

# SCENE

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™



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THE WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 10 - 17, 2015

# THE GERALDO YEARS

## *Investigative and Hard Hitting*

FOX NEWS television correspondent Geraldo Rivera is in the middle of a phone call in his 17th floor corner office in New York City, speaking rapid fire Spanish to the person on the other end of the phone. As the conversation concludes, the man that just about everyone in America recognizes by his first name alone turns himself to the next task at hand: a trip down the river of time to the days when he was majority owner and managing editor of a small town newspaper known as The Two River Times.

By the time Geraldo first sailed into the Two River area on his 70-foot yacht, Voyager, he had earned fame far and wide as the crusading reporter who brought the squalor and brutality of Willowbrook, a state-funded institution for the mentally disabled, into America's living rooms with a 1972 series titled, "The Last Great Disgrace."

His efforts helped to close a facility that had been the scene of near-medieval incidents of physical and sexual abuse and neglect. He won a Peabody award for that report; it's the story he recalls nearly a half-century later as the proudest achievement of his career.

In addition to his work at Fox News, Geraldo now hosts a daily talk show on WABC radio in New York. He's frequently in the field, covering riots and controversies, scandals and catastrophes around the globe.

In his free time, he's just as frequently to be found on the water, the place he feels most at home.

Geraldo's time in the Two River area began in 1989, when he and his then-wife, C.C. Dyer, bought Rough Point, a 10-acre estate crowned by a roomy Victorian, its wide porches overlooking the Navesink River.

It was to be a place for pets and boats and children: Geraldo could sail to work in the city. They had looked at many places, but this was the one: C.C. was familiar with the area through her cousins, the Sorensens, whose roots in the Two River area go back generations. C.C. and Geraldo's two children, now-grown daughters Isabella and Simone, would spend the first years of their lives here. Isabella spent this past summer interning with Fox Business News, a few floors down from Geraldo's office. Simone, a student at Northwestern, spent the past year in a study-abroad program in Paris. The girls – all his girls – are close, Geraldo says proudly.

When Claudia Ansong approached him about investing in the TRT, "I thought she was just asking me to subscribe," he laughs now. Instead, he bought a majority share.

"It was kind of almost spontaneous," he says now. "I fell in love with the paper the first time I held it.

I loved what she had done with the design," Rivera said. "I wanted to bring it some investigative chops."

Soon after purchasing the paper, Geraldo got wind of an unsolved arson fire in Sea Bright, which took the lives of four mentally disabled men in 1977.

The years-long investigative effort by Geraldo and the TRT staff earned the paper numerous awards and resulted in the arrests of two men, one of whom was tried and acquitted and one of whom pleaded guilty and served his sentence.

"That was a very dramatic story," Geraldo recalled. "It was fine journalism – as good as anywhere. I was very proud of my staff."

But he also recognized the importance of covering the social scene.

Joan Lucky, then host of a popular cable television show, filmed a visit with the Riveras for her TV audience. That meeting inspired Geraldo to ask Lucky to become the paper's first People Page editor.

"The People Pages were the life of the party for so many years," he remembered. "They were the social heart of the Two River community."

It was a time of resurrection for Red Bank. A town hard-hit by the recession was afloat again on a rising tide, and the TRT was fully engaged in the renaissance. "You can track the TRT's birth and evolution as totally tied to Red Bank," Geraldo said. Red Bank died with the Daily Register and was brought back to life with the TRT...If we weren't at the heart of the community; we were certainly the most accurate measure of its pulse."

TRT helped to re-establish the annual Christmas tree lighting in Red Bank, held a fundraiser for the Count Basie that featured a live version of Geraldo's talk show, and had a ringside party at the annual Hunt. C.C. kicked off the annual SPCA dog walk with her team of much-beloved and notoriously naughty canines.

"We did a lot of those kinds of events," Geraldo says now. "We brought people to the river. I have been very proud of that. We said, 'Look where you are; you are so lucky to live here.'"

Geraldo's sister, Sharon Rivera, joined the paper as an advertising representative, later becoming chief operating officer. In her years "on the street," Sharon swiftly became a Red Bank celebrity in her own right, causing many to wonder, only partly in jest, how it was that Geraldo was the most

famous Rivera. Sharon also spearheaded numerous initiatives on behalf of the residents and businesses in Red Bank, including putting together the arrangements allowing the borough's first ever larger-than-life Menorah to be situated on the grounds of the Dublin House, where it served as the centerpiece for a celebration of Hanukkah that continues to this day. In honor of Sharon's contributions to Red Bank, she was named by the Borough Council as a Red Bank Ambassador.

Among the more memorable events the paper sponsored was the Navesink River Swim.

"That's indelibly imprinted on my mind," Geraldo laughs now. "Craig (Rivera, Geraldo's brother and producer) and I were joking about it last week. There were 200 swimmers. I finished second from last, behind a 73-year-old guy. Craig was last. We still laugh about it all these years later."

Geraldo's youngest daughter, Sol, whom he had with his present wife, Erica Levy, is a swimmer, he says. "She passed me in the pool when she turned 10. So I swim almost as good as a 10-year-old."

The paper also received numerous awards for its coverage of the impact of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, which took the lives of dozens of Two River residents. "We played a key role for these folks (in the Two River area). It made 9/11 very personal to me."

Like many Two River residents, he lost friends and neighbors that day, including Rumson resident David Bauer, who worked for Cantor Fitzgerald.

"Owning the newspaper and living there, I took what happened very personally. It played a key role in my quitting NBC. I wanted to go to war because I was so angry." But when NBC refused to send him to war, he told them to "take this job and shove it," he said. "I came to Fox for less than half the pay as the senior war correspondent."

He continued to head the newspaper, contributing his column from overseas. The challenges of changing times also brought an end to Geraldo's years as a resident of the Two River area. He and C.C. divorced, and in 2004, Geraldo sold the newspaper to businessman Michael Gooch.

Geraldo remains a subscriber to the paper, noting that after 25 years, it has become part of the fabric of the community. "I believe that whoever owns it has been faithful to the charge."

While he is no longer a regular here, "I'm still on the river from time to time." He watches for the Twin Lights, high on the hills of Highlands as he makes his way down the Shrewsbury. "Every time I travel past it, I feel a feeling wash over me, a tremendous feeling of nostalgia and affection. That was really the golden age of the Rivera clan."

Recently, Geraldo made a substantial donation to Staten Island College, establishing the Geraldo Rivera Fund for Social Work and Disability Studies. The School of Social Work will be dedicated in his name.

The college occupies the site where Willowbrook once stood, on the grounds he once trespassed with his camera crew in pursuit of justice for those who were powerless; who waited inside, with no hope of rescue.

"I plan to be buried there," Geraldo said.

**By Eileen Moon**

*Former TRT managing editor*

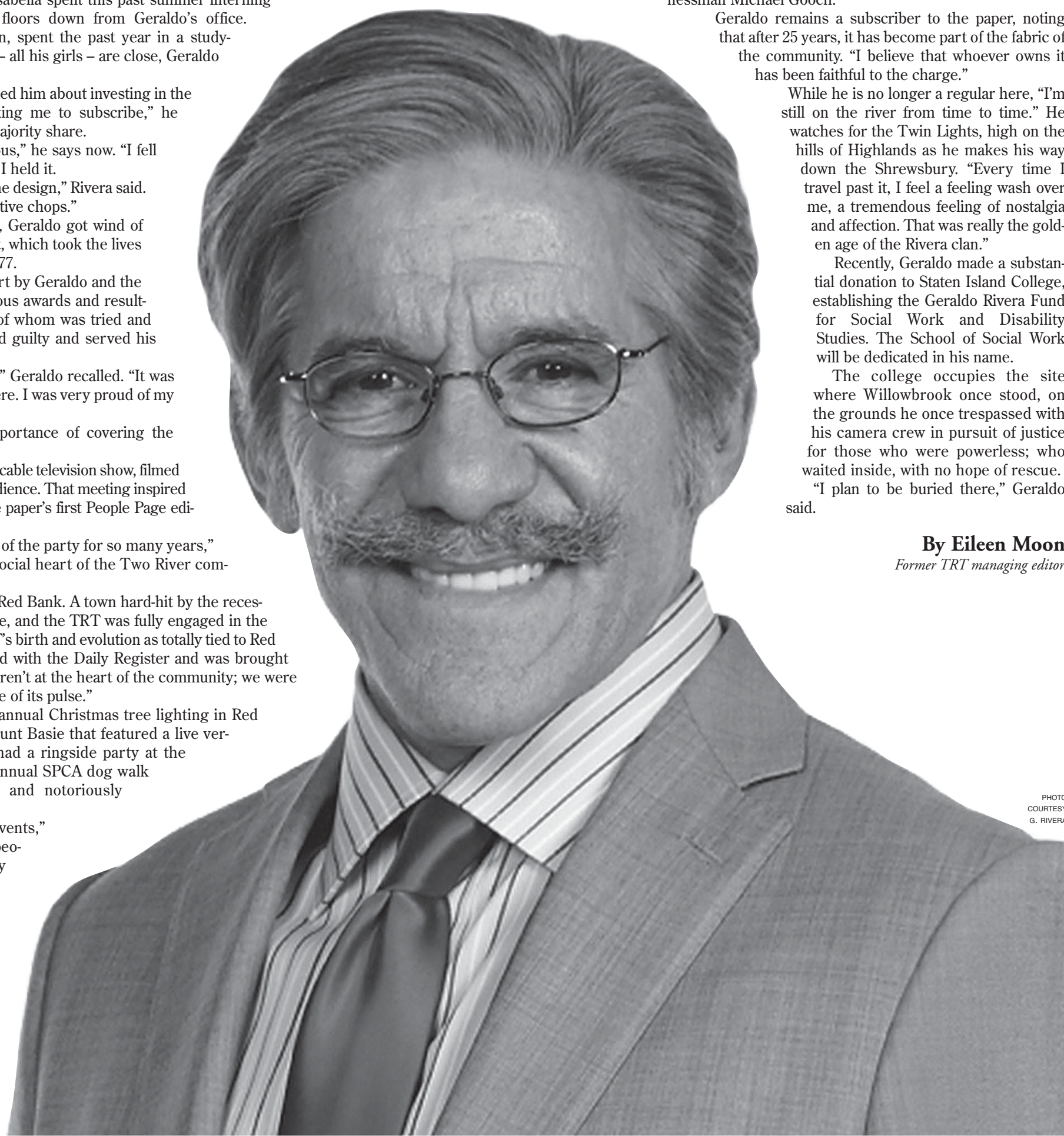


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