MIDDLETOWN, N. Y.
TIMES HERALD RECORD
D. 45,349 SUN. 41,720

SEP 15 1975

Q&A--Foreign correspondent comes home

By RON RHODES
Copy Editor

Richard Severo, a Newburgh native, writes for The New York Times.

Although he claims he is not a joiner, Severo has found himself not only a member but a leader in a neighborhood campaign to save the Balmville Tree.

The towering old tree occupies a walled island in the center of Balmville Road, right in front of Severo's sturdy Colonial-era home in the Town of Newburgh.

The Balmville tree is threatened by age and the kind of progress that doesn't allow for trees in the middle of busy roads. But Severo and his neighbors have been responsible for keeping the tree — and the way of life it represents — alive against the odds.

Severo and his wife Emoke have no children, by choice. They care for two dogs and a cat — all former strays.

Although Severo grew up in Newburgh and played around the Balmville Tree as a boy, he admits he didn't become attached to that cause — or to any other cause, for that matter — until he returned from a tour as Mexico City-based correspondent for the Times.

Severo, 42, studied music and history at Colgate University. He got to The Times by way of a winding course through CBS news in the mid-'50s, with stints at The Poughkeepsie New Yorker, the Associated Press and the Washington Post. From 1971 to 1973, he became Times correspondent in Mexico, South America and Caribbean countries.





—Record photos by Todd Strasser

Richard Severo: "Most freedom at The Times"

"I wanted to come back to New York — the state and the city," Severo said.

Back in Newburgh, Severo's "beat" is the environment. He has investigated, among other significant stories, the charge that the Dairylea milk co-op illegally added powdered skim milk to its whole bottled milk.

In the following interview, Severo talks about his Newburgh roots and his work for The Times.

Q: How did you feel about your job as a foreign correspondent for The Times?

A: I don't think that being a foreign correspondent is all that it's cracked up to be. I think that the idea of being a free agent, three or four thousand miles from home base with an expense account, was a lot of fun. But I just had the feeling that I should come home. And I still have that feeling.

Just recently, I wrote the story about PCBs in the Hudson River contaminating the fish....What happens to this river means much more to me than what happens in Dutch Guiana. And I think if you feel that way, you should stay here, rather than go to Dutch Guiana.

Q: Are you writing primarily about your home area?

A: I move around. What I've gotten The Times to do is to give me the environment to write about. That's what I was interested in and the guy who had it didn't really want it anymore. So I write about the environment. But basically, what I do is investigative reporting.

Q: Were you awed by what you found at The Times when you went to work there?

A: The Times is intimidating to buy and intimidating to work for, when you first work there. It has some traditions that it prides jealously. It takes itself very seriously. But it is by no means a monolith.

People have funny ideas about newspapers. They have the idea that newspapers are directed heavily by a handful of editors, and they don't really believe that the discretion of the reporters plays a major role in determining what goes into the newspaper.

Q: Does it?

A: Sure it does. The last 25 or 30 stories that I've done have been all mine. None of

(Continued on Page 30)

MONS 023810

... Q&A -- Foreign correspondent comes home

(Continued from Page 5)

them were assigned. And they've been things that I discovered myself or thought were worth covering.

But the critics will say, 'The Times is in favor of something, or isn't in favor of something.' It isn't The Times at all. But at a paper that big — there are 500 reporters and editors in New York, and at the metropolitan desk, I think now there are 150 reporters — with a staff that big, it's just impossible for the editors to send the reporters out as minions to attack problems that they may be personally interested in....Of all the places that I have worked, I think that I have had the most freedom at The New York Times.

Q: Readers seem to take The Times very seriously. Does the staff take what they say so seriously? How involved do you get in the stories that you cover?

A: Oh, I get very involved.

Q: Does it become a crusade? You're in environmental subjects, so I imagine that could become quite an emotional issue, compared, say, to politics.

A: Yes, I'd never want to cover politics. Well, for example, last year on the Dairylea story. I didn't break that story originally. That story was a year old when I got to it. They had been fined by the State Dept. of Agriculture for adulterating milk. They were fined $150,000.

A year after that incident was first reported, and six or seven months after they were fined, there was silence about this thing.

So what I set out to do was to find out if there was a criminal side to the case. And if there was a criminal side, why had nobody said anything about this. So there was a grand jury investigation, and they indicted 12 people, plus the company, several months ago.

Q: So there can be some results. In this case, if you had not stirred the ashes, the issue might have died?

A: Might have died, yes. So there is the discretion of a reporter to try to do something or not to do something. Of course, a lot of things can happen. One of the guys who was indicted —I don't want to mention his name in this — was a guy I went to school with in Newburgh.

Q: Can you stand back from a story and say, I am a spectator, or do you find yourself becoming involved and saying 'I wish they'd do something about this?'

A: I think my instincts are mostly more than that of an observer. Which is why I have done so much investigative stuff. I think investigative reporters ought to have a low boiling point. I don't think they should be crude and zealous, running around making trouble or anything like that. But I think that if you see something that is obviously wrong, you are taking it upon yourself to say that something's wrong.

I think where the objectivity comes in is that you are professional enough to say 'I was wrong.'

And this has happened at The Times. And not just to me, but to other people. You look at somebody and you don't know whether he's done something amiss...you satisfy yourself that you've asked all the questions there are, and you can't find any more sources. Then, you've got to drop it and say, 'I was wrong.'

But healthy skepticism is part of being a reporter. No matter who you're talking to. And this idea of objectivity is defined by a lot of people as accurately reporting that which is said, or something that happened.

But just because something happened doesn't mean that it's worth reporting. And just because somebody said something doesn't make it worth reporting.

Maybe it is something that somebody hasn't said, or something that hasn't happened, as in the case of the criminal case I couldn't find with Dairylea. Maybe that's worth reporting. I think that certainly what we do has got to be more than sitting down and talking to some politician about the way that he views life.

And probably one of our biggest shortcomings, even now after Watergate, is that we still tend to get too much of our information from official sources and not from street sources.

What's happened to me, in buying this house —it's the first time since I was a kid that I've had roots someplace. But if you have people, let's say, out in the Orange Lake area, with improper sewage facilities, people whose wells are spoiled, what does this say about what's happening to the life in the Town of Newburgh?

And can't we solve this problem in some orderly fashion? And you start to ask yourself about the governmental process.

Q: Do you think as a reporter you're more likely or less likely to become involved, now that you have been up against such a situation with the Balmville Tree?

A: I think probably less likely. You're sort of conditioned over a period of years to observe. Even if you feel very strongly about something, you attain a certain detachment. You still have this restraint and independence. And I think it's a tradition that we all ascribe to.

Now that I've come back (to Newburgh), I find myself getting involved, and I feel kind of awkward about it. Because it's something I'm just not used to. Coming back here has changed me.

Q: But what about the saying that you can never go home again?

A: I think that you have to go home again. I don't believe that you can't go home again. I think that there's no place left to run to. And when Thomas Wolfe wrote that, maybe there were alternatives to the town that he grew up in.

But I have now done enough national reporting to know that what is going on here in Orange County is going on in a lot of countries and you can't run away from it.

There isn't anyplace left to run to.

MONS 032811