

## *Eugene Leslie Roberts Jr.*

Gene Roberts is known by everyone in the news business as a hard-nosed journalist who in an era of great editors took second place to none. He came by his calling naturally and he pursued it with integrity and professional genius for more than half a century. He began his lifelong love affair with journalism by helping with the Goldsboro Herald, a weekly paper published by his father. After graduating from Carolina with a B.A. in journalism (1954), Roberts worked for the Goldsboro News-Argus, where he wrote a farm column titled "Rambling in Rural Wayne." His readers enjoyed stories about things like who made the best watermelon rind pickles or a sweet potato that looked like Charles DeGaulle. After writing for the Norfolk Virginian-Pilot, the Raleigh News & Observer, and the Detroit Free Press, Roberts joined the staff of the New York Times. There, he became one of the first people to report in depth on how the civil rights revolution was affecting the lives of ordinary people. Similarly, his coverage of the Battle of Hué in Vietnam told the story of ordinary soldiers in desperate straits.

Roberts became national editor of the Times in 1969, often a stepping-stone to the top job, but in 1972, he took a chance on the struggling Philadelphia Inquirer. Serving as executive editor of the Inquirer for 18 years, Roberts turned what had been a rag wrung dry by its much larger rival, the Philadelphia Bulletin, into a top 10 newspaper. During his tenure, the Inquirer won 17 Pulitzer Prizes, including two gold medals for public service. He won the circulation war with the Bulletin and propelled the Inquirer to the top by expanding news coverage, adding national reporters and opening foreign bureaus.

Upon leaving the Inquirer, Roberts accepted an appointment as professor of journalism at the University of Maryland's College of Journalism, teaching courses on writing complex stories, the press and the civil rights movement, and newsroom management. In 1994, Roberts returned to the New York Times to guide the paper's move to become a national newspaper in fact as well as name. He retired in 1997 to return to his faculty position at the University of Maryland.

In 1990, the staff of the Philadelphia Inquirer and Knight-Rider endowed the Eugene L. Roberts Prize in Carolina's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. The annual award encourages aspiring journalists to write the kind of in-depth stories that exemplify Roberts' career. In the words of the award criteria, a prize-winning story idea is "one that is dedicated to the untold event that oozes instead of breaks; to the story that reveals, not repeats."

In 2006, Roberts and his co-author Hank Klibanoff won a Pulitzer Prize for "The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation," hailed as a highly important study of how journalists covered the civil rights movement.

Roberts is married to Susan Jane McLamb, Carolina Class of 1956, whom he met while he was a student here. They have four daughters and two grandchildren, and spend as much time as they can at their summer home in Bath, North Carolina, where groceries are delivered by rowboat.

For outstanding accomplishment in the field of journalism, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is pleased to confer on Eugene Leslie Roberts Jr. the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.