

Award winner says failing to do good rural journalism tells rural people that they are 'not that important'

By Jennifer P. Brown, opinion editor, Kentucky New Era, Hopkinsville

“Mom, are you on deadline?”

Deadlines are inspirational. That’s a lesson that I learn over and over. It happened again Friday morning as my husband drove us to Richmond for a journalism banquet and I wrote on my laptop. Somewhere near Lexington, I finished an essay on my newspaper career.

The essay was the basis for comments I gave at the banquet, where The Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, based at the University of Kentucky, and the Bluegrass chapter of the Society of Professional Journalism presented its Al Smith Award for community service through rural journalism to me and to Max Heath, a retired executive with the Landmark [Community] Newspapers chain.

The award was generous, and I’ve spent much of the weekend thinking about people who’ve helped me do what I do at the New Era. Here’s what I wrote:

I’m 50 years old this year, and I’ve spent half of my life at one daily newspaper, the Kentucky New Era in Hopkinsville. If you believe in accidents, you’ll understand that I sort of landed in journalism by accident. A college counselor insisted one day that I was required to have a minor to go along with my English major — and the two of us decided journalism was a nice fit. It was as if we were selecting matching drapery and bedspread patterns. English and journalism. “That’s a fine choice,” the counselor told me.

When I interviewed for an internship at the Kentucky New Era, the editor, Cecil Herndon asked me, “Who are your people?” I was certain the answer would be a problem. My father, Dr. Frank Pitzer, a pathologist at the local hospital, was well known as an instigator in Hopkinsville. Cecil hired me anyway.

Reporting in your hometown means you occasionally wade around in your own history. And it’s messy. It is sometimes lonely because you have to write unflattering things about people you know —about your own people even. You have to be careful with friendships, and you have to tell the truth. And then you see the subjects of your stories in the toilet paper aisle at Kroger.

Once, a source for a story threatened to turn her dogs loose on my children as we stood on her front porch. The Todd County jailer kicked me out of his office and said things about me I cannot repeat here. A man who believed in aliens said he was coming to my house with a rifle after I incorrectly reported he was dead.

But those are exceptions. Working for a small independent paper gives a journalist many opportunities if she’s willing to pursue them. I am a generalist. I’ve written stories about murderers, bee charmers, whiskey makers, carnies, governors, generals and homeless people. I’ve flown in a B-17 bomber and Blackhawk and Chinook helicopters. I’ve crawled through caves and walked on rooftops.

I’ve also worked with many excellent journalists. They’ve all taught me something. Often, I learn that we don’t expect enough from people. I mean we don’t expect enough from our own journalists and from the people we cover.

Setting the bar high usually works. I hate to see people at smaller papers accepting crumbs. If you don’t do good journalism at small papers —and doing good journalism includes filing open records requests and complaining when the open meetings law is violated —then you are telling people who live in rural areas that their place in life, in the world, is not that important.

Several years ago, I told someone in my newsroom that I wanted to go to Gander, Newfoundland. It was around the time of the 20th anniversary of the chartered jet crash that killed 248 soldiers from Fort Campbell, Ky. When I mentioned this idea, someone laughed at me, as if it was impossible for a small paper to send a reporter to another country. That day, I wrote a short proposal, and researched the flight schedules. Soon, New Era Publisher Taylor Hayes was short about \$1,000 and I was headed to Gander. Our readers learned things about that tragedy that they never would have understood if the New Era had not believed it’s possible for a small paper to do big things.

I appreciate all of those opportunities and I really appreciate this recognition from the Institute for Rural Journalism and the Society of Professional Journalists — for me and for the Kentucky New Era.

My family is here tonight. Some of you who cover city council meetings and library board hearings will appreciate what they’ve experienced in our home. My husband John is supportive without fail, all of the time. I’m assuming he is rare. My daughter, Renee Kinder, who lives in Lexington, is here, and my son, Christopher Brown, is here from Tulsa with his girlfriend, Taylor Campbell. My daughter is a speech pathologist. My son and his girlfriend are becoming pilots. Renee and Chris are the kids who, growing up, would call from school because they’d forgotten their lunch or a school paper — and they knew that first they should ask, “Mom, are you on deadline?”

My granddaughter, Kathryn Kinder, is here tonight. She came to this dinner and left her three brothers at home because she was voted most likely to enjoy this evening and to allow all of you to enjoy it as well. Kathryn is 4 years old, and I’m really hoping she will remember this night. So, if you’d like to help her make a memory, stop by and say hello to Kathryn before you leave this evening.

Thank you.