

MIZZOU

The magazine of
the Mizzou Alumni Association

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Former ad executive Steve Kopcha talks up a good many things

Story by Sarah Garber | Photo by Nicholas Benner

Steve Kopcha, a 30-year advertising executive turned MU journalism professor, often says, “Good ads sell stuff.” He would know — his did. Nine years out of the business (and into teaching), Kopcha, BJ ’63, talks up a good many things — mostly learning, living and loving every minute. No doubt about it, the man has a way with words.

(For more on Kopcha, check out his [personal manifesto](#) and don't miss [behind-the-scenes footage](#) of three outrageous photo shoots.)

MIZZOU: Give us an overview of your career.

Kopcha: I spent most of my career in St. Louis with D’Arcy Advertising Company, which eventually became D’Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles Worldwide. I spent about half of my career in St. Louis working for Budweiser. The second half of my career was with the same ad agency but



A life in advertising lets you do great things.

in the Detroit office, working with General Motors.

I started out as a copywriter, but it wasn't long before I was a manager. I was responsible for an entire creative department, but I didn't always create the campaigns myself. My specialty was presenting and selling the advertising to our clients.

After 25 years with D'Arcy, I retired to a farm in Drake, Mo. I had two tractors, a pickup truck, a yellow Lab, an ATV, a dirt bike ... it was paradise ... only to find out after a couple years that my wife hated every second of it. So we moved back to Detroit and I worked five more years at McCann-Erickson, on the Buick and GMC truck business, mainly. I retired again and we moved to Santa Fe [N.M.] before heading to Columbia to teach.

MIZZOU: What are some of the more successful campaigns in which you were involved?

Kopcha: I was involved in all of the Budweiser campaigns during my time there. The Budweiser experience was fantastic because it gave me a chance to work on a brand I was very familiar with, having been a Mizzou grad. The Bud people did everything first-class, and it was a tremendous exercise in developing advertisements for and helping a great brand attain such dominance. We helped bring them, in many ways, into the 21st century. We put them on *Saturday Night Live*, doing live commercials called 'The Taste Buds' with John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, etc., dressed up in taste bud suits.

When I went to Detroit, our biggest account there was Pontiac. At the time, Pontiac was just not doing well. I came in to run the creative department there. Together with Pontiac getting its own act together and putting out some terrific cars, we went from almost out of business to one of the leading car brands in America. We were able to help take a very sick brand and help make it healthy again. That was tremendously challenging, but ultimately satisfying. Another highlight was The Dow Chemical Co., who came to us looking for some help with its image. At the time, they were suffering some baggage from the Vietnam War — they made Agent Orange and napalm. We created a campaign for them with the tag line, "Dow lets you do great things." There was a good message there — if you work at a first-class chemical company like Dow, and you're a scientist, you're going to get to do great things. It was effective.

Overall, my advertising career was a lot of fun, but I don't want to give the wrong impression. It's hard work, too. It's a simple business, but it's not easy. People who can do it well and keep the clients happy — and their business booming — they're the ones who succeed. But it's not as easy as it looks.

MIZZOU: In some circles, advertising is demonized. What's your response to that?

Kopcha: When was the last time you bought something you didn't want? Never. We have never been able to make people buy things they don't want. Advertising's role is simply to dramatize the superiority of one product over another. As an advertising agent, or ad man, my role is to dramatize why my product is the best. The object is to give you a more informed choice. I always like to point out that in the ad business, if you lie, you go to jail. You can't say

Kopcha and his team developed the "Dow lets you do great things" advertising campaign. From the stage of the Missouri Theatre Center for the Arts in Columbia, Kopcha combines his love of opera and motorcycles — this one is a Harley-Davidson Low Rider. Photo by Nicholas Benner

things that aren't true, especially major blue-chip advertisers. It's just like a résumé for a product in a way. You put your best foot forward ... that's what advertising does. It lets the product put its best foot forward.

MIZZOU: What do you think about *Mad Men*, the AMC show about advertising executives in the 1960s?

Kopcha: It's dead on. That show is all about the advertising business, the way it was when I started. It's a little bit before my period, but it rings true. I'm in awe of the creators. They really captured the feel of the business. It's a lot of smoking, drinking and promiscuity, and that's the way it was. It was a business where people worked really hard, but they played really hard, too. I don't think it's quite as zippy now as it was then.

MIZZOU: How did you make the decision to teach?

Kopcha: I think the short answer is that I was bored with retirement. But deep down, I think I always wanted to do it. I just jumped in and loved it from day one.

I had retired for the second time and moved to Santa Fe. Just as I was getting restless and bored again, I got a call from the university. Henry Hager [now professor emeritus], who had this job before I did, asked me if I knew anyone who wanted to teach advertising at the J-School. I said, yeah, I know a guy ... me! It just seemed like a great idea, and it was the right time. So I thought, I'll try it for a couple of years. Now, it's nine years later and I just love it. In some ways, I almost feel like the 30 years I did in the advertising business was only prep for what I'm doing now, which is teaching. Luckily, I did do those 30 years, so I actually know what I'm talking about in the classroom.

You know, right here on this little patch of earth is the key to all that's best in my life. [Points out the window of his office in Walter Williams Hall along Francis Quadrangle.] Here, I learned and got excited about my career. Right over there by the Columns, I met my wife, Avis Ann. My whole life has revolved around this place.

MIZZOU: What's your teaching philosophy?

Kopcha: I want to help students shine a light down a dark tunnel. It happened for me — the light went on — right next door, over in Neff Hall. I saw the catalog for the J-School. I knew I wouldn't be good at newspapers, but I tried advertising. I found out that I liked it and I was good at it. After I graduated and left the Navy, I got the job of my dreams at D'Arcy.

Now, as a teacher, I want to do two things: I want people who don't know what advertising is to know what it's all about, and second, to get excited about it.

I've thought about what I would have wanted to know at the age of 21 about the business, and I designed my classes around that. It seems to work pretty well.

I've had several students who were super talented. To bring out that talent in my classes — to see them thunder out of my classes and kick serious butt in a highly competitive business — is really a thrill. As a teacher, you're putting out into the world a whole cadre of people trained by you. If they're good, that's really something. It's really a big responsibility, but it's a big thrill too. I didn't always get that in the business world. In the business world, they give you money. And money's a good thing — it is. But in many ways, it's not as rewarding as going to

graduation and having a student say, ‘Thanks. Thanks for changing my life.’

MIZZOU: What do you learn from your students?

Kopcha: They say, he who teaches learns twice. The students have a lot to teach you, not about facts and figures, but about character. Enthusiasm. You can see their enthusiasm and say, ‘Boy, if I didn’t think that was important before, I do now.’ Their joie de vivre is infectious.

I’ve also learned that students are in many ways different from when I was one, and in many ways the same. It’s cool to respect your students, and I do. You can learn a lot from them. And I do.

MIZZOU: What do you do outside of work?

Kopcha: I have some hobbies. I love opera. My current passion is baroque opera ... great stuff. But I haven’t always had that taste. I didn’t really get turned on to serious music until I was in my 30s. Then I started listening to opera seriously, and going to operas. It’s a piece of my life that I could not imagine being without. But it’s also a little intimidating in a way. The genius of the giants of classical music is truly humbling. For example, I spent all afternoon listening to Bach. I think about the towering intellect it took to compose his massive portfolio of masterpieces. When did he get all the time? It’s fun to get inside the mind of somebody like that.


My other hobby, besides Mizzou football, is riding my Harley. It’s a Low Rider. This one I’ve had about 10 years, and it’s pretty sweet. So I like to take trips — I’ve been to Nova Scotia, Colorado, Duluth [Minn.], Fargo [N.D.] and Jefferson City [Mo.]. Mostly short trips now, as I’m getting too old to get rained on.


I guess that’s part of why I’m such a happy camper. I just love so many different things. It makes life fun and interesting ... I’ll be very sorry to leave this life, you know, because I’m enjoying it so much.


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Last updated: Feb. 15, 2013