

With class and grace, 'Graham' shines from beginning to end

★★★★

BY ANN HORNADAY

REVIEW Anyone looking for a must-see movie need search no further than "Don Graham," as entertaining as it is edifying, as surprising as it is affecting. Featuring a protagonist possessed of the brio of Astaire, the blushing modesty of Keaton and the indefatigable human virtue of any hero of Ford or Capra, "Don Graham" is a genuine crowd-pleaser, a film guaranteed to win over viewers of any age, taste or temperament.

Who wouldn't love this story? The title character, a scion of the storied publishing family, could so easily have assumed his career at The Washington Post as a matter of birthright. Instead, after earning his bones at the Harvard Crimson, he joins the Army's 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam, then the Washington police force — episodes that account for some of "Don Graham's" most harrowing scenes of physical courage.

Only upon surviving those perilous grounds does Graham see fit to enter The Post newsroom, following the classic career path of so many publishing daughters and

sons, working in an assortment of departments to gain firsthand knowledge of the organization he will one day inherit.

For most of its running time, "Don Graham" is devoted to the painstaking care of that vocation and enterprise, during which the central character's passion, steadfastness and expansive personal warmth make him beloved by employees and stockholders alike. It's not that the run was trouble-free — far from it. But as "Don Graham" makes clear, the truest measure of leadership isn't unbroken success, but the integrity and grace with which you survive the setbacks.

(Even when things aren't perfect, the film is shot through with a sense of ruddy, spontaneous good cheer: One of the film's most endearing visual motifs is how Graham's face lights up each time he encounters someone new in the 15th Street elevator.)

"Don Graham" could easily have been a succession of showy set pieces, chronicling the cardinal events the title character both witnessed and shaped: President Richard Nixon's downfall. The scandal of Iran-Contra. D.C. Mayor Marion Barry's cocaine addiction. The unraveling of wartime Iraq. Classified zealotry at the NSA.

What makes the film a superior work of art, though, are the small, otherwise invisible moments — the quietly delivered reassurance, the flawlessly timed gesture of support — that make the life portrayed in "Don Graham" not just consequential, but also deeply meaningful to so many.

The tension ratchets up considerably as economic and technological quakes threaten to upend the publishing industry forever, changes that the protagonist weathers with characteristic forthrightness and, not incidentally, considerable sacrifice. No spoilers here; suffice it to say that

the final act centers on what may well be remembered as the hero's last, most splendid act of stewardship on behalf of a public trust he never considered less than sacred.

As the end of an era for one of Washington's grandest institutions and families, it's a melancholy moment. But as an example of unusual vision and unflagging commitment, it's a hopeful one, too. A good film adroitly captures those contradictory emotions; a great one radiates with the uncommon decency of the man who inspires them. Put simply, "Don Graham" is a masterpiece: You'll laugh. You'll cry. You'll wish it could go on forever.

The ultimate sacrifice: Father knows best

BY MARC FISHER

For a good 30 years after Don Graham served in the Metropolitan Police Department, there were cops in town who would talk to The Post solely because, as they'd put it while making clear that the reporter in question was barely human, "Don's okay."

For decades, even in some of the worst schools in the city, in buildings where teachers resolutely ignored students who they said simply could not learn, some kids pushed on, seeing a future because "the man from The Washington Post" was going to make sure they got a scholarship if they got to graduation.

Every reporter runs across sources who claim to have such blockbuster info that they insist on revealing it to only one man — and when that one man wasn't someone who'd been played in the movies by Robert Redford, he was often the publisher, who, in his eternally modest way, would take the call, listen to the yarn, and let the reporter know that this was just one more nutball. But Don took the calls because he knew that someday the stranger on the phone would have the goods.

Like many reporters, I arrived here with a very different idea of what the owner or publisher was. At my previous paper, the chairman of the board was a booster yahoo with a charming habit of calling reporters at night to complain that we were being too aggressive toward some favorite political cause of his.

So when I came to the District and got a lame assignment to cover a speech by the superintendent of schools and arrived at the meeting only to see the publisher of my new paper making the introduction, I feared the

worst. But then I heard Don win over the crowd by wondering how the schools chief could possibly have made it to the top when her mother didn't even own the school system, and while I was still chuckling over my new boss's wily but aw-shucks manner, he came up from behind me — we had never met — called me by name (of course), hurled a barnyard epithet at my editor for having given me such a lousy story, and urged me to dig up some dirt on the very folks he had just had to make nice to.

We liked him because he had a mouth as foul as ours. We admired him because he got what we do and relished every minute of it. We cherished his Graham-grams and saved every last one of them in our desk drawers. Impossibly, he knew us all, and our families too. He pushed us harder than our editors did, and he savored every one of our hits. He had our backs, always.

Or so we thought. Truth be told, we didn't really know him that well. He managed to turn conversations around so that they were about us and our work. If we made assumptions about Don's goodness, we made them because we knew that he ran the place in good measure to allow us to do what we'd always wanted to do, and that was plenty good enough.

Now he's sold us down the river. That's how it felt, at first, on that stunning August afternoon. On reflection, we figure that, because Don says so, the new guy probably has his heart in the right place, or at least must have one somewhere. We trust our boss that much because we know that although he won't ever say it, doing what he thought was right for The Post was like giving up his child.

A presence felt by everyone

BY LONNAE O'NEAL PARKER

I began my Post career answering phones in corporate advertising. Then I answered phones for the Virginia desk in Metro. Then I became a reporter in Metro, Style and the Magazine. Everywhere I've been, Don Graham saw me. Ribbed me once when I wore a Southern Illinois University sweatshirt to work the year they played Duke in NCAA opening round.

I've changed floors, titles, salaries, bosses, but Don's "Hey, Lonnae" has remained constant.

It can seem like such a little thing in such a big place with such a storied reputation, but sometimes, especially when you were young, or a woman, or African American, or all three, that notice from Don could make all the difference in the world. Sometimes, when you get tongue-tied riding the elevator with higher-ups, it's a relief when that higher up is just Don. Because there's a comfort to him, an ease that can't be faked. An ease that helps you

like your job, and love, love the guy you work for.

I still have every note Don's ever sent me on a story somewhere. Time was, you could walk through the newsroom and see where your colleagues — reporters and editors — had pasted or taped their "Donnygrams" to the walls of their cubby. It was better than being on AI, and you didn't have to be on AI to get one. Just turn a phrase, find a fact, "Good quotes, Lonnae!" Don might write, and I could coast on that for days.

We understand about change, but we also hold in mind a time when we worked for Don Graham's newspaper, and that meant something to people. It's meant something especially, I think, to the people who've put in time. Who feel like we grew up at The Washington Post and imagined that somehow we'd all grow old together.

That last part might not happen, but I feel certain Don will still be around. If not in person, at least on a very good day, when your story all comes together, and you know Don will write.



HARRY NALTCHAYAN/THE WASHINGTON POST



TYLER MALLORY/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



TODD CROSS/THE WASHINGTON POST

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF DONALD GRAHAM: Pose for a picture with mom; sneak outside for a quick belt of who knows what from the Post Pub, while Bo Jones keeps the security guard distracted with stories about glory days at Harvard Crimson; return to work sauced and attempt to use new-fangled computer machine that confounded the daylight hours of him; then head down to newsroom and partake in yet another ceremony where yet another employee is given a Pulitzer for doing something other than the sewer management story he wanted covered in Beltsville.



JONATHAN NEWTON/THE WASHINGTON POST

Taking long, strange trip while paying his dues

BY JOEL ACHENBACH

Given the keys to the family empire, Don Graham chose another path. He would earn his way. He would explore the business starting at rock bottom, laboring at The Washington Post like any other employee, experiencing the daily grind the way every other person in the building experiences it other than the "will be chairman of the board someday" part.

As a young man he believed that he should understand not only the pressroom and the ancient craft of hot type, but also the very nature of lead, ink and thermodynamics, which led to his interest in chemistry and a lucrative side business at Harvard manufacturing LSD. He developed a new font, Donnie New Roman, that never quite caught on. So determined was Graham to grasp the business of newsprint that he decided to spend an entire year in the forest, studying trees, examining their grain, finding the best species for the creation of pulp. Only later did his friends reveal to him

that he was actually in Vietnam.

He knew that someday he wanted to work for the City Desk of The Post, so first he got a job as a beat cop in Northeast, then worked as a fireman and a corner before getting a gig driving a sanitation truck. Finally, after one final stint as a dogcatcher, Graham felt he had enough of a resume to apply for a job at The Post. He refused to use his inside connections and, indeed, showed up for the first job interview disguised as a nun.

He eventually was hired as a city reporter, then worked in the Sports section, switched to the commercial side, sold ads, then went to the printer's shop, and later became a foreman in the pressroom before winding up as a driver delivering early-edition newspapers to convenience stores in Prince William County. It seemed haphazard, but it was all part of a master plan, which was to lay the groundwork for becoming the World's Humblest Newspaper Publisher.

And it worked. It worked very well, for Graham, and for The Post. To the bitter end.

A boss with tunnel vision for things that mattered

BY MARTIN WEIL

Reporters are trained to see two sides. But can there really be two sides to a boss who takes the Metro? Well, as editors are fond of saying, there are two sides to everything. One fine weekend summer day, Metro's infamous lack of efficiency and The Post's infamous lack of weekend staff collided in what looked like it might be an unfortunate way.

After a period of time in which his phone calls went unanswered and then were shuttled around to various copy aide stations, Don Graham finally got connected to the one and only Metro staff member on duty at that hour.

It was a day like many Washington weekend days, only more so. Events heaped upon events. All over the city, throngs were trying to get somewhere. And the Metro, to get technical, was single tracking on its busiest line in the downtown area. On many trains, it also seemed the air conditioning had gone out. Trains were crowded, chaotic — an infernal scene.

And, of course, one of those patiently enduring the chaos was Mr. Graham. When he could breathe freely and move his arms enough to draw out his cellphone, he had called the newsroom to suggest that some sort of coverage of this underground bedlam might not be out of place.

Just a friendly suggestion from a concerned citizen.

The Metro editor on duty, the sole Metro employee visible in the newsroom, made a quick decision: This was too good a story to pass up.

Every Metro staff employee then on duty anywhere in the newsroom was dispatched. Or, it might be said without violence to the language, the entire staff dispatched himself.

Perhaps this was an extraordinary step. And the important thing about it is that it was not

"He knows a good story when he sees one... but he also knows that sometimes you can call your own newspaper and someone is not going to pick up right away."

taken out of fear. If anyone would have understood why no coverage appeared, it would have been Don. If anyone were to fail to be offended if the newsroom staff substituted its news judgment for his, it would have been he.

Let me assure all that it was — to use a word that does not appear in Don's paper — it was HELLISH down there in the Metro. AT LEAST, that's what it SAID in the paper the next day!!! Whaddya want????

He knows a good story when he sees one. Not only that, but he also knows that sometimes you can call your own newspaper and someone is not going to pick up right away. And he has the patience to see that someone, somewhere in that newsroom, can eventually be found who will pay attention. And he was prepared to wait. And to not complain.

MILESTONE A1s SINCE DONALD GRAHAM BECAME PUBLISHER

March 31, 1981
Reagan shotJanuary 13, 1982
Air Florida CrashJanuary 31, 1983
Redskins win Super BowlJanuary 29, 1986
Challenger explodesJanuary 19, 1990
Marion Barry arrestedSeptember 26, 1998
Monica Lewinsky scandal