

## Through an Actuarial Looking Glass, Darkly

“Irwin Vanderhoof on the line for you.” I took a deep breath. I’d been on the job three days and I knew who Irwin Vanderhoof was before I answered his first call. I’m not an actuary, but I’d read enough copies of the magazine before accepting the editorial job to know he was the long-standing author of “Through an Actuarial Looking Glass,” *Contingencies*’ back-page mainstay. He was, in fact, an institution.

Though I didn’t know Irwin, I did know something about back-page mainstays. I’d worked for another association magazine for 12 years, and the back-page author of that one was a prima donna—archaic, verbose, and resistant to any kind of editing. We could never touch so much as a comma of his copy. And if he wrote long, as he frequently did, our options were to use smaller type or to back-jump the copy to an earlier page. Cutting was absolutely out of the question.

So with trepidation, and “prima donna” firmly in my mind, I accepted the call from Irwin.

“Hi,” said the laconic, faintly New York-accented voice. “I’m Irwin Vanderhoof, the Actuarial Looking Glass guy. I just wanted to call and introduce myself....”

That was the last time I ever had to hesitate about accepting a call from Irwin Vanderhoof. Every other month, that cheerful “hi” signaled the start of a fascinating, sometimes rambling, always challenging conversation. After awhile, he didn’t even have to introduce himself. I knew who it was, and he knew I knew. All he had to do was launch.

“I’ve got some ideas I want to run by you,” he would say. “You can tell me if I’m all wet or not.”

Right.

It never occurred to me to suggest that anything Irwin came up with might even be damp, let alone all wet. Actuarial? Not necessarily. But whatever it was, it was bound

to be playful, profound, provocative, and pithy.

He was a man whose mind went in unconventional directions and embraced unconventional enthusiasms. (Tuvan throat singing?) He had a personal interest in the research into and the treatment of Lyme disease, which he reported on every chance he got. Every phone call, every conversation, was an enthusiastic and unexpected exploration of an idea that had captured his imagination. And we collaborated on how best to make the connections that were so clear to him equally clear to the readers of *Contingencies*.

About a year ago, Irwin called about something else. He’d been diagnosed with cancer. He was apprehensive but encouraged by his prospects for treatment. He tried to be his usual, cheerful self. I’m going to take a little hiatus, he said, but I’ll be back. Hold my place.

I tried. But it was not to be. Irwin’s condition deteriorated steadily and tragically. And it wasn’t until late September that he finally succumbed.

When I eventually had to ask Rich Zatorski and Sam Gutterman to share *Contingencies*’ back page, I realized more than just a change in custodianship was in order. Only Irwin Vanderhoof could see the world through an actuarial looking glass and make such perfect sense of it. So the name of the column would have to pass along with its originator.

His was a unique perspective that captured the hearts and minds of *Contingencies* readers from the very first issue. Wherever I travel, people invariably mention the pleasure they derive from Irwin’s prose. They’ll miss him, and so will I. I’ll particularly miss those phone calls. They were one of the perks of the job. ●



EDITOR

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