

Famous New Yorker: Tim Russert



Photo by Harry Scull, Jr.
Courtesy of the *Buffalo News*

When Tim Russert died on June 13, 2008, some people were surprised by the extent of mourning and the volume of tributes offered to a television journalist. The memorial services reminded some of funerals for heads of state. Others wondered what a mere reporter had done to deserve it all. The mourners knew that Russert was the most important political interviewer on television, but many also knew him as a great friend.

Timothy John Russert was born in the City of Buffalo, Erie County on May 7, 1950. Tim was devoted to Buffalo and to his father, “Big Russ,” throughout his life. After graduating from the Catholic Canisius High School, Tim studied law, ultimately earning a Juris Doctor degree from the Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in 1976.

One year later, Russert joined the staff of newly-elected U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Starting out as a legal counsel, Russert became Moynihan’s chief of staff two years later. He was an advisor, researcher and operative, often conveying sensitive information to the news media.

When Moynihan faced a strong challenger in 1982, Russert discovered that the challenger had exaggerated his war record, and gave the information to influential political columnists. The challenger dropped out of the campaign.

After Moynihan’s re-election, Russert became a counsel for New York Governor Mario Cuomo. In 1984, however, he shifted from politics to journalism by joining the staff of NBC News. His experience as a political insider made him a natural for the network’s Washington Bureau, where he was promoted to chief in 1989.

In 1991, Russert received one of NBC’s most prestigious assignments. He became the moderator of *Meet the Press*, a political interview program dating back to 1947. Once the most popular Sunday morning news program, it had declined in audience ratings during the 1980s.

Russert’s arrival brought a major change in the show’s format. In 1992, *Meet the Press* expanded from a half-hour to a full hour. Previously, guests were interviewed by a panel of reporters. Now, Russert interviewed guests himself, then joined in a round-table discussion with other journalists. The show acquired a personality it had lacked before, as Russert perfected a distinctive interviewing style. He confronted guests with past statements that seemed to contradict their current opinions or policies and challenged them to explain the contradiction. But despite tough questions, hardly anyone held a grudge against Russert.

At the turn of the century, Tim Russert brought *Meet the Press* back to the top of the Sunday political talk show ratings. His dramatic coverage of the 2000 Presidential election made Russert more of a household name, while his 2004 memoir “*Big Russ and Me*” increased his popularity as a personality as well as a reporter. His story of life with his father inspired readers to tell their own stories, which Russert published in another best-seller, “*Wisdom From Our Fathers*,” in 2006.

Tim Russert died on the job while recording voice-overs for *Meet the Press* at the NBC studio. The mourning that followed reflected the fact that Russert himself, along with his show, had become a national institution.



Buffalo is located in western New York along the eastern shore of Lake Erie.

To learn more about Tim Russert go to the library and read one of his books, “*Big Russ and Me*” or “*Wisdom of Our Fathers*.” For information about *Meet the Press* go to www.msnbc.msn.com. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2009.