



Zeleny is "Certified Native Nebraskan," who just happens to work at CNN

By Cindy Workman, OPC Publications Committee

While there is plenty to talk about in Washington D.C., it was the Daily Nebraskan days of CNN senior Washington correspondent Jeff Zeleny that made for an entertaining roast at the Omaha Press Club's Face on the Barroom Floor event on Sept. 27.

Paula Lavigne, an investigative reporter for ESPN who worked with Zeleny when he was the editor of the Daily Nebraskan, served as emcee.

"Glad we could catch you on such a slow news week," quipped Lavigne in her opening remarks.

A 1996 graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Zeleny played trumpet in the Cornhusker Marching Band as well as serving as editor of the Daily Nebraskan where he caught the ire of Coach Tom Osborne for coverage of the football team on and off the field.

In deciding what to say about Zeleny, Lavigne said he was someone you didn't mind working for at the school paper. Though she did recount the story of Zeleny sending her to cover a Nebraska football practice after Coach Osborne had closed all practices to reporters because of some of the coverage the team had received.

"He knew Osborne wouldn't kick a girl out," she said. "And he was right."

She described Zeleny as a person with unassuming farm boy looks, who had a crushing handshake and would introduce himself as "Hi, I'm Jeff Zeleny and I will be covering the White House someday."

His brother Mike, chief of staff and associate to the UNL chancellor, talked of Jeff's early days working at the local Pizza Hut to reporting breaking news at the York News-Times and the Fillmore County newspaper in Geneva.

"He learned early how to cover a story and the importance of being first," Mike said. "But Mom would sometimes scoop him. She told him then Gov. Mike Johanns would be resigning to accept the ag secretary position as well as telling him that the president would be visiting the troops at Thanksgiving, to which Jeff said, 'No way.'"

He went on to say that when his brother took a job at the Des Moines Register as a political reporter after the Omaha World-Herald turned him down at graduation, it changed the course of history.

"Roasting Jeff is tough because he's such a nice guy...or is he? He doesn't let up until he's done with you," his brother said. "He's covered a lot of people in his lifetime, all who have become victims of his reporting."

Another roaster, Joe Starita, a journalism professor at UNL, said, "Brooklyn has its JZ and Nebraska has its JZ, dropping F-bombs on the air every night – one fake news bomb after another."

Starita noted that Zeleny had a natural instinct for news, "When other students were sucking up, Jeff was filing FOIAs."

Allen Beermann, the Omaha Press Club's 121st "Face on the Barroom Floor, who is retiring in 2020 as executive director of the Nebraska Press Association after 25 years, said the roast was his opportunity for revenge.

"We get to take him off of Air Force One and plant his face on the barroom floor."

This was the final "Face" for artist Jim Horan who has been drawing the "Face on the Barroom Floor" since 1971. While Horan was unable to attend the event, he did share a description of Zeleny's "Face," that includes three of the presidents Zeleny has covered – Donald Trump, Barack Obama and George W. Bush, who is on all fours "looking like an offensive lineman."

"I'm honored to bring Trump to the walls of the Omaha Press Club," joked Zeleny. "Trust me, my face has been on the barroom floor many times."

Never one to leave any source untapped, Zeleny said he had heard from a source on the street, "might be my aunt," that Joe (Starita) was going through old scrapbooks looking for information prior to the roast.

A native of Exeter, Neb., Zeleny is one of the most accomplished journalists to come from the state.

He began his career at the Des Moines Register, going to the Chicago Tribune where he was a member of the reporting team that won a Pulitzer Prize in explanatory journalism for documenting gridlock in the nation's air traffic. From there he headed to the New York Times, where he covered Obama's first years in the White House. Later, at ABC News, he served as senior Washington correspondent. He joined CNN four years ago as senior Washington correspondent, where he covered the 2016 presidential election – his fifth presidential election – and has reported extensively on the first three years of the Trump presidency.

"I am living out my childhood dreams and who knows where it will go from here," Zeleny said.

While the roasters all had fun at Zeleny's expense, Beermann perhaps summed up the evening best as he told the crowd, "Zeleny is CNN – a Certified Native Nebraskan and we get to call him Jeff."

Jim Horan's Description:

Jeff Zeleny, CNN White House correspondent – the 162nd Face on the Barroom Floor

In the background, I tried to show the road that Jeff has traveled during his illustrious career. On the right side, there's Exeter, Neb. – population 544 – where Jeff grew up on his family farm. On the left is the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, DC, where Jeff now hangs out covering politics for CNN.

In his left hand, Jeff is holding a list of the prestigious places he has worked – Wall Street Journal, Des Moines Register, Chicago Tribune, New York Times and ABC News. In his right hand, he is holding the logo of his present employer – CNN.

He is surrounded by three dudes who he has gotten to know quite well over the past few years – George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. I'm not sure why, but I've got President Bush down on all four like an offensive lineman.

What the heck with the Ohio State game coming up tomorrow – and Jeff planning to attend – I thought I might as well bring in a football element. Hey, it's Nebraska, and you know – Jeff played trumpet in the Cornhusker Marching Band when he was in college at UNL.

So, there you have it – my rendition of Jeff Zeleny, the 162nd Face on the Barroom Floor. And, you need to believe me when I say, "This is not fake news! This guy is the real deal!"