

Bill McEwen retiring as The Fresno Bee's opinion page editor

By John Ellis
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Veteran journalist Bill McEwen, who in a 35-year career with The Fresno Bee became one of the paper's most well-known personalities during stints as a sports and news columnist and now as its opinion page editor, is retiring.

His last day at The Bee will be Oct. 23. The following Monday, he will start as local district director for Rep. Jim Costa, a Fresno Democrat.

McEwen, who will be 62 in December, said he is making the jump from newspapers to politics because he is ready for a new challenge.

"I'm fortunate to have this opportunity while I'm still a relatively young man," McEwen said. "I always wanted to try my hand at politics."

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Fresno Bee Senior Vice President/Executive Editor Jim Boren

Jim Boren, The Bee's senior vice president/executive editor, said McEwen leaves a larger-than-life legacy at the paper.

"Bill is a passionate journalist who puts everything into his work, and he has left an impressive mark with his award-winning reporting," Boren said. "The newspaper will miss his institutional knowledge, especially his deep understanding of Fresno politics. Bill has given four decades to public-service journalism, and our community is much better for it."

McEwen, a 1972 Fresno High graduate who later attended Fresno State, has known only one career: journalism.

"It's been my life," McEwen said.

He started at the now-defunct Fresno Guide, then moved on to the Visalia Times-Delta as a sports writer and Saturday editor. His start at The Bee was rather inauspicious – interim sports copy editor, filling in for someone on a leave of absence.

But McEwen rose in the ranks, covering Fresno State basketball and eventually becoming a sports columnist, a position he held for a decade. He then moved to the news side, covering Fresno City Hall, before jumping back to sports as the section editor.

McEwen then became a metro news columnist, writing columns three times a week for 11 years. In December 2012, he was named The Bee's opinion page editor when Boren moved from that position to the paper's executive editor.

"It's a very challenging assignment," McEwen said of his stint as heading the opinion page. "You have to balance the views of many stakeholders. Some people express their concerns and frustrations in very reasonable tone. Others like to vent. So you have to deal with that."

Now, he's not just making a job change; he is making a career change. He will deal with constituents in Costa's 16th Congressional District and be, as McEwen puts it, Costa's "eyes and ears when he's back in Washington, D.C."

“I hope to be successful, and if I am successful I can see myself working a few years at this,” McEwen said.

In a statement, Costa said, “As a lifelong Valley resident, Bill McEwen knows and understands the issues that are important in our San Joaquin Valley, and I have every reason to believe, that with his experience, background, and knowledge, he will be a great addition to my staff.”

Bill McEwen says a highlight of his Fresno Bee career is coverage of the 1984 L.A. Olympics, including Kingsburg native Rafer Johnson lighting the flame.

As McEwen leaves The Bee and journalism, he said the memories that stick with him are spending a month in Los Angeles covering the 1984 Summer Olympics. Part of that was a story on Kingsburg native Rafer Johnson lighting the Olympic flame during the opening ceremonies.

McEwen also was present in Las Vegas in 1997 when boxer Mike Tyson bit off Evander Holyfield’s ear during their bout at the MGM Grand Garden Arena.

His far-flung reporting included a 2004 trip to report from Hmong refugee camps in Thailand and a 2005 visit to the New Orleans area after Hurricane Katrina that turned into live coverage of Hurricane Rita.

McEwen also noted that he started his journalism career covering the murder trial involving the Clarence Ray Allen gang for three shotgun murders at Fran’s Market east of Fresno. Later with The Bee, McEwen was part of a team that covered Allen’s 2006 execution at San Quentin Prison.

The coverage won a California Newspaper Publishers Association award.

“I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about this and it only became clear in about the last 10 days or so,” McEwen said. “I’ve given journalism 35 years and I want to try something new while I still have the opportunity to do it.”

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