

Norton Press newspapers sold

Mixed emotions as family entrusts to new owners

Three of among Virginia's few remaining family-owned newspapers have been sold.

The Coalfield Progress in Norton, The Post in Big Stone Gap and The Dickenson Star in Clintwood have been purchased by American Hometown Publishing, headquartered in Nashville, Tenn.

Founded in 2003, American Hometown Publishing acquires and manages community newspapers by forming partnerships with local publishers. AHP's concept keeps local publishing partners in place and involved, while strengthening the newspapers by helping them improve their business operations.

The company was created by L. Daniel Hammond, the original founder of American Profile, the newspaper magazine that appears in The Coalfield Progress and The Dickenson Star each week. Preservation of local editorial independence and respect for local relationships between the newspaper staff and the community are the company's stated goals.

The sale opens a new chapter in the history of the newspapers as it also brings to an end three generations of family ownership that began in 1924, shortly after newspaper-

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Michael N. Tate,
president
Norton Press

man Presley Thornton Atkins came over from Kentucky and settled in Norton.



RON SKEBER PHOTO

▲ American Hometown Publishing Chairman L. Daniel Hammond (center) is flanked by Norton Press President Michael N. Tate and sister Jenay Tate, editor and publisher of The Coalfield Progress.

More than 80 years later, having followed in the footsteps of their grandfather and parents Carroll and Robbie Tate, co-owners Jenay Tate and Michael Tate officially announced the sale of The Norton Press, Inc., in meetings with employees on Thursday. Reports of a pending sale have been circulating for months within the coalfield communities served by the three newspapers.

"Obviously, we've got mixed emotions about all this but it's a relief to finally be able to talk about it out in the open," company president Michael Tate said.

"I see this as a great thing for all parties. American Hometown Publishing believes in community journalism and the local people who put out good newspapers. They believe in the relationships between newspapers and communities," Tate said. "And they believe in what our family has always

believed in. They are committed to preserving the integrity and independence of community newspapers."

With tears forming in his eyes, Tate admitted readily, though, "It will be a very sad day for me when I finally walk out of the building, with no key in my hand to get back in."

Following a period of transition, Tate will depart the business and chart new career opportunities locally. Tate will reside in the family home in Norton with wife Paula, his three children and her two children. They are expecting a child in December.

"The reality is, this is the best thing for everybody — especially my family at home and my family of employees at The Norton Press, who have made us who we are."

Tate has agreed to continue writing "The Dope Bucket," the football prognosticating column founded by his father,

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Carroll N. Tate.

Tate said he won't be leaving behind tender memories, but taking them with him, along with a lifetime of treasured personal and professional relationships.

"I would like to thank all the readers and advertisers who have faithfully supported our newspapers. It was a pleasure to serve you and I truly believe through these relationships we have prospered together," he said.

The Tates said it has been an honor to carry on the family's long and proud tradition but that retaining family ownership was not as important a goal in the long run as maintaining quality newspapers produced by a quality company.

While continuing to produce among the best newspapers in Virginia, the company struggled financially.

In the end, the burden of what to do rested with brother and sister.

"Both of us have invested our lives here and we have not come to this decision lightly," said Jenay Tate, who will remain with the newspapers. "I never thought, in a million years, that I could ever be excited about selling our family business. But as this day arrives, I am inspired by the opportunities ahead.

"We couldn't look ourselves in the mirror each morning if we didn't feel absolutely right about this. It's quite extraordinary how the mission of American Hometown Publishing matches our thinking about community newspapering.

"The final leg of this journey — deciding it was time to sell the family business and then actually getting it done — has taken almost a year, and it has been a tough, tough year for all of us," Jenay Tate said.

Mr. Tate said it had been even longer than that since it appeared clear the small company needed greater financial resources if it was to continue producing the kinds of quality newspapers to which readers and advertisers have grown accustomed, and do so as the kind of company both he and his sister had envisioned when they purchased Norton Press in 1998 from their mother Robbie Tate and sister Carol Tate Bryant.

At the same time, personal considerations weighed in the decision. The extraordinary demands of heading up a small business came into increasing conflict with the extraordinary demands of raising children. Michael Tate concluded his young family unequivocally was his first priority.

The Tates concluded another company, the right company, could better serve the interests of employees, readers, advertisers

and the community.

So with all those interests in mind, the Tates set about their search for a new owner. Cribb and Associates represented the family in the sale. Ultimately, the Tates chose American Hometown Publishing as the right company to take up the challenge ahead.

"We were looking for a company that appreciated the value of what we do, where we do it and the people who get it done," Jenay Tate said.

"We wanted a company eager and able to grow, that could see our existing strengths and growth potential," Michael Tate added, "We got that with American Hometown Publishing."

While the two partners admit their fair share of mistakes, they end ownership with a deep sense of pride in what they and their family have accomplished.

"For more than 80 years, our family has provided Wise County with one of the best newspapers in the state and all of the southeast in The Coalfield Progress," Michael Tate said. "The Post has been serving readers for 115 years. The Dickenson Star, which merged with The Cumberland Times, has been reaching readers for nearly 25 years. These all are great papers. It's not just our egos driving that statement. The awards that hang on our walls will tell you that, so will the people throughout our industry."

Jenay Tate said she has always been struck by the reach of the newspapers — in the miles they travel and in how deeply they touch the lives of readers.

She expects none of that to change.

"As part of our newspaper family, The Coalfield Progress, The Post and The Dickenson Star have left not just an impression, but an historic mark on our communities. They have recorded the good and the bad, the happy and the sad, the minute and the milestone moments. They have praised, prodded, poked, pondered and pounded."

She expects none of that to change, either.

"What distinguished American Hometown Publishing was what we found in Dan Hammond, the company president, and the foundation on which he built his new company," she said.

"There is a deeply held belief in the importance of community newspapers, an understanding of the relationships between these newspapers and their communities and a commitment to the preservation of local editorial independence. They see themselves as partners in building stronger papers. That's what our papers need, our readers need, our communities need." ▲