

**Remarks of Peter Baniak**, editor, Lexington Herald-Leader, presenting Lewis Owens Award for Community Service to Publisher Earl Kinner and the Licking Valley Courier, Jan. 25, 2013

It is the Herald-Leader's privilege every year at this convention to present the Lewis E. Owens Award for community service.

It is named after one of our former publishers and a long-time supporter of the KPA who died of Lou Gehrig's Disease in November of 1998. Lewishad been a force in virtually every major civic and charitable organization in the Lexington area.

I have to say it is a special privilege to be able to present this year's award. This year's recipient exemplifies service to community under the most trying of circumstances. Even more than that, I don't think it's overstating things to say that, in a time when our industry continues to face challenges on many fronts, this year's recipient stands as an inspirational example of the power of newspapers.

The power to help a community up from the rubble.

The power to provide vital information to people whose lives literally depended on it.

The power to remind those of us in this room why we got into this business in the first place.

On a Friday last March, the staff of the 100-plus-year-old Licking Valley Courier in West Liberty left the office for the day around 3 o'clock. Owner and publisher Earl Kinner went home to his house across the street. Four hours later, Kinner's house and the paper were gone.

According to news stories at the time, Earl Kinner made it to his basement, and the house fell down around him when the tornado hit.

Many of you no doubt remember seeing the photos of what remained of West Liberty after the tornado – and what little remained of the Licking Valley Courier, too.

Despite the damage, and despite the personal punch the storm delivered, Earl Kinner, who calls himself a "country newspaper man," and his staff had little question about what would happen next.

After Earl was rescued from his basement, he stayed in a shelter. While there, he asked for a notebook and began interviewing fellow tornado survivors, Licking Valley Courier reporter Miranda Cantrell said a few days after the storm. "I wasn't at all surprised to hear he was doing that. He told people, 'my paper's coming back,'" Cantrell said.

Meanwhile, Cantrell started up a Facebook page to keep the people of West Liberty informed and connected, posting funeral information, notices about public meetings, information about what was open and where essential services had temporarily set up shop. The page promised: "The LVC will be there to cover it whenMorgan County rises again!"

Earl Kinner's family first took over the Licking Valley Courier in 1944. He officially assumed responsibilities for the paper himself in 1963, and hasn't stopped – not even for a tornado.

“The only thing I know to do is to just keep chugging doing what I've always done,” Earl Kinner said while accepting an East Kentucky Leadership award recently. “We're trying to build it back. The town needs a newspaper ...”

Those who know Earl Kinner aren't surprised by his determination.

Said Lance Williams, who started out covering high school sports for Earl Kinner and is now the business editor at the Tennessean:

“Earl Kinner has never been the most popular nor profitable man in town – nor has he ever wanted to be. He is one of the last true newspapermen, independent and unafraid to write what needs to be written.

“He is fair but firm, and that approach has earned him the absolute trust of his readers.

“The newspaper industry has been filled with a lot of “woe-is-me” talk recently, but I would challenge anyone to spend a day with Earl Kinner and not walk away feeling energized about what we do.

“For decades, he has written the true living history of West Liberty each week, and given the extraordinary events of March 2, it's clear that his latest chapter is his best yet.”

After the tornado, the Licking Valley Courier published its next edition – with a little help from some colleagues here in the KPA – and it was only one day late. Earl Kinner has said it was the best way to show everyone that West Liberty and the Licking Valley Courier were “still kicking.”

Added Miranda Cantrell just after that edition was published: “It's what we do. It's a calling. It's our life and we want to do our part. And make people realize that what we have here is worth fighting for. People in Morgan County want to build back, better than ever.”

I am proud and honored to present this year's Lewis Owens Award for Community Service to Earl Kinner and the Licking Valley Courier. Here to accept on Earl's behalf are Miranda Cantrell and ad director Rick Adkins.