

John Callaway - RIP

On Tuesday, John D. Callaway, 72, passed away from a heart attack. John was best known as the long-time host of *Chicago Tonight*, a talk show style news show on public television in Chicago. He was hands down the best interviewer I have ever seen. He never had an ax to grind. He never let his own views of a topic interfere with his interview, and he always treated his guests with the delicate and respectful touch of a true gentleman.

Sitting down for an interview with a journalist is an intimate experience. As a result, it is virtually impossible for a reporter to hide his or her personal views. But John was able to do this with ease. I think this was because he really believed that his job was to find out what people were thinking. He had no desire to argue or debate. He asked questions to elucidate and educate, not to play “gotcha.” He viewed his job as helping his viewers understand his guests.

He was especially adept at this because he was a very smart man. He dropped out of Ohio Wesleyan University, but was as well read as anyone I have ever met. He could have intelligent conversations with experts from any discipline or walk of life.

His work earned him over 60 awards, including seven Emmys and a Peabody award. And *Chicago Tonight* was one of the most watched news shows in the Midwest. A key reason for his popularity is that he left the judgment of his guests, and any decision about who had made better points in the debate, to his audience. Many people are credited with being humble, but John’s humility was out front for everyone to see night after night, as he showed deep respect for both his audience and his guests.

Hearing that John Callaway had passed away on Tuesday reminded me of the times I was with him. On probably a dozen different occasions back in the 1990s, I was a guest on *Chicago Tonight*, an award-winning talk show on Chicago’s WTTW-Channel 11. John pioneered this program in 1984 and then hosted it for 15 years.

But the last time he interviewed me was the most special. Last year, John was hired by a Fox Valley restaurant to do a few promotional after-dinner talks. He chose four topics – politics, health, sports and economics – to do interview-style events with an invited guest. He could have asked any local, or many national economists, to sit down with him and they all would have said “yes.” But I was the economist he chose. This was one of the biggest honors of my career.

He grew up in West Virginia in the 1940s and 50s. Maybe this is where he came to appreciate the less flashy Midwest over the glittery East Coast. In the late 1960s, John spent time as a Vice President of CBS Radio in New York, but he chose to return to Chicago. The second city, and public television, apparently was where he felt at home. He wanted to do a job and he wanted to do it well. There are too few people like John Callaway in the world. He will be missed, but his bright light will shine for a very long time.

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