

Local newspapers are vital to community

Dan McCaffery - September 2022

I'll soon mark my 50th year in journalism.

In the spring of 1973 I graduated from the communication arts program at Lambton College. The two-year program, headed by Geoff Lane and John Murray, trained students for careers in radio, television and newspapers.

From the beginning I had my eyes set on newspapers. After graduation I applied at a number of places, including the Sarnia Gazette weekly.

The publisher, Marceil Saddy, gave me a part-time job in the spring of '73 as a sports columnist and occasional feature writer.

I plugged away at that position but kept looking for a full-time job. I got an interview at the Oakville Beaver (also a weekly) and a community paper in Wallaceburg. The Beaver turned me down. I kept plugging away at the Gazette and was rewarded with a full-time position. Within hours of being hired by Saddy, the Wallaceburg editor called to offer me a reporting job there that I naturally turned down.

Over the next 36 years I worked at both the Gazette and The Observer, covering everything from the prime minister's visit to Sarnia to local fall fairs.

I believe local newspapers are vital to a community. Without them, we don't have coverage of important issues. We don't know what our leaders are up to. More than that, a city loses touch with itself. We end up not really knowing our own community or what's going on in it.

Local papers don't just cover city hall or the board of education. Reporters are at concerts, theatre productions, sporting events, school plays, court proceedings and much, much more.

Unfortunately, newspapers are in full retreat. Over 250 Canadian news outlets folded in the 10 years prior to the pandemic and many more have gone down since. In the United States, more than 360 journals have disappeared since the pandemic began less than three years ago, or an average of about two a week. Among papers that have survived, the reporting staffs have been cut by about half.

We're seeing this locally too. In my time The Observer and the Gazette were here, there and everywhere. Today, many community events across Sarnia-Lambton go largely unnoticed by what's left of the mainstream media.

I don't think many people care about this sad state of affairs. They think the trash found on so-called 'social media' is all they need. Many rely on Facebook for their 'news.'

That's appalling because much of what you find from those sources is nonsense.

The official slogan of the Washington Post, perhaps the greatest surviving newspaper in North America, is 'Democracy Dies in Darkness.' And that's exactly what's happening today.