

Dan Rather:
A Brief Biography of a Distinguished SHSU Alumnus

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Although this year's incoming freshmen may be too young to remember Dan Rather anchoring the *CBS Evening News*, many at SHSU remember him as more than just the name on the campus' Dan Rather Communications Building.

Dan Rather is a native Texan, born in 1931 in Wharton. His family moved around the state, following oil crews for his father's job as a pipeliner, but they settled in the Heights Annex area of Houston when young Dan was preparing to start school. Rather speaks well of his public school education in Houston during the 1930s and 40s, recalling in a 1986 interview with *ULTRA* that he "was blessed with extraordinary teachers" and "was given a truly extraordinary sense of history." He graduated from John H. Reagan High School in 1950.

Rather attended Sam Houston State Teacher's College and graduated with a degree in Journalism in 1953. During his time in Huntsville, Rather was editor of the campus newspaper, the *Houstonian*, was an Associated Press reporter in Huntsville, and worked for the local paper and KSAM radio.

Rather served in the U.S. Marines after college, but was discharged early for medical reasons. His journalism career took him to Houston, where he worked at the *Houston Chronicle* in 1954, the KTRH radio station, and the KHOU-TV television station, also known as Channel 11, Houston's local CBS affiliate station. It was during this period of his life, in 1957, that he married Jean Goebel, with whom he went on to raise two children.

One of the most noteworthy stories Rather covered during his time in Houston was Hurricane Carla in 1961. Rather and a camera crew were sent to Galveston, providing Channel 11 viewers with live broadcast coverage of the storm. Today we are more accustomed to seeing anchormen in raincoats on beaches, buffeted by hurricane winds and dodging flying debris, but at the time, it was a groundbreaking idea. Rather's broadcast is believed to have been a major factor contributing to the 350,000 people evacuated from the Gulf Coast; no larger American evacuation had been seen before. The Channel 11 news station won a presidential commendation, and the event led to greater notice of young journalist Rather.

He was hired as a correspondent for CBS in 1962, and he spent three years in Dallas as the CBS Southwestern Bureau chief, in which capacity he covered President John F. Kennedy's assassination. He relocated to Washington for a time, then became a foreign correspondent to the White House. Serving in that role in London and Vietnam from 1964 to 1966, he covered the Greek civil war and military action in South Vietnam, among many other world events.

Rather moved again in 1974, this time to Manhattan, where he began producing documentaries for CBS. In 1975, he became co-editor of the news show *60 Minutes*, on which he made regular appearances. He maintained that position until 1981, when he was selected to replace Walter Cronkite—called by one poll "the most trusted man in America"—as the anchor and managing editor of the CBS Evening News.

In 1986, Rather also took on the job of anchoring the news show *48 Hours*, and in 1999, he became a regular correspondent for *60 Minutes II*. Because he was working simultaneously on so many news shows, he became known as "the hardest working man in broadcast journalism." Beginning in the late 1990s, Rather also began writing a syndicated newspaper column, and his radio program *Dan Rather Reporting* was heard on over 300 stations across the nation.

Over the years, Rather held onto his identity as a Texan, returning often to the state with his wife, regardless of where they lived at the time. He also maintained a strong connection with his alma mater, Sam Houston State, often visiting town for the university's homecoming events, for his book signings, or to speak in front of students and faculty. In 1998, he established a special student internship program between SHSU and CBS News, which SHSU students have called "one of the best broadcasting internships in the United States." In 2006, he gave a gift of \$2 million to the SHSU Share the Vision capital campaign for endowments to support academic excellence in the Mass Communications department and to provide annual scholarships to students in any discipline.

In a 1999 *Houston Chronicle* article, Rather was quoted as saying that, as an anchorman, "my role is to be an honest broker of information." He was sometimes seen as overly aggressive, and he had his share of controversies—including a six-minute walkout on the Evening News in 1987, a 1988 clash with then-Vice President George Bush due to questions about the Iran Contra Affair, and a 2004 scandal involving questionable source material. But nevertheless, over the years, Rather succeeded in earning the respect and trust of many viewers, both for himself and CBS.

After 24 years, Rather announced his retirement as anchor of the *CBS Evening News*, effective March 9, 2005.

Rather received numerous Emmy Awards and a Peabody Award. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Camera Never Blinks*; *Memoirs, I Remember*; *The Camera Never Blinks Twice*; and *Deadlines and Datelines*. He received a Distinguished Alumni Award from SHSU in 1977. The house where he was born in Wharton, TX, is now part of the Wharton County Historical Museum and Visitor Center. The Dan Rather Communications Building on the SHSU campus was dedicated on October 21, 1994.

Sources (Special Collections, Thomason Room, Newton Gresham Library)

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