



(clockwise from upper left)
Marquee welcoming cartoonists to Lexington
and speaker Larry Flynt to the Kentucky Theater;
Etta Hulme celebrates the release of a documentary
about her; and Dwane Powell jams on the last night.

CONVENTION REPORT LEXINGTON 2004

Politics & Partying in the Heart of Kentucky

By R.C. Harvey

The funnies were certainly not being altogether funny the week that embraced the AAEC's April 21-24 convention.

The Association of American Editorial Cartoonists convened in Lexington, Kentucky, the very week that comic strips were attracting attention for their political commentary.

In Darby Conley's *Get Fuzzy*, Rob

Wilco, the human protagonist, learns that his cousin Willie has lost a leg in Iraq and goes to visit him in the hospital. And in Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury*, B.D., the erstwhile football player turned coach then warrior in Iraq, loses his leg. And for the first time in his 34 years in the strip, B.D. appears without a helmet or similar head-covering.

Doonesbury's Pulitzer winning creator Trudeau, fresh from another Pulitzer

nomination for editorial cartooning this spring (the winner was Matt Davies of the *Journal News*, also at the convention), was on the speaker line-up at the AAEC gathering. Others included such editooning luminaries as Pat Oliphant and Tony Auth, as well as *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt.

Publisher Flynt's presentation took place near the AAEC convention hotel

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in a downtown Lexington movie theater where clips from the film "The People vs. Larry Flynt" highlighted the pornographer's confrontation with the Rev. Jerry Falwell in a 1988 struggle over First Amendment rights. While the AAEC held no brief for pornography, it had supported Flynt when the case was argued before the Supreme Court because of the freedom of speech implications of the case. At issue was a cartoon parody of Falwell, and the Court affirmed *Hustler's* right to publish it. "Had the Supreme Court gone in Falwell's favor," Flynt told his cartoonist audience, "you all would have been out of business because all somebody would have to prove, to sue you, is that you hurt their feelings."

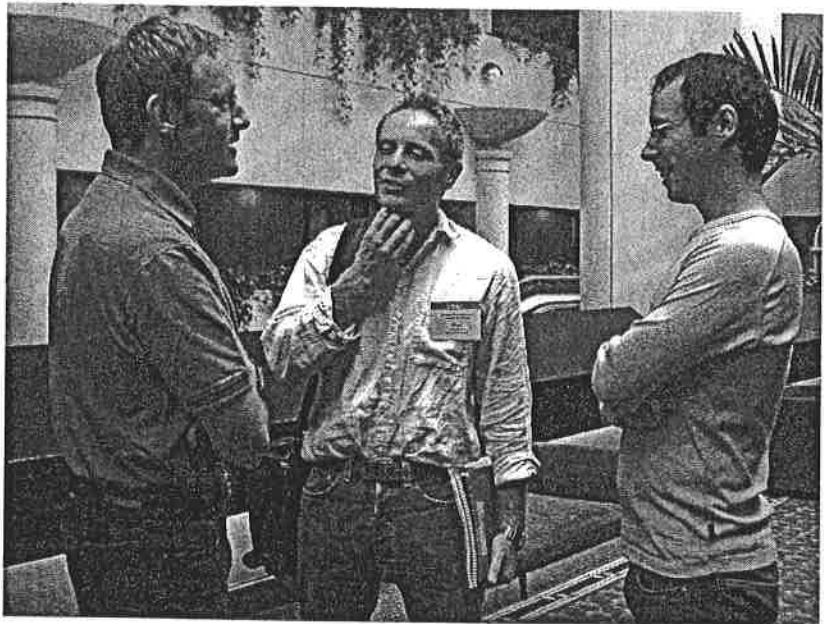
Flynt began by expressing his admiration for cartoonists. "Believe me," he said, "no other group in the country could have gotten me out this week," alluding to an impending book promotion tour for his new book "Sex, Lies and Politics." When he was invited to appear before AAEC, he readily adjusted an already tight schedule to make the trip possible.

"When I go looking for icons in publishing," Flynt continued, "I don't look for editors or publishers or photographers. I look for cartoonists. I've always been fascinated by how a small cartoon can say more than the entire editorial page of a newspaper. You guys are underpaid, you guys are underappreciated, and you get too much static from the powers that be."

He believes the news industry is much too deferential to the current administration: "The media has totally sold out," he said. Asked about the often alleged connection between pornography and violence, Flynt said, "If there were any evidence connecting porn and violence, we'd have no porn."

Confined to a wheelchair since the assassination attempt that crippled him in 1978, Flynt was shapelessly fat and doughy-faced, and he seemed tired, speaking in a halting croak; but his mind wasn't handicapped at all.

Hustler very early staked out offensiveness as its special province in cartooning, a stance for which Flynt is wholly unapologetic. (Still, he regrets a cartoon he published shortly after First Lady Betty Ford had undergone a double mastectomy. The cartoon depicted a breastless woman seen in



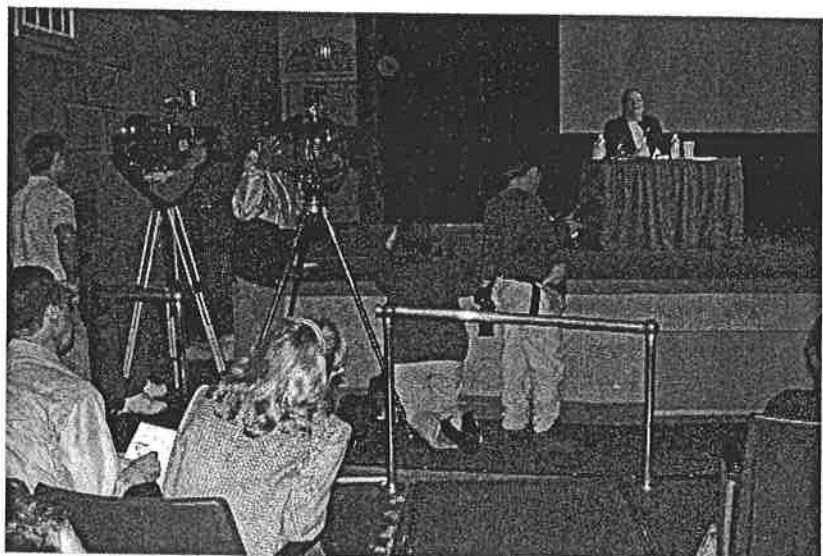
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Walt Handelsman schmoozes with incoming AAEC president Matt Davies and out-going prez Mike Ritter.



J.P. TROSTLE

Waiting for Larry Flynt to take the stage at the Kentucky Theater.



J.P. TROSTLE

Flynt proved a big draw for local media coverage.



J.P. TROSTLE

Steve Benson fires another question at Flynt during an open Q&A session that went on longer than scheduled.

Convention host Joel Pett (below) fields more questions for Flynt (at right). The audience pulled few punches in their questions; while some were not wholly satisfied with his answers, Flynt didn't shirk from a single question and earned the grudging respect of the cartoonists present.



BRIAN FAIRINGTON



J.P. TROSTLE

silhouette through a White House window, with the caption, "All I want for Christmas is my two front tits." That was over the line, he now admits, upon reflection. "It was insensitive," he said, "but everyone knows that tastelessness was part of our goal.")

Mike Luckovich, editorial cartoonist for the *Atlanta Constitution*, told a reporter after the Flynt presentation that he cringed at Flynt's descriptions of the crude stereotypical ways *Hustler* cartoons depict African-Americans, but he also appreciated Flynt's unabashed comments. "Most celebrities are very guarded in what they say and speak in bland sound bites. Flynt doesn't hide his opinions."

About George "WMD" Bush and the Patriot Act, the publisher said: "Bush's warmongering aside, his assault on civil liberties and rights is probably the most damaging thing he did for the nation." And he quoted Benjamin Franklin: "Those who would trade their civil liberties for security deserve neither."

I was talking with Pulitzer winner Ann Telnaes later, and she said that she agreed with what Flynt had said about the First Amendment, but regretted that "a spokesman for freedom of the press and free speech is a pornographer." Writing later to Joel Pett, Pulitzer-winning editor and organizer of the convention, she said: "I want to thank you for Larry Flynt: between being inspired by his defense of the First Amendment to being unconvinced by his defense of pornography, at least now I know I really do believe in Free Speech. You certainly came up with the ultimate test."

Trudeau also commented on Flynt: "Satire is still protected by the U.S. Constitution. For that we need to thank Mr. Flynt."



Arab cartoonist Khalil Bendib showed samples of his cartoons, which pointed out the hypocrisy of U.S. policy in the Middle East. He also thanked Trudeau for replying to a letter he'd written the *Doonesbury* creator when he, Bendib, was a college student and for "never falling into the temptation of stereotyping Muslims and Arabs." Bendib's cartoons

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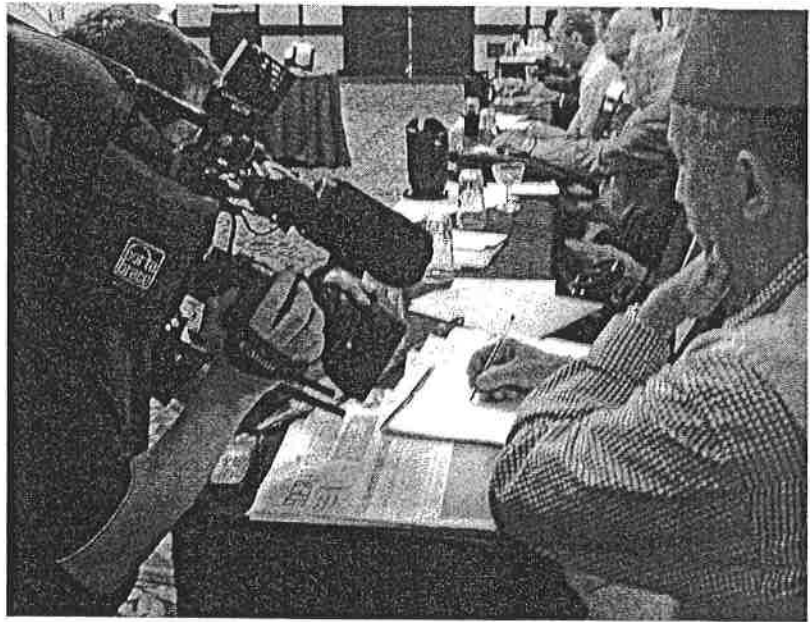
(www.bendib.com), which represented the Palestinian side of the tragedy in Israel in an attempt to balance perspective, emphasized the inherent biases in the U.S. — for Israel and against the Palestinians. The visual stereotypes of Arabs in this country are much more pervasive and derogatory than the stereotypes of Jews, who have been quick in recent years to voice objection to any imagery that seems anti-Semitic.

Bendib's presentation provoked Hy Rosen, a long-time member of AAEC presently retired, who objected to Bendib's favorable portrayal of the Palestinian point of view, condemning all such portrayals because Palestinian children were being taught to hate Jews in Palestinian schools. Bendib listened but did not argue thereby embodying the good manners essential to all free speech: he'd made his point, now it was Rosen's turn.



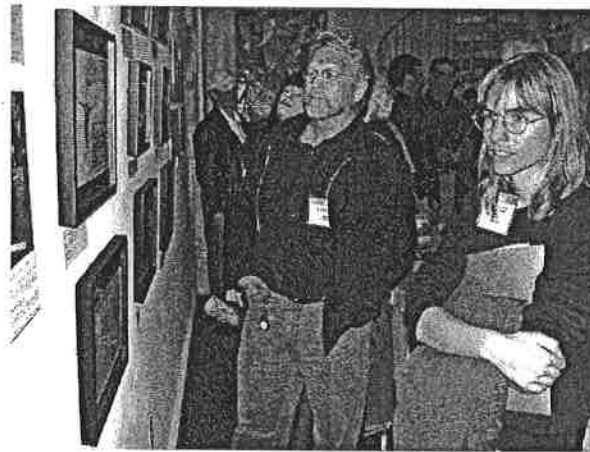
In the hallways between sessions, cartoonists griped about the bottom-line orientation of publishers and fearful editors. *Herald-Leader* reporter John Cheves noted that the younger cartoonists, of which there were many, complained that in a market with a dwindling number of staff positions, the chances of their finding full-time employment were virtually nil.

Those occupying those positions are all baby boomers, said Eric Shansby, and they'll stay in their jobs "until they die." Agreed Mikhaela Reid: "They're like federal judges." By the time they retire, Shansby and Reid and their generation will likely no longer be in the business, having been forced to find livelihoods elsewhere. While attendance at this year's AAEC meeting (about 150 cartoonists) suggests a reasonably healthy organization, most of those now drawing editorial cartoons do it part time, squeezing one or two a week out of an art department production schedule that includes mostly illustrations and layouts for feature articles at their papers, not editorial cartoons. Or they freelance by self-syndication, often focussing on state-wide issues and distributing their work only to state newspapers, weeklies as well as dailies. The only cheerful prospect on this otherwise bleak horizon looms in the growing number of weekly newspapers, many of which are



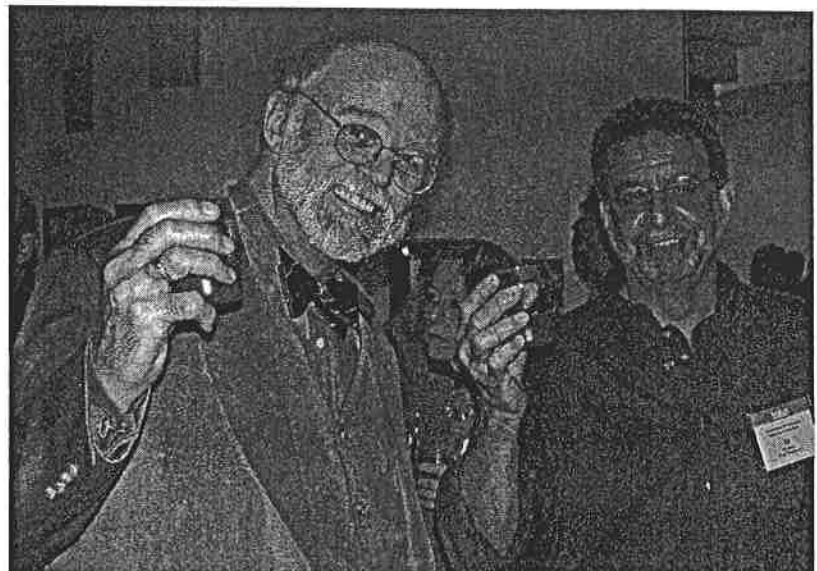
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A cameraman from NBC News films Khalil Bendib as he doodles before his presentation on Thursday at the convention.



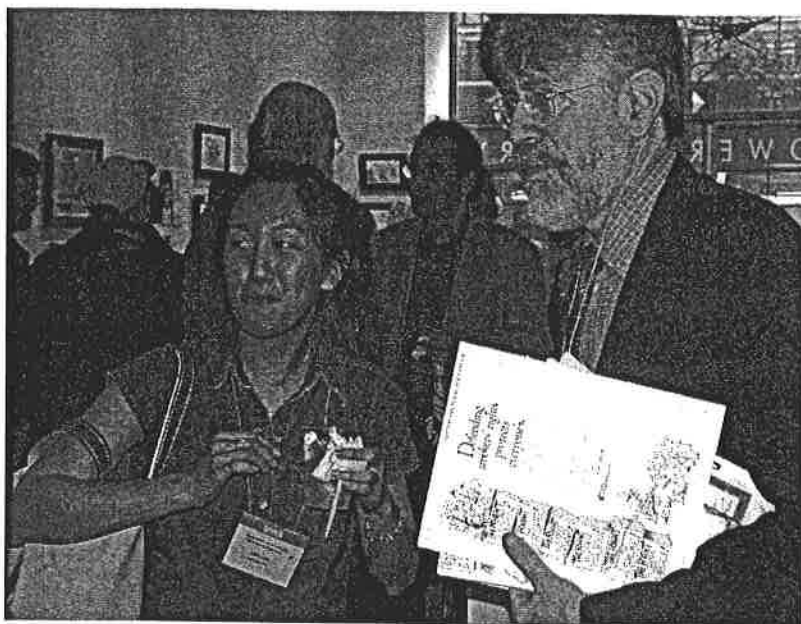
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Steve Artley and Sage Stossel check out the "Cartoonists Take Up Smoking" show at the Ann Tower Gallery.



J.P. TROSTLE

Uh-oh: Ben Sargent and Ed Stein find the table with the free bourbon.



Nahyun Cho, of the Population Media Center, Inc. chats with "Smoking" show organizer Dr. Alan Blum, from the University of Alabama.



Cartooning legend Pat Oliphant gives tips to an aspiring cartoonist.



Garry Trudeau (second from left) hangs out with the hoi polloi during Friday's session.

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BRIAN FAIRINGTON

BRIAN FAIRINGTON

free, living entirely on advertising revenues and fostering an "alternative" agenda for their readers. A vast number of these periodicals beckon cartoonists who find the traditional perch at a daily newspaper increasingly precarious.



Friday morning saw presentations by acknowledged "Masters of the Craft" Pat Oliphant, Tony Auth and Garry Trudeau.

Pat Oliphant and Tony Auth showed slides of their non-political cartooning work: Oliphant, sculptures; Auth, book illustration. Auth said he tries to do one drawing a day that is not political; it keeps him from forming visual habits — "the Auth nose ... the Auth ear."

Oliphant has returned to life drawing classes to keep his work fresh. One of only a few editorial cartoonists without a home-base newspaper, Oliphant said he misses the newsroom. "If I miss anything, it's that," he said — the immediate response his cartoon got from colleagues in the newspaper offices. Referring to a recent cartoon that depicted Mel Gibson being abused by the nuns of the school he attended as a child (thereby prompting the movie-maker's apparent passion for associating Christ with blood and gore) and the outcry the cartoon inspired in Boston, Oliphant said, "Readers get more irate about cartoons on religion than with those on politics," adding that "newspapers are becoming more of a bottom-line organization; they hate controversy because that affects the bottom line."

Oliphant, however, seems to delight in producing cartoons that blatantly attack the sensibilities of his readers as well as his editors—a delight, by the way, I rejoice at.

Auth said his paper, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, isn't hesitant about publishing provocative cartoons. "The only reason to be an editorial cartoonist," he said, "is to say what you think." Oliphant, who began his newspaper career at the age of 15 on the *Adelaide News* in Australia, the first newspaper Rupert Murdoch owned, was asked about Murdoch, about whom, as is well-known, he harbors no affection whatsoever. Said Oliphant: "There's a good reason why people only live so long."

In his presentation, Trudeau talked mostly about his professional past and the future of comics, not about B.D. Remembering his

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early years on the strip, he allowed that he was "the original not-ready-for-prime-time player" who made the comics safe for bad drawing. "Without me," he continued, "there would be no Cathy, no Dilbert."

In reflecting on his success with *Doonesbury*, Trudeau decided, not surprisingly, that he'd reaped the benefit of being in the right place at the right time. His syndicate didn't take him on because of the brilliance of his artwork: instead, they saw him as the voice of his generation, and *Doonesbury* was "dispatches from the front line" of the sixties youth — sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Many newspapers, under the thumb of a more staid generation of publishers, cancelled *Doonesbury* in the early years. Trudeau worried about it, but he was reassured by the confidence of John McMeel, co-founder of the infant syndicate that Trudeau's comic strip would, pretty soon, put on the map. Said McMeel: "Sooner or later, these [old conservative publishers] die." Trudeau grinned: "Damn if he wasn't right. All across the country, publishers who said *Doonesbury* would appear in their newspapers over their dead bodies were getting their wish. My client list floated upward on the tears of widows and children."

Today, the strip is one of only a handful with a circulation of 1,000 or more newspapers (*Doonesbury* is in 1,400). And Trudeau juggles storylines among 30 major characters — "like a Russian novel," he quipped.

As for the future, Trudeau acknowledged that young people don't read newspapers — not even his children. Animation on the Web is the future of comics, he said. And he showed a 3-minute sequence with Duke undertaking to run for President, animated by motion-capture technology that "makes it possible to animate for low cost and in real time. ... But no matter what the platform or the delivery system," Trudeau concluded, "the fundamentals of the craft will remain the same."

Referring to the hundreds of nearly unreported grievously wounded being returned from occupied Iraq, Trudeau explained the reasoning behind B.D.'s tragedy during a Q&A session Friday morning: "If I kill off B.D., that is shocking," he said (and he's killed five characters in the strip over the years), "but it seemed far more useful to look at these extreme sacrifices, short of



R.C. HARVEY

"Check it out — I downloaded 'Shrek2'! You guys want a copy?"



J.P. TROSTLE

"Masters of the Craft" Pat Oliphant and Tony Auth.



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Jack Ohman, Chris Britt and Steve Kelley talk to the hand at the Cartoonist Rights Network fundraiser dinner.



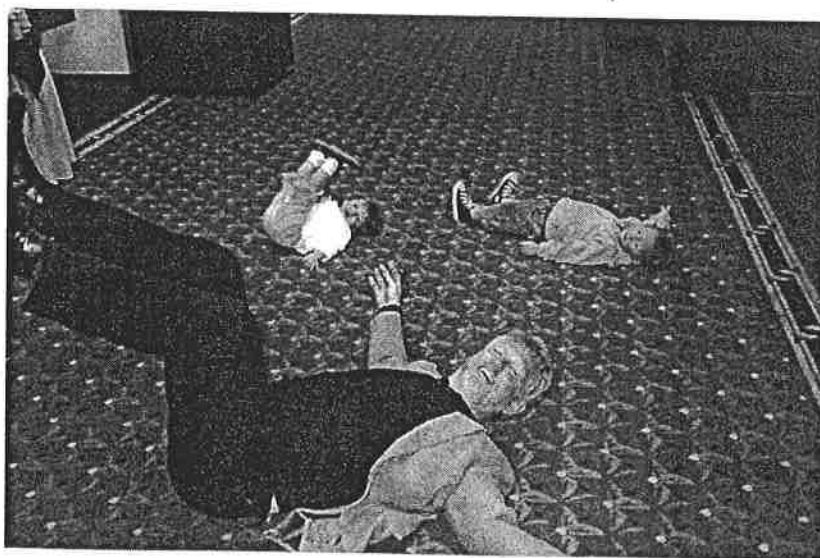
Guest of Honor, embattled African cartoonist Tony Namate (right), thanks the audience at the Cartoonists Rights Network fundraiser dinner.

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Dick and Mary Locher congratulate this year's Locher Award winner, Josh Ferrin, from the University of Utah.

MARY LOCHER



Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist David Horsey gets play tips from future cartoonists Caroline Cole and Sebastian Babin.

JOHN COLE

death, that are being made by the troops in the field."

To recognize and make us more conscious of the sacrifices many returning soldiers are making, Trudeau plans to detail the months of painful and angry rehabilitation that B.D. will endure. "I want to show the process of recovery and rehabilitation ... and the impact on family and friends. It's profound: B.D.'s life will never be the same. That's why I took his helmet off after 34 years: he's moving into a different part of his life."



Friday afternoon, AAEC members celebrated the venue of its convention by going to the horse races at Keeneland Race Track. On another afternoon, they watched a documentary about the life and work of one of its most distinguished members, Etta Hulme, who, although partly retired, still contributes her typically hard-hitting cartoons a couple times a week at her former domicile, the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*. Called, throughout the video production, AAEC's "den mother," Hulme's mild southern-fried manner and grandmotherly mein are deceptive. She's a tough-minded political commentator who, after training with Disney and a short career in comic books (Red Rabbit), started freelancing editorial cartoons at various destinations in the mid-1950s, took time off to have four children, serve as Girl Scout leader and Potato Lady for the Rotary Club lunch ("I have a good recipe but it serves 400"), and wound up in Fort Worth in the late 1960s. She started submitting editorial cartoons to the *Star-Telegram*, and Hulme, as she puts it, "made a nuisance of myself until they agreed to print a few on a freelance basis." By the late 1970s, she was a regular employee and by 1980, she was doing five cartoons a week, which makes Hulme one of the earliest full-time female editorial cartoonists in the history of the medium. She tends to pooh-pooh such distinctions, however, saying, "I've been called an iconoclast and a harmless housewife. I like to keep my options open, so I'm willing to agree to both descriptions." Working in her father's grocery store as a young girl, she got "a pretty good notion of the human condition," she said. "I learned that the customer always thinks he is right and how to cut a pound of cheese (within an ounce)."

—R.C. Harvey