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Newsboys: Inspired by the story of his Monterey father, author explores essence of street smarts

Inspired by father who was a newsboy



The story of George DiGirolamo (left) moving to Monterey in 1936 as a 9-year-old newsboy from Boston and hitting the streets selling papers for the Monterey Herald inspired Vince DiGirolamo (right) to write “Crying the News, A History of America’s Newsboys.” (Courtesy photo)

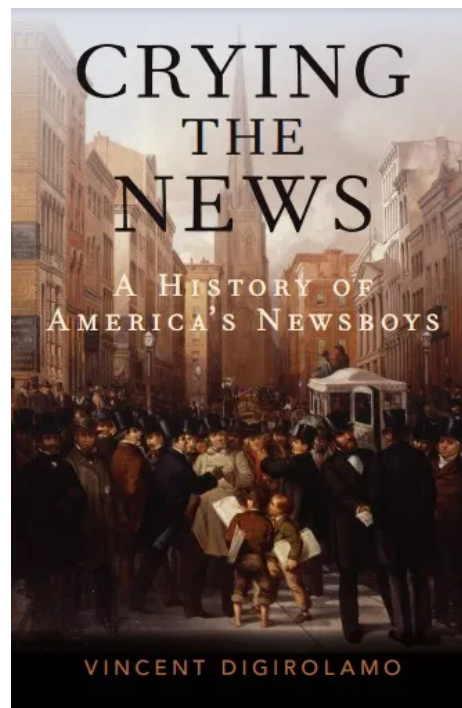
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Vince DiGirolamo grew up hearing about his father, George DiGirolamo's move to Monterey in 1936, a 9-year-old newsboy from Boston, who hit the streets selling papers for the Monterey Herald. DiGirolamo found that interesting and imagined others would, too, but he had to figure out what made his father's experience worth sharing — and how best to do so.

Plenty of people grow up hearing family stories and go on to retell some version of what they remember, but most don't write books about them. Those who do seem to listen with a different ear, gathering the details in a larger context to help deliver the message, make it memorable, give readers a reason to care.

DiGirolamo graduated cum laude from UC Berkeley's School of Journalism in 1978 with a minor in ethnic studies. He received an master's in comparative social history from UC Santa Cruz in 1989, followed by a year of independent study at the University of Leeds, and then did doctoral work in history at Princeton University, where he received his Ph.D. in 1997. Rather than resting on the laurels of his education, he decided to do something with his ability to research and craft a story.

He wrote a book.



“I went to graduate school, armed with lots of background stories and interests,” he said. “But when writing, when I’m looking around for subjects to investigate, in addition to a family connection, there has to be an intellectual reason, a problematic focus that would get the green light from graduate schools and publishers.”

DiGirolamo settled on a book that would explore the romantic and rogue notions of the newsboy, without actually promoting either in his portrayal.

“When we read about journalism,” he said, “it tends to focus on editors and reporters. But this level of the trade is fascinating. I wanted to look at the economic activity in the lives of young newsboys, to explore how they developed their world views, class perspective, and personal expectations. I knew, by studying the children of this early workforce, I could shed light on cultural, gender, and economic histories.”

DiGirolamo realized that biting off more than he can chew, unsure of what he’s getting into, is one of his specialties. While investigating and writing, “Crying the News, A History of America’s Newsboys,” the author took on a monumental project that went beyond delivering a tribute to his father, to exploring early and contemporary working-class life and the role of petty commerce in making ends meet. From conceptualizing the topic to writing thematic essays about it in graduate school, to developing it into a book, he says, the project took about 30 years.

“Through stories and film, we think we know all about the newsboys, those snotty-nosed little wise guys, bootstrap-pullers,” he said, “who raised themselves and achieved upward mobility through entrepreneurship. This particular view of them is pretty important, as it affected social policy while protecting the use of this labor source by the newspapers.”

Exploring the Innocence of the Industrious

While the role of the newsboy has been romanticized and praised for ingenuity, says DiGirolamo, it also has been condemned for corrupting children and as a detriment to their development.

Newsboys “carried vital intelligence and information to a young nation of readers, bamboozled them if opportunity arose, received unwanted attention from authorities,” wrote DiGirolamo, “and met with violent rebuke from those who disliked their message, retelling the breaking news that would become America’s history.”

Throughout his project, he couldn't help but wonder if his father was exposed to bad influences that led him astray, or did his job as a newsboy give him the skills to eventually make him a successful storekeeper, restaurateur, and real estate agent? Likely, the answer is yes.

DiGirolamo remembers his father's tale about selling newspapers on the street when two sisters invited him to dinner at the San Carlos Hotel in Monterey and bought him a new suit and a pair of shoes. It was the first time he'd had a pork chop, and he liked it better than the suit. Turned out the women were members of the newspaper dynasty which owned The Monterey Herald.

George DiGirolamo, now 94, dropped out of Monterey High, succumbed to the draft and, after he made it home, joined forces with his six brothers to open Angelo's Restaurant on the Wharf. Son Vince DiGirolamo joined the family firm at age 8, working for a dollar an hour, plus tips, through high school, until he left for college.



A photo from the book "Crying the News, A History of America's Newsboys" shows a Boston police detective interrogating runaways Andrew DiGirolamo, Vincent Serafino, and George DiGirolamo in 1931. (Courtesy photo)

"Angelo's was the center of the family and was important to my becoming who I am — my own bootstraps story," he said. "I was praised as being a good worker, which was meaningful as the boss' son. If someone didn't show up, my dad called me. I remember hiding — just once."

Although he spends his summers and every other Christmas in Monterey, DiGirolamo lives in New York, where he teaches at Baruch College of the City University of New York. “Crying the News: A History of America’s Newsboys,” is but his latest book, published by Oxford University Press, in 2019 and already the recipient of several significant book awards. His wife, April Masten, who teaches history at Stony Brook University, is the daughter of legendary poet Ric Masten, the Poet Laureate of Carmel, whose words reached well beyond the Peninsula.

“Just for the record,” said DiGirolamo, “I never carried newspapers as a kid in California, but I did deliver them on Long Island while writing ‘Crying the News.’ I lasted a week.”



Vincent DiGirolamo
