

# Getting to the Bottom of the News

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By [John Kelly](#)  
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Ellie Becker and I were crossing the street on our way to a coffee shop in the Watergate when a brown UPS truck slowed to a stop. The driver gave us a friendly wave, and Ellie returned it.

"You know him?" I asked.

"Yeah," said Ellie, editor of the Foggy Bottom News. "I did a story on him. That guy's Rob, and the other [UPS driver] is Robbie."

That's a story -- Rob and Robbie, the UPS men -- that The Washington Post missed. I can pretty much guarantee we'll miss Ellie's follow-up story, too: a photo feature on the Postal Service letter carriers and FedEx drivers of Foggy Bottom.

Of course, when you put out a neighborhood newspaper, that's the sort of story you want -- one that hits you, quite literally, where you live.

Says Ellie: "I think the newspaper ought to be covering what two neighbors meeting at 25th and I want to hear about."

Near 25th and I streets NW is about where we first ran into Rob. Small rowhouses line the block, a counterpoint to the neighborhood's heavier hitters: the hulking State Department headquarters and the whale-toothed Watergate.

"It used to be more like this," she said, indicating the street of tiny rowhouses. Ellie is 72, about five feet tall, with short, gray hair and glasses she wears on a chain around her neck. On the morning I spent with her, she was sporting a bright pink T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of the Foggy Bottom News. "It's really a very different neighborhood from when I moved here," she said.

That was in 1963, first in an apartment, now in a rowhouse built for the people who toiled at the breweries and gas works that once clustered along the river.

Ellie pens something called "Foggy Bottom Folks" for each issue of the News. The feature reports on such things as the new captain at the fire station, how Mel and Darrell booked passage on the inaugural voyage of the Queen Mary 2, how Bob was recovering from knee-replacement surgery.

This is not to say the Foggy Bottom News is all fluff. Nor is it exactly nonpartisan. Ellie attends zoning and Advisory Neighborhood Commission hearings as a citizen and agitates for a better transportation plan for the neighborhood, a state of affairs that often has Ellie the editor writing about Ellie the activist. ("It's weird," she admits.)

And the pages of the Foggy Bottom News fairly scream with coverage of the neighborhood's great enemy: George Washington University and its land-hungry president, Stephen Joel Trachtenberg.

"When I moved here, I barely knew the university was here," Ellie said. Now it seems to be gobbling up the neighborhood block by block, and residents complain of trash and late-night carousing.

"A lot of us like the kids, but there are just too many of them. A lot of them are really great, but the ones that are bad are really bad."

(Like many Foggy Bottom residents, Ellie keeps a file of the letters she's received from Trachtenberg in response to her own missives. She characterizes his writing style as "snide.")

After finishing our juice at Cup'a Cup'a, we took the long way back to Ellie's house, bumping into Rob the UPS man at nearly every turn. At Western Presbyterian Church, we ran into sexton Gaston Paige, tidying up a flower bed out front.

"Everything look okay to you?" Gaston asked. Ellie had done a story about him, too.

The Foggy Bottom News has been published for 46 years, the last 15 of them with Ellie at the helm. She solicits stories and writes them herself. She sends copy to the typesetter, pastes up galleys in her back bedroom, sends them to the printer and then, with help, distributes 5,500 copies nine times a year.

Ellie didn't set out to be a community newspaper editor. She spent 32 years working for a pharmaceutical trade association, in membership, writing letters, that sort of thing. "My boss would say, 'Ellie, put it in English.' . . . But I've never been a reporter."

We stopped at St. Mary's Court, a housing project for seniors. A letter carrier came in to empty the mailbox. She wrote down his name: Reginald Chew. Look for him in the July issue.

That will be Ellie's last.

"I'm getting up there," she said. "If there was any kind of transition, I wanted it to be not when I was run over by a car."

Saying goodbye to the Foggy Bottom News is going to be hard, Ellie admitted. "I'm already going through withdrawal. . . . I don't think we'd be a neighborhood without the paper."

The Foggy Bottom News quite literally won't be the same after Ellie steps down. After its summer break, it will start up again as a more modest newsletter that's mailed to members of the Foggy Bottom Association and distributed in a few places around the neighborhood.

"I don't know what else they can do," said Ellie, "because they're not going to find anyone as idiotic as me."

### How to Help With Camp

Our Send a Kid to Camp campaign needs to raise \$750,000 by July 23 to support summer activities at Camp Moss Hollow. As of yesterday, Washington Post readers had donated \$152,941.51.

Here's how you can contribute: Make a check or money order payable to "Send a Kid to Camp" and mail it to: Attention, Lockbox, Department 0500, Washington, D.C. 20073-0500.

To contribute online, go to [www.washingtonpost.com/camp](http://www.washingtonpost.com/camp). Click on the icon that says, "Make Your Tax-Deductible Donation."

To contribute by phone with Visa or MasterCard, call Post-Haste at 301-313-2200 on a touch-tone phone. Then punch in KIDS, or 5437, and follow the instructions.