Journalism, Truth and Healthy Communities

Healthy people, healthy businesses, healthy governments — healthy communities — are all best informed and engaged by independent community journalists who examine school budgets, expose scandals, question practices and politics, scrutinize environmental practices, who champion good and who dare to challenge fear and falsehoods.

The work we do in our newsrooms enhances community life, it exposes mental and social health care problems and brings solutions forward, it relentlessly exposes overspending in our governments, and highlights the great people who live and work all around us. Communities are healthier, more engaged, more resilient and better able to thrive when informed by truth.
A year ago, Carlene Gray suffered a stroke and now every time the 82-year-old tries to climb down the five steps to her yard, it’s a harrowing experience.

The boards wobble beneath her. She clutches the railing in fear and hangs on to whomever is there to help.

“Somebody has to be with her,” said Hope Priola, Gray’s granddaughter. “Getting her down the steps takes two or three people.”

Enter Lily Thibeault, Gray’s great-granddaughter. Lily is 12 and has been saving her allowance — every penny of it — because she knows her great-grandmother needs a ramp and she knows that ramps cost money.
One week later ...
Harry Walker stopped on Route 4 in Auburn to make a left turn onto Lake Shore Drive, bringing home a quart of milk.

The next thing he knew, he was waking up in the hospital with a concussion, eight broken ribs, a broken vertebra, a broken arm, a collapsed lung and bleeding on the brain.

He was 84. Doctors didn’t think he’d survive.

“(From behind, the car) hit me and drove me into oncoming traffic, but I don’t remember anything,” he said.

Amy Liberman stopped on Route 4 to make a left turn onto Lake Shore Drive while driving with her mother, her 5-year-old daughter, Danika DeMayo, and her eldest daughter’s boyfriend. They had time before meeting family for dinner, so Liberman decided to drive around Lake Auburn. Danika loved the water.
After decades of silence, the women of St. Joseph’s Orphanage in Lewiston talked about the physical abuse and emotional trauma inflicted in the 1960s, and about finding peace.

Each of the women we talked with had endured a lifetime of fear in silence, and the details of their years at the orphanage were so brutal we published an editor’s note at the top of the story warning our readers the story contained descriptions of disturbing events.

In the end, we heard from people that it helped them to know they were not alone.
When the Portland Press Herald recognized the number of complaints about inaccurate Central Maine Power bills was escalating, two reporters were assigned to investigate, and started by assembling a database of complaints culled from the Public Utilities Commission and the Public Advocate’s offices. They also scraped LinkedIn, Facebook, Google, internal CMP newsletters and news reports on promotions, new hires, retirements, etc. about former CMP employees.

From that research emerged a picture of a company in the throes of chaos and disarray. The documents showed that CMP had cut corners on testing and training of its new billing system, that it misled the public in downplaying the severity and scale of the billing errors, and dodged responsibility.

Through the complaints lodged with public agencies and a Facebook group of angry at CMP customers, reporters reached dozens of people whose compelling and sometimes tragic stories gave the story its human face and heart.

Several state investigations continue today.
Isaiah Washington is an entrepreneurial teen who built a forge in his backyard and started crafting custom knives.

On the day that story ran in the Sun Journal, the city of Auburn shut him down because his home wasn’t zoned for blacksmithing.

Two months later, he was back in business after people in the community helped him find a new location.
BIDDEFORD, Maine — The mayor worries for his city because the local newspaper, the Journal Tribune, ended its 135-year run Saturday. The superintendent of the schools isn’t sure how he will tell the community what’s happening inside its classrooms. The head of the local food pantry is in mourning; he turned to the paper when his organization was about to be kicked out of its building.

The three city leaders are distressed. That said, none of them was subscribing to the paper when it published its last issue.
Journalism is the window to the soul of the citizenry.

— Eric Stout, Records Officer and Freedom of Access Act Support Maine Department of Administrative and Financial Services Office of Information Technology