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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 9, 2017

ABERNATHY GIVEN VPA LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

AP executive honored for 39-year journalism career

RICHMOND, Va. - The Virginia Press Association honored Dorothy G. Abernathy with a VPA Lifetime Achievement Award at its annual award banquet Saturday. The reward recognizes exceptional individual contributions to the newspaper industry.

Abernathy, a career journalist and longtime executive at the Associated Press, received the award at VPA's annual conference at the Hilton Richmond Hotel & Spa/Short Pump.

Before joining AP, Abernathy spent four years at the Kansas City Star where she was part of the reporting team that won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the 1981 skywalk collapse at the Kansas City Hyatt.

Abernathy, who will retire in a few weeks, spent 35 years at the AP and for more than 30 years was the Virginia Bureau Chief in Richmond.

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Attachment: Written tribute to Dorothy Abernathy

Virginia Press Association
Lifetime Achievement Award
Dorothy G. Abernathy

April 8, 2017

Written and delivered by Betsy Edwards

Focused. Committed. Calm. Supportive. Talented.

These are some of the words friends and colleagues use to describe Dorothy Gast Abernathy. As most of you know, Dorothy has had a distinguished 35-year career working at the Associated Press.

But, Dorothy hasn't always worked for the AP.

Her first job was as a reporter at the Kansas City Star. She had just graduated with a journalism degree from The Ohio State University. At the Star, she wrote about county government and aviation. She was also part of the reporting team that covered the July 1981 collapse of a skywalk at the Kansas City Hyatt that killed 114. In the four days following the disaster, the Star (and its sister paper The Kansas City News) worked with engineers to investigate the cause of the collapse and expose a design change in skywalk's construction that was later revealed as the main cause of the collapse. This work led to a 1982 General Reporting Pulitzer for the Star and the News.

In early 1982, Dorothy landed her first AP job in Little Rock, Arkansas. Within a few years, she was moved to the AP bureau in Roanoke. Working out of an office the size of a closet, Dorothy covered the entire western part of the Commonwealth. Keep in mind this was before cell phones or the internet.

Joe Macenka, who was Dorothy's colleague at the time, recalled how competitive it was in the years Dorothy was in Roanoke and how intrepid you had to be if you wanted to get the story. In September 1985, a commuter plane crashed near Weyer's Cave, killing 14 people. Dorothy, armed with little more than one of those old-school "bag" phones, went trekking into the mountains and got the story that kept her on the national wires for days. Joe remembers Dorothy calmly calling in report after report, detailing the disaster and keeping AP's readers abreast of details other news outlets were unable to provide.

Dorothy's time in Roanoke proved to be fortuitous – both professionally and personally. While she was working where - she met and started dating Duncan Abernathy, who before going to architecture school had worked as a copy editor at what was then The Roanoke Times & World News. On the first day of spring in March 1987, Dorothy and Duncan were married at Our Lady of Nazareth Catholic Church in Roanoke.

From Roanoke, Dorothy moved to an editor's job in AP's Cleveland bureau.

But in 1989, she returned to the Commonwealth to be the Virginia Bureau Chief in Richmond. For the next 32 years, she managed a large team that first covered Virginia, then added West Virginia and eventually she oversaw a staff of 40 that covered the entire mid-Atlantic.

In addition to these responsibilities – she and Duncan had three children, Maureen, Glen, and Ellen. Dorothy managed to juggle a career, family, and community responsibilities with aplomb.

Her experience as a mother made her a compassionate boss. Heidi Brown was a broadcast editor in the Richmond bureau in 1992 and was expecting her first child. Her pregnancy went well until her fifth month when the baby began showing signs of stress. Her physician said she could continue to work but would need as much rest as possible. Dorothy ordered a roll-away bed and pillow for the stock

room and encouraged Heidi to take breaks and nap after lunch. This worked well until Heidi's seventh month when she was ordered to go home and stay in bed. Dorothy would frequently stop by Heidi's on her way home to drop off parenting magazines and offer words of encouragement.

During her career, Dorothy has helped countless young journalism students get internships, recommended many friends and colleagues for promotions and provided counsel and support to those she supervised.

These leadership and mentoring skills did not go unnoticed. In 2013, Dorothy was inducted into the Virginia Communications Hall of Fame.

We all associate Dorothy with her journalism career – especially her years at AP. But, you may not know much about her life before she became a journalist.

Dorothy comes from a strong and close-knit family. The second youngest of six children, she grew up in the Village of St. Henry in rural Mercer County, Ohio. Today, the population is 2,500, but when Dorothy was young there were about 750 people in St. Henry. The Gast family raised tomatoes and green beans and owned a processing facility that canned the vegetables. Today, the fourth generation of Gasts run the family business.

Not surprisingly, Dorothy was a good student in high school. Her mother recalled how devoted she was to playing the trombone in her high school band and how as a senior her commitment led to her winning the school's John Phillip Souza Award.

This part of Ohio has always yielded a lot of great football players – four NFL players have come out of St. Henry. But after Dorothy and her colleagues won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982 – the town wanted to do something to honor her, so they established the St. Henry Hall of Fame and inducted her into its first class.

Dorothy's older brother, Bo, says her musical abilities were not limited to the trombone. She also played the guitar and banjo and in college, he says she played in some clubs.

For most of the past 38 years – Dorothy has lived more than 400 miles from her family in Ohio. But, Bo says the distance doesn't keep Dorothy from visiting frequently. She is particularly devoted to her 93-year old mother who still lives alone. Even with a full-time work schedule, she tries to see her mother every six weeks or so and spend a few days with her. As Bo noted – not every daughter is this caring.

This really isn't that surprising. Fitting a lot of things into her schedule is one of her greatest skills. Tom Silvestri has a theory that "orchestration is an under-appreciated part of being a leader, but without it you never achieve lasting results." Dorothy, he says, "is a master conductor. Her successful 35-year career is proof she knows how to get things done."

Focused. Committed. Calm. Supportive. Talented.

There are two other words that friends and family use to describe Dorothy –

Big Hearted.

Tonight, we aren't just honoring Dorothy's career – we are honoring her life.

On behalf of the Virginia Press Association – it is my great pleasure to give you our Lifetime Achievement Award.