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House of Representatives

TRIBUTE IN HONOR OF BILL ESTEP

HON. HAROLD ROGERS
OF KENTUCKY
IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Monday, June 30, 2025

Mr. ROGERS of Kentucky. Mister Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to Kentucky journalist Bill Estep, who is retiring from the Lexington Herald Leader after 40 years of dedicated news and investigative reporting in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

As a resident of Somerset, Kentucky, Bill is one of my constituents, giving him personal insight into the generational challenges that we have faced in Kentucky's Appalachian region. He has written about our coal mines, our education system, historic flooding and tornado disasters, while also holding elected leaders accountable in the courtroom of public opinion, and never failing to keep facts at the core of his journalistic integrity. With the uprising of "yellow journalism" in the form of social media's sensational opinions and unchecked rumors, 24-hours a day, Bill has remained consistent in his news coverage, keeping his pen steady, balanced, fair and accurate.

Over the last four decades, Bill and I have sat down together to talk about every issue that impacts the people of southern and eastern Kentucky. We built a trusted relationship with the understanding that we both had an important job to do, requiring tough questions and, at times, tough answers. In 2003, Bill embarked on an investigative series called "Prescription for Pain" that would prove to have a monumental impact on my public service. The series exposed a rapidly growing opioid epidemic more than 20 years ago that was spreading like wildfire throughout our small communities, taking the lives of high school beauty queens and local leaders alike, while revealing local corruption and criminal drug trafficking in the depths of our mountain communities. His collective work inspired me to not only respond, but to take action. In the following weeks, I called together a group of leaders from across our region to launch a non-profit organization called Operation UNITE – Unlawful Narcotics Investigations, Treatment and Education – the nation's first multi-pronged approach to help save lives and curb the drug crisis.

In 2012, Operation UNITE took its mission to the national stage by establishing the National Rx and Illicit Drug Summit, which has grown into the largest convention of its kind with more than 3,000 annual attendees and highlighted by keynote speakers from federal agencies across the country, including four U.S. Presidents. Bill's reporting inspired a life-saving movement in Eastern Kentucky that is now impacting collaborative efforts nationwide – a feat worthy of a Pulitzer Prize and more.

In 2013, when the downturn of the coal industry was exacerbated by the Obama Administration's war on coal, we lost more than 12,000 coal mining jobs in Eastern Kentucky alone. Once again, turning to action rather than words, former Governor Steve Beshear and I co-founded a bipartisan initiative called SOAR – Shaping Our Appalachian Region – to reimagine the future of southern and eastern Kentucky. Since inception, SOAR has focused on expanding access to high performance broadband, more diversified industrial development, workforce training, innovative tourism projects, expanded health care opportunities and much more. With the formation of SOAR, Bill Estep showed up once again with his iconic yellow notepad and a recorder to get the story right. From day one, he made sure there was an entire section in the Herald Leader featuring the work of SOAR, and he has remained committed to following our progress, our goals and our challenges.

Throughout his career, it has been clear when Bill used his opinion in an effective way, advocating for a larger spread in the urban Lexington-based statewide newspaper to help feature stories in Eastern Kentucky that the rest of the state should care about. I imagine that he didn't win every battle with his editors over the years, but I know that Bill believed in the value of southern and eastern Kentucky for the rest of the Commonwealth. He was bold to ask tough questions, patient enough to listen to the response, and determined to conduct necessary research before writing a story. Upcoming and current reporters should take notes from Bill, and proceed with unbiased questions, an open mind, and a relentless dedication to facts over opinions and click-bait.

Our rural Appalachian region has largely remained in the shadows of Kentucky's bigger cities, playing the national media's role of the impoverished, forgotten people who need a savior. Thanks to courageous journalists like Bill, we have had the opportunity to fight the stereotypes and tell the real story taking place in Eastern Kentucky, where resilient and innovative people are stepping up to shape a brighter future for the next generation through aerospace, medical science, engineering and much more. As Bill begins a new chapter of retirement to focus on his family's story and new traveling adventures, I hope it is filled with great pride in the work he has accomplished and the light of hope that he has helped shine on Eastern Kentucky.

HON. HAROLD ROGERS
Dean of the House