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To Whom it May Concern:

The page came over the intercom a bit before 9 a.m.

“Rick, it’s Dave on line one. He’s in Woodstock, I think.”

I grabbed the phone and punched line one.

We need to make sure everyone’s in the office right away, he said.

I tried to interrupt.

And the printing crew. That includes the printing crew.

I tried again.

We need to start thinking about a special edition.

I couldn’t take it any longer.

“Dave,” I said, talking over him. “Dave. Everyone’s in. The reporters have been here for hours. Everyone’s here. Yes. The printing crew’s here. Yes. The sale’s staff is here. Dave. Just say yes.”

I’ll clean up the language just a touch at this point.

“Hell, yes.”

It was Friday, Nov. 24, 1989. Serial killer Allan Legere had been captured just a few hours earlier. When the phone rang at that pre-dawn hour I’d leaped out of bed. They got him, the voice on the other end of the line said.

I grabbed my wife and danced around the room, then threw on the nearest clothing I could find, forgetting my belt, bolted for the car and raced to the RCMP station in Newcastle.

Minutes later, the Crown prosecutor raced into the parking lot. He and his family had been hidden under police protection during the final days of a manhunt that stretched back to May 3 when Legere escaped from two prison guards during a visit to a Moncton hospital.

We hugged, for the first – and only – time in our lives.

I ran across the street, banged on a door, asked to use their phone, called CBC Moncton collect and less than a minute later was live on the radio describing what I was seeing across the street. Not much.

That done, I hurried back to the office, arranged to have a reporter babysit the RCMP station to ensure we got a photo of Legere if he came out, and began planning for a special edition. Even though I didn't have permission from the publisher.

I knew I'd get it.

David Cadogan hired me in a few years earlier. I'd quit the international relations graduate program at Carleton University and went to the unemployment insurance office to look for a job.

"Can you type?" the counsellor asked that afternoon.

I'd lied. Well, fibbed. I could type, but not very quickly.

"They're looking for a reporter at the newspaper."

I called the paper. It was a Friday. Dave wasn't in.

"Any idea where he'd be?"

The person on the other end answered honestly. Try the local bars. I did. Calling everyone and leaving a message at each.

"Who are you," Dave demanded when he finally called back.

I was hired before my interview was done. Months later, I was hired by Canada's foreign service, quit after about two years, returned to the Miramichi Leader as a reporter, left to earn my masters degree at the University of Western Ontario - now Western University - with financial help from Dave, and became the editor.

I planned to stay a year. I stayed 17.

My marching orders as editor were simple. Make the Leader the best newspaper, pound for pound, in the country.

I figured that meant go out and pick fights with those who deserved it. So I did.

A chemical company was polluting land and threatening the world-famous salmon fishery on the Miramichi River. We spent months reporting on it, alone, while no one else paid any attention. It cost the company millions to clean up the mess.

The provincial government claimed the local unemployment rate during the worst of the 1980s was about 10 per cent. We spent a week or more digging out the real figure. It was 54 per cent.

The economic development minister, a local MLA, called in rage.

"You'll never get another story from me," he snarled. I laughed and pointed out we'd never gotten a story from him before.

A federal cabinet minister was coming to town and the woman planning the trip called, rhyming off the many places he'd be that day. Places our reporter could be to cover the visit.

"Is there an announcement?" I asked.

There wasn't. It was a pre-election press-the-flesh trip.

“If there’s no news, we won’t be there,” I said.

After a full and frank discussion, the minister’s handler demanded to talk to Dave. I punched hold, walked into Dave’s office and warned him what was coming. He smiled.

A few minutes later he walked by my desk. Still smiling. I never heard from the minister’s office about the visit again. And we didn’t cover it.

He must have handled lots of calls like that over the years. Picking fights with those who deserve it will light up the phone.

We were sued twice, won one, the other was dropped. One was prompted by a remark made by a columnist that offended a local business. It went to trial, we won. The judge awarded us expenses, but no way did that cover our costs.

The second time we published a secret report into the behavior of two members of the local police force. Both were fired. A local man mentioned in the report sued, trying to get us to reveal our source. We refused. He gave up.

Later that year, my home was broken into while my wife and I were away. The house was trashed. We rushed home.

The house looked like a scene from CSI, complete with RCMP officers and fingerprint dust. Nothing was stolen. It was a message, a friend with connections to the local criminal community told me later.

“Do you have any enemies?” asked a RCMP officer standing in my kitchen with a notebook in his hand.

“I’m a newspaper editor,” I said.

I stayed at the Leader for years because it was the best job in the world. And Dave let me do it, while protecting me from those trying to stop me. When we had our differences, we sorted them out behind closed doors. When the mess hit the fan, he stood in front of me and took the hit.

He was a newspaper editor’s dream boss.

Oh, and the special edition. A 20-page tab went to press the evening Legere was caught. They had to bring the crew back in the next day to print more of them because they sold out. It won a national award.

And in the few hours they had to sell banner ads across the bottom of the pages, the sales staff sold enough to ensure the section made money.

Yours Truly,

Rick MacLean,  
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