Reflecting Pond as a community of Knights in a candlelight vigil to honor the memory of Steven Sotloff, a freelance journalist and former UCF student who was kidnapped and brutally murdered by militants of the Islamic State.

That stub of a candle from that night reminds me of a life shortened too soon and a light snuffed out by darkness.

It reminds me of the mission of journalism articulated by the newspaper company started by editor E.W. Scripps way back in 1878: “Give light and the people will find their own way.”

Steven Sotloff dedicated himself to bearing and shedding light – especially in dark corners of the world torn by war and riven by age-old hatreds and intractable, systemic poverty. Knowing the risks, he headed to Syria – the most dangerous country in the

world for journalists in 2014, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists – to try to help his readers understand what was going on there amid a horrific civil war.

It cost him his life and the light he sought to share.

I didn't have the privilege of knowing or teaching Steven Sotloff. He arrived at UCF in 2002, the year before I joined the faculty. While taking some journalism courses he joined the staff of the campus newspaper, the Central Florida Future, where he worked his way up to senior staff writer and wrote his way to the front page numerous times, usually with stories about politics. His experience lit a spark – and he fanned it into flame professionally working as a freelance reporter for TIME magazine, The Christian Science Monitor and World Affairs Journal.

“Give light and the people will find their own way.”

He took that light to the Mideast and North Africa – to Israel, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and ultimately Syria, where he was captured by the Islamic State in 2013 and held for a year before he was executed. He was only 31.

My memory of Steven does not consist of the video image that the militants of Islamic State would like me to have. No, my memory of him is burned in my mind every time I pick up that candle on my desk, fumble it around in my fingers and recall the words he smuggled out of captivity in a letter to his family in June 2014: “Everyone has two lives. The second one begins when you realize you only have one.”

Journalism wasn't a job, a paycheck, a vocation or even a profession to Steven Sotloff. It was more than that. It was his life.

At Steven's funeral, Rabbi Terry Bookman eulogized him as “an idealistic young man whose only desire in his journalistic efforts was to bring a human face to the conflict.”

By reporting the news – going headlong to the center of the story and telling it from the inside by observing, digging and scraping out facts and details about how real people are being impacted by conflict – Steven believed in an ideal that all journalists share.

“Give light and the people will find their own way.”

Journalism as an academic program at UCF is in the College of Sciences. That's entirely fitting in that journalism is a method of free inquiry. But it's also based on an article of

faith – a faith shared by Steven Sotloff and reporters everywhere, such as journalist and novelist Thrity Umrigar, who wrote, “Journalism is an idealistic profession. It is based on the hopeful belief that if readers know the truth, they will make intelligent, informed decisions that will change things for the better.”

“Give light and the people will find their own way.”

Thanks to Steven Sotloff’s family, his light will not go out. His parents, Shirley and Arthur Sotloff, have generously and graciously established the Steven Sotloff Memorial Endowed Fund at UCF, which will provide scholarship support to UCF students majoring in journalism as well as funding symposiums, lectures and other programs to advance journalism and journalism education. For more information about the fund, go to ucffoundation.org/sotloff.

In a statement on the foundation website, the Sotloff family said: “We will be working with young, talented, aspiring journalists dedicated to bringing light to a world increasingly in need of illumination.”

Steven’s life will still be lighting the way for generations of journalists yet to come.

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