

My Last Paper for Nora

Notes on the passing of Penn's one-woman journalism school

By Stephen Fried

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Nora Magid wasn't like the other humans.

No student ever forgot that first day in Nora's classroom at Penn. She was invariably dressed in an inside-out sweatshirt adorned with a strand of pearls. Baggy pants and beat-up moccasins with no socks completed the ensemble. Her cheeks were redundant with rouge, her full lips bright with red lipstick, and most of her long graying hair was piled high on her head. Dropping her canvas bag on the floor, she sat cross-legged on top of her wooden desk, lit a cigarillo, took a few puffs from it, and then either crushed it out on her shoe and returned it to the pack or just crushed it out in the pack itself. Then she began to speak--her voice deep and musical and almost cartoonish--and this improbable woman of unguessed age and background would proceed to provoke the hell out of 20 or so teenagers, who never imagined that they would ever take education so personally or that a teacher could ever take her students' ideas so seriously.

Nominally, Nora Magid was teaching freshman English—until 1977, when her students stunned her by begging the department to let her offer another, higher-level course. Then she was nominally teaching Advanced Expository Writing—“Advanced writing, what is it,” she would joke, “longer words, longer sentences?”—which remained her official duty until she died suddenly in March, 1991. But the phenomenon of Nora, which her fellow instructors in the English department watched with a mixture of astonishment and envy, went far beyond her job description as “senior lecturer.” Using current periodicals and her students' own papers as the only course materials, she gave master classes in concise expression and personal exploration, teaching how to read between every line. And she did so with an unspoken motto that no careerist college professor could have considered—either her *students* published or she perished.

Besides her remarkable deskside manner, Nora also administered to an amazing network of former students—the “Nora-ites”—whose lives became part of some grand group mythology masquerading as a job placement service. She peppered her classes with stories of former students' editorial escapades. (I shudder to think of how many people know about the day that Eliot Kaplan--who went on to become managing editor of *GQ*, editor of *Philadelphia*, and eventually editorial talent director for Hearst magazines--and I were called to the board in class and challenged to conjugate “lie” and “lay,” which is probably the only thing Nora ever *failed* to teach us.) She covered several walls in her Bennett Hall office with Polaroids she took of her favorite students. (Nora smoked and drank a lot of coffee, but her main physical addiction was to Instamatic film: She compulsively chronicled the lives of her friends, students, pets and plants with her instant camera—although she always avoided letting anyone photograph her.) And, in between grading 600 papers a year, Nora managed to keep up an astonishing level of handwritten (or manually typed) correspondence with all the people she ever found “clever,” staying in their lives for as long as they would have her.

It was never clear how Nora Magid came to her unconventional ideas about the outward boundaries of teacherdom. She was always very guarded about her past and

present, and none of her brilliant young journalists was able to find out much about her. As students, we knew she was from Canada (you couldn't mistake the accent), had attended McGill University and Columbia, and had worked as an editor at a prestigious, now defunct New York literary magazine called *The Reporter*. She had once summed up her life by writing, "Before I came to Penn, I was an editor, and before that, a very young and alarmingly inept college instructor." We knew she still did some writing for *The New York Times* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*—mostly reviews of children's books, for which she would give the books to children and document how *they* liked them. After a particularly warm review of one of the early George and Martha books, author/illustrator James Marshall drew a personalized panel in which his characters—two genteel, older hippos—thanked Nora for her support. The framed drawing hung in her office.

Those of us who were later invited to her off-campus apartment found that she had a George, of sorts. She cohabited with another professor in the English department, Gerald Weales, who specialized in drama and had also been at *The Reporter*. They lived in a first-floor railroad apartment that was infested with books. It had a minuscule kitchen in which Nora somehow produced little miracles of delicate baking, an oasis of a garden that Nora cultivated in the tiny backyard, and an objet d'art comprised of hundred of long, thin, pliant metal skewers that made the shimmering sound of some mystical cymbal when nudged.

As soon as the weather was even close to warm enough, the two of them would do their schoolwork in the yard, Gerald plopped on a plastic beach chair or chaise lounge amid the flora, Nora sitting above, at the top of the brick stairs leading to the back door, drinking coffee, smoking and grading papers. The relationship between these two educational dinosaurs was always a mystery. All we knew was that they loved food and books and children and animals, especially stray cats, which they took in and gave odd names. Their last cat was called Pissy Mewkins. (Gerald tried unsuccessfully to get to obit writer from the *Inquirer* to include Pissy as one of Nora's survivors.)

Beyond this grab bag of personal details, we knew that Nora seemed to be on a first name basis with nearly every writer whose work we read in the major magazines we were assigned to dissect each week. And the fact that she had, at one time or another, edited pieces by everyone who was anyone made it all the more amazing that she would want to read anything *we* had done.

Nora Magid taught people how to write and rewrite, and she taught them how to find things to write about: how to take their own pulses, how to jog their own memories and how (and why) to *learn* new things. But she also made college kids feel that they already understood a great deal, and that their instincts and still-forming ideas were vital. Her greatest educational innovation was probably her way of treating students as if they were already professionals—which was as much a commentary on what she had seen pass for professionalism in the "real world" as a compliment to the young people. And even though most of her students weren't destined for careers in writing at all—the majority of the hundreds of recommendations she wrote every year were for graduate schools, and she took equal pride in noneditorial successes—she conducted her classes like they were editorial meetings at the most ambitious publication eve conceived. The discussions were intense and hilarious and scary and *purposeful*: No matter how out-of-control, they always started and ended with something that had been done for her class.

Nora never actually graded the weekly papers required in her course. She really *edited* them, and then elevated them to pieces of writing worthy of speculation, discussion and improvement by revision. She chose one student paper a week to be anonymously distributed, unedited, to the class for group modification. And before each session—although no one ever actually saw her do this—she covered the blackboards with excerpts from other students’ papers or, if you happened to work for the college newspaper, from your articles. It was customary to rush to her classroom each Tuesday and Thursday to see whose choice sentences and wrong turns of phrase had been reproduced for group dismemberment. “One of my students once said that my ideal classroom would be the Sistine Chapel,” Nora wrote, “only with the walls and the ceiling covered with blackboards.”

But it was in the written dialogue she had with our papers—appreciated in the privacy of our dorm rooms, or behind her closed office door if you got an “I’ll explain”—where her true Nora-ness came through. With one of her arsenal of colored Flair pens, she filled the margins of our papers with priceless comments. Badly chosen words were “dumb” or worse (she once accused me of using a “feeble baby word”); incredibly mean statements got an “ouch!” and sentences that disagreed with themselves could elicit a simple “This is crazy” or a diatribe about the two opposing viewpoints expressed in eight or nine words. She was also on a personal crusade to rid the world of the misused adverb “hopefully.”

But Nora could also pay the highest of compliments. And there was nothing like the feeling of being 19 and totally unclear of your place in the world and being told you had written “a gorgeous line” or had offered a “remarkable” insight by someone who had edited John Kenneth Galbraith and Henry Kissinger—and who just might be inclined to send off something you did to one of her pals at *The New Yorker*.

I realize that every student in America recalls the time spent with his or her favorite teacher as a unique period in the history of education. But taking Nora’s freshman English class in 1976, and her first-ever advanced class in 1977, really did seem like a magical experience to me and most of the other 30 or so students involved. And our belief that we had been part of something very special—sort of the Woodstock of nonfiction writing—was confirmed when the demand for space in Nora’s course, and a place in her mentoring heart, grew exponentially each semester. By the time I graduated from Penn in 1979, students were camping out overnight at the English department to register for the scant 45 spots available each semester in English 45 (later changed to English 145). Her course was arguably the most popular at Penn, and certainly the hardest to get into. It remained so until she died on March 14th, 1991, just five days shy her of 66th birthday and four days into the Philadelphia Flower Show—a traditional rite of spring that was one of her true loves in life.

Her annual photo trips to the flower show were the subject of a 1986 *Philadelphia Magazine* story I did for which the bud-sters will never forgive me. (I insinuated that seeing Nora’s pictures of the show was more fun than actually attending.) And one of her pictures won a prize in the magazine’s 1982 photo contest. But her influence at *Philadelphia* was quietly omnipresent in other ways. A writers’ magazine, it always has been produced by a tiny core group: since the early ‘60s, there literally have been only two dozen or so major contributors. And, starting in the early ‘80s, when Nora’s first

“advanced writers” starting hitting the market, many staffers at *Philadelphia*--as well as many other top magazines and newspapers--were what we call “Nora-ites.”

Amazingly, three of Nora’s students in a row actually served as editor-in-chief of *Philadelphia*. Eliot Kaplan took over only months after Nora’s death in 1991; I succeeded him in early 1999 and in early 2001 I was succeeded by Loren Feldman, who is now editorial director at *Inc*. Many of Nora’s disciples worked for *Philadelphia* first as interns, among them Lisa DePaulo (a longtime *Philadelphia* senior editor, now a national magazine writer in New York, mostly for *GQ*); David Borgenicht (who went on to co-write the bestselling *Worst Case Scenario Handbook* and start his own successful publishing house, Quirk Books); Mark Cohen (who later became a *Philadelphia* editor and is now a deputy editor at *Men’s Journal*); and Maria Shao (who worked at *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Boston Globe* before becoming assistant business editor at *The San Jose Mercury News*.)

While “the Nora network” had its highest concentrations in Philadelphia, her influence is still felt nationwide. Other Nora with well-known bylines include Miriam Arond (author and editor-in-chief of *Child* magazine); Jean Sherman Chatzky (author and business columnist for *Money* and “The Today Show”); Stefan Fatsis (author and sports columnist for *The Wall Street Journal* and NPR’s “All Things Considered”); Joel Siegel (the former city politics columnist for *The New York Daily News*, now a senior editor and writer at ABC “World News Tonight”); John Prendergast (author and editor-in-chief of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*); Randal Lane (founding editor of the lamented *POV* and now president and editor of *Trader Monthly* and *Justice*); Michael Bamberger (author and senior writer at *Sports Illustrated*); Richard Stevenson (White House correspondent at *The New York Times*); Willow Bay (author and former TV anchor for CNN and “Good Morning America”) and Amy Salit (a producer on “Fresh Air,” the nationally syndicated radio program.

Nora’s students have won nearly every major prize in American journalism, and are represented well in nearly every major magazine, newspaper and broadcast company in the country. A half dozen other universities with big journalism programs might be able to boast similar accomplishments, but Nora was Penn’s journalism program, and its unofficial (and unpaid) consultant to the student newspaper.

Nora created us, or allowed us to create ourselves, and we did our best to repay her investments in us. She never made that process entirely easy, because she was simultaneously overwhelmed and embarrassed by our attention, and balancing mentorship and friendship is tricky. In 1981, the Nora cult reached a sort of critical mass after our perhaps-too-fearless leader was mugged while walking back from the Philadelphia Museum of Art to her home in West Philadelphia. Among other things, her precious camera was stolen, so 15 of her former students chipped in to by Nora the newest, fanciest model that Polaroid made. At the same time, we all felt we were doing something as selfless as what Nora had done for us. I can now look back on the gesture as a far more complicated one. It was an act of kindness that also assured that she always had a lens to focus on us—pretty symbolic of the entire Nora phenomenon, a sort of mutual-admiration pyramid scheme which somehow paid off emotionally (and professionally) for everyone.

But Nora would never be so cynical as to see it all that way. She treasured any

gift--a camera, a new hippo for her burgeoning collection, even an especially delicious piece of fruit--and news of any such nicety was immediately broadcast through the Nora network of correspondents around the globe. And her love for her students (and their work) was entirely unconditional. She sent us birthday cards, attended our weddings, and made all of our accomplishments more important than they really were. She once wrote of us, "I love my students. They are bright and brave, funny at their own expense and blunt in their self-criticism. They are well-informed and responsible, they have political and social consciences, and they are fiercely devoted to each other. A decent and generous bunch."

It was only through Nora's death that I found out a few more details about her life--details that once would have rapidly circulated through the Nora grapevine. Nora was born in Montreal in 1925, the only child of a family of immigrant Russian Jews. She was an academic star in high school--receiving the Province Prize for the best student in Quebec--and she studied and taught English at McGill University, from which she graduated in 1946 with First Class Honors in English Language and Literature, also winning the Shakespeare Gold Medal. She then spent two years at USC as a graduate assistant (Nora in Southern California--now, there's an image) before coming east to teach at Adelphi and get a master's in comparative literature at Columbia University (where she was also assistant to the dean of women). In 1954, she joined *The Reporter*, and worked her way up from assistant to associate and senior editor to literary editor. She was also a regular contributor to *The New York Herald Tribune*, several national journals of opinion and the Canadian Broadcast Corporation, and served on the editorial board of *The North American Review*.

When *The Reporter* folded in 1968, Nora was made editorially homeless. Many of her former colleagues landed on their feet (like Meg Greenfield, who went to *The Washington Post*), but for some reason Nora passed up opportunities at *Look* and several other publications. She always described that period of her life as very difficult, and now that I've worked for a few magazines myself, I can speculate that she was searching in vain for a way to reunite her first, formative professional family--or find something that felt just like it. She freelanced for over a year, until Joel Conarroe--then chairman of Penn's English department, and now retired as president of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in New York--convinced her to begin teaching English in Penn's night school and layed (or is that laid?) the groundwork for her second coming.

For the several years she commuted. In the mid-70s, Penn gave her a non-tenure-track day job, and she began living in Philadelphia. The first official Nora-ite was a man called Joe Secor, who took her first course while working as a building supervisor in Penn's engineering school. "In figuring out the application of editorial techniques to the teaching of writing, I must have changed direction every five minutes," Nora wrote. "Mr. Secor followed so cheerfully that he carried the rest of the group with him. At the end of the semester, he brought me one of the best presents I have ever received--two erasers and a lot of chalk. I cherish those erasers."

Gathering information for Nora's obituary brought other surprises. I discovered that she had been distributing an informal annual newsletter to professional colleagues for years, crowing about her students' achievements. I also discovered that Nora and Gerald had been together for 40 years, and that throughout their lives, colleagues had wondered

about their relationship. Three days after Nora's death, I sat in their living room eating St. Joseph's Zeppoli pastry from Isgro's bakery--which Gerald said was an annual tradition of theirs, since St. Joseph's day coincided with Nora's birthday. I nosily asked why they had never married. "Nora wouldn't marry me," Gerald said with a laugh. "She was never ready. And if Nora didn't want to do something..."

While double-checking several things about her career, I was forced to reconsider a central issue of Nora's later life. I always knew that Nora could be very obstinate, and she had the lowest threshold for mortification of anyone I ever met. She wrote letters of complaint that were masterpieces of displeasure. Polaroid was one of her favorite targets (the ever-changing, ever-defective film ruined some of her most artful shots), and an immigration dispute with the Canadian government produced hilarious missives: All should someday be collected into a book called *Nora Annoyed*.

And I always knew there was no institution that could upset Nora the way Penn could. The English department never seemed to know what to do with her, nor she with it. Nora was forever convinced that her job at Penn was in peril, and she convinced me, too. In the mid '80s, she contacted a number of us with the appalling news that Penn was forcing her to *ask former students to vouch for her teaching abilities*. Before writing a recommendation for the woman who was still writing recommendations for us, several people called the department to complain. The chairman insisted that Nora's job was not in jeopardy and the recommendations were part of some standard departmental review. Nora never bought this line, and when the review later led to a promotion, she led us to believe it was some sort of apology for the entire affair.

Because Nora wasn't on the tenure track, she was never eligible for the annual Lindback Award for distinguished teaching. In 1988, Penn finally got around to creating a special honor expressly for its non-tenure-track instructors, the Provost's Award. They gave the first one to Nora and she seemed to mistrust that gesture as well: It wasn't too little, but it was far too late.

After Nora's death, I spoke to undergraduate chairman Alice Kelley (one of the only people Nora seemed to trust in the department) about the situation. She insisted that Nora had always misinterpreted the department's intentions, and claimed that the recommendation fiasco was, in fact, the result of a decision to promote Nora. Normal promotion procedure would have been to mail recommendation forms directly to former students. Kelley said that in light of Nora's close relationship with her flock, and her well documented jumpiness about department politics, they had guessed that Nora's discomfort might be minimized if she were asked to solicit the recommendations herself. Kelley agreed that they had probably guessed incorrectly.

I'm now beginning to wonder if Nora's ability to be absolutely certain about things that weren't quite clear--like the talent of a young writer--made her believe she was being attacked when she was simply being misunderstood. I also wonder if the departure, in a huff, of several of her closer friends in the department of the years caused some excess huff to rub off on her.

None of this wondering, by the way, contradicts Nora's basic contention that there were a lot of jerks at Penn and the university's best teachers were often underappreciated. Nor is it meant to excuse the department for its refusal to waive very dumb rules for someone who was being driven to distraction by them.

There were certain times of the year when Nora's ex-students were likely to see her. Penn's Homecoming, in the fall, was one. The annual Manhattan meeting of the National Book Critics Circle, of which Nora was a member, was another--especially after one of her students, Sandee Brawarsky, got her first job at a major publishing house (on her way to becoming an author herself and book columnist at *The Jewish Week*) and turned Nora's yearly pilgrimage north into a mini-reunion of New York Nora-ites. Alumni Weekend, in mid-May, was the third: Nora would appear on campus during lunchtime, wander down Locust Walk with the class parade, and return to her apartment to hold her salon in the late afternoon.

By Homecoming in 1990, Nora was not looking well; since she was pretty unconventional-looking to begin with, and she refused to *ever* see a doctor, it was impossible to be certain. Over the holidays, she caught one of the brutal flus that everyone seemed to be fighting. But Nora was unable to fight it. She began teaching the spring semester, but started canceling classes because of illness--something she had never done. Some days she would be fine; some days she was unable to eat or get up. The Monday before her death, she was able to take Pissy out to the vet for a shot. The next day she was too weak to get up, and finally admitted that perhaps she should see a doctor. She and Gerald had planned to go on Friday. On Thursday morning, while the National Book Critics Circle members were arriving in New York and floral fanatics were battling for Civic Center parking spaces, Nora died in her sleep. Although it was first believed that the flu itself had done her in, the official cause of death was atherosclerosis: vascular disease, and, probably, a gentle failure of her very big heart.

That year, we again spent the late Saturday afternoon of Alumni Weekend recalling Nora stories and recounting the exploits of her students. Only Nora, the person who made us all possible, was missing. She left behind a mountain of Polaroid pictures, a herd of hippos, probably 50 people who owe her letters, phone calls or visits, and a void in the Penn faculty that will never be filled. Nobody will ever be able to teach a class like Nora, and I'm sure Penn will make sure that any future cult of personality is undermined, so that all the dull, *tenured* profs don't get jealous and cranky.

When Nora died, I told one of my fellow Nora-ites--Kevin Vaughan (now COO at the Free Library of Philadelphia)--that I imagined our mentor in heaven composing an angry missive to the manufacturer of the cold remedy she had been taking. This got a nostalgic chuckle from Kevin, but the line was, as Nora herself would have written in the margin, "a little forced." Then life wrote a far better line. On March 19th, which would have been Nora's 66th birthday, an obituary appeared on page D23 of the *New York Times*, just below that of office furniture dealer Edward B. Blau.

"Norma Magid, 65, Writer and Lecturer," read the headline, and, just below, "Norma Magid, a prize-winning writer and lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania, died..." Besides the appalling typo in her first name ("Ouch!"), the lead was inaccurate to boot. The moment I saw the obit, I knew what Nora's first editing assignment would be in the afterlife.

Is that ironic observation enough to eulogize a woman who was so important in the lives of so many exceptional people? Probably not. But Nora had suggested to me a long time ago, in one of her many notes of gratitude for the camera, that words occasionally failed her as well. "All I want to do is take pictures, pictures, pictures," she

wrote. "Whatever happened to my passion for the printed word! One of the reasons, aside from the fact that I love light and colour, is that words are insufficient. Thank-you sounds frail and tepid. I guess it will have to do."

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In Fall 2003, he and Eliot Kaplan established The Nora Magid Mentorship Prize (www.NoraPrize.com), which will be given annually to one gifted non-fiction writer from the University of Pennsylvania who would most benefit from mentorship from Nora's network of students—and those of their colleagues that the winning student wishes to meet with. The cash prize of \$1000 will cover transportation and lodging for interviews arranged with or by former students of Nora's, and each winner will be expected to then join the Nora network and help mentor others in her memory.

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