

## Editorial Matters:

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by Susan Lampert Smith, Regional Reporter, Wisconsin State Journal

*[Note: the last 3 paragraphs recount the reporter's experience with Pleasant Rowland]*

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It was a sweltering August day, and I was hiking the streets of Milwaukee's Inner City with two elderly men, both of whom looked like candidates for imminent heart attacks. I felt very white, and very nervous. Which one would I save? And how would I get them back to the car when the shooting started?



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When I finally settled down and listened, I realized that Frank Ziedler, the last Socialist mayor of Milwaukee, wasn't seeing what I saw. Where I saw boarded up buildings and trashy vacant lots, he saw the Milwaukee of 50 years ago. Back when the Socialists still ran Milwaukee, the streetcars ran through this neighborhood, which was home to beer barons and a prosperous working class.

Ziedler still lived in the neighborhood (he was mugged not long after my profile ran) and was still involved in community betterment projects. My walk through the old neighborhood with him crystallized the central image of my profile of Milwaukee's last Socialist mayor: A man who remained true to his beliefs while the world around him changed almost unimaginably.

To write about someone, you need to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. You want to show the person in action. Besides, if you interview a public official in her office, the best you'll be able to do is that horrid, hackneyed phrase "as she leaned back in her chair and said..."

Go door to door campaigning with your candidate. Go grocery shopping with him and find out what his constituents are nagging him about. Tour the neighborhood



Former Mayor Ziedler  
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or district, and see what anecdotes are triggered when you drive past the latest state boondoggle project or the hometown of the opponent.

You'll always get a better story and you'll have more insight into how the person thinks and acts.

The bonus is that you'll hear about other stories. On a tedious campaign trip through eastern Wisconsin, the former state attorney general mentioned that he had to oppose abortion as a legislator because he represented "The Holy Land." I had never heard of this area, but made a note of it. Years later, it led to an Easter feature on this very European (and conservative) part of Wisconsin.

More recently, I met a local D.A. for coffee when doing the standard 12-inch election piece. Once the interview was over, he mentioned that he and several other district attorneys from around the state had a rock 'n' roll band. It made a great feature. You haven't lived until you've seen 200 beered-up district attorneys bopping to "I Fought the Law (And The Law Won)." It was something I would never have heard about had I done the interview by phone.

Now, all of this advice assumes you've done the basic good reporter work first. Before you go out, you need to talk to the friends and enemies, review the record and check the candidate out at the courthouse. (You may never use anything from the divorce file but, believe me, you want to know about the vindictive ex-spouse BEFORE the profile runs, not after.)

Of course, things can still backfire. I had done weeks of research for a profile of Pleasant Rowland, founder of the company that makes American Girl dolls. Rowland tightly controls media access and refused to allow us to shoot photos of her. It took much cajoling and vetting with handlers to get a short interview in her office.

I later heard from sources inside the company that she had secretly tape-recorded the interview, and later hung the transcript at company headquarters, highlighting places where she felt her quotes were taken out of context. I relied on written notes and still regret not taping that interview. I never heard from her or the company afterward, but did hear from people who were told she wanted me fired. To re-quote one source from my profile, which was about 98 percent laudatory, "Pleasant, isn't."

So, my final piece of advice is never underestimate the subject of your profile. It turned out that I was safer on the mean streets of Milwaukee than in the Valley of the Dolls.

