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By Joseph F. Jalkiewicz

IN ADVANCE

An Early Christmas Present

► If you're anything like me, I'm sure you have days from time to time when you wonder whether what you do for a living has any impact on anyone beyond, say, the people you work for.



I was having one of those days just before Christmas when I got this email from a man named Ryan MacMichael:

"Hi—This is kind of a weird letter, but

what the heck.☺" Ryan's note began. "Back in 1990, when you were writing for the Burlington County Times, you wrote an article about me. I was 14 at the time and running a bulletin board system on my middle school's computer. I was looking back on that article today and reflecting—it's been 17 1/2 years ... but here I am now, working at my job as a webmaster, arguably the 2007 version of a 1990's BBS SysOp. Funny how that works.

"Anyway, just thought I'd write a belated "thanks" for covering me in the paper. It's fun looking back on it now."

Ryan also sent along a scan of the article, dated Sunday, April 15, 1990, and said he got the clipping after his grandmother passed away in 2005. "I know for a fact my mom has about a hundred copies of that paper somewhere in her basement.☺" he added.

To be honest, I couldn't recall having written the article. I obviously had; my byline was on it. But Ryan's email spurred me to do a little reflecting of my own.

For one thing, I'm certain that at that point in my career, five years out of journalism school, I didn't look at such assignments as much more than "just doing my job." I think I looked at that particular assignment as just one more "clip" in a pile of experience that I hoped would help me move on to bigger and better things, as they say.

But to Ryan and his family, that brief, story on page A4 of the Sunday paper was so much more: A source of pride. An encouragement to pursue a career in computers.

Perhaps even the chance to feel famous for a while at school.

Like a thoughtful, early Christmas present, Ryan's note of thanks reminded me that what I do for a living does matter. And I began wondering how many more articles must be yellowing away in the basements and desk drawers of people I wrote about, to be taken out occasionally for their own trips down memory lane.

I couldn't help feeling a little grateful myself.

"Cute story," you might be thinking, "but I take X-rays for a living. I don't get many chances to make much of a difference."

If that's you, please, think again.

I still remember the technologist who took my X-rays at the A.I. DuPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Del., in the 1970s. I was in the hospital for scoliosis surgery and was feeling quite fearful of the impending operation and spending the next 10 months in a body cast.

But with her silly jokes and hearty laugh, that RT made me believe that I could get through it.

I'm sure that if you asked her, that tech would say she was "just doing my job." But she helped to give me some of my most cherished sights along memory lane. Not only that, but it's some 30 years later, and here I am now, editing a publication for folks just like her.

Funny how that works.

Here's wishing you a happy, prosperous—and meaningful—New Year. ■

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