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## Albrecht newspapers sells to American Hometown Publishing

**CLAUDIA JOHNSON**  
claudia@ucbjournal.com

After a 50-year career in community journalism, Joe Albrecht has retired, having sold his publishing network to American Hometown Publishing.

Albrecht served as editor,

publisher and a minority owner of Cookeville's Herald-Citizen from June 1976 until January 1990, but his involvement in the newspaper



Joe Albrecht

industry began in 1953 as a "Little Merchant" newspaper carrier for the Manhattan (KS) Mercury.

"I started in the business at such a young age, by the time I reached an age where you begin thinking about a career, the newspaper industry had

been a part of my life for so many years I never seriously considered another career path," Albrecht said.

In 1990 he and his wife, Connie, purchased the Times Journal and Russell County News in Russell Springs,

SEE **ALBRECHT** PG. 20

**ALBRECHT**  
FROM PAGE 1

Ky. Thereafter, they had a family ownership interest in The Franklin Times in Louisburg, N.C., The Nashville Graphic in Nashville, N.C. and The Roanoke Beacon in Plymouth, NC. Their network also included four Tennessee newspapers: The Macon County Times in Lafayette, the Brownsville States-Graphic, The Covington Leader and the Chester County Independent in Henderson.

Looking back over a half-century career, Albrecht said that the most important thing he has learned is that newspapers have "an awesome responsibility" to the communities they serve.

"They record history, serve as a watchdog, provide a forum for their readers, provide the information readers need to make decisions in their lives, entertain, and so much more," he observed. "The primary point I want to make is the recognition of, and appreciation for, that responsibility."

Albrecht noted that newspapers are facing many of the same problems that other businesses deal with daily, offering as examples dealing with a litigious society, the rising cost of health care, finding quality employees with the needed skills, worker's compensation insurance costs and others.

"Newspapers are losing subscribers every year," he said, adding, however, that some small town newspapers are actually showing gains in subscribers. "Most times, that growth is a result of market growth. The reality is that circulation growth is more difficult to achieve this year than it was 10 years ago. Newspapers with a Web site are

showing significant growth in registered visitors."

Albrecht theorized that this trend is "probably" a precursor to the method of delivery for newspapers in the future.

"Newspapers serving the small towns of America have an advantage over the metropolitan dailies," Albrecht said. "In many small cities and towns, the newspaper is the only viable source of local news coverage. The newspaper creates the content that the citizens desire, and the advertisers are inclined to follow."

The veteran newspaperman was quick to admit that his assessment was "an over simplification" of a more complex issue.

"Large cities have several sources of local news available to the people in their service area," he expounded. "All of those local news sources are also selling the business community on the value of advertising in their product."

Despite concerns throughout the industry of the Internet's impact on traditional media, Albrecht believes that newspapers have "a very bright" future.

"The method of delivery may change over time," he conceded. "It may not always be ink on paper. Newspaper personnel compile and compose the information that is important to the people within their service area. The method of delivering that information will be dictated by the customer over time. The advertisers are buying eyeballs. They will not be that concerned about how they reach those eyeballs."

Doubtless, publishers of newspapers have a great deal of power, requiring what can be a difficult balance

between community influence and the accompanying responsibility.

"Owners must always remember that they are the temporary custodians of a community's voice," Albrecht said. "If they abuse this custodial responsibility for an extended period of time, they will lose their franchise."

He added that there is "no substitute for honesty, integrity and being fair."

"Absent those qualities, a newspaper will lose influence in the community," he said. "On the other hand, if newspaper management embraces those qualities, the influence can have a profound positive impact on the community they serve."

Albrecht is confident about the acquisition of his family-owned newspapers by Nashville-based American Hometown Publishing Inc., a growing network of weekly and small daily community newspapers with a circulation of 25,000 or less. AHP's publishing partners continue local leadership and involvement while receiving financial interest in the growing company.

For example, Albrecht's son, Jay, will continue as publisher of The Covington Leader and group manager of the Brownsville and Henderson papers while Connie Albrecht will remain as manager of the corporate bookkeeping operation in Cookeville. Specific terms of the sale have not been disclosed.

"I will continue my involvement in the community," Albrecht said, adding, "Connie and I have been dedicated to the Cookeville region for over 30 years. That dedication will continue and grow." ■