

Former RNA President Russell Chandler wins 2007 William A. Reed / RNS Lifetime Achievement Award

By Kevin Eckstrom
Religion News Service



When Russell Chandler was trying to track Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in the early 1980s for the Los Angeles Times, he headed up to eastern Oregon and started chatting up the local court clerks, wondering what they knew.

One mentioned a mysterious land purchase of some 120,000 acres and Chandler's ears perked up. Said the owners were all wearing orange robes.

"That's all I needed," Chandler said, before heading out to a lake near the compound, fishing pole in hand, orange shirt on his back. It wasn't long before he was discovered.

"They had the choice of treating me nice or kicking me out," Chandler said, "They decided to try to butter me up to see if they could get a good story, or convince me not to do the story. But they couldn't do that."

That brand of on-the-streets reporting for the Los Angeles Times, Christianity Today and the Modesto Bee, coupled with years of personal service to the religion beat and the RNA, has earned Russell Chandler the 2007 William A. Reed/Religion News Service Lifetime Achievement Award.

Chandler, who will turn 75 a few weeks before the RNA annual conference in San Antonio, was a pioneer on the modern religion beat, helping to set the standards for professionalism, respect and seriousness that are now taken for granted among RNA members.

"Between his own work at the Los Angeles Times and his selfless leadership in the RNA, he's one of a small number of reporters who early on made covering religion one of the most sought-after beats in journalism," said his longtime LA Times colleague, Larry Stammer.

Chandler has also personally invested in the beat — he and his wife, ML, started the Chandler Student Religion Reporter of the Year award in 2003. The couple has given \$27,700 to date and has pledged another \$15,400 over the next two years to recognize outstanding religion coverage among college students.

"There are many people who are equally or better qualified," Chandler said with his trademark gentleness. "I'm just glad it doesn't have to be posthumous."

Chandler retired from the Los Angeles Times in 1992 after nearly 18 years at the paper. While there, he earned three Templeton Awards — including the first ever, in 1984 — and three Supple Awards from the RNA. He served as RNA president from 1982-1984.

"Russ had a fairness of spirit and a pleasant manner that drew out reluctant sources, and all that aided his notable investigative edge," said Dick Ostling, the 2006 Lifetime Achievement Award winner, who recruited Chandler to succeed him at Christianity Today in 1969.

"He was a dedicated evangelical and an ordained Presbyterian ... but always strived to be non-partisan in religion coverage, and thus represented the very best of what our guild stands for."

Prior to his career at the Los Angeles Times, Chandler worked at the Union Democrat in Sonora, Calif., from 1972-1974; was news editor at Christianity Today from 1969-1971; was religion editor at the now-defunct Washington Star from 1968-1969; and held his first job at the Modesto Bee.

Prior to entering the Fourth Estate, Chandler worked for a higher one, as an ordained Presbyterian minister.

"I never heard Russ preach from the pulpit ... but in the newsroom, he was the consummate journalist — calm under pressure, fair to a fault, competitive and courageous in his coverage of difficult stories," Stammer said.

Chandler was serving churches in California's Central Valley when he got a new calling to write, as he said, "for a different audience."

"I always kept thinking that somehow I'd like to be doing more writing, and I couldn't project myself forward to being a pastor until I was 65, so I thought maybe I could marry the two greatest interests and

experiences of my life — church and theology, and writing — so I started doing a few freelance pieces."

He later married the greatest love of his life, ML, in 1978. That's "342 months and counting," he says, in case anyone was keeping track.

Chandler had actually dabbled in journalism much earlier, at the tender age of 10 when he created and distributed a mimeographed newsletter to friends and family serving in World War II. The venture, however, didn't last very long.

"The circulation didn't grow, and the advertising base wasn't there," he said.

Chandler has covered the big names — Billy Graham is one that sticks out — but says he found the greatest joy in documenting the lives of "unsung heroes and heroines, people who weren't in the limelight and who were unselfishly doing things for their love of doing them, to make the world a better place, to serve their God."

But it's the Chandlers' personal investment in the future of RNA — and indeed, the religion beat itself — that has won Russ and ML the thanks of the RNA board and its members.

"You get a lot more kick out of something if you can do something for people and be able to see the benefits yourself," Chandler said. "It isn't a memorial scholarship; it's fun to have a living person who can present the award."

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