



“We are willing to risk making people uncomfortable with the truth”



Jonathan Austin took the unlikely career step of starting a newspaper, the Yancey County News.
BILL SANDERS/WSANDERS@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

SMALL-TOWN journalist takes **BIG-TIME** risk



Jonathan Austin starts newspaper and quickly challenges authority

By Jason Sandford, jsandford@citizen-times.com

BURNSVILLE —

Jonathan Austin, with an armful of newspapers, stood outside the Ingles grocery store here on the night of Jan. 13, 2011, and did his best to attract a little attention.

The snow and ice meant people had little time for distractions, but Austin was offering up something for free — the first edition of his new weekly newspaper, the Yancey County News. And the

issue was a blockbuster.

One of Austin's first news stories detailed a state investigation into allegations of voter fraud in the election just a few months earlier. Thousands of documents had been seized from the offices of the Yancey County Board of Elections by state election officials for review.

Austin's appearance outside the Burnsville grocery store was unusual for another reason. What was a veteran newspaper reporter and editor doing starting

a print newspaper in tough economic times and in a digital age when other publications were struggling with Internet competition? After all, it was the business venture for Austin and his wife, Susan, his single employee.

The Austins persevered, hammering away at the story of alleged voting fraud, as well as wrongdoing in the local sheriff's department. Working 80 or 90 hours

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NEWS: Austin stirs things up in Yancey

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a week, Jonathan kept challenging authority and covering his community, while Susan held down the office.

It paid off earlier this year in the form of two national journalism awards that recognized the hard work and risk the couple faced. The newspaper received the E.W. Scripps Award for Distinguished Service to the First Amendment, beating entries by Bloomberg News, which tracked the billions spent to bail out Wall Street banks, and by OpenSecrets.org, which trailed the role of money in politics.

The Yancey County News was also awarded the Ancil Payne Award for Ethics in Journalism. In their praise, contest judges wrote that taking on “the powers that be in a rural community where citizens are afraid to speak out against local law enforcement is very brave. To stake your livelihood and personal safety on it is above and beyond. This is an extraordinary example of public good.”

In his Main Street office, Austin talks about his newspaper in more down-to-earth terms. His work has simply been “Journalism 101” in a small town where the existing newspaper didn’t make waves. In a self-deprecating manner, he referred to his “pipsqueak paper” and said he’s simply doing what newspapers should always do.

“We are willing to risk making people uncomfortable with the truth, and if you don’t do that, I don’t think you deserve to call yourself a newspaper,” Austin said. “And if the only thing that comes out of all this is winning an award, we will have failed.”

Born and bred

Jonathan and Susan grew up in Asheville. Jonathan Austin graduated from Reynolds High School and attended college but never earned a degree. He started his newspaper career in Alabama and then bounced around, serving stints as a writer, copy editor and news editor at the Hendersonville Times-News, news editor at the Tuscaloosa News and senior editor, books editor and copy editor for CNN.com.

He worked as a writer and editor for the Statesville Record & Landmark for five years before becoming editor at the News Record & Sentinel in Madison County, a weekly newspaper owned by Gannett, the parent company of the Asheville Citizen-Times.

When Austin inherited land from his family and moved to Burnsville, he decided to return to the business he knew and loved — newspaper journalism.

Austin decided to start his own newspaper. He lined up writers to pen columns about hunting and nutrition. He publishes reports about UARA racing and prints school lunch schedules. Austin covers everything from local county commissioner meetings to high school football. He prints obituaries for free — something most newspapers stopped doing years ago — and publishes his 16-page newspaper every Thursday. A single copy costs 50 cents.

Most entrepreneurs would scoff at the idea of starting a newspaper these days. Newspapers and magazines have been cutting costs and laying off employees for the past several years in response to a sluggish economy and the growing popularity of smartphone and tablet technology.

Austin is undeterred. “Not everyone benefits from or has access to technology, especially if you live up a draw on Jack’s Creek,” Austin said, emphasizing his community’s mountainous



Jonathan Austin, along with his wife, Susan, have published the Yancey County News weekly newspaper for about a year and a half, and have already won two national journalism awards. BILL SANDERS/WSANDERS@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

terrain. “I just like the confidence that you’ve got something in print. It’s right here,” he said, “and I think there will be life for community newspapers for many years to come, especially in rural communities.”

The investigation

As Austin documented the state investigation into allegations of voter fraud, he also began reporting on how the second-in-command at the Yancey County Sheriff’s Department was pawing county-owned guns for personal gain.

The chief deputy, Tom Farmer, eventually resigned. Farmer was arrested and charged with felony embezzlement in the theft of a handgun and with willfully failing to discharge his duties. Farmer recently pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor and received a suspended sentence.

State investigators, meanwhile, remained quiet about the voting fraud investigation. But they cooperated when Austin requested copies of the documents they had seized, and he moved forward with his own analysis. Austin discovered disturbing trends — first, that Yancey County recorded 1,800 mail-in absentee ballots in the 2010 election, a startling number for a small county and a number exponentially higher than other, larger Western North Carolina counties.

Austin also noted a large number of absentee ballots were sent in by people who had been charged with various crimes in the county and many of those ballots were witnessed by Sheriff’s Department employees. Some of those voters had their criminal charges dropped or dismissed in later months, Austin’s reporting showed.

Sheriff Gary Banks won by 300 votes in 2010. His father held the office before him, and Banks’ grandfather served as sheriff

before that. In all, a Banks has served as sheriff in Yancey County for 30 years.

Gary Bartlett, director of the N.C. Board of Elections, said the voter fraud investigation continues.

“We’re working with the State Bureau of Investigation on this. We were hoping to have the investigation closed a long time ago,” Bartlett said. “When one door closes, another one opens.”

Charles McCurry, chairman of the Yancey County Board of Elections, said his board is working with a new elections director who started in March.

“We’re just ensuring our i’s are dotted and our t’s are crossed,” McCurry said. “We’re doing everything we can to ensure there is no semblance of election fraud in the county.”

Along the way, Austin said he’s had some advertisers pull out of his newspaper. He said he’s never been directly threatened but has seen examples of indirect intimidation. He said he’s also received support, publicly and privately.

Sharon Morrow, owner of Sharon’s Salon in Burnsville, said she opened her own beauty shop last year and liked working with Susan Austin.

“I really liked her, and I liked the fact that no matter who it was about, they reported the news,” Morrow said. “I just like the fact that they report the news.”

Austin expresses some frustration at the lack of attention.

“If this happened in Asheville, somebody would be doing something about it,” he said. “Hello — elections might be being stolen.”

Regardless, Austin said he’s committed to sticking with his publication, and he’s grateful for the national recognition.

“I didn’t come here to be a rabble-rouser,” he said. “I came here to do a community newspaper.”

BUSINESS PEOPLE

» Palmer Wahl Instrumentation Group, 234 Old Weaverville Road, has added three members to the sales team: **Cheryl Garcia**, **Gary Lux** and **Randy Cutrara**. Garcia has been promoted to manage the north-eastern U.S. territory. Based in Asbury, N.J., she previously worked as a nuclear engineer for GPU Nuclear. Lux is the new vice president of sales and has more than 20 years of experience in avionics engineering and advanced technical sales. Cutrara provided customer service expertise and directed the release of fixed, high temperature, and long distance infrared products in 2012.



Cheryl Garcia



Gary Lux



Randy Cutrara

» **Genie Orr** has joined Champion Credit Union, at 2311 Hendersonville Road, Arden, as the mortgage lending manager. Orr brings more than 21 years of mortgage lending experience to the team. She can be reached at 734-1149.



Genie Orr

» The Givens Estates Inc., a nationally accredited Continuing Care Retirement Community and the largest single-site CCRC in North Carolina, recognized milestone years of service on July 20.

Recognized for five years of service were: **Lisa Garrett**, dining; **Anne White**, nursing; **Katherine Young**, nursing; **Jaime Conley**, financial operations; **Karen Valentine**, dining; **Annette Stephenson**, environmental services; **Cheryl Wallen**, life ministries; **Darrell Sullivan**, programming; **Ellis Griffin**, environmental services; **Tamara Arsenovich**, environmental services; **Kay Cook**, social services/admissions; **Linda Gauntt**, nursing; **Theresa Samuels**, dining; **Loray Samuels**, dining; **Leilani Sides**, dining; **Jonathan Weaver**, technology; **Christine Spencer**, nursing; **Josh Peart**, technology; **Denise Washington**, nursing; **LaVerne Lordman**, dining; **Christian Grunder**, financial operations/HR; **Rodney Peek**, utility maintenance.

10 years: **Otis Suber**, environmental services; **Freda Hayes**, nursing; **Nancy Brunette**, environmental services; **Nikki Smith**, nursing; **Georgia Roberts**, dining; **Linda Waters**, nursing; **Debbie Giddens**, marketing.

15 years: **Keisha Miller**, nursing; **Farah Calloway**, dining; **Bobby Barnes**, dining; **Susan Snell**, social services; **Pamela Noah**, dining.

20 years: **Chip Davis**, dining.

» **Heidi M. Jameson** has been appointed vice president of marketing at Mission Health. An award-winning health care professional, Jameson brings more than 20 years of marketing and communications experience. She started July 9. In her new role, Jameson will use marketing strategies to increase market share, unify brand messaging and spread awareness of services offered at Mission Health.



Heidi Jameson

» **Sulaiman H. Sulaiman** is the new chief information officer and senior vice president at Mission Health. Sulaiman most recently held a similar position with Cleveland Clinic as chief information officer at Sheikh Medical City in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Current CIO **Arlo Jennings** will retire after 25 years.

» The Board of Governors of the N.C. Bar Association elected **Robert H. Haggard**, of The Van Winkle Law Firm, as a new board member. He will serve a three-year term. Haggard, a partner since 1978, concentrates his legal practice in the areas of estate planning and probate law.

From staff reports

HEALTH KUDOS

Crane named director of primary care

ASHEVILLE — Dr. Steven D. Crane has been appointed medical director of primary care at Mission Health.

Crane will direct the Mission Medical Associates Primary Care clinical staff and oversee MMA’s primary care clinical programs. In addition to his new role at Mission Health, Crane will remain active at MAHEC as assistant division director of family medicine and continue to see patients at Pardee Flat Rock Family Health Center.

BRCHS receives pediatric trauma grant

HENDERSONVILLE — Blue Ridge Community Health Services has received a \$30,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Henderson County to provide pediatric trauma counseling for the children of Mainstay clients.

Both organizations are collaborating to provide behavioral health and substance abuse/addiction services to adults. This grant will help strengthen this collaboration and provide much needed counseling services to the youngest victims of domestic abuse.

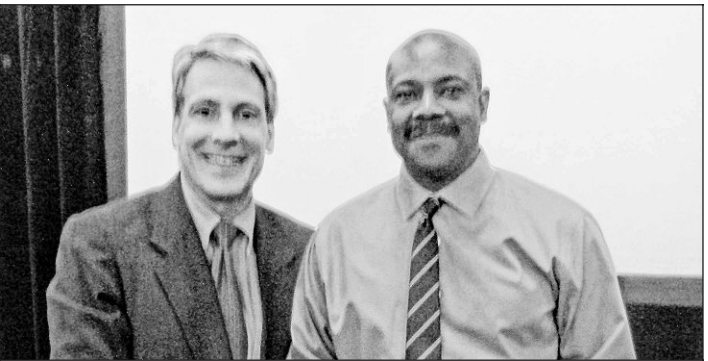
Mainstay domestic violence shelter is committed to helping victims of domestic violence in Henderson County acquire the information and skills necessary to take control over the decisions affecting their lives.

Mission Hospital named 2012 Most Wired

ASHEVILLE — Mission Hospital has been named one of the nation’s Most Wired hospitals,



The Mission Health finance team placed third in Asheville’s Chamber Challenge 5K. Charles Ayscue, senior vice president and chief financial officer of Mission Health, and the finance division named their 5K team “Charles’ Angels.” From left, Francine Hill, Brenda Canter, Cathi Durham and Stephanie Taschereau. SPECIAL TO CITIZEN-TIMES



Dr. Ronald A. Paulus, president and CEO of Mission Health, left, with Jerome Searles, transport tech at Mission Hospital, winner of the Anna Woodfin Award. SPECIAL TO CITIZEN-TIMES/

according to the results of the 2012 Most Wired Survey released in the July issue of Hospitals & Health Networks magazine.

Mission Hospital is one of only eight North Carolina hospitals to achieve this recognition.

The Most Wired recognition is based on technology advancements made by healthcare organizations to enhance patients’ safety, quality and customer satisfaction. For more information,

visit www.hhnmag.com.

Mission honors employees with achievement awards

ASHEVILLE — Mission Hospital recently held its first Service Excellence Achievement Awards ceremony to honor staff members who provide high quality care to its patients.

The Anna Woodfin Award

was presented to Jerome Searles. This annual service award is given to the individual that most exemplifies compassion, drive and tenacity demonstrated at Mission Hospital to take care of the people in WNC.

Winners of Quarterly Service Champion Awards include: Quarter 1, True Morse and Jerome Searles; Quarter 2: Darlene Wexler and Chuck Charles Parris; and Quarter 3: Renee Eggleston, Kerry Crandall and Aleen Dailey.

Quality Team Awards included: Mission Surgical Safety Checklist: Dr. Michael Lecroy, Doug Roberts, Michelle Whittaker, Dr. Peter Mangone, Larry Buckner, Dr. Lemuel Kirby, Marianne Lee, Vicki Arnold, Pat Adamson, Diane Gambrell, Laurann Adams, Donna Peek, Kelly K. Phillips.

Drug Shortage: Brian Nass, MarySue Carson, Dr. Susan Mims, Dr. Alan Johnson, Kelli Kirkpatrick, Dr. James Keel, Dr. Paul Martin, Jon Brown, Tracy Wilson, Ellen Williams, Jill Jones, Jenny Sippel-Tompkins.

Nicholls named head of behavioral services

CLYDE — MedWest-Haywood welcomes psychiatrist John C. Nicholls, MD, JD, as the medical director of Behavioral Health Services, effective July 23.

Nicholls will lead the Behavioral Health Unit, an adult psychiatric inpatient program at MedWest-Haywood where individuals experiencing emotional or behavioral problems that are at crisis levels can receive inpatient care and support.

From staff reports