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KEN RUDIN

**Quill poses
10 questions
to people with
some of the
coolest jobs
in journalism**

BY SCOTT LEADINGHAM

Some kids obsess over a sports figure or the latest teen pop music sensation. Others spend their time outside or getting into mischief down by the creek on a lazy summer day. For Ken Rudin, NPR's political editor and brain behind the popular Political Junkie column, his young days were spent at local (competing) campaign offices and collecting candidates' buttons. He now estimates his political button collection at "70,000 or so." But aside from an interest in button collection (one he calls "obsessive"), he's a go-to resource for political news and analysis. If you're a political junkie, Rudin's column on NPR.org, segment on "Talk of the Nation," and "It's All Politics" podcast with colleague Ron Elving are, well, almost required. In 2011 he's changing up the routine a bit and will help lead NPR's new Impact of Government initiative, a push for more state and local reporting in every state.

1 You've been a "political junkie" as an interest and doing the actual Political Junkie column for a long time. What prompted that interest?

I always loved current events and politics. I remember, as a young lad growing up in the small town called the Bronx, walking into Bobby Kennedy and Barry Goldwater headquarters in 1964 and talking politics with the folks there. But I've always looked at politics objectively. I was never an advocate or a partisan. Many people cite Woodward and Bernstein as their impetus to go into political journalism. My awakening came much earlier, during Vietnam and the unrest in the streets.

2 Where did the actual column name come from? All your idea?

1998 was a year I returned to NPR after a four-year absence; I originally left in 1994 to run the political newsletter Hotline. When I returned, NPR's website was nowhere as substantial as it is now, and I met with the folks at the Washington Post website to write a weekly column as well as a weekly installment of my campaign button puzzle. I wrote a "Political Graffiti" column for a couple of years at The Hill, a Capitol Hill newspaper. The folks at the Post wanted

me to extend that column with interaction with readers. In order to eliminate possible confusion, we switched to "Political Junkie" when the Post column began. It was my idea to write about politics and campaign history and trivia and lore; it was probably a joint decision to give it its title.

3 What's with the famed campaign button collection? Did you start that at a young age when other kids were collecting baseball cards?

Well, I collected baseball cards too. But in 1966, my interest in politics peaked. I began writing to many of the candidates running for office that year for campaign buttons – Ronald Reagan and George Wallace and Pat Brown and George Romney. Dozens of candidates. Everyone responded with buttons; I still have the letter sent by Governor Reagan's executive assistant, Ed Meese, who sent a button as well. Meese, of course, later became attorney general under President Reagan. By the end of the '66 campaign, I had a cigar box filled with buttons; I remember remarking how impressive I thought that was. Now my collection numbers around 70,000 or so. Impressive led to obsessive.

Did you ever consider another aspect or beat in journalism or news analysis?

No, never. And I remember, sometime in late 1984, after that year's presidential election and I was still at ABC News in New York, where my job security was not clear, a network vice president telling me that I should choose between journalism and politics, but it's almost impossible to have a career in political journalism. Those jobs don't exist, he told me. That was more than 26 years ago.

I think a fair amount of people go into political news coverage or even major in political science or a similar discipline with the interest of actually working in politics. Was that you at any point?

Again, no, never. Well, for the record, I used to "volunteer" at many campaign headquarters, often with several competing candidates at the same time, just to experience the feel of a campaign (and, of course, get buttons in the process). But I never found myself agreeing with a candidate or a party to the point where I thought I would want to go the partisan route. I just loved the politics of it all. In 1989, I had both Democratic and Republican friends urge me to work for their party's congressional committee. But I always winced at the thought of a "D" or an "R" accompanying my obituary.

Regular followers of your NPR work (myself included) can't miss your somewhat self-deprecating sense of humor and writing style. What's with that? (It's funny.)

Well, first of all, I've never taken myself too seriously. But more important, I know that many people simply dislike politics. They dislike the meanness, the pettiness, the over-the-top rhetoric. I try to get past that stuff. I want it to be fun. Obviously, I love this stuff. I find myself talking about politics the way I talk about baseball: the stories, the history, the people, the lore, the trivia. I can, and often do, talk about it for hours at a time. And if people stay awake, or even manage to smile, don't nod off, or even smile, I feel like I've succeeded. But I will concede that there is so much more important about this than simply winners and losers; politics is also about people, and how government affects our lives. I recognize that, and even agree with that, even if I do slip into horserace coverage. I concede that not everyone is pleased with my focus.

Tell us more about this Impact of Government initiative.

With more and more people turned off by the constant bickering and ineffectiveness on Capitol Hill — some will argue that it's getting worse all

the time — there is a nagging need that people still look to government to improve their lives. If it doesn't work in Washington, then maybe the focus should be on state and local/municipal government. But can that succeed, given drastic state budget deficits? Immigration, water rights, public service unions, property taxes, jobs, redistricting — all of that is the function of state and local government. This new NPR project will focus on the role of (non-Washington) government, and whether it meets the needs of its people. It comes at an opportune time for us, as fewer and fewer newspapers are focusing on such problems.

Why is now an important time to focus on state/local government and its impact? Was Tip O'Neill right with that oft-quoted axiom?

Well, as I said, more and more states are finding themselves in an untenable economic situation. It's easy to say, well, let's just cut spending. It's more difficult to call for higher taxes. But in some states, the old, easy ways are no longer an option. We have to see if political courage and political will will be met by voter acceptance. But there's no question, the situation in many states is just dire. And I am very proud that NPR has filled the void with this project.

To the young person just starting out, maybe double majoring in journalism and political science and wanting to work in political journalism, what advice would you give?

Well, I majored in political science and I'm not sure it got me anywhere. If I could do it over again, I would have majored in journalism. What I would definitely do is get involved with your school newspaper or radio station. Often a few years at a college radio station can be a great introduction to, say, public radio, either locally or nationally. You know, when I was with ABC News (1983-91), I had no idea what NPR was. I never listened. Now, wherever I go, whenever I travel, people will always come up to me and say they could not live without public radio. That helps explain why our listenership is increasing when newspaper circulation and network news viewership is down. There is a crying need for this kind of in depth coverage, and we do it better than anyone else. And the only way for NPR to continue growing is for the young political journalists of the world — the next generation of Ken Rudins — to come on board.

You make a lot of predictions during campaign season in all national, congressional and gubernatorial elections. Usually you're pretty good. What other

sources of political news and information (besides NPR, I guess) do you depend on to inform your judgments on races?

I read a lot of blogs; that habit came to me grudgingly. I had long been an anti-blog snob. I grew up as a traditionalist. I would wait until 6:30 to hear what Walter Cronkite would say. Now there are sources of information everywhere. It's amazing, for example, how much I learn from Twitter. Yes, there is a lot of garbage out there, and yes, the Fox Newses and MSNBCs of the world have transformed what was once called journalism to ideological advocacy. You've got to know which sources to trust. The problem with the Web is that everyone is a journalist; few are editors. But there is no shortage of information, and we need to understand how to use it to make journalism better. ♦

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