



Photos by Ellen Blum Barish

It started as a one-year
appointment.
Twenty-five years
after **Abe Peck** came
to Medill, the Magazine
Publishing Project is
still turning heads
...and pages.

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hen media management executive Bernard Gordon and Medill Dean I.W. Cole sat down in 1981 to talk about a program for graduate students in which they would develop a marketable magazine from concept to completion in 12 weeks — they were thinking, *one prototype, one quarter, tops*.

Dean Cole pulled together a team that included Gordon; Richard Koff, a magazine business and circulation pro and Asa Baber, a Playboy magazine columnist and editorial executive. When the experiment led to a second go-round, Medill recruited former Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Daily News reporter Abe Peck, a New York-born, quick-talking, culture-observing Ph.D. dropout who was taking time off to write his book, “Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press” (Citadel 1991, Pantheon 1985.)

Twenty-five years and 50 magazines later, the Magazine Publishing Project at Medill is the only student-produced magazine program in the country in which



Medill's Magazine Maverick

two never-before-published magazines are launched in two 12-week quarters that include publication design to five-year business plans to international distribution. The rigor of the program alone prompted one publication (ADEPTations: Journal of the Association for the Development of Electronic Publishing Technique) to dub it “the Twelve-Week Miracle.”

Whether it's a miracle or *inward bound*, as Peck fondly calls it, the program has fostered a generation of editorial opinion leaders (see page 7) and has attracted not only more than 800 students over the years but has prompted publishers, corporations and foundations to donate \$5.5 million over the last quarter century.

“It was supposed to be a one-year appointment,” Peck recalled when asked about those days. “We were sniffing out the situation — we weren't sure where it would take us.”

After all, though Peck was certainly steeped in journalism, he wasn't a traditional academic.

by
Ellen
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(MSJ84)



1... *Armadillo, the first product of the magazine program, was published in 1981.*

Peck had worked toward a Ph.D. in modern European history at the City University of New York, put a brief appearance in the U.S. Army Reserves and was “doing the hippie thing in the East Village” when a job

selling textbooks lured him to Chicago.

Though the job didn’t last long, he remained in Chicago, editing the underground newspaper *The Chicago Seed*, practicing what he calls “cause journalism.”

In the ’70s, Peck drove a cab and sanded pots while he was writing freelance articles for rock magazines and the *Chicago Daily News*. His big break came when he moved to San Francisco to edit music news and performance pieces for *Rolling Stone* magazine. Soon after came stints as rock critic for the *Associated Press* and as a staff writer/editor for the *Daily News* and *Chicago Sun-Times*. This led to freelance articles for *Esquire*, *Gentleman’s Quarterly*, his book and his “one-year day job at Medill.”

Koff, 79, now retired and living in Santa Fe, N.M., said that the program was “an easy sell” in part because there

dubbed their publication *Armadillo*, a publication for teenage males. It was edited by Charles Whitaker (MSJ81), now a full-time magazine program faculty member. (You can read Whitaker’s memories of being a student team member of *Armadillo* on page 36.)

Since then, Peck’s mania for magazines has only grown deeper into the floorboards of Fisk Hall’s rooms 206 and 207 providing, quite literally, the foundation of the magazine program. (Room 206 is endowed by the McAllister family; Room 207 is offered up for endowment as part of the 25th anniversary celebration).

“I fell in love with the intensity that comes with this process,” he said. “The realities of the magazine business are replicated. Students get feedback from the real world; they discover best practices. The whole process is like a giant thesis defense.”

Under Peck’s chairmanship, all six members of the current full-time magazine faculty — Abe, assistant professors Charles Whitaker and Patti Wolter; associate professors David Abrahamson and Douglas Foster, and

were’t any others like it in the country and because of the timing: It was the spring of 1981 and consumer magazines were popping onto the scene. “Abe shepherded it through the administrative process” and “had a background that was appealing to students,” Koff said.

“It was very demanding for the students,” Koff recalled. “It was an 80-hour-a-week proposition for them, but Abe’s enthusiasm helped carry them through.”

Enthusiasm and moxie

Craig Klugman, now editor of the *Journal Gazette* in Fort Wayne, Ind., director of undergraduate studies at Medill at the time, recalled that Peck “got in the way” a great deal with lots of big ideas.

But Peck brought several things to the program, said Klugman, not the least of which was a great deal of energy and creativity.

“He brought a depth of experience because he had written for magazines that students read and liked,” Klugman said. “He had been in the trenches — it brought instant credibility to the program. Abe took the idea and expanded on it and got students thinking about it systemically.”

Quite simply, Klugman added, “The program would not have been a success without him.”

Students in the very first magazine program that spring

lecturer David Standish — have either directed the publishing project or taught its editorial component. Two quarters a year, nine full-time and long-standing adjunct faculty (see page 15) provide expertise as an average of 18 students become a publishing team. So do visiting professionals, including those brought in as McAllister Top Managers and Top Editors. The project culminates with presentations on campus and in Chicago to national publishing leaders and faculty. Peck has led students on tours of magazine publishers in New York, otherwise known as Magazine Mecca, during the writing and editing quarter that precedes the publishing project.

Sometimes the presentations are so persuasive, the student magazine is sold to outside interested parties, as it was when Glenn Coleman was editor (and four times after that). See “Satisfaction” sidebar on page 9). The magazine *Contract Health Care* sold to Health Learning Systems in Lyndhurst, N.J., in 1988.

But that wasn’t Coleman’s favorite memory of the program.

“I remember the people, the craziness, the good fights, the bonds — magazines are forced collaboration, so it is all about the group dynamics,” said Coleman, now assistant managing editor of *Money* magazine. “But the strongest memory I have is of Abe. He was like Yoda, only taller and





Fall 2005 quarter magazine graduate students

not green. He was the *ubermensch*. He loved the energy of his students and he had more intellectual energy than all of us combined. He is a force of nature and a treasure for the program.

“Since graduating I have found him to be still very plugged in and a great source of advice ... and gossip,” Coleman added.



Next to chairing the Magazine Publishing Program, Peck teaches writing and directs an executive education program for the Media Management Center. In 2001, he received Medill's first named endowed professorship (the Sills chair), and in 2003-04 he was named educator of the year by the Magazine Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. He has been acting and associate dean at Medill. He has written for magazines from Ad Age to the reincarnated Satisfaction, and he is also an editorial consultant, helping media businesses with editorial performance reviews, positioning, mission statements, magazine architecture, feature story structure and publishing ethics across the U.S., and in the United Kingdom and China.

Peck may have been called in to round out an academic experiment back in 1981, but, in the words of Klugman, he “ran with it like a wide receiver taking a short pass and running 90 yards for a touchdown.” He has since been an ever-evolving, multitasking magazine maverick in perpetual motion who keeps your interest while he has one eye on his computer screen, one hand on the phone receiver as he problem solves and readies himself for the next big thing.

Like a good, page-turner of a magazine. **M**

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