



## Michael B. Coakley, III

May 13, 1942 - July 26, 2011

Michael B. Coakley III, night rewrite man for The Inquirer and the Evening Bulletin

By Walter F. Naedele  
Inquirer Staff Writer

Michael B. Coakley III, 69, of Blackwood, a throwback to the nights of competitive newspaper journalism at the Evening Bulletin and later at The Inquirer, died of complications of Alzheimer's disease Tuesday, July 26, at his home. If any night reporters, phoning in stories to the city desk, uttered that old cliché, "Hello, sweetie, gimme rewrite," they often got Mike Coakley. And what they got in the 1970s and 1980s was an echo of an even earlier time, before college graduates became the norm instead of high school-educated reporters. Mr. Coakley was a high school dropout who worked at blue-collar jobs before becoming a copy boy, a job that before computers meant running a typewriter-written story from the writer up the aisle to an editor and then running back for more. As time went on, Mr. Coakley did better. Former Bulletin and Inquirer police reporter Thomas J. Gibbons Jr. recalled that Mr. Coakley was key to a major story in the MOVE confrontation in May 1985. A standoff had gone on for hours between police and the radical group's members, who had barricaded themselves inside their West Philadelphia house on May 12. Gibbons said the top editors of The Inquirer had ordered Mr. Coakley to remain in the newsroom well past his usual 2 a.m. departure. The editors had also ordered Gibbons and others to remain close to the

confrontation throughout the night. "When gunfire began, signaling the beginning of the MOVE shoot-out, I unloaded to Coakley, about 6 a.m.," Gibbons said, recalling phoning in his raw notes. And what Mr. Coakley wrote became the main story for a May 13 Extra that The Inquirer printed that morning, hours after the usual time for the last edition. "The Inquirer over the years didn't do too many extras," Gibbons said in an understatement, and Mr. Coakley was key to a memorable one. Born in West Philadelphia, Mr. Coakley attended Merchantville High School, worked seasonal construction jobs from 1960 to 1963, and spent eight months in a Philadelphia tannery before joining the Camden Courier-Post in June 1964. It was there, after graduating from copy boy to night reporter and night rewrite man, that he earned the 1968 Best Writing Award of the Philadelphia Press Association. Mr. Coakley alluded to his offbeat education in the literary arts in a brief autobiography, stating that as a teenage dropout he "lived in [the] Greenwich Village section of New York at the end of the Beat era . . . published some freelance fiction." In 1968, he began at the Bulletin on night suburban rewrite. Being a suburban rewrite man in the 1960s meant listening to folks who were paid by the newspaper to attend night meetings dictate their impressions of what had happened. It was a rigorous way to spend an evening, because they had only the expertise they had acquired through on-the-job training. But Mr. Coakley soldiered on, taking notes from the stringers, and assembling a half-dozen stories every night. Eventually, he became a night rewrite man, taking stories from reporters like Gibbons. "When you filed a breaking news story from the field to Coakley," Gibbons said, "it was almost a wonderful experience to hear his voice. "He was cool, he was calm." At The Inquirer, which Mr. Coakley joined in February 1981, Gibbons said, "I often would hear the night city editor in the background hollering, 'Give it to me, Coakley; give it to me, Coakley,' " because the editor had little time to move the story to the composing room. But, Gibbons said, Mr. Coakley "wouldn't pay attention to the demands of the editor - just trying to get that last bit of information that would make the story sing." Ashley Halsey III, a Washington Post reporter who worked with Mr. Coakley at both of his

Philadelphia papers, recalled that he "wasn't of the old generation of rewrite guys. He came after them. "But he stuck to their belief that you should never get a byline as a rewrite guy. He took pride in that." That worked at the Bulletin, but The Inquirer sometimes broke his rule and gave him the recognition that he deserved. When he wasn't given that recognition, Halsey said, "he was the poetry behind so many much better-known bylines. Services Private.

# Tribute Wall



“ *Michael B. Coakley, III*

---

November 27, 2022 at 03:45 PM