

Thomas Vincent Kelly

(2 Aug 1923 – 17 Jun 2010)

The Washington Post, June 20, 2010

Washington Journalist and Capitol Hill Resident Thomas V. Kelly Dies at 86

By Emma Brown

Thomas V. Kelly 86, a Washington journalist whose home on Capitol Hill was such a community hub that he came to be known as the mayor of the neighborhood, died June 17 at George Washington University Hospital after a heart attack.

Mr. Kelly lived for all but 11 years of his life on the same block of Constitution Avenue on Capitol Hill. He was the husband of Marguerite Kelly, who for many years wrote the "Family Almanac" column in The Washington Post's Style section and the father of journalist Michael Kelly, who was killed in 2003 while covering the U.S. invasion of Iraq for the Atlantic Monthly.

Tom Kelly worked for the Washington Daily News during the 1950s and '60s, covering the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations and Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy's hearings into alleged Communist subversion in government. He also covered local news, and his stories about mismanaged funds and other administrative misconduct at D.C. General Hospital led to sweeping changes there.

In 1962, one of Mr. Kelly's tough questions earned him a sock in the left eye from former Army Maj. Gen. Edwin Walker, who aspired to be governor of Texas and who helped organize protests against the use of federal troops to enforce racial integration at the University of Mississippi. Walker was leaving a testy Senate hearing when Mr. Kelly approached him. The reporter asked for a response to a statement by American Nazi Party leader George Lincoln Rockwell, who had praised Walker. Walker answered with a punch that made headlines around the country. "My eye doesn't hurt much," Mr. Kelly said afterward, "and I don't plan any action."

Mr. Kelly left the Daily News in 1965 and later became the editor of a monthly Canadian magazine and a freelance writer for publications including the New York Times, People and the Nation. In the 1990s, he worked as a feature writer for the Washington Times.

He had a reputation for clever turns of phrase. In a profile of a Louisiana governor, he wrote, "Gov. Edwin Edwards is so cold, if you put a pat of butter in his mouth in the morning it would still be there when he went to bed at night."

He wrote an occasional series on intriguing murder cases for the Washingtonian magazine and in 1983 published "The Imperial Post," a scathing history of The Post that was not well-received by those inside the paper who found it unfairly critical.

In Washington, the Kellys were known for hosting large parties inspired by Marguerite's New Orleans heritage, featuring Dixieland bands and crawfish. Ken Ringle, a retired Post reporter, wrote in an e-mail: "Their enormous dining room has always been a genuine salon where ideas were bandied about and joyously debated while Tom gestured from his end of the table and told stories with his memorable snorting little Irish laugh."

Mr. Kelly a diminutive Irishman who reminded friends of a mischievous Leprechaun, wrote annual Christmas plays in which he cast scads of neighborhood children. The plays, children's stories with dialogue that doubled as political commentary, were always staged in the Kellys' backyard before a crowd of parents.

Thomas Vincent Kelly was born in Washington on August 2, 1923. He graduated from Gonzaga College High School in the District and had his first newspaper job as a copyboy at The Post before he enlisted in the Navy during World War II.

"I knew nothing about the Navy. I thought it consisted mostly of battleships," Mr. Kelly said in a 2001 interview with The Post. "I'd seen a Fred Astaire movie where sailors sang and danced on the quarterdeck. I figured that was the kind of service I could handle." He served on the Navy's last sail-powered wardship, the triple-masted USS Guinevere, which escorted supply convoys across the Atlantic. "We were supposed to patrol for U-boats, but we stayed just out of sight of the convoys," he said. "It would have depressed the merchant sailors too much to think that all that stood between them and Hitler's navy was a sailing ship."

After the war, he earned a journalism degree at Pennsylvania State University in 1947. He went to work as a reporter at the Baton Rouge-State Times and later the New Orleans Item, where he met his future wife. They moved to Washington in the early 1950s.

In addition to his wife, to whom he was married 57 years, survivors include three daughters, Katherine Kelly Bottorff and Meg Kelly Rizzoli both of Washington, and Nell Conroy of Darien, Conn.; and eight grandchildren.

At the time of his death, Mr. Kelly was finishing a book about the life and death of his son. Michael Kelly once wrote that he had decided to become a reporter because of deep admiration for his father whom he described as an unfailing optimist.

"What a good father is supposed to do for the people he loves is fix whatever goes wrong with them," Michael Kelly wrote in a 2001 Post column. "So, happily, it was for me. In the house where I was lucky enough to grow, the weather was always balmy, rain or shine. And life was always good, good or bad, and the children were always successes, succeed or fail. And the experiences were always marvelous."