

Trudy Lieberman

Contributing Editor

The Columbia Journalism Review and blogs about health care and retirement issues for cjr.org.

Bob Butler loved journalism. Although a physician by training, he easily crossed academic boundaries, and was as much a philosopher, thinker and journalist on the age beat as he was a doctor. As an undergraduate at Columbia University, he became editor of the *Spectator*, Columbia University's student newspaper, and he forged relationships with other journalists that lasted a life time. In 1975, he wrote a Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *Why Survive? Being Old in America*, which changed the way Americans discussed growing old. That is just what journalists are supposed to do if they're doing their job right, using their megaphone to improve the lot of humanity. He wrote other books too: *Human Ageing and Sex after Sixty*.

Butler coined the word "ageism" in

the late 1960s at a time when American newspapers were discovering another ism—consumerism which gave reporters a chance to discover all the ways the marketplace failed people in their role as consumers. The American marketplace was also failing families who put their loved ones in nursing homes. Nursing homes were dreadful places, and many still are. Working with consumer advocate Ralph Nader, Butler helped expose horrible living conditions in the nation's nursing homes. That was pioneering work that many journalists including myself followed—me two decades later. Today many American journalists write stories about their local nursing homes, keeping a journalist's eye on the bad ones. They have Dr. Robert Butler to thank for paving the way for this kind of reporting.



Mr. Otsu, Reporter of the Yomiuri Shimbun and Dr. Lieberman

Butler talked to any reporter who called. They didn't have to work for the New York Times or the Washington Post to get a return call. All Butler wanted was for the reporter to dig deeply for the facts and present a complete picture of whatever aspect of growing old in America they were writing about. In 1995, Butler assembled experts in various aspects of aging who presented reports that could shape ILC's mission; Paul Kleyman, then editor of *Aging Today* published by the American Society on Aging, wrote the blueprint for journalism. In the fall of 1995, Columbia hosted a conference for U.S. journalists. I attended and learned what a gold mine of stories could be found on the aging beat. There was a lot of information presented, and Kleyman recalls the Columbia meeting set the stage for an international meeting two years later.

In 1997, Butler convened a two-day conference with U.S. journalists who covered aging and journalists from Japan who did the same. We compared notes and contrasted coverage of sensitive topics in both our countries. In Japan, as I learned when I was a Fulbrighter, the

topic of end-of-life-care was taboo. We discussed how cultural differences colored our approaches to stories. I had asked my 12-year old daughter to attend the reception. As a youngster, she had been at my side when I did my Fulbright interviews in Tokyo. To this day she remembers someone asking her what publication she worked for. I remember how exciting it was to share what we do in the U.S. with Japanese journalists. Unfortunately, that meeting did not result in an international circle of journalists who covered aging, but it did spark a new project for ILC-New York—the Age Boom Academy, which began in 2000 and for several years trained U.S. journalists on how to cover the age beat. I spoke at the first one and then again in 2008. Butler and I had a long conversation about what we had accomplished—he as a role model and I as someone who interpreted what he was all about. That was the last time I saw him and began to think he was slowing down. No, I said to myself. I always thought he would last forever.

*Trudy Lieberman was a Fulbright Scholarship to Japan in 1993.