

Religion Newswriters Association press releases

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JUNE 24, 2002

Lifetime Achievement Award: Helen Parmley

By **Virginia Culver**

The Denver Post

Helen Parmley, who covered three popes, dozens of bishops and wrote 23 Christmas, Easter and Yom Kippur stories, has received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Religion Newswriters Association.

Parmley, a past RNA president, will receive the award at RNA's Annual Conference Sept. 21 in Nashville.

A veteran religion writer for the *Dallas Morning News*, Parmley retired in 1992. She didn't cover only Baptists, for which the state is famous, even though she often remarked, "covering the Southern Baptists in Texas is like covering the legislature."

She found religion stories everywhere: sports, government, education, medicine and civil rights. She interviewed presidents, governors and astronauts and was a reporter on more than one papal trip. Despite the "fabulous meals and hotels like the Waldorf Astoria," Parmley recalls, the trip was exhausting. "We traveled to six cities in four days and never knew what day it was or what city we were in."

The drill was, when the pope finished his appearance, reporters had to "grab a hamburger, run for a plane and hope there was still a room at the Days Inn Motel." Parmley, known for her warmth and friendliness, kept press rooms at religious conventions stocked in munchies—a habit she kept in the newsroom at the *Morning News*.

And she loves to tell funny stories about herself. Once her daughter, Beth, answered the phone and came to Parmley, saying, "Mother, it's some nut who says he's Billy Graham."

Parmley went to the phone and the person said, "Hi Helen, this is Billy Graham." And it was.

She was on the beat through times of huge changes: A pope who traveled constantly, the emergence of minorities as a power in churches, the rise and fall of television evangelists, growing visibility of women's power in religious organizations and the still-controversial issue of gays in the ministry.

But there were also the stories every religion writer gets stuck with. Like the one Parmley had to cover of a yo-yo champ who was promoting an evangelist. She seemed to know every Baptist in Texas, and knew their proclivities as well.

Once, when the Southern Baptists had their national convention in Las Vegas, she and a friend stationed themselves in a restaurant overlooking an acre of slot machines in a hotel. In addition to the Baptists who walked by with a haughty glance at the gamblers, Parmley spotted Texas Baptists she knew who were dropping their quarters and half-dollars into the one-armed bandits.

A native of Sharon, Pa., Parmley spent many of her growing up years in Illinois and attended classes at Washington University in St. Louis.

She is a former president of the Religion Newswriters and has won writing awards from the Dallas Press Club, Associated Press, United Press International and the Religious Public Relations Council.

Parmley will be the second reporter to receive the Lifetime award. The first was given to Wilmar Thorkelson, longtime religion editor for the *Minneapolis Star*.