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### What Killed Kevin Morrissey?

How the death of an editor threatens the future of the University of Virginia's prestigious literary review

By Robin Wilson

When Kevin Morrissey walked to the old coaling tower near the University of Virginia campus late last month and shot himself in the head, he not only ended his own life, he exposed turmoil within the small staff of *The Virginia Quarterly Review* that now threatens the future of the high-profile journal.

Family members and people close to the review say Mr. Morrissey, the review's managing editor, had been complaining to the university about workplace bullying by his boss, Ted Genoways. But, they contend, the institution did virtually nothing to help. "Kevin had been to the university as recently as the Monday before the Friday he died," says an employee who worked at the review for a year. "The university had tools to step in and mediate, and they didn't." Some close to the situation say that in the days before the death, they even warned the university that Mr. Morrissey, who suffered from serious depression, might commit suicide.

Mr. Genoways, the journal's editor, is highly regarded in publishing circles. He is credited with taking *VQR*, as the review is known, from a sleepy publication to one of the nation's preeminent literary journals. He denies the allegation of bullying and says it was Mr. Morrissey's depressed state, not their rocky relationship, that caused Mr. Morrissey's suicide. "His long history of depression caused him trouble throughout his career," Mr. Genoways wrote in a statement to *The Chronicle*, "leading often to conflicts with his bosses."

In the wake of Mr. Morrissey's death, *VQR*'s own stability has been challenged. Mr. Genoways's office has been cleaned out, and police have been stationed at the doors of the award-winning journal. *The Chronicle* got such details, as well as further charges of turmoil, from a half-dozen people close to the situation. None would allow their names to be used because, they said, the university has instructed them not to talk to reporters and they fear for their jobs.

(A member of *VQR*'s staff, Sheila McMillen, is the sister of a *Chronicle* editor. None of the information used in this story is from Ms. McMillen.)

Mr. Genoways told *The Chronicle* that the university had already "reviewed all the allegations being made against me and found them to be without grounds." The university wouldn't comment on that or answer most of *The Chronicle's* questions about the situation, citing the confidentiality of personnel matters. A statement on the journal's home page says that UVa "remains strongly committed to *VQR*."

Still, others are questioning whether too much damage has already been done. Elliott D. Woods, a *VQR* contributor and an ardent supporter of Mr. Genoways, wrote in an e-mail message to *The Chronicle* that he feared that accusations about what caused Mr. Morrissey's death could "ruin the greatest little magazine I know."

Gregory M. Britton, publisher of Getty Publications, agrees. "These are tough enough times for small literary magazines," he said. "A crisis like this can be a death blow, even to the strongest scholarly publication."

#### **Former Friends**

It was at the Minnesota Historical Society Press, where Mr. Britton was director during the early 2000s, that Mr. Genoways and Mr. Morrissey first came to work together. They got along well enough that a year after Mr. Genoways took over at *VQR* in 2003, he asked Mr. Morrissey to come to Charlottesville as his right-hand man. It was the kind of job that Mr. Morrissey had done before, those close to him say, and that he did well. People who worked with Mr. Morrissey, including Mr. Britton, say he paid close attention to details and could be counted on to take on more than his fair share of work. They also say Mr. Morrissey, who was 52 and had never been married, could be grumpy and prickly, and that he suffered from what at times seemed to be a deep depression. Some of those who spoke to *The Chronicle* say he had talked about seeing a psychotherapist and taking medication. "He managed his disease, and he managed to be really high functioning," said someone who worked with him.

When Mr. Genoways took over at *VQR* at the age of 31, it was with hopes that he would breathe new life into a stodgy-looking black-and-white publication whose editor's office didn't even have Internet access. The departing editor, Staige Blackford, had been at the journal for nearly 30 years and was in his 70s when he decided

to retire.

Mr. Genoways gradually began putting the publication on the map, hiring well-known authors and photographers and taking on timely nonfiction projects in addition to the usual poetry and fiction. He paid journalists to write about high-stakes international conflicts like the war in Afghanistan and the violence of the Mexican drug cartel. The change quickly garnered both Mr. Genoways and *VQR* notice from those at the literary world's highest levels, winning the publication four National Magazine Awards and 14 more nominations, all of which it accomplished on a half-million-dollar budget.

During their first few years at the magazine, as it grew in stature, Mr. Genoways and Mr. Morrissey remained the closest of friends. In a letter Mr. Genoways sent to contributors this month that was obtained by *The Chronicle*, he said Mr. Morrissey was a fixture in his Virginia home and at holiday dinners with Mr. Genoways's wife and young son. Mr. Morrissey also traveled with Mr. Genoways to New York to accept the National Magazine Award that *VQR* won for general excellence in 2006. "We were the toast of the publishing world that night," Mr. Genoways wrote in the letter to contributors.

In the last few years, however, as Mr. Genoways took on more and more ambitious projects, and as he also became worried about the magazine's financial future, the relationship between the two men and the atmosphere within *VQR*'s offices began to sour. Some of those close to the magazine say Mr. Morrissey questioned Mr. Genoways about what Mr. Morrissey felt were excessive advance payments to contributors and about bills for parties Mr. Genoways hosted that reached into the thousands.

They say Mr. Genoways, in turn, began cutting Mr. Morrissey out of key decisions and distancing himself from the office, refusing to answer staff members' e-mail messages, shirking many of his day-to-day duties, and dumping most of the work on his small staff. "The whole staff felt Ted took all the credit and did none of the work," said the one-year employee, adding that Mr. Genoways spent most of his time at *VQR* "scrambling to be a star." Mr. Genoways has been away from the office on a Guggenheim fellowship in recent months, but he still has been responsible for making sure the journal's issues are finished on time.

When Mr. Genoways *was* in the office, some recall, he could

occasionally be overheard screaming at Mr. Morrissey behind his office door.

In his statement to *The Chronicle*, Mr. Genoways acknowledged there "had been tensions between staff members in the *VQR* offices." But people close to him, including the contributor Mr. Woods, say Mr. Genoways was hardly AWOL from his *VQR* duties. Nor was he depending on Mr. Morrissey and others to run the place. In fact, the exact opposite was true, says Mr. Woods. Mr. Genoways ran the magazine almost single-handedly, he says: The editor conceived of the ideas that inspired the covers, and cultivated contributors and held their hands through their reporting and writing, while at the same time he reached out to the larger world to gain renown for the journal and insure its continued vitality.

"Ted is the creative genius responsible for the magazine's success," says Mr. Woods, who worked as an intern at the magazine in 2008. "Ted is the fulcrum of the discussions about the future of *VQR* and, honestly, the future of journalism.... Ted is the star at the center of *VQR*'s constellation of writers, poets, and photographers."

#### **Worsening Relations**

While there may be disagreement over who was responsible for the breakdown in relationships at *VQR*, everyone who talked to *The Chronicle* seems to agree that the situation grew much worse late last year after Mr. Genoways hired a young UVa graduate, Alana Levinson-LaBrosse, to help raise money for the journal. Ms. Levinson-LaBrosse is the daughter of Frank H. Levinson, a wealthy Silicon Valley entrepreneur who has made generous donations to the university. Ms. Levinson-LaBrosse herself has already given \$1.5-million to the Young Writers Workshop at the university's Curry School of Education, from which she earned a master's degree in 2008.

Mr. Genoways, say those close to the publication, had been worried that despite its success, *VQR* might eventually be the victim of budget cuts, like so many other university literary journals.

And perhaps he had reason to be concerned. The journal has been financed, people close to it say, through a discretionary line in the budget of the university's president. John T. Casteen III, the university's longtime president, had announced he would step down in 2010. And Mr. Genoways, who reported directly to the president's office and who was good friends with his son, John T. Casteen IV, couldn't possibly expect to have the same kind of

relationship, at least right away, with the university's new president, Teresa A. Sullivan, who took over this month. It was unclear whether Ms. Sullivan would protect *VQR*'s budget and where within the university, and under whose control, the journal might wind up.

So Mr. Genoways and Ms. Levinson-LaBrosse began looking for another home within the university and more money from outside. Other staff members at the review, though, were not part of that work and didn't share Mr. Genoways's fears about the future. Nor did they take well to seeing Ms. Levinson-LaBrosse, 24, elevated to what some say appeared to be second-in-command under Mr. Genoways. Her desk was in his office. Some of those who worked at *VQR* clearly resented her and repeatedly made rude comments and ignored her during office meetings, says a university employee.

#### **Seeking University Help**

It was in this atmosphere, with the *VQR* staff growing more and more fractious, that Mr. Morrissey, together with three other journal staff members, went earlier this year to the president's office to complain. Mr. Morrissey had already registered his own complaints about Mr. Genoways with the university ombudsman and the human-resources office, according to his older sister, Maria Morrissey.

But university officials, those close to the publication say, brushed off the group's complaints, saying that creative people like Mr. Genoways could be difficult to work with and were often bad managers.

Meanwhile, people who knew Mr. Morrissey say he grew more and more despondent over the last couple of months of his life. He didn't think his problems with Mr. Genoways would ever be resolved. And he also felt trapped because while he may have been a talented editor, he lacked a college degree. Mr. Morrissey had a \$76,000-a-year salary at Virginia and owned a condominium in Charlottesville, both of which he feared he might never replace if he had to leave UVa.

It was two final actions in the weeks before Mr. Morrissey's death that his family and friends believe pushed him over the edge. First, Mr. Genoways sent an e-mail message to Mr. Morrissey in mid-July, 10 days before his death (a copy of which *The Chronicle* has obtained), telling Mr. Morrissey that he had "engaged in unacceptable workplace behavior." In the e-mail, Mr. Genoways

did not specify what that behavior was, but he ordered Mr. Morrissey to work from home for a week and warned him not to talk to other *VQR* staff members. People close to the magazine say Mr. Genoways was furious after learning that Mr. Morrissey and another staff member had clashed with Ms. Levinson-LaBrosse during a meeting.

It was around that time that Nancy A. Rivers, Mr. Casteen's chief of staff, reportedly got involved and, in what appears to be the only official action from the university, apologized to *VQR* staff members. Some were buoyed by her involvement, but not Mr. Morrissey. According to his sister, his cell-phone records show that during the last two weeks of his life, Mr. Morrissey made 17 calls to the university's human-resources department, the president's office, and university officials responsible for employee assistance and faculty-staff relations.

On the morning of Mr. Morrissey's death, Friday, July 30th, Mr. Genoways sent Mr. Morrissey another e-mail message, says Mr. Morrissey's sister, accusing Mr. Morrissey of ignoring a plea for help from a man who had worked under dangerous conditions to help *VQR* with a recent story. Ms. Morrissey says Mr. Genoways wrote that in ignoring the man, Mr. Morrissey had put the man's life at risk.

It's not clear that Mr. Morrissey read that e-mail. What is known is that at about 11:30 a.m. that morning he called the Charlottesville police and reported a shooting at the former C&O coaling tower, a landmark near the campus that has attracted criminal activity in the past. Within minutes police arrived to find that Mr. Morrissey had shot himself in the head. With him were his will with instructions about what should be done with his body, along with a typed suicide note that, according to those who have seen it, said: "I'm sorry. I know she won't understand this, but I just couldn't bear it anymore." Maria Morrissey says the "she" in the note referred to a longtime female friend of her brother's from Minnesota.

#### **Charges of Bullying**

Ms. Morrissey hadn't spoken to her brother in years. He had cut her and their three brothers out of his life. When she first heard about his death, in a phone call that Friday, she thought his depression had gotten the better of him. But as she talked to Mr. Morrissey's coworkers about the events of the last year, Ms. Morrissey grew more and more angry. "What I heard was that Ted

Genoways had been a workplace bully to Kevin for three years," says Ms. Morrissey. "He was a bully to everyone in the office, but he picked out Kevin as his particular target." Ms. Morrissey has made similar accusations in comments on an item about Mr. Morrissey's death posted on [cvillenews.com](http://cvillenews.com) by his former colleague, Waldo Jaquith, who is *VQR*'s Web editor. (People close to the magazine say Mr. Jaquith submitted his resignation from the *VQR* staff shortly before Mr. Morrissey's death.) Ms. Morrissey says her family is talking to lawyers about filing a lawsuit against the university.

In an e-mail response to questions from *The Chronicle* about Mr. Morrissey's complaints and the university's response, a UVa spokeswoman said she was "unable to respond to many of them as they are part of individuals' confidential personnel records."

Ann H. Franke, an expert on the law and higher education, said university officials should respond to all complaints of workplace bullying whether or not they determine a formal investigation is necessary. "Prompt handling of workplace complaints makes a better environment altogether," she said in an interview.

The University of Virginia paid for Mr. Morrissey's memorial service on the campus this month, says his sister, and bought plane tickets for his father and siblings to travel to Charlottesville. After the service, family members and people who worked with Mr. Morrissey went back to his home where they ate some of his favorite foods, including red beet salad and chocolate-chip cookies.

Around his apartment, says Ms. Morrissey, her brother had left signs that he was looking for a new job and considering selling his apartment. And on the bureau in his bedroom, he had a book that Ms. Morrissey believes might give some insight into how her brother viewed Mr. Genoways. It's called: *Working With the Self-Absorbed: How to Handle Narcissistic Personalities on the Job*.

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