



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

## Journalist Paul Davis, advocate for mental health, dies at 74

By Lydia Seabol Avant  
Staff Writer

Published: Tuesday, September 25, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

Newspaper publisher and journalist Paul Davis, whose coverage of conditions at Bryce Hospital in the 1960s led to the reform of mental health hospitals across the country, died Sunday night. He was 74.

Born in Montevallo, Davis grew up in Alberta, just blocks from W.D. Partlow Developmental Center where he and his brothers would often play ball with the patients. It was later when he worked as a reporter at The Tuscaloosa News covering the medical beat that he uncovered abuses at both Bryce and Partlow that he had first seen as a child, - including overcrowding and neglect.



File photo

Veteran journalist Paul Davis died Sunday at 74.

"We asked ourselves whether, if someone was committed to the state for care, did the state have a binding obligation to provide that care?" Davis said in 2008.

At that time, anyone could be committed to Bryce for almost any reason, he said in a Department of Mental Health article on his experience as a reporter.

"As I've said over and over, many — maybe most — of those people didn't need to be there. But since they were there, was the state obligated to provide treatment? That was our big question."

Eventually, his coverage garnered national attention, and led to the Wyatt v. Stickney case, which set new national standards for the care of the mentally ill and developmentally disabled, requiring the state to provide adequate care.

During Davis' time at The News, his health beat coverage also led to the closing of a tuberculosis hospital in town.

And when Gov. George Wallace made his "stand in the schoolhouse door" at Foster Auditorium at the University of Alabama, Davis was the only reporter inside the auditorium.

"The thing about Paul was, Paul was a really hard nosed reporter and editor," said Dan Meissner, who was a photographer and writer who worked with Davis at The News. "He was the type that would go after a story with everything he had. He was also the kind of person who cared deeply for individuals and causes."

Davis, who started at The News as a 3 a.m. night shift reporter in the early 1960s, eventually became associate editor. During his tenure, his work was nominated twice for a Pulitzer Prize.

"Paul's reporting skills were to dig until he got the story, and he was a person with great compassion for people in dire need of having their story told, and in finding an advocate," said James B. Boone Jr., chairman of Boone Newspapers, who worked as publisher when Davis returned to The News in 1968. "That led Paul to have strong



- Golf Cart Repairs
- Pickup & Delivery Available
- Trailer Parts & Repairs
- Custom Trailers Built
- Trade-Ins Welcome

**TRAILER STORE PLUS**



12 Years in Business!

**Phone: (205) 333-7711**  
4705 McFarland Blvd. Northport, AL 35476

opinions about such matters, and the combination of his reporting skills and his willingness to separately offer opinion made the lives of many people better. “

Copyright © 2012 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.

Davis went on to become editor of The Selma Times Journal and vice president and general manager of the Natchez (Miss.) Democrat. At the time of his death, he served as editor and publisher of the Auburn Bulletin, The Tuskegee News and the Tallassee Tribune.

“He was kind of an old-fashioned newspaper man,” said Charles H. Land, former publisher of The News who worked with Davis in the 1960s and 1970s. “He wasn’t afraid to cover something that was controversial and he was passionate about the stories he covered, mental health issues in particular. He stayed that way throughout his life. He went on to an impressive career.”

In more recent years, Davis became known for his investigative work relating to the Auburn University Board of Trustees. Davis tried to shine the light on what he “thought was board interference into the day-to-day operations at Auburn University and what many thought were inappropriate financial ties among some of the trustees and with the University itself,” said Bill Keller, former executive director of the Alabama Press Association.

“He wrote about it week after week after week, writing that contributed to much positive change there,” Keller said.

Keller later nominated Davis for the APA’s Lifetime Achievement Award.

“I know I speak for many who knew him,” Keller said. “We’ll miss his good nature, his support, his courage and his dedication to the downtrodden and mistreated.”

Davis also continued as an advocate for mental health, serving on the board of trustees for the Alabama Department of Mental Health during a time when the state sold the Bryce property to UA, closed Partlow and planned for the construction of a new Bryce Hospital.

“I can think of no one in Alabama who has had a greater positive impact on the rights and treatment of persons with mental illnesses over the past 45 years,” said ADMH Commissioner Paul Reddoch, who is also a former director of Bryce. “He has been an active member of the State Mental Health Advisory Board, always keeping mental health consumers as the absolute first priority.”

In a guest column published in The Tuscaloosa News in February, Davis continued to write about his concern for the state’s mental health system, most notably for proposed budget cuts after the closure of Partlow. At the time, the ADMH announced that Bryce would close and a state-of-the-art mental health hospital being built on the Partlow site would be used to house the criminally insane.

“I dreamed of the day when we would do right by the mentally ill,” Davis said. “Now, I feel with all my being that we are reversing track. I further believe, I strongly believe, that the issue of the care of citizens with mental problems will move back into the federal courts. It’s always been tragic to me to have a court at the highest level make us do what we ought to do.”

The plan to close all state mental health hospitals and use the new Bryce for the criminally insane was later reversed. The new Bryce, which will have 268 beds for the general population, is under construction.

Davis was preceded in death by his parents, W.M. and Una Belle Davis of Montevallo and Tuscaloosa, and a brother, Willard Davis. He is survived by his wife, Gayle Davis, and their children, Alan Davis, Roger Richardson, Susan Davis May, Keith Richardson, Chris Davis and Scott Richardson. He is also survived by two sisters,

four brothers, 13 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Visitation will be held at Jeffcoat-Trant Funeral Home in Auburn from 6 to 8 p.m. today. Funeral services will be at 2 p.m. Wednesday at Auburn Church of Christ.

Reach Lydia Seabol Avant at 205-722-0222 or  
lydia.seabolavant@tuscaloosanews.com.