

# Grim news, and good, as papers go on

Dear Readers,

I've had a hard time putting pen to paper these past months, in the long days filled with change, uncertainty and sometimes chaos at our family of newspapers.

I should have spoken from this space months ago as the transition began to unfold from third generation family ownership to a brand new owner called American Hometown Publishing, Inc. Indeed, I tried many times. My computer hard drive is littered with unfinished thoughts dating all the way back to January 2005 when my brother Michael and I first had our most serious conversation about selling the com-

pany and its three newspapers.

It will come as no surprise to anyone who knows me that I'm behind deadline and struggling to release from my iron

grip any piece of work that falls short of the high standard we set for our newspapers. It's not just the arrangement of

words nor the accurate placement of punctuation that makes a piece finally ready. A story must be fair and accurate. It must be complete in content, too, leaving no unnecessary gaps, answering questions and questioning answers.

With many questions that had no answers, I've been vexed by my writer's block. But the time to overcome has arrived.

After four months since we sold our newspapers, my brother logged his final day here last week and fully embarks on the exploration of new opportunities, including much-treasured time with his children and wife.

I write now as evening falls on a warm Sunday, 123 days since ownership of our newspapers left the hands of the family that had been caretaker of The Coalfield Progress since 1924. It has been just three days since I undertook the painful task of advising seven members of our newspaper family that I was eliminating their positions and laying them off. No one at The Post lost a job. One person was laid off at The Dickenson Star. Six full- and part-time people were laid off at The Coalfield Progress in positions that touch all three newspapers.

Thursday was a particularly sad day. Fundamentally good people were no longer with us. I was touched by the grace and understanding with which most people took this terribly grim news. Their supportive attitudes, even in the face of job loss, made my job all the harder, my heart breaking as I uttered words like "downsizing." For as great as my pain was in having to deliver these messages, it is inconsequential compared to the hurt these people felt and will continue to feel as they work their way through the trying times ahead of them.

## Inside Out

*Jenay Tate*

PUBLISHER AND EDITOR

At close of business on Thursday, we posted notices on the doors of our three papers that we would be opening late on Friday. Those of us who remain — more than 50 full- and part-time employees along with key members of our Nashville team — gathered together for a company-wide meeting that morning.

It was a time of paying respect to those gone as well as recognizing the extraordinary efforts of those who have played key roles in this transition. We talked about the challenges ahead and the need to work together to meet them. Following Thursday's darkness, Friday morning brought good news about better days ahead. The words did not ring hollow as our company president laid out the details of new programs, new revenue opportunities and new financial goals.

Faces that at first looked fearful and gloomy began to brighten as he spoke. Throughout the morning, we witnessed strength and heard expressions of resolve and confidence in tackling the tasks before us.

Since the sale of our newspapers, we have experienced an interesting transition as we have gotten to know our new owners and they have gotten to know us. They like what they see and so do we. It has been hectic and trying at times as we work to adjust. We have mourned the loss of our family-owned business, but have remained diligent and focused on finding our way down this new path.

Despite the layoff, I remain positive and confident that my brother and I made the right choice in selecting American Hometown Publishing as the next caretakers of these important newspapers.

At every point when there has been a test of the commitment of the new owners to the principles outlined in the discussion of a sale, I have not been disappointed. They believe in local content, in local control, in the talented local people who produce these exceptional newspapers each week.

But they also believe in business success and that can not happen without profitability.

Profit, I've learned since my younger days when I thought it to be a dirty word, is the only way to reward employees with better pay and benefits; the only way to reinvest in equipment and other resources we need to thrive and continue to contribute to our communities. What's negative is not profit, but greed that drives financial margins for shareholders without regard for the toll that takes on those who do the work and the work they do.

That's not the way of American Hometown Publishing. It is a distinctly different kind of newspaper company, looking at financial health as the way to protect the long-term interest of our newspapers, the employees who produce them and the readers and the advertisers who depend on them.

Whether our employees realize it or not, each one here influenced my decision to remain with our papers and to join this new band of brothers in community newspapering. And along with them, I was further convinced by Dan Hammond, the company president whose belief in and vision for community newspapers leaves me confident, inspired and challenged.

In my new job as general manager, and retooled position as publisher and editor, I am surrounded by people who work hard and work well, who are committed to our newspapers, our community and our company and who have demonstrated tireless determination and immense patience through extremely difficult times.

Like our new owners, they are solid souls full of conviction and drive. We embark together on a new journey toward a common goal — putting out exceptional newspapers for exceptional communities like ours. ▲