

Bill Barnhart, longtime Tribune business columnist, dies at 74

By [Bob Goldsborough](#)
Chicago Tribune

Jul 12, 2021 at 5:49 pm

William E. Barnhart was a Chicago Tribune reporter, editor and columnist whose work over 29 years focused heavily on covering economics and the stock market.



Figure 1 Chicago Tribune business columnist Bill Barnhart in 2001. (Bill Hogan / Chicago Tribune)

“He was the consummate professional who was very knowledgeable and very humble,” said Mary Jane Grandinetti, a former Tribune business editor and a former South Side neighbor. “He was the calm in the storm no matter what was going on around him, but he was also a lot of fun.”

Barnhart, 74, died of liver disease on July 3 at Tidwell Hospice in Sarasota, Florida, said his wife of almost 40 years, Kate. A longtime resident of the South Side’s Morgan Park neighborhood, Barnhart also had a home in Sarasota.

Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Barnhart was the son of a salesman, and the family moved frequently. He attended three other high schools around the country before graduating in 1964 from Glenbard West High School in Glen Ellyn.

Barnhart received a bachelor’s degree in English literature from Knox College in 1968 and later earned master’s degrees in business and education from the University of Chicago.

Barnhart taught elementary school for a short time but was attracted to journalism and in 1970 began working as a police reporter for the old City News Bureau of Chicago wire service. He joined the Tribune’s Suburban Trib operation in 1972, then covered the state legislature in Springfield from 1974 until 1976.

“I think that Bill’s greatest contribution to all the people who worked with him over the years was to instill in a lot of people to do the job the correct way,” said former Suburban Trib reporter Tom Witosky, who later was a reporter for the Des Moines Register.

Barnhart took a job covering business for the Chicago Daily News in 1976.

“Bill was unperturbed, unhurried and always made his deadlines,” wrote former Chicago Daily News business reporter Dan Miller in an email. “He was a steadying influence when investors and readers needed clear, accurate reporting.”

After the Daily News folded in 1978, Barnhart moved to the Chicago Sun-Times. In August 1979, Barnhart joined the Tribune as a business reporter, and in 1983 he began writing a column titled “The Bottom Line.” His reputation as an unflappable performer was maintained in all his roles.

“I remember once he was on the phone with a source and had tapped his pipe into a wastebasket, which started a small fire. He never missed a beat (and) just kept questioning his source while stamping out the fire,” said Pat Widder, a former colleague in the Tribune’s business section.

In 1987, Barnhart was named associate financial editor. In 1992, he started writing a daily column offering news and commentary on the stock, bond and currency markets. Barnhart’s aim was to provide a local voice on financial markets and to tap the expertise of market commentators based in the Chicago area, rather than those from Wall Street.

“Bill Barnhart was a first-rate journalist. He was smart, insightful and had an intellectual curiosity that served him and his readers well,” said retired Tribune reporter Gary Washburn. “I’m guessing Bill was often the smartest guy in the room, but you’d never know it from the way he acted.”

In 1997, Barnhart added a column in the Tribune’s Sunday business section focused on mutual fund investing.

Barnhart also delivered a daily financial market report on the now-defunct, Tribune-owned CLTV cable television channel. That elevated his profile considerably, and made him more recognizable to the public.

Grandinetti recalled riding in a car once with Barnhart and his wife when their car broke down on the expressway. An emergency traffic patrol vehicle pulled over to help, Grandinetti said, and the patrol worker got out to help the group and immediately asked Barnhart, “Are you the guy on CLTV?”

Barnhart collaborated with former Illinois state Rep. Eugene Schlickman to co-author a biography of former Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner titled “Kerner: The Conflict of Intangible Rights.” The book was published in 1999.

Barnhart retired from the Tribune in March 2008. In his final column, Barnhart concluded that “readers were engaged, and sometimes enraged, by the reports and interpretations presented in this space.”

“As to the column’s sources, the hypothesis that Chicago-area brainpower could enhance and occasionally counter the market’s New York megaphone was validated,” Barnhart wrote. “The process of putting readers and sources together through simple, declarative sentences was rewarding.”

In retirement, Barnhart again worked with Schlickman to co-author a 2010 biography of U.S. Supreme Court Associate Justice John Paul Stevens, titled “John Paul Stevens: An Independent Life.”

Barnhart enjoyed playing golf, playing the banjo and listening to bluegrass music. He also was an active member of the Chicago Literary Club, and he wrote and presented a paper, “Four Score,” in 2009, commemorating the 200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln.

In addition to his wife, Barnhart is survived by his sister, Jean Romsted; and his brother, Jim.

A memorial service is being planned.