

Creating a Bold Venture in Community Journalism Education

The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism

Quickening the Heart of Heartland Journalism

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First comes the birth. Then comes the christening to name and to define and to rear the child into the fold.

The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism is a brand new baby. It is the non-profit offspring of a foundation formed by the owners of Consolidated Publishing, Co., publishers of The Anniston Star.

Every naming ritual in human societies has the effect of reaffirmation for the body of people who sponsor the child. So those of us in Alabama behind the Ayers Family Institute are redefining the beating heart of heartland journalism.

We not only propose to teach community journalism. By extension we take on the serious responsibility on behalf of mass media to insert some meaning behind it when we include in the name of this child, "Community Journalism."

There's something really serious and soulful behind that term. And like all deep experiences, this process promises both to reform and to restore how the profession of journalism has come to see itself in hometown papers.

Accessibility, continuity and intimacy are the most important elements in those newspapers readers identify with home. That was an opinion by Anniston Star Chairman and Pub-

lisher H. Brandt Ayers, quoted by The Willits News, a National Newspaper Association and California Newspaper Publishers Association member.

An insightful thread of contemplation within the Ayers Institute about community newspapering is a fresh, bright, new way of looking at our collective life in journalism. Our profession wants and needs such a leadership idea for our collective reinvigoration. The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism may be the little child that grows up to lead.

Practitioners and academics in journalism and mass communications, take note!

Yet who are we in Anniston, Ala., to make such bold declarations?

Few community newspapers have landed on as many lists of quality journals.

The Columbia Journalism Review cited The Star as 30th among all U.S. newspapers in excellence, regardless of size. In fact, however, The Star was one of only two with less than 100,000 circulation on the list. Selection was based on writing and reporting quality, integrity, accuracy and fairness, vision and innovation and influence in community as well as the broader journalistic and public world.

The American Journalism Review featured The Star along with its chairman and publisher, H. Brandt Ayers. Author James V. Risser, in the piece titled “The State of the American Newspaper, Endangered Species,” commented, “Something special is being lost” as the newspaper industry consolidates and the ranks of independent newspapers are thinning. Risser included The Star in his article for surviving when other newspapers lose their community ownership. He quoted from a Star front-page letter by publisher Ayers, declaring to the world, “We’re not for sale – not for \$50 million, not for \$100 million.”

TIME Magazine twice named The Star to its quality newspaper listings. One TIME headline read, "Big Fish in Small Ponds." Publisher Ayers and his wife, Josephine, promptly threw a party and handed employees a can of sardines tied in a bright, red ribbon. The magazine later called The Star one of the best little newspapers no one ever heard of. For publication Ayers said, "We could make more money by putting out a weak newspaper, but that would short-change the people of Anniston and our region. Anyway, who wants to be remembered just for making money."

Dismayed at the decline in shoals of such sardines in journalism, the Anniston publishing family decided to buck the trend of passage into oblivion. The Ayerses and his sister, Elise Ayers Sanguinetti, along with her husband, Phillip, have agreed to an eventual stock transfer in the company inherited from their dad, Harry M. Ayers, whose own father had been publisher in the Northeast Alabama county of Calhoun.

The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism is the late-in-life offspring in a family of newspapers established in 1883 with an antecedent named The Hot Blast. The New South editor Henry Grady prompted the nameplate on a visit to Anniston, called The Model City even then, when he saw the local iron foundries sending sparks into the community night. The hometown imagery, Grady is reported to have said, should also stimulate the paper's editorial leadership.

Newspapers merged and grew and acquired sophistication in Anniston, Ala., as everywhere. By 1912 the new baby of that time was The Anniston Star. To this day, however, a small nameplate of The Daily Hot Blast that started it all still appears on the lower right hand corner of The Star's editorial page.

Quest for *continuity* of the community newspaper tradition inspired the creation of The Ayers Family Institute. As an educational entity, the Institute, along with its supportive foundation, expects to be exempt from state and federal taxes at the death of the owners. Despite the beginning of change in the U.S. Tax Code, such taxation or the fear of it or the life insurance premiums on key members of newspaper families for tax-paying purposes at death has been a stimulus in the decline of local newspaper voices throughout the country.

Another word present at the creation of The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism has been *perpetuity*. The owners not only look back on this history with fondness, they have every expectation of everlasting-ness for the media properties they own. Besides The Star, those include The Daily Home of Talladega, Ala., and the weeklies, The Jacksonville News, The Cleburne News, The St. Clair Times and some other ventures. There's an online division for each publication.

The Institute also models for the whole nation of community newspapers a way toward the same continuity and perpetuity. Preservation of the community voice in every heartland place so accustomed stands out as a democratic ideal. The need for preservation comes at a time when homogenization and pasteurization of the media are far, far along, aided by Federal Communications Commission and congressional IRS legislation and even the human instinct to take the money and run.

The family behind the institute named for the Ayerses has estimated it is foregoing \$50 million to \$100 million by directing the gradual dedication of stock to the foundation. Largely to honor that decision, the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April gave what was only its second industry leadership award to Brandt Ayers.

That ceremony at the ASNE convention in New Orleans underscored what the development of The Ayers Institute will mean for the furtherance of journalism education, a chief goal in the creative purpose.

The Institute's charter will allow numerous educational ventures in extending journalism as a force for a civil society, including global involvement.

The Southern Center for International Studies in Atlanta has agreed to a partnership, resulting in an October conference on international news coverage. Funded by the Knight Newspaper Foundation and others, the site will be Jacksonville State University, a short drive from The Anniston Star. The point will be to gather editors of the global news report picked up by community newspapers and read in the heartland. The program is slated for broadcast on PBS-TV. Location of the program alone will make the Ayers Institute's point that global news is – or at least ought to be – a local story in community newspapers.

The Public Journalism Network, among other potential educational partners, prominently seeks joint projects with The Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism.

The developing relationship with the Journalism Department in the College of Communication & Information Sciences of the University of Alabama clearly draws the most critical interest from community journalism educators.

Institute and University expect to cooperate in the establishment of a graduate program taught in the newspaper headquarters of Consolidated Publishing Co., publishers of The Anniston Star.

We believe our baby is unique. Of course every proud parent thinks that way. Yet we know of no other accredited graduate degree in community journalism offered from a class setting that also is a professional newspaper. The company's daily and weekly siblings and

online division will share in child-rearing. If we ever have a chance to complete the convergence with radio and television, we certainly will.

The University of Alabama is the alma mater of both Elise Sanguinetti and Brandt Ayers, majority shareholders in Consolidated Publishing. The University's journalism department is the significant regional producer of academically trained members of the mass media. Its successful graduate program alumni are prominent in professional and academic journalism – in practice, in research and in teaching.

A conversation with the dean of Communications & Information Sciences, Dr. Culpepper Clark, and the chairman of the journalism department, Dr. Ed Mullins, began more than two years ago. Talks often expanded into three-way communications with attorneys for the University and estate counsel for the Ayers and Sanguinetti families along the way.

For most of the talking, the only known fact was that some formal relationship almost surely would result from a partnership. Questions far outnumbered that one positive assertion.

Would the University own the newspaper? It would not, a fact widely misunderstood by the public even today. The owners preferred a Poynter Institute arrangement of the sort that has kept The St. Petersburg Times independently owned and operated for all these years since the death of its founding editor and publisher. Nelson Poynter's first impulse, we are told, was to bequeath his paper to his alma mater, Yale University. He withdrew from that idea for fear those trustees might one day dispose of the property that he wanted to see retained in a community relationship in perpetuity, our big goal – eternity.

Why was The Ayers Institute for Community Journalism needed? It was conceived as the mediating institution between newspaper and University, the point of creative impact. Since it will seek other partners for other ventures – as in the case of the Southern Center for International Studies – the Institute had multiple reasons to come into being.

Would the educational purpose beckon journalists who already are members of the profession? Without permanently excluding the possibility, the biggest prospect features the establishment of an on-premises graduate school for what are likely to be beginners or near-beginners in journalism.

Would the school function in Anniston or a three-hour drive away in Tuscaloosa, already the site of undergraduate and graduate journalism education? The uniqueness of the project grew from the marriage of a working professional news operation with a high-quality academic program run by an experienced faculty but within a community setting. The problems and issues and opportunities for learning community-based journalism determined the school would locate in Anniston. The discussion settled on the image of newspaper office as a “teaching hospital.” The metaphor is an apt model since the University of Alabama System operates a separate Birmingham university that is so insinuated with a world-class hospital complex as to be inseparable.

The questions and answers leading to the creation of The Ayers Family Institute seem so simple now. Negotiations never approached the protracted nature of talks between Israel and Palestinians. Yet the labor pains for the Institute’s creation were real. Focus on solutions was shaped by the ultimate issue of how to finance a childhood for the new creature. Family bequests eventually will move Consolidated Publishing stock into the supporting foundation for residual, ongoing support. But what happens in the early years?

The breakthrough moment occurred while defining the answers and seeking to finance the start-up. The potential source of initial funds is the Knight Foundation. Dean Clark, Dr. Mullins and I had flown to the Knight offices in Miami to apply for a \$50,000 project-planning grant while continuing our joint discussions. Talks already had been intense with the family members, the lawyers and Ed Fowler, vice-president for operations of Consolidated Publishing, Co.

After greeting Hodding Carter III, Knight's chairman, the three of us moved to a conference with Eric Newton, Knight's grant officer for journalism projects. Newton commented that he had never seen a really successful project emerge between a university and newspaper in a big way like we were proposing. He was impressed we had at least kept the conversation open as long as we had.

High in a downtown office building, we were on eye level with Miami's wintertime visitors – the “snowbirds” that actually were Ohio vultures down for the season. The setting seemed wholly inauspicious as we somewhat crossly raised the by-then familiar issues of who, what, where and how as if our academic discussions reflected the old formula for writing a newspaper story topped with an Associated Press lead.

I couldn't see the point of an academic relationship that didn't make use of the newspaper as campus. My academic discussion partners couldn't at the moment see beyond the successful undergraduate and graduate programs they oversaw in Tuscaloosa. Reflecting on our mutual frustration, Dean Clark said the project shouldn't be so hard to design since the University offered a Master of Fine Arts degree away from its campus at the Alabama State Shakespeare Theater, Montgomery. A division in his own school even let graduate students

in library science earn a master's degree at a University extension center in Gadsden, which is much closer to Anniston than to the University of Alabama campus in Tuscaloosa.

Well, that's it! That's the answer, I said, recognizing the breakthrough moment when the head of the baby crowns.

We'll create something entirely new, I proposed. We'll design a professional graduate program for University faculty to teach in our newspaper office in Anniston on an honors basis with a community journalism curriculum funded by Knight.

The foundation grants officer chimed in that his chairman and board could get really excited about something so one-of-a-kind with the prospect for improving American democracy by showing how to keep smaller, independently operated newspapers alive. The whole room in Miami also agreed journalism education could use some similar enlivening.

The moment was as though the darkly forbidding birds soaring outside the Knight windows had turned into angels.

Not every moment has been sunshine and haloes. The difficulty of conversation between a university community and a professional journalism community is nothing to cheer the soul.

We quickly learned back in Alabama that the partnership talks had occurred overlong without direct participation by Tuscaloosa faculty members who would run the courses and without Anniston editors and managers who would serve as adjunct teachers. They also would oversee the students in their hands-on journalism experience.

We conceived a degree program that would train a community journalist holistically in reporting, writing, editing, photography and design but also in production, marketing, distribution, advertising and business office skills. We wanted our first graduating class to have

the collective skills to go out and start their own new business together. We would need a non-compete clause, I quipped, so they couldn't start another newspaper in Anniston Star territory.

There was no doubt the newspaper employed the talent to impart and that the University faculty had the academic skills to match. What happened next was a large joint meeting in Anniston to lay all the merger issues onto the table and to start an action plan. The result was a set of four joint task forces with co-chairs from university and newspaper company in the topics of curriculum, finance, admissions and instructional issues. After the first general meeting and additional work by the four groups, we met again on campus in Tuscaloosa. By then I was able to say, with a second from Dean Clark, that there was now no longer any doubt that the Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism would cooperate with the University of Alabama in the Anniston graduate school.

The baby was born.

The Columbia Journalism Review printed one of the birth announcements. In its article entitled, "A Big Plan to Stay Small," the Review's Liz Cox described the strategy as keeping Consolidated's newspapers from becoming just an undistinguished link in a long corporate chain. The writer also learned this from the publisher: "The mission for the Ayers Family Institute, Brandy Ayers says, is to diminish the distance between newspapers and the neighborhoods they cover."

The University of Missouri School of Journalism followed by sending its faculty member Judy Bolch to the newspaper for interviews on a book. The Missouri faculty plans a volume on what's right about American journalism, with a chapter devoted to Anniston. Pro-

fessor Bolch, Houston Harte Chair in Journalism, did a live-in visit at Consolidated's airy new \$16 million headquarters for in-depth interviews to be part of the Missouri report.

Before our new baby reaches toddler stage – before the first class of University of Alabama graduate students walks into The Anniston Star newsroom – we have much more talking to do back and forth between journalism professionals and academics. We anticipate drawing upon the whole joint-discipline profession – practitioners and academics – across America to get everyone's input.

The obvious starting point is simply to ask each of us to define what we mean by the term “community journalism.” As with so many words and phrases reduced to jargon by long usage, the exactitude of meaning gets lost.

I once proposed to a vice president of a major mass media conglomerate that ASNE should rename its Small Newspapers Committee and call it the Community Newspaper Committee. Size is not meaningful when some big newspapers are so inferior and some with less circulation look like mice that roar. What ought to matter to the body of professional editors, I proposed, was the bonding relationship between a newspaper and its readership. Together they may form a community that projects a dignity beyond small size.

The corporate executive used the old cultural argument that size does matter. It can't be helped if “small” implies inferior, he said, because after the metro class and medium-sized dailies, all the rest of the papers are at the bottom of the heap. His view.

Besides, he argued, some very big papers in his corporation and others consider themselves community newspapers.

Yes, well, maybe on that. The Wall Street Journal gathers around itself the investor class. But you'd have to look on those readers more as a national interest group poring over

service information and news of record than as a community with much commonality beyond making money. USA Today has amassed a readership actually displaced from community – people like hotel guests, hospital patients, dorm residents and road warriors – an audience more than a community. The New York Times historically covers global capitals better than the five boroughs of its hometown yet can from time to time rise to the level of community newspaper.

The whole nation was forged by the events of 9/11 into a single community. When The Times undertook to write an individualized and stylized obituary with photo of every victim, the meaningful undertaking represented not only community journalism but also the Civic Journalism that is a staple of community papers. The editors of The Times and other major media outlets often decry Public Journalism, as the form also is called, as too activist and participatory to be good journalism.

Despite past opinions about dabbling in the civic arena, The New York Times wisely did not decline any one of its numerous Pulitzer Prizes for 9/11 coverage. The Times stories and photos were soulful and healing and appropriate to the kind of community bonding heart-land newspapers accomplish daily and weekly. The national newspaper from New York accepted its special community role whether or not its editors recognized the act of bonding it had performed in the process.

After growing up in the West, and working in the South and judging the New England Newspaper Association contest this year, I can attest that community newspapering is where you find it. And you can find it in every contour and region of America.

No, size doesn't matter in community newspapering. Nor location. Nor ownership, although the independent voices and personalities of editors and publishers do lift their publi-

cations above mere numbers and regimented, syndicated ownership to embrace readers and sometimes to brace them.

I resigned from my last corporate-owned newspaper on a point of honor. The publisher insisted we win a Pulitzer – or else! We won two. But one was for investigating the deadly 1981 Hyatt Hotel disaster in Kansas City. After the prize ceremony I left for a paper 10 times smaller where the publisher said he was more interested in the welfare of readers than in winning prizes for investigating their disasters.

That paper was The Anniston Star, where the founding statement on the editorial page declares it is the duty of the newspaper to serve as the attorney for the most defenseless of its readers. And now the same culture is giving birth to The Ayers Family Institute and is birthing the discussion of what community journalism really, really means.

I believe we will end up declaring that community journalism is that bonding between reader and newspaper that occurs when a genuine caring relationship replaces the singularity of a publisher's impure profit motive. Every good paper must make money, naturally, to be good. It's the goodness that is the motive and goal rather than profit in the best community newspaper. The proprietor would rather experience community than to become ever richer at the expense of readers either through exploiting them or through cheating them on the quality of publication.

In our academic relationship that new understanding of community journalism makes mass communication into a "helping" or "caring" profession – journalists more like firefighters...police officers...doctors and nurses than like the old understanding of a cross between social historians of current events and business proprietors.

In a speech to the summer Journalism Institute of Jacksonville State University, I told rising young communicators they should survey that campus for its police academy.... its nursing school...its emergency workers training...and its Department of Communications and consider the common purpose.

All the helping professions are first responders to civic threats and emergencies. All function in healing, sometimes with doctoring and sometimes with the scalpel of a surgeon or investigative reporter. All keep local society safe through problem solving and walking the beat like a cop to safeguard the institutions of civil society.

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a fireman and ride the big red truck with the spotted dog like my Uncle Harris, the heroic fire chief of his town. Then I got hit by a car and wanted to be a policeman to stop bad drivers. When I got tonsillitis, I wanted to be a doctor like Dr. Jimmy who made me better. And I always wanted to be a teacher, to improve the lives of others with knowledge.

I'm glad I followed journalism, I told the Jacksonville State audience, because my career allowed me do all those things.

The caring profession of community journalism is healer, rescuer, civil guardian and educator.

The concept percolates through the developing graduate school curriculum at the Ayers Family Institute for Community Journalism.

When a local district attorney went too far in dragging an Anniston Star reporter into serving as witness instead of public observer, we obtained a writ to quash the subpoena. Then we invited the DA to lunch at the paper with the editorial board. We explained why the First Amendment requires an independent distance between journalist and law enforcement for the

sake of credibility. It's an exquisite argument for the communications profession that sees itself on the side of law and order. I looked around the lunch meeting and said to myself that was a room where some journalism grad students should be present. Then they'd learn by seeing, hearing and participating – by osmosis and example – the intricacies of relationships in the journalism of community.

Prominent in our Institute's curriculum is a weekly set of seminars to replicate that community-meets-newspaper atmosphere with ministers, politicians, peace officers, environmentalists, corporate leaders, community activists and the unheralded community leaders who shape any community regardless of election or selection or official title and designation.

We also expect to incorporate the intricacies of community with its successes and tragedies and rewards and problems and even its wonderfully plain, ordinary, everyday life in a core course of community journalism.

While University of Alabama faculty will shoulder the rigorous classroom load for students, their professional journalism partners will oversee hands-on experience like a professor of medicine conducting grand rounds in a teaching hospital.

The question is not whether our Institute has found a marketplace for our idea. We have. The first class will enter our grad school in a year.

The issue isn't whether other heartland newspaper proprietors should follow our lead. Some already are, and more should.

The problem isn't an excess of zeal and idealism on our part. It is whether the rest of mass media can grasp the inspiration for good community life through journalistic vigor.

The potential prize looms magnificently in the future of the civil society of American democracy in the heartland.

For when we preserve and build community newspapering, we create a bond that also builds community.

Sources:

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- Pg. 5* H. Brandt Ayers, chairman and publisher of The Anniston Star, addressing the April, 2003 convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, New Orleans, LA.
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- Pg. 6* “Values of The St. Petersburg Times” by Eugene Patterson, retired chairman and chief executive officer; October, 1988.
- Pg. 7* Interview with founding Poynter Institute president, Robert Haiman, by the author; 2002.
- Pp. 9-10* Memoranda of record at meetings between Consolidated Publishing executives and faculty and deans of the University of Alabama Department of Journalism as reported by Bill Keller, media consultant
- Pg. 10* Columbia Journalism Review “A Big Plan to Stay Small” by Liz Cox, pp. 16-18; May, 2003.
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- Pg. 14* Address by the author to the summer Journalism Institute, Department of Communication, College of Education & Professional Studies, Jacksonville State University; June 19, 2003.

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Report of Curriculum Task Force, co-chairs Dr. Ed Mullins, chairman of the Journalism Department, University of Alabama, and the author, president of The Ayers Institute for Community Journalism.