

# grassroots editor



*A journal  
for newspeople*

**Published by the  
International Society  
of Weekly Newspaper Editors**

## 2003 Golden Quill & Golden Dozen Awards



Editorial skills and courage exemplified by winners  
of the ISWNE contest

**and the**

## **The 28th Annual Gene Cervi Award**

**volume 44, no. 2 • summer 2003**

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# 2003 Golden Quill contest and Eugene Cervi award

The 2003 winner of ISWNE's Golden Quill contest is only 26 years old. Jeremy Waltner, news editor of the *Freeman (S.D.) Courier*, was among 74 people who entered the editorial writing contest this year. ISWNE received 144 entries, up from 113 in 2002.

The 12 best entries are gathered together as the Golden Dozen. The summer issue of *Grassroots Editor* traditionally contains these editorials along with comments from the judge. It is an opportunity to see the quality of commentary in the weekly press. Although the Golden Quill recognizes North America's best non-daily opinion writing, an Irishman (Declan Varley) is among this year's winners.

The *Freeman Courier* has developed a penchant for superb editorial writing. Waltner won his first Golden Dozen award in 2001. His father, Tim Waltner, publisher of the *Freeman Courier*, won Golden Dozen awards in 1994, 2000, 2001, and 2002.

One of the co-winners of this year's Eugene Cervi Award is also a former Golden Quill winner. Gary Sosniecki won the award in 1998 as publisher of the *Webster County Citizen* in Seymour, Mo. Gary and his wife, Helen, are the recipients of the 2003 Cervi Award.

ISWNE is dedicated to encouraging and promoting high standards of editorial writing and to facilitating the exchange of ideas. These awards, we believe, serve those purposes.

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# Golden Quill Winners

## 1961-2003

- 1961 Hal De Cell**  
*Deer Creek Pilot, Rolling Fork, Miss.*
- 1962 Don Pease**  
*Oberlin (Ohio) News Tribune*
- 1963 Hazel Brannon Smith**  
*Lexington (Miss.) Advertiser*
- 1964 Mrs. R.M.B. Hicks**  
*Dallas (Pa.) Post*
- 1965 Robert E. Fisher**  
*Crossett (Ark.) News Observer*
- 1966 Owen J. McNamara**  
*Brookline (Mass.) Chronicle-Citizen*
- 1967 Alvin J. Remmenga**  
*Cloverdale (Calif.) Reveille*
- 1968 Henry H. Null IV**  
*The Abington Journal, Clarks Summit, Pa.*
- 1969 Dan Hicks Jr.**  
*Monroe County Democrat, Madisonville, Tenn.*
- 1970 Richard Taylor**  
*Kennett News & Advertiser,  
Kennett Square, Pa.*
- 1971 Edward DeCourcy**  
*Newport (N.H.) Argus Champion*
- 1972 C. Peter Jorgenson**  
*The Advocate, Arlington, Mass.*
- 1973 Robert Estabrook**  
*Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*
- 1974 Phil McLaughlin**  
*The Miami Republican, Paola, Kan.*
- 1975 Betsy Cox**  
*The Madison County Newsweek,  
Richmond, Ky.*
- 1976 Peter Bodley**  
*Coon Rapids Herald, Anoka, Minn.*
- 1977 Rodney A. Smith**  
*Gretna (Va.) Gazette*
- 1978 Robert Estabrook**  
*Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*
- 1979 R. W. van de Velde**  
*The Valley Voice, Middlebury, Vt.*
- 1980 Garrett Ray**  
*Independent Newspapers, Littleton, Colo.*
- 1981 Janelou Buck**  
*Sebring (Fla.) News*
- 1982 Albert Scardino**  
*The Georgia Gazette, Savannah, Ga.*
- 1983 Francis C. Zanger**  
*Bellows Falls (Vt.) News-Review*
- 1984 John McCall**  
*The SandPaper, Ocean City, N.J.*
- 1985 William F. Schanen III**  
*Ozaukee Press, Port Washington, Wis.*
- 1986 Henry G. Gay**  
*Shelton-Mason County Journal,  
Shelton, Wash.*
- 1987 Ellen L. Albanese**  
*The Country Gazette, Franklin, Mass.*
- 1988 Michael G. Lacey**  
*The New Times, Phoenix, Ariz.*
- 1989 Tim Redmond**  
*Bay Guardian, San Francisco, Calif.*
- 1990 Bill Lueders**  
*Isthmus, Madison, Wis.*
- 1991 Stuart Taylor Jr.**  
*Legal Times, Washington, D.C.*
- 1992 Hope Aldrich**  
*The Santa Fe (N.M.) Reporter*
- 1993 Michael D. Myers**  
*Granite City (Ill.) Press-Record*
- 1994 Jim MacNeill**  
*The Eastern Graphic, Montague, PEI, Canada*
- 1995 Brian J. Hunhoff**  
*The Missouri Valley Observer, Yankton, S.D.*
- 1996 Patricia Calhoun**  
*Denver Westword, Denver, Colo.*
- 1997 Tim Giago**  
*Indian Country Today, Rapid City, S.D.*
- 1998 Gary Sosniecki**  
*Webster County Citizen, Seymour, Mo.*
- 1999 Jeff McMahan**  
*New Times, San Luis Obispo, Calif.*
- 2000 Jeff McMahan**  
*New Times, San Luis Obispo, Calif.*
- 2001 William F. Schanen III**  
*Ozaukee Press, Port Washington, Wis.*
- 2002 Paul MacNeill**  
*The Eastern Graphic, Montague, PEI, Canada*
- 2003 Jeremy Waltner**  
*Freeman Courier, Freeman, S.D.*

# The judge's comments

By Ray Laakaniemi

I am one of those who thinks the editorial page is the heart of a strong newspaper. Not everyone reads the editorial page, but the movers and shakers do, and that is justification enough.

If one view of a newspaper is that it is a community talking to and with itself, someone has to start the conversation. While they may not say it, readers expect a newspaper to help them sort through the issues and give them some help. In today's world, especially with many people working out of town, the reader cannot always be in touch with the people who make local decisions. The editorial should bring those opinions to us.

But what is a good editorial? I was looking for strong stands on relevant issues, for writing which brought the pieces to a higher level, and for strong opinions. I did not expect to agree with all of the opinions, but I was looking for work, which brought problems to light in a way, which made you think.

We do not expect the vitriol or invective practiced a hundred or more years ago in a newspaper. Society has changed. But people still need guidance and they will appreciate a well-

reasoned discussion of issues, which concern them.

I was very pleased with the overall quality of editorials presented. Anyone who thinks papers do not present cogent arguments and take a stand should read the entries I did. Newspapers in the countries represented did a fine job.

I like to break news categories down into PERSIA — political, economic, religious, social, intellectual and artistic. Not all of these categories apply every week in every community, but if you limit yourself to commenting on the council or school board, you are missing many quality of life issues people want to talk about.

And there is nothing more satisfying than writing an editorial about a local issue BEFORE it becomes street talk, in other words, anticipating the needs of the community and bringing up subjects which have not yet been acted on by official boards.

Those of you who were in Joplin last summer can remember Ken Starck telling us how he went through the editorials several times before he could separate the best in his own mind. Likewise, I started with 144, and had to make several cuts to get down to the Golden Dozen. I am sure there could have been several winners

selected from say, the final 30 entrants. They were that close, and I am sure next year's judge will have the same problems.

What I did to make my final selection was read all 12 finalists again, for perhaps a third or fourth time. Then I went on to other things for several days and let my mind sort out the ones I remembered the best.

That is what brought me to the winner. The topic is not new — drunk driving. But the passion of the writer, the style in which the victim's name is repeated over and over, and the hammering home of a theme made me remember this one more than the others.

A few general comments. Some of the writers were more formal than might be needed. Write your editorial as if you were telling it to any one person, and bring in the familiar and the personal. Details and specifics to back up your opinions would help in many cases. The reader wants your opinion but also wants the facts you base it on.

Read the editorials presented here. The issues vary, the approaches vary, but at the heart of all of them is an editor or writer who cares about his or her community and takes extra steps and effort to get readers to think. There can be no higher calling in journalism.

## About the judge

When Ray Laakaniemi had a letter to the editor published in *My Weekly Reader* when he was 10, that was an omen.

When he applied for a job as a reporter on the hometown twice-weekly at 13 (and didn't get it), the die was cast. He has since spent all of his life in and around newspapers.

His first job after college (Michigan) was at a weekly in Ohio, selling ads in addition to reporting and editing, for a grand total of \$56.25 take home a week, usually for 70-hour weeks.

He may be best known for his *Weekly Writer's Handbook*, a guide for those without J-school training, which has sold more than 4,600 copies. It is being revised and the third edition should be out again shortly. He is also the author of *Newswriting in Transition* by Wadsworth, and has spoken in some 25 states on writing and weeklies.

For the last three years he has been retired after 22 years teaching at Bowling Green State University. His

teaching was enhanced by weekend work at *The Toledo Blade*, and two sabbaticals, one on the desk at *Stars and Stripes* in Tokyo and the second teaching public relations at Tartu University in the newly free Republic of Estonia. While there, he gave eight hours of lectures in the small town in Finland his grandfather had left exactly 100 years before to find work in the copper mines of Upper Michigan.

Running a close second to his passion for newspapers is his family's passion for travel. In addition to Japan and Estonia, he and his wife spent six summers with a foreign study group in Graz, Austria. He has been in all 50 states and about 35 countries.

His wife Karen is a certified nurse midwife in Ligonier and Kendallville, Indiana, and his son Brian was graduated in May from Case Western Reserve College of Medicine in Cleveland. He is doing a surgical residency at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.



Ray Laakaniemi

# Golden Quill Winner



**Jeremy Waltner**

**News Editor,  
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**February, 6, 2002**

## Act in memory of Nicole Sikkink

**T**he tragedy that struck this community June 3 in which a young person was killed and another sentenced to prison in connection with her death won't soon be forgotten. Not by a long shot.

The grim, troublesome details surrounding the accident, some of which remain unclear, make it one of the most tragic stories in this community's history.

But perhaps now, in the wake of last week's sentencing in which Jason Mehlhaff was sentenced to 12 years in the state penitentiary, five of those years suspended, the healing process can truly begin.

In memory of Nicole Sikkink, it must.

We'll save judgment on the sentencing, other than saying Hutchinson County Judge Lee Anderson outlined very well his reasoning for giving Mehlhaff the sentence he did.

Instead, we'll simply offer our hope that the lessons learned from what happened on June 3 will transcend months, years, decades, generations.

There are many, many lessons that can be taken from this tragic story, none more valuable, perhaps, than the one that's been stated time and time again.

We'll say it again.

Do not, under any circumstances, drink and drive.

We've seen the effects.

This community has had its fill of alcohol-related tragedies involving teens in recent years: Two.

In 1999, four teens were headed back to an early-morning party when the car they were driving in careened off the road and into a heavily wooded area known to many as "the gulches." All were lucky. Nobody was killed, although two were seriously injured.

Hopes that a lesson would be learned were wiped out on June 3 of last year.

We hope it's learned now. If you must drink and must go somewhere, have a designated driver. It's encouraging to see drunk driving statistics down in recent years, which is probably due to an aggressive campaign to curb the problem.

Let's keep that momentum.

Please, in memory of Nicole Sikkink, don't drink and drive.

And forgive.

Judge Lee Anderson may have said it best at last week's sentencing: "Holding anger and holding a grudge and not forgiving...it has no effect on the other person but it tears apart the person who's holding it."

Anderson is absolutely correct and we all could do well to heed that advice.

As difficult as it may be, forgiveness is an essential part of the healing process.

In memory of Nicole Sikkink, we must forgive and move on.

Don't take anything for granted.

Relationships of all kinds — whether it's family or friends — are too easily and too often taken for granted. We get comfortable and forget their precious nature. We become complacent in our day-to-day lives.

Unfortunately, sometimes it takes a tragedy like the loss of a loved one to remind us of the importance of our relationships at home, at work, at school.

In memory of Nicole Sikkink, embrace, nurture and appreciate the relationships in your lives.

The tragic story of June 3 is laced with endless angles and valuable lessons and for years will be remembered and talked about within the walls of this closely-knit community ... and beyond.

That's a good thing if it's remembered for the right reasons.

It would do Nicole Sikkink far more justice if the events of June 3 are remembered for the lessons learned rather than simply as a tragic car accident that suddenly took her life and dramatically changed the life of another.

We believe Jason Mehlhaff has already embraced some of those lessons.

"Nobody should have to go through this," he said in court last week. "I promise nothing like this will ever happen again."

We all must have the same attitude that Mehlhaff has taken.

We must, in memory of her.

**FROM THE JUDGE**

This work stands out because of its passion, its care, and its writing quality.

All too briefly, the story is this. A young girl dies in a car accident, a young man is sentenced to 12 years in the state penitentiary, five years suspended. All of this, we assume, was duly reported.

What now? Is reporting the story enough? No.

The writer leads us through the healing process, through the alcohol-related aspect, and into forgiving and moving on. A community must heal itself, and this work will help.

Repeating the phrase “in memory of Nicole Sikkink” is bound to stick in the minds of the reader.

It made this an editorial I could not forget, even weeks after I read it the first time.

## *An explanation from the winner*

I was eating breakfast with some friends the Sunday morning I heard Nicole Sikkink had died in a car accident just eight hours earlier.

On most occasions I'm the one who responds to such things — accidents, fires and other emergencies — but I was out of town when Freeman teenagers Nicole Sikkink and Jason Mehlhaff left that drinking party at Silver Lake near Freeman early that June morning.

I was out of town when Jason missed that curve on that gravel road that winds around the lake near Freeman, his car flipping into the water and landing upside-down.

I was out of town when Jason escaped but couldn't pull Nicole from the passenger seat.

I was out of town when a panicked Jason met some friends as he ran back to the party and left the scene — at the advice of his friends — only to be picked up by police officers several hours later.

I was out of town when Nicole Sikkink drowned.

But when I heard, the news hit me like a fist to the jaw.

I had seen Nicole the afternoon before, working at her job behind the counter in a local convenience store. I think she sold me a slice of pizza.

She bubbled like she always did, and as I walked out the door I vividly recall looking back at her and taking note of her million dollar smile greet the customer next in line.

That was Nicole.

Everyone who knew her knew that smile, that upbeat attitude, that unmistakable fervor.

That's why her sudden, tragic death and the painful details surrounding it were so very difficult for the Freeman community to grasp.

When that final breath of life left that 18-year-old, a breath went out of Freeman, as well.

But time has a way of healing.

And time is exactly what allowed me to write the editorial called “Act in memory of Nicole Sikkink” eight months after she died.

It was written as both a tribute to her and as a way to bring closure to what had been a painfully difficult story for everyone in our closely-knit community to absorb.

And I must admit a part of me penned it — the first draft was actually scribbled on notebook paper during an early-morning hour in which sleep was hard to come by — as a way to deal with my own grieving.

Nicole's death affected me greatly, and as the story and aftermath unfolded it became more and more difficult to deal with.

Mental strength is the only thing that allowed me to stay focused and true to the journalism trade — fair, unbiased reporting.

Still, I was angry, and the questions that I asked for months — questions we all asked over and over again — fueled the editorial that would come later.

Why did Nicole ask Jason for a ride home from that Silver Lake party?

Why did Jason's car miss that curve and end up in Silver Lake?

Why was Jason able to free himself but unable to get Nicole out of the car?

Why didn't Jason's friends, upon seeing him running from the scene, go to help Nicole immediately instead of leaving for town?

Why weren't EMTs able to revive her?

Why does underage drinking continue to be such a problem?

Why?

At Nicole's funeral I sat next to the Freeman Public School Superintendent. I recall glancing in his direction at one point and noting the grimace on his face. It must have looked identical to mine.

At Jason's trial I remember sitting across the aisle from both the Sikkink family and the Mehlhaff family. Their outward sobs as Jason was convicted of vehicular homicide must have felt like my inward ones.

At Jason's sentencing I shook as I grieved again, this time watching the 19-year-old stand in front of the judge and cry his eyes out as he apologized over and over again — to the judge, the Sikkinks, to himself.

And I distinctly remember the judge's words: “My sentence will be fair and it will be harsh.”

And with that, the case closed.

But it wasn't over.

A final word needed to be said. Perspective needed to be gained. Closure needed to be achieved.

The night Jason was sentenced to seven years in the South Dakota State Penitentiary I began writing my editorial.

It came easy.

In a strange way it had been written in the months prior, as I worked through the pain and the anger and the sadness of the tragedy — just like everyone else.

When emotions run high, an impassioned editorial is fairly simple to write and a call to action is easy to find. And that, of course, is what editorial writing is all about. And by offering perspective and presenting a challenge, an editorial can help individuals, families and a community like Freeman heal and move on, as well.

In this case, it was what all of us needed.



**Scott Frank**

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**March 20, 2002**

**FROM THE JUDGE**

**The teacher's union survey, 500 of 685 members responding, gave the superintendent F's on leadership, seeking input, communication and leadership. The school board got Ds for accessibility and supporting reasonable salaries and benefits, an F for valuing employee opinion and an F for leadership.**

**The board agreed to meet with the teachers but not to discuss the survey. This was followed by the teachers issuing a no confidence vote, 92 percent approving.**

**The editorial discusses what happens after this bloodletting, apparently. In the writer's words, "the board has missed its opportunity to prevent a problem from becoming an emergency, (and must) prevent the emergency from becoming a crisis."**

**The specifics are good, the evidence is damaging, and the call to action is clear.**

# School board needs to take leadership role

**A**merican writer Arnold Glasgow said, "One of the tests of leadership is the ability to recognize a problem before it becomes an emergency."

It is disappointingly clear that the Marysville School Board has failed that test, allowing its inaction to widen the chasm which exists between the district's teachers and staff members. The board has missed its opportunity to prevent a problem from becoming an emergency. For the sake of the district and its students, the board must not miss its opportunity to prevent the emergency from becoming a crisis.

The board has been given ample notification of the teachers' growing discontent and the administration's unwillingness to acknowledge or address it.

In early February the Marysville Education Association, the union which represents the district's teachers, surveyed its 685 members. The result from the 500 returned surveys was a report card filled with failing grades that no student would want to take home to his or her parents.

District Superintendent Linda Whitehead was given straight Fs. For "Values staff opinion" an F; for "Communicates effectively" an F; for "Can lead the school district" an F; and for "Seeks employees' input on policy" an F.

The school board did not fare any better. For "is accessible" a D; for "Values employees' opinions" an F; for "Supports reasonable salaries and benefits for employees" a D; and for "Can lead the school district" an F.

What's even more disturbing than the failing grades is the administration's response to them.

After the survey results were tallied, the MEA requested a meeting with the district's administration to discuss them but were rebuffed. The district did offer to meet with the MEA regarding "morale and other issues," but it refused to specifically discuss the survey and its results. Why? What detrimental effects could have possibly come from the administration and MEA simply discussing the survey and its results?

Feeling they had no other options, on March 12 the MEA and its members held a no-confidence vote for the school board and superintendent. And again, the results left no doubt as to the severity of the problem and the depth of the teachers' dissatisfaction.

More than 92 percent of MEA members who sub-

mitted a ballot, cast a vote of no confidence. Nine out of every 10 voters said they did not believe that the board or the superintendent have what it takes to lead the district. How much more serious does the emergency have to get before the board decides to take action? Will it take a unanimous no-confidence vote of the teachers before the board intervenes?

The board has steadfastly supported the superintendent saying they agree with her vision for the district's future. But does the board actually believe that without the support, cooperation and commitment of the teachers and other staff members that the superintendent's vision will ever come to fruition?

Ultimately, the people who will suffer most, from the district's ongoing turmoil are the students.

It is understandable that despite, their personal and professional commitment to Marysville's children, some of the district's teachers may tire of the discontent and move to other school districts — districts in which they feel valued by their leadership. In addition, does the district administration or board really believe that it can attract the best and brightest teachers to fill vacancies given the current climate?

Some of the administration's recent actions indicate that they are, in fact, aware of the lack of trust and confidence. For example, the recent decision to pay a private investigator \$160 an hour to look into the athletics program. While we strongly support the decision to investigate recent allegations — all allegations involving students, no matter how small they may seem, must be thoroughly investigated, we do not believe that the administration would have found it necessary to pay an outside investigator if the administration had the credibility, trust and respect of the teachers and the community.

The current emergency is only going to get worse unless immediate and tangible action is taken.

Mark Twain once said, "In the first place God made idiots. That was for practice. Then he made school boards."

We hope that in the upcoming days and weeks, the Marysville School Board will take the necessary steps and prove Mr. Twain wrong. The board must not only take action to prevent the current emergency from becoming a crisis, it must take action to repair the damage already done to ensure that the administration and the district's teachers can truly work together to provide the very best for the district's students.

# Choose right path

**T**he Shelton School District, now revisiting drug policies, can take either of two paths in its effort to curb use of illegal substances. One route, a quick fix, purports to catch abusers but is flawed, violates rights and creates an ugly atmosphere for schoolchildren. The other course is educating and respecting kids in a never-ending battle against drugs and alcohol that has been waged for generations. The task force studying the issue, and the school board, should choose the latter avenue.

The school board has asked the task force to consider various strategies, including testing students for drugs, bringing drug dogs onto campus and hiring an undercover police officer to work in schools. All three of those "solutions" are fraught with problems.

Perhaps school officials have been emboldened a bit by this summer's 5-4 U.S. Supreme Court ruling allowing schools to require drug tests for those in extracurricular activities. But just because that court says a practice is legal doesn't make it best for our children, nor does it mean that suspicionless drug testing conforms with our state constitution, which has stricter privacy protections than the U.S. Constitution. In fact, the American Civil Liberties Union is suing the Wahkiakum School District, which has instituted a drug-testing program, because case law shows that it's unconstitutional in this state for public schools to search a student without individualized suspicion that he's breaking the law or a school rule.

No matter what Clarence Thomas and four colleagues say, Shelton can still recognize that drug testing is a violation of the Fourth Amendment's protection against unreasonable searches. "Securing order in the school environment sometimes requires that students be subjected to greater controls than those appropriate for adults," Thomas wrote. He seems to say that 16-year-olds aren't protected by the Fourth Amendment. But we don't need to take away more rights in another War on Something.

Beyond the legal arguments, drug testing would create a frightening atmosphere at school. There would be unintended consequences for innocent individuals caught up in the net thrown to catch druggies. Drug tests treat everyone like a suspect. Students are put in a position of proving their innocence. This is like strip-searching a group of students when \$5 is missing or putting up a roadblock to find drunk drivers. The specifics are not pleasant but degrading: Students have to take off enough clothes to prove they're not hiding a container of someone else's urine and then urinate in close proximity to an official. They also have to make sure they can urinate on cue; in Wahkiakum's case, students who can't produce are assumed to be drug users. If you're out with the flu on test day, does that mean you're a drug user afraid of the test?

There would be students who would freak over having to give a sample this way. Others would quit the team or the activity over the principle of the thing. It doesn't help a school desiring strong teams and clubs to have those people abandoning the volleyball team to play club ball or leaving the band to play in a symphony that doesn't test its trumpet players. A child who unwittingly ate a food causing a positive test could be traumatized.

Not that this could happen in Shelton, but what if

twin distance-running phenoms decided they were going to train with a private coach instead of turn out for the cross-country team? The rumormongers would hold that they were drug users. Lance Armstrong is dogged by detractors as a drug user even though he takes tests and passes them. How would our distance runners avoid suspicion?

You've been through adolescence and know how it grates on kids to be accused when a charge has no basis in fact. Instead of reasoning with children to encourage them to make good choices, a testing program disrespects them, invades their privacy and uses scare tactics. That hardly would make them trust and confide in adults; they would probably regard adults as the enemy.

If we assume that kids involved in sports, drama and French Club are less likely to use drugs than noninvolved students, a testing policy hammers a group with relatively fewer users and ignores the rest of the population. So it is inconsistent in not even addressing the highest-risk group. If activities are a good influence on kids, drug tests boot the kid who experimented with marijuana out of the character-building activity so he can walk the streets. As Ruth Bader Ginsberg wrote in a dissenting opinion in the Supreme Court this summer, "The particular testing program upheld today is not reasonable. It is capricious, even perverse: It targets for testing a student population least likely to be at risk for illicit drugs."

Many in this nation do not comprehend or appreciate the Bill of Rights. Drug testing only exacerbates that situation of sheep not understanding the rights that make this country unique. And a lot of parents who support drug testing, we're afraid, don't care about privacy or civil liberties in the first place and shirk their parenting duties. They willingly give up their privacy to corporations that mine them for personal information, and they believe schools are the place to teach sex education and drug education and to police social ills. Drug testing just spends more education money on nonacademics.

An undercover cop posing as a student is another bad idea. An institution trying to teach honesty and truth would go into the deception business. If you weren't the cop but were a newcomer at school, you would be under suspicion as a narc. Students would lose a measure of their freedom of speech and association if they could never talk to acquaintances on campus or hang out with them without fearing surveillance because someone they're associated with is suspected. This cop could start a sting operation, the questionable practice of doing something illegal to try to get someone to do something illegal. And an arrest by a cop can give a kid a felony record as opposed to intervention by school authorities who can use discretion in how a drug find is handled.

Finally, we thought the drug-dog idea was settled last year when the police chief told the school board it was impractical because every "hit" on a locker or backpack required a separate time-consuming search warrant.

Shelton schools need to address drug abuse with education and intervention, but harsh end-justifies-the-means policies resulting from frustration with drug problems only trample constitutional rights and innocent lives. What's next, a mandatory drug test just to be able to attend a public school?



**Charles Gay**

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Journal**

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**November 7, 2002**

## **FROM THE JUDGE**

**What is the proper way to react to the possibility of drugs in a school? Test all of the students? Bring drug-sniffing dogs onto campus? Hire an undercover officer to work in the schools?**

**This editorial rejects all of those possibilities, with clear and compelling reasons.**

**The writer says drug testing would create a frightening atmosphere and students would be put in the uncomfortable position of proving their innocence. And if students dropped out of their regular after-school activities, "the rumormongers would hold that they were drug users."**

**There is another course of action — drug education while respecting the individual's rights.**



**Rick Johnson**

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December, 4, 2002

**FROM THE JUDGE**

**This is an innovative and effective way to get people to think about what the U.S. calls welfare, what Canadians call social assistance.**

**The writer takes us through a week in which he/she tried to live on what social assistance recipients get — \$20 a week. Dare I say it, \$20 Canadian?**

**Starting with glorious ideas and memories of Mother saying “waste not, want not,” the week quickly hits reality when the writer cannot “just grab whatever I wanted, whenever I felt like it.”**

**Although the writer did sleep better without late night snacks, there was no cheering at the end of the week. Only the realization that there is a problem, and hunger is here, there and everywhere.**

# The real poverty challenge not about welfare rates

**F**the Winnipeg Harvest Poverty Challenge and “lived” on what social assistance recipients get for food and entertainment for a week — \$20.

It was a great learning experience, but not something anyone should have to accept as a way of life. Waking up in the morning hungry, leaving every meal hungry, and going to bed hungry is no way to live.

On the up side, I slept better almost immediately. I think my body enjoyed not having to spend the night processing a huge bowl of popcorn and other evening-in-front-of-the-TV snacks.

I also enjoyed pushing myself to meet the challenge. My mother used to say, “Waste not, want not,” and I too believe living frugally is admirable. However, \$20 for the week gives a whole new meaning to “frugal.” But I was enthusiastic.

I wonder how many people on social assistance are similarly enthusiastic about the “challenge,” week after week?

My strategy was to get through the first couple of days on as little expenditure as possible (\$10.37 for compressed fruit snacks, white margarine, eggs, pasta, rice, salmon, tuna, bread, and a 50-cent cup of coffee) and then regroup for the home stretch by purchasing whatever I could that would go the farthest.

By Tuesday evening, I longed for something I could really sink my teeth into. Pasta and rice don’t offer much resistance. I bought a \$2.29-can of processed meat and imagined it was a pork chop. I had the first half for supper that day; the rest I nibbled at and mixed with pasta, eggs or rice for a few subsequent meals.

Midway through the week, I desperately wanted to feel full. I never realized it before but at least once a day, I am used to eating until I reach that, “Man that was good, am I ever full,” feeling. What a luxury!

On Thursday, I craved fresh fruit and veggies. Anything with colour. By evening, visions of broccoli with cheese sauce danced through my head, and I’d have given my kingdom for a banana, a Christmas orange, a thick piece of apple pie and ice cream... and I don’t even like ice cream.

Then the prolonged, dull headaches started and the energy level dropped, while general annoyance with the world began to escalate. I wonder how well people do dealing with family stresses, or going to job interviews while in such a frame of mind.

I considered giving up and making a penalty contribution to Harvest, but people who live like this all the time don’t get the opportunity mid-week to say, “This is too hard, I don’t want to play anymore.” So, I persevered, making it through the week with only an extra couple of cups of herbal tea, and a couple of hours of television on my cheat list.

Oh yes, I must confess to accepting a couple of free cups of coffee and a bowl of chili from sympathetic co-workers. And I managed to scoff a leftover sandwich from one department’s group lunch. Good thing I have a job.

I never accepted my one dinner invitation out, nor did I visit any community meal programs. I felt that should be a last resort, as I am certain it is with people in the real world.

By the weekend, with lots of food at home, I

became really annoyed at not being able to just grab whatever I wanted, whenever I felt like it. (Isn’t that a right in this country?)

With a bowl of rice and a bit of pasta still left, I ended my “challenge” with a celebratory dinner with family Sunday evening.

For most of the week, because I normally eat pretty much according to the Canada Food Guide, I really missed my “five-to 10” a day, which should probably be the basis for social assistance rates. At the same time, that would likely be very expensive and I wonder how much government can be expected to pick up. Maybe asking government to “fix” the rates is just a way to get the rest of us off the hook.

As Dr. Wayne Dyer says in one of his books, “We see hunger and starvation on our planet, but become impatient when we must wait five extra minutes for a table in a restaurant, where half the food will be discarded as garbage.... In our own personal lives, too many of us believe that we are unable to make a difference on the larger issues, so we immerse ourselves in our game of ego-sponsored trivial pursuit” — three or four bathrooms, an attached three-car garage with a vehicle in each, two snowmobiles, a winter holiday, enough clothes that a change of wardrobe is possible every three hours, and the latest technological toys imaginable, from cell phones to satellite dishes and everything in between. Yet people go hungry.

But consumerism feeds the economy, and our egos, especially at Christmas. Unfortunately, it does not feed the poor. That takes consistent action borne of a genuine sense of reverence and compassion for all, without judgment.

Canadian welfare rates range from 20-76 percent below the poverty line, but they are not really the issue. Raising them is a necessary, short-term Band-Aid, but the real issue is how to eliminate the need for assistance in the first place, which is poverty.

And it starts, and probably ends, with the individual, not government. Regardless of their relative wealth, people tend to fixate on their lack, which persists no matter how much money they have every week. We are less good at seeing our relative abundance, and in what ways, regardless of what may or may not be in the larder (or the three-car garage) in which we can share, whether it’s food, money, or something less tangible, like moral support.

There are more than enough Manitobans eating when and what they like every day, who have far more than \$20 a week to spend on groceries and entertainment, to have a significant impact on the situation of people trying to get by on a lot less. All we need do is take collective ownership of the real “poverty challenge.”

As equal members of the human family, every person can, and should, help out in some way because it’s everyone’s challenge, not to be met through seasonal generosity, or by responding to an occasional specific plea for help, but by making action borne of compassion more a matter of course in daily life.

And Winnipeg Harvest makes it so easy for us. They do not depend on governments, nor the United Way, for money. Harvest gets its money from indi-

# Worthy of support

**I**t's hard for teachers to understand, but the facts are you as a collective group are not particularly well liked. Notwithstanding, many teachers as individuals are well respected. But, the ability of the government to pass Bill 12 with few "squeaks" from the voting public, and in many cases whole-hearted support, clearly puts your profession in the same category as lawyers!

We all know why we hate lawyers; but why teachers?

First, every working stiff in Alberta is jealous of your vacation time.

Second, every professional in Alberta is envious that you get your professional development time paid for and provided during regular working hours.

Third, Dave Rutherford tells us that teachers in Alberta are the highest paid in Canada.

Fourth, really bad teachers are never fired.

Fifth, everybody has had a bad teacher to blame for lack of success in life.

Sixth, Albertans hate unions.

However, as much as teachers are envied for their life style, and as much as unions are hated in Alberta, it

is regretful that such a big chasm has developed among teachers, the school boards and parents.

School boards and teachers will have to rise above Bill 12 if public schools aren't to stay in a war zone. School boards need to collectively fight to have the taxing power returned to them.

Teachers and school boards need to institute annual performance reviews and pay scales based on merit. Everyone wants a good teacher to be paid more.

Teachers need to quit doing volunteer coaching, field trips and anything else that is outside their list of job requirements.

Parents need to volunteer more time to work along side of teachers in the classroom. Parents need to pay 100 percent for extras such as field trips and sporting events. A teacher who coaches should be paid directly by the parents for his/her after hours work.

Finally, year-round schools need to be seriously considered.

As this paper has been promoting, it's time to think outside the box, and save public education. Public education is a good thing and worthy of our support.



**Brenda Schimke**

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**March 19, 2002**

## FROM THE JUDGE

**As a teacher for more than 20 years, I cannot say I agree with everything in this piece. But I will defend to the death the writer's right to say it, and applaud the courage it takes to make a stand.**

**The writing is crisp, the point of view clear, and the subscription cancellations may start to roll in.**

**But the role of the newspaper is to discuss issues of public importance, not just to report on the bare bones of public meetings without giving meaning and context.**

**Sometimes you have to hit them over the head to catch their attention, and this certainly does that.**

## Poverty challenge *from page 8*

viduals, foundations, service groups, schools, faith communities and business people. And for every donated dollar, they can move \$20 worth of food. What an impact!

That food is then distributed through community food banks, drop-in centres, family resource centres, breakfast and lunch school programs, soup kitchens, group homes, community kitchens, day-care centres and emergency food programs. In 1987, 835,451 pounds of food were distributed; in 2001, Harvest moved 6,830,006 pounds.

Individual families can access a food bank in Winnipeg only once every two weeks, where they will receive just two to three days' supply of food. Harvest books an average of 200-300 appointments per day.

And most of the work is done by volunteers. The ratio of volunteer hours to paid hours at Harvest is an average of 7-1, which is the highest ratio of any food bank in Canada.

### The face of poverty

- 54.5 percent of food bank clients are women.
- 51.3 percent of single senior women are poor.
- In 1997, 27 percent of women with disabilities, aged 16-64, lived in poverty.
- In 1995, 42.7 percent of aboriginal women

(excluding those on reserves or the territories) lived in poverty, compared to 20.4 percent of non-aboriginal women.

- In 1996, 31.8 percent of visible minority women lived in poverty. Yet, they are more likely than other Canadian women to be employed full-time.

- 28.3 percent of poor Manitoba women are seniors.

- In 1997, of the 20 percent of Canadian women who were single parents, 56 percent lived in poverty.

- Lone-parent mothers and unattached women account for 48 percent of heads of households on social assistance.

- A quarter of all welfare families are headed by people with some form of disability.

- 37 percent of people dependent on social assistance for survival are children (45 percent in rural Manitoba).

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

John Donne (1572-1631)



## Declan Varley

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September 5, 2002

### FROM THE JUDGE

The editorial is about travellers, which the Cambridge dictionary defines as "A member of any of various groups of traditionally itinerate people living especially in Scotland and Ireland."

Schooling in any country is fraught with politics, but in this case three youngsters are denied the right to schooling because they belong to this specific group.

How universal is this problem? Have you not heard of it in other contexts? The writer takes it on directly, and forcefully. "As long as we force innocent Traveller children to learn alone, not only will the acceptance of the Travellers' culture be as far away as ever, but so will the provision of basic human rights for all in this country."

# The shame of Ballinruane

**G**oing back to school was always exciting. Those lazy hazy days of summer would wind their way towards the first week of September, when the thoughts of meeting old friends once again would ensure that the novelty of the return to school would be maintained for a few days at least.

This week in Galway, a lot of that pleasure has been taken away from three schoolchildren who having spent the summer together, go back to school to find that they will once again be the providers of their own company, because they are Travellers — segregated before they had even had a chance to enter mainstream education, branded because of their culture and forced to accept what is one of the most unlikely and most unsuitable teaching arrangements in Irish education.

Of course the return to school of Bernie and Debbie and the start of school for young Tom Ward made for great TV and photographic footage, as they rode up to school in a pony and trap. This in some way camouflaged the prejudice of those who decided that they did not want their children educated alongside them, despite feeble protestations to the contrary.

Overall the Ballinruane episode is something of which we should be ashamed. If it had to happen in Soweto or Mississippi, there would be worldwide coverage, most of it from this country as we flock to the moral high ground of causes overseas.

Ballinruane School became steeped in controversy a year ago when the parents of the 12 children attending the small national school strongly objected to the enrollment of nine Traveller children.

They said they had no objection to having some Traveller children enrolled in the school, but felt that nine was totally disproportionate to the 12-pupil school.

They first of all kept their children at home for a week in protest, but then returned them to the school, issuing a statement that they recognised the right of Travellers in their community to an education at the local school.

The Travellers, who had enrolled their children at Ballinruane School having arrived in the area from Louth, then moved away over the dispute at the school but a number of them returned a few days later.

Five of their children began attending the school and eventually the parents of the 12 other children withdrew their children from Ballinruane School and sent them to two other nearby schools.

From last autumn until end of term in June the school remained open with the five Traveller children attending, but the school's Board of Management and the Department of Education kept its future under constant review.

Snobbery is nothing new to education. In recent years there has been a flock to some "alternative" schools under the guise of a desire for "alternative" education and advanced linguistics, but really because in many cases these school are outside the reach of certain sectors of society.

Of course parents want the best for their children, but that should go for Traveller parents as well as for settled. The parents who withdrew their children from this school probably felt that the presence of Travellers would lead to distractions and hinder their own children on the difficult route that is academia. But segregating their own children from other sectors of society does their own children no good either and merely reinforces the prejudices of those who moved them.

Don't mistake me for some bleeding heart liberal. I know the limitations of all sectors of society, but it is obvious when something is just downright wrong.

Education provides us all with options. It ought not intrude on the cultures of sectors of society, but it allows people within sectors to make informed decisions and to further the possibilities of cross-cultural acceptance.

However, as long as we force innocent Traveller children to learn alone, not only will the acceptance of the Traveller culture be as far away as ever, but so will the provision of basic human rights for all in this country.

# Neighbourly differences

**S**ide by side, it's hard to tell Canadians and Americans apart. They look alike. They dress almost alike. They speak English differently, which people from other countries don't notice and mistake Canadians for Americans.

They share a continent; but for many different reasons Canadians and Americans have different attitudes and approaches. They have different political systems. Americans have an obsessed president, George W. Bush; Canadians have a confused prime minister, Jean Chrétien. Canadians have loonies and toonies. Americans have their mighty one dollar bills.

Although the U.S. is a melting pot, — English is its only official language. Canada is a multicultural society with two official languages, English and French. The Canadian French factor is a huge difference. Generally, people consider Canadians as gentler and more reserved than Americans.

Canadians are relentlessly bombarded by American "culture," but resist it well. They're not American clones; perhaps because they have a wide southerly view and don't always like what they see there.

Canadians want peace. Americans will follow their president to war. Americans consider it their constitutional right to carry arms, yet can't understand why so many people use them. Even those who dislike gun control laws wouldn't want Canada to become another gun-toting, trigger-happy society. Some U.S. states still have the death penalty. Canada does not.

As imperfect as it is now, Canadians prefer their universal health care over the U.S. system that can deny care to the millions who can't afford it. They're too reserved to wave their flag and sing anthems the

way Americans do, but in fact most Canadians are deeply patriotic. The British Queen is head of state in Canada, a royal connection some Canadians suggest we no longer need. Americans have George W. Bush as their head of state and yearn for a royal connection.

Most Canadians know more about U.S. geography, and current events than Americans know about Canada. Canadians laugh at themselves and enjoy a more sophisticated style of humour than the American slapstick comedy.

Let's not-forget the CBC, that unique public broadcasting network that probably does more than anything else to keep Canadians Canadian. Love it, or love to hate it, but CBC television and radio are an incredible force uniting Canadians from coast to coast. The CBC's programming provides something for everyone. Its audiences are loyal, proud Canadians. There is no U.S. equivalent.

Even with so many differences, Canadians have extremely close ties with the United States. They should seize every opportunity to be good friends and neighbours. So an Ontario senator has the right idea in suggesting Canada declare September 11 as America Day in a gesture of friendship and goodwill. Why not? It won't cost much, and who knows it could do a great deal of good.

After all, most Canadians care about Americans and on September 11 their thoughts are about the United States, suffering and losses on September 11. Declaring it America Day would strengthen the friendship and perhaps even foster a better awareness about Canada in the U.S. their little-known neighbour north of the 49th parallel.

God Bless America. All of it.



**Marg Hennigar**

**Editorial Writer**  
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**October 16, 2002**

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**FROM THE JUDGE**

**Not all editorials need be deep and calling for immediate action. The editorial page also calls for some whimsy, some well-written approaches to familiar topics that provide a change of pace from the usual fodder for commentary.**

**Such is this editorial, comparing Canadians and Americans in the guise of talking about declaring September 11 America Day.**

**Despite the differences so aptly pointed out, the editorial concludes "Declaring it America Day would strengthen the friendship and perhaps even foster a better awareness about Canada in the U.S., their little-known neighbour north of the 49th parallel."**

**"God Bless America. All of it."**



**Lloyd Call**

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**January 10, 2002**

**FROM THE JUDGE**

Editorials can educate as well as persuade, and the best do both.

I was delighted to read this one discussing a drug court — federally funded, locally controlled, with a 12-step program with teeth in it for those who do not take the program.

By thoroughly explaining what the options are — “fine ‘em, lock ‘em up and forget ‘em” or a new approach — the writer does the community a good service.

If it takes a village to raise a child, it is going to take that same community to stamp out addiction.

# Drug court may offer solution to community-wide problem

**M**uch effort has gone into the “just-say-no” philosophy of substance abuse prevention. We pound our children with slogans and DARE programs. Yet we are not short of people who have substance abuse problems.

We must find a way to help people who, for whatever reason, become addicts. We cannot afford to judge such people moralistically and just say, “They brought it on themselves. Why should we help?” The cost to innocent family members and society demands that we find a better solution.

One such solution may be a “drug court,” an idea that Sanpete County is going to implement soon. Before explaining how a drug court works, it’s useful to look at how Sanpete County, and most of the country, has been handling addiction.

The approach of the law and justice system has been “fine ‘em, lock ‘em up and forget ‘em.” But considering the recidivism rates, this approach costs a lot of taxpayer money for little return, not to mention failing to help addicts.

Rehabilitation programs staffed by medical and behavioral health professionals have been around for along time, too. But most cost a lot of money, and the people who need them most typically can’t afford them. Many programs are short term (30 to 60 days), which isn’t sufficient time to reverse ingrained behavior.

There are also 12-step programs, most patterned after Alcoholics Anonymous. These non-professional

self-help groups offer a long-term structured recovery process; but participation is strictly voluntary. The programs have no “teeth” to force participants to stay involved.

A drug court is a little bit of all these programs put together, and we believe it might just fit the bill. The program is federally funded, which helps with the costs. Yet it is administered through the county government, which allows staff to adapt the program to local needs. A community steering committee will be established to reflect the community’s values and give the program broad-based input.

A participant who has been arrested for a substance-related offense will be required to participate in 12-step programs (at no cost). But there will be teeth to compel attendance, because those who break away from the program will be dropped back into the old system of fines and imprisonment.

Mental health professionals are also there to tackle counseling issues. Most persons with addiction problems lack coping skills. Long-term counseling could help them develop these skills.

Addiction is a cunning disease that affects every level of an addict’s life. Families are torn apart and the whole society pays a high price in crime, loss of life, and cost of convict and incarcerate offenders. Sanpete County, feels the toll as keenly as any place.

It will take the whole community to begin to put a dent in this problem. We believe drug court is a good move for addicts, their families and the community and urge Sanpete residents to support the program.

# Following the rules

**A** Pictou County school is the centre of a controversy over a new anti-smoking rule put in place this year by the Chignecto-Central Regional School Board.

In September a group of students from West Pictou District High School stepped out onto a busy highway to protest the rule which bans students and staff from smoking on school property.

The students walked four abreast down the highway after being told they must leave school property in order to smoke. However, when RCMP responded they did not lay charges, but instead told school officials that it, was their responsibility to keep students safe. The school has criticized the RCMP for not at least warning the students of fines that they could be facing for their actions.

Now the CCRSB must address the situation and the potential liabilities they may face if any student is injured, as the result of leaving the school grounds to smoke. The board will also ask its solicitor about its responsibilities and obligations in such a situation.

It's a crazy world when children who are not even legally able to purchase cigarettes can hold an entire school board hostage simply because they do not want to follow the rules.

The anti-smoking policy was put in place by the board to deter smoking in young people. Why? To

keep them safe from the harm tobacco causes, not only to smokers but to others through second-hand smoke. Now this same board is facing a dilemma caused by a group of spoiled brats who don't want to take "no" for an answer.

It's absolutely ridiculous that these kids could get away with this type of behaviour. Where are the parents in this? What are their responsibilities in preventing their children from participating in activities, such as smoking and walking into traffic, which may compromise their health?

There's no doubt that the police should have given these children a warning, and the parents should have followed up with some punishment at home. Why should the board be left to deal with this type of bad behaviour? They have enough on their plates trying to, ensure our children get a decent education without spending time addressing an issue that has nothing to do with school work.

The board should be entitled to ban smoking from school property without fear of being sued because, some kid decides to walk out onto the highway to smoke cigarettes that he's not even legally, allowed to possess. The next step should be banning children from leaving the property during school hours without a permission slip.

This is a prime example of the education system having to compensate for poor parenting skills.



**Susan Belliveau**

**Editor**  
*The Record*

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**October 9, 2002**

## **FROM THE JUDGE**

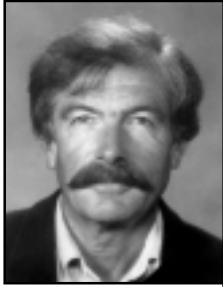
**A group of school children forced out of school by a non-smoking rule react by stepping out onto a nearby highway to protest the rule.**

**The editorial takes it from there. Why were they not arrested? What is the role of the school district? And parents, where were you?**

**"It is a crazy world when children who are not even legally able to purchase cigarettes can hold an entire school board hostage simply because they do not want to follow the rules."**

**In an unbelievable scenario like this, the writer minces no words. The protestors were "a group of spoiled brats." That they could get away with this is "absolutely ridiculous."**

**Sometimes we just have to "call it like we see it."**



**William F. Schanen III**

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**January 10, 2002**

**FROM THE JUDGE**

**You have a 100-year-old corner house with beautiful trees.**

**The city is going to put a sewer line, not under the street, but through your property. And they did it to save \$25,000 and on a 4-3 vote, which reversed an earlier 4-3 vote.**

**The writer takes you through the drama and difficulty of this decision, tells of the owner's fears and concerns, and hits the nail right on the head with "The cost is not the primary issue. What matters more is how the city treats its citizens."**

**I fear many papers would have reported this in two or three lines under Other Business. Not here.**

**Someone has to stand up for the rights of the individual. This is an outstanding example.**

# A sewer for your yard

**E**veryone knows that eminent domain trumps private property rights. That's how highways get built and electric power lines, gas pipes and sewers installed.

But this does not relieve government of the responsibility to exercise its power to use private land for public improvements with respect for an owner's financial and emotional investment in his property.

There is little sign of such respect in the case of the sewers that, as a result of a 4-3 vote of the Port Washington Common Council last week, will invade Neil Thill's yard.

The two sewer lines — 14 inches and 24 inches in diameter — will run right along side of Thill's house at the corner of Chestnut and Milwaukee Streets. They will pass so close — within a few feet — that Thill fears the excavation of the 10-foot deep trench will damage the fieldstone foundation of his nearly 100-year-old dwelling.

The sewers will lay waste to the home's shady, well-tended yard. Four trees will be removed, including two of exceptional size and beauty. One is a maple Thill calls his bicentennial tree, which he planted in honor of the nation's 200th birthday in 1976. Another is a white birch planted in the first half of the 20th century by a previous owner of the house.

The city can run the sewers through a private yard because, as is common around Port Washington, the right-of-way for the street extends well beyond the curb and into Thill's property.

The sewers can go there, but they don't have to. They could be put in the street, as sewers usually are. In fact, that is what the council agreed to do on Dec. 4 when it voted unanimously to reroute the pipes, as had been recommended by the public works director and wastewater plant supervisor.

But on Jan. 2, when it came time to approve the order for the change, four aldermen changed their minds and voted against it. Thill's reprieve was thus snatched away. Excavation of his yard is expected to start any day.

(Aldermen Tom Hudson; Karl Leicht, Harold Matthews and Armin Schwanz voted against rerout-

ing the sewers; Burt Babcock, Peter Jushka and John Urban voted for the change.)

The about-face apparently had to do with money. The contractor put a price tag of almost \$25,000 on making the change.

To say that saving this amount of taxpayer money justifies the invasion of the Thill property sets a harsh standard. It could just as easily be argued that it is a necessary price to pay to protect private property threatened by a public works project.

The cost probably would have been a moot point if the city staff had the foresight to see the obvious — that running large sanitary sewer lines through a family's yard, next to its home, at the expense of valuable trees and perhaps even the integrity of the house itself was certain to be a problem — most of the extra cost might have been avoided by specifying from the beginning that the sewers be buried in the street.

The cost is not the primary issue, however. What matters more is how the city treats its citizens. It's hard to think that any homeowners who can imagine themselves in Neil Thill's place would feel good about how one of their own is being treated by their city.

Thill and his wife left the council meeting with not only the disheartening knowledge that the decision to spare their property had been reversed, but that the city was essentially washing its hands of responsibility for any damage to their house. The contractor has insurance for this sort of thing, they were told.

We can't imagine the aldermen feeling very good about any of this either. Any satisfaction over refusing to pay the contractor's extra charge must pale beside the awareness of the hurt about to be done to a family's property. The decision is not just bad for one family; it's bad public policy, reflective of an insensitivity to the most basic concerns of all homeowners, and it should not stand. It takes only one alderman, one of the majority of four, to step forward to ask that the excavation be held up until the council can reconsider and take back this mistake.

# The future at stake

**T**ime is running out for persons wishing to stick their necks out — way out — and seek a seat on the Lincoln County School District Board of Directors.

Thanks to last month's recall, four seats are going begging, with the deadline to file set for Monday.

The requirements are residence in a specific zone of the county — and with four seats open, most people are eligible — and, according to members of the Linn-Benton-Lincoln Education Service District in Albany who will make the appointments, a community orientation and a background in helping public or charter schools. The ESD board will look at applicants' expertise in school matters, as well as their goals, education, work history, references, and time available for board service.

We have a few other suggestions for qualifications, based on the fact that despite the people many of you love to hate are no longer on the school board, the same hard financial decisions remain. We urge appointment of people with financial expertise coupled with a strong stomach, so that when the millions of dollars in budget cuts must be made — and soon, they will have the fortitude to do their volunteer job and make the cuts that are likely to involve the jobs of their friends and neighbors. Or that involve closing down the schools their children attend.

Because folks, despite the success of the recall, you can't save the school district budget by reopening Eddyville, hiring a public relations person, and hacking away at administrative salaries. Go ahead and hack at those salaries, but that won't equal the money needed to keep the school district in operation.

More suggestions for qualifications — how about

an emphasis on caring what kind of education LCSD students receive, and knowledge of the kind of curriculum needed for the future workforce of the 21st century. What worked in the 1950s or the '70s or the '90s is not necessarily what works today. Lincoln County is a very different place than it was even 10 years ago, and is very much part of a larger world, one our children must live in. So keep that in mind.

Again, we need people with the ability to focus on the child, not on whose job should be saved, whose school should be kept open, whose salary should take a hit or be boosted, which union and which group of retirees should be placated. Someone who can convince the ESD board that his or her actions as a school board member will be based on providing the best education possible for the most students.

That's the only bottom line.

We don't need a slate of candidates from one or another interest group or union. We'd like to see people stepping up who care about children, period, regardless of affiliation. And who understand the education needed in today's world, along with the realities of our legislature's gift of financial disaster.

Being a member of a school board at any time makes you a point person for someone's anger. It means you will not make everyone happy all the time. Ever. Today in Lincoln County, it means sticking your neck so far out that you will feel pain. But we still think it's a volunteer effort worth seeking, as the goal — educating our children — is about as fine a goal as anyone can pursue.

We know more than half of you didn't even bother to vote in the recall. But we hope more than a few of you will decide to take a chance on the future."



**Leslie O'Donnell**

**Managing Editor  
News-Times**

PO Box 965  
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**December 4, 2002**

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**FROM THE JUDGE**

**The voters have spoken. The four "rascals" on the school board have been recalled.**

**What now? After the purge, who is going to step up?**

**The writer suggests several interesting requirements, including people with financial expertise to make the hard spending decisions, people who care about the children's education more than anything else, and people who understand that "it means sticking your neck out so far you will feel pain."**

**If one of the roles of an editorial is to make people think, and make them act, this one succeeds so very well.**



**Laurie Dennis**

**Editor**  
*Monticell Times*

116 East River Street  
Monticello, Minnesota  
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**July 4, 2002**

**FROM THE JUDGE**

**This is a calm, dispassionate analysis of school vouchers, coming down on the side of public education and against grants. The author believes vouchers take away vital support from public education, which has done so much for so many in this country.**

**“To allow public schools to be drained of funding is to encourage a greater gulf between the haves and have-nots and thus a shrinking of our middle class base.”**

**In an era of tippy-toeing through minefields of political correctness, here is an effort to see through court decisions and outline possible long-term effects. Well done.**

# Supreme Court erred on school vouchers

**W**here is it that policymakers came across this convoluted idea that the best way to fix a “failing school” is to gut it? That the best way to encourage competition at a school populated by students from poor, transient and unstable families is to pay those students to leave? That the best way to help our poorest students is to thrust them into unregulated religious schools with underpaid teachers, often-questionable curriculums and limited resources for handling problems and disabilities?

We need to back up and find the place where we slipped into this nonsense, because this wrong thinking has just tripped up the Supreme Court, which concluded its term Thursday with a misguided decision supporting school vouchers.

The recent 5-4 decision allows the City of Cleveland to continue its six-year-old program to let parents use government money to pay for religious or secular private schools. The program offers vouchers worth up to \$2,250, giving a priority to families with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty line.

In their opinions, concurrences and dissents, the Supreme Court focused on the question of whether the Cleveland voucher program offends the constitutional principle, set forth in *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing*, that “no tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions.”

The court majority found the Ohio program to be neutral toward religion even though almost all the voucher dollars have thus far gone toward religious, rather than secular, private schools.

“School voucher programs finance the religious education of the young,” stressed Justice Stephen Breyer in his dissent. “In a society as religiously diverse as ours, the court has recognized that we must rely on the Religion Clauses of the First Amendment to protect against religious strife, particularly when what is at issue is an area as central to religious belief as the shaping, through primary education, of the next generation’s minds and spirits.”

The court majority was clearly wrong to, in the

words of the dissent of Justice John Paul Stevens, “remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion and government.”

But beyond the threat to our constitutional doctrine dividing church from state, this ruling sets other disturbing precedents.

It is the first step in an effort to permit families at all income levels to renege on their responsibility to support public education. What begins with a program for the poor is sure to quickly become an effort to help the wealthy pay their private school tuition bills, at great cost to the public schools that the vast majority of our students attend.

In that regard, school vouchers represent a harmful policy likely to diminish the strength of America’s middle class. Education is the key to success and advancement in our society, and our public school system has over the decades consistently given us a well-schooled workforce that has turned this country into a world leader. To allow public schools to be drained of students and funding is to encourage a greater gulf between the haves and the have-nots and thus a shrinking of our middle class base.

Yes, there are places, particularly in inner cities, where schools show consistently low test scores and high drop-out rates.

But to suggest that the way to help such financially-strapped, struggling schools is to take away even more of their resources is laughable. And dangerous. And arrogant. These schools are on the front lines of a war against poverty and school vouchers will do nothing for them. In fact, school vouchers could spell their demise.

What a mistake, what a terrible injustice the Supreme Court has given us in its support for school vouchers.

The battle over vouchers is fast moving from the courts to our state legislatures and to Congress, where bills are already being prepared to start new voucher programs across the country.

It’s time to speak out against this threat to our long tradition of public education for all — the future of our children’s quality of life is at stake.

# The 28th Annual Eugene Cervi Award



The Eugene Cervi Award was established by ISWNE in 1976 to honor the memory of Eugene Cervi of the *Rocky Mountain Journal*, Denver, by recognizing a newspaper editor who has consistently acted in the conviction that “good journalism begets good government.”

The award is presented not for a single brave accomplishment, however deserving, but for a career of outstanding public service through community journalism and for adhering to the highest standards of the craft with the deep reverence for the English language that was the hallmark of Gene Cervi’s writing. The award also recognizes consistently aggressive reporting of government at the grassroots level and interpretation of local affairs.

Cervi died on Dec. 15, 1970, from injuries suffered in an automobile accident. He was 64. Several ISWNE members regard him as their “journalism conscience.”

## This Year’s Winners Are...

### Gary & Helen Sosniecki



Gary and Helen Sosniecki are editors and publishers of *The Lebanon Daily Record* and editors and vice presidents of its parent company, Lebanon Publishing Co., in Lebanon, Mo. Besides *The Daily Record*, Lebanon Publishing Co. and its affiliates own weekly newspapers in Richland, Waynesville, Gainesville, Seymour, Mountain Grove, Mansfield, Conway and Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.; five weekly shopping guides; various niche publications and KFLW radio in St. Robert. The company also is an Internet Service Provider in more than a dozen Ozarks communities. Lebanon Publishing Co. is owned by Dalton Wright, 1998 president of the National Newspaper Association and a 2000 inductee into the Missouri Press Association Hall of Fame.

Gary Sosniecki, 52, is a native of Bensenville, Ill., a Chicago suburb, where in 1968, as a senior in high school, he began his professional career as sports editor of the weekly *Bensenville Banner*, then published by a subsidiary of Time Inc., and as a youth correspondent for Paddock Publications newspapers that were predecessors to today’s Chicago *Daily Herald*. Helen Sosniecki, 52, is a native of Clinton, Mo., where her first exposure to Missouri journalism came through her contractor father’s remodeling projects at the *Clinton Daily Democrat* and his construction of the current home of the *Benton County Enterprise* at Warsaw.

Gary and Helen met as students at the University of Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia, where they both reported and copy edited for the *Columbia Missourian*. Gary also was a co-founder of and reporter for the *Campus Courier* student newspaper, which later was merged into *The Maneater*, the official campus newspaper; he served on the Student-Faculty Board of Publications; was president of the M.U. College Republicans and was a candidate for Missouri Student Association president in 1972. As a Jefferson City reporter for the *Columbia Missourian* in the fall of 1972, Gary rotated writing a column for Missouri Press Association newspapers, “Highlights and Sidelights from the State Capitol.” Gary and Helen studied community journalism under then-Missouri Press Association executive director Bill Bray and

spent their week’s internship at the *Lee’s Summit Journal* in the spring of 1973.

Gary and Helen received their bachelor of journalism degrees in 1973 and were married on graduation day, May 15, by the Rev. (and State Rep.) Harold Reisch of Columbia.

After graduation, both worked for *The Jackson (Tenn.) Sun* — Gary as Gibson County bureau chief, Helen as a copy editor, then assistant chief of the copy desk — until November 1974, when they moved to Marion, Ill. Helen held a variety of editing, reporting and photography jobs on the *Marion Daily Republican*, including managing editor. Gary held a variety of reporting and editing jobs on the *Southern Illinoisian*, a daily newspaper in Carbondale, including political reporter and sports editor. He shared a first-place award from the Illinois Associated Press Editors’ Association for in-depth reporting in 1976 and received first place for sports columns from the Illinois AP in 1978.

In the early years of their careers, Gary and Helen worked for and with several people whose names are well-known in the industry today. Helen was hired for the Marion job by Larry Perrotto, later president of American Publishing Co. and now owner of Community Media Group. Gary was hired for the Carbondale job by George Irish, now president of Hearst Newspapers. One of their co-workers on *The Jackson Sun*, Reid Ashe, is president of Media General today. One of Gary’s bosses from Carbondale, David J. Butler, is editor of the *Los Angeles Daily News*.

In August 1980, the Sosnieckis returned to Missouri to buy the *Humansville Star-Leader*, which they published until selling in March 1986. While there, gross revenues doubled, and they received 34 awards for journalism excellence, including first-place awards from the National Newspaper Association for typography, community service and freedom of information.

From 1986 to 1988, the Sosnieckis lived in Hillsboro, Kan., where Gary was editor and general manager of the *Hillsboro Star-Journal*, co-owned by Web Hawkins, also an NNA president. Helen worked one year as a copy editor for the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, the biggest daily newspaper in Kansas. She also worked a year as promotions director for Salem Hospital Inc., a hospital, nursing-home and retirement-apartment complex in Hillsboro.

The Sosnieckis bought the *Webster County Citizen*, a weekly newspaper, and *Webster County Advertiser*, a weekly newspaper/shopper, in Seymour, Mo., on Aug. 27, 1988. Until 1995, the Sosnieckis were the only full-time staff on the newspapers.

Under the Sosnieckis' ownership, paid circulation increased 25 percent, gross revenues more than doubled, and the *Citizen* received 52 journalism awards from the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, the National Newspaper Association, the Missouri Press Association and the Kansas City Press Club. The *Citizen's* 11 awards for 1998 included the Golden Quill Award, the top award for opinion writing from the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors; the National Newspaper Association's Community Development Award for non-dailies and the Missouri Press Association's Community Service Award for non-dailies. The Sosnieckis sold the *Citizen* and *Advertiser* to Lebanon Publishing Co. on Feb. 1, 1999, and began work in Lebanon on June 1.

In their first three years in Lebanon, *The Daily Record* won more than 80 awards for journalism excellence. In 2002, *The Daily Record's* newsroom won 18 awards from the Missouri Press Association, seven from the National Newspaper Association, seven from the Missouri Associated Press and two from the Inland Press Association. Paid circulation has increased steadily, bucking the national trend, and *The Daily Record's* online edition now averages more than 2,200 visitors a day.

Gary and Helen are active in civic affairs and press activities. Helen was president of the Seymour Area Chamber of Commerce in 1990, served on the editorial advisory board of Missouri Community magazine, served six years on the University of Missouri Alumni Association Communications Committee, was president of the alumni association's Webster County chapter and currently is on the board of the Laclede County chapter. She served three years as a director of the Ozark Press Association, has been secretary-treasurer and currently is OPA president. She also serves on the board of the Lebanon Arts Council. Gary and Helen served as publicity chairmen of the Seymour Apple Festival for nearly a decade. Gary currently is a director of the Lebanon Area Chamber of Commerce, vice president of the Lebanon/Laclede County Route 66 Society and serves on the Lebanon Concert Association board. He is past chairman of the Seymour Community Library Committee (which successfully raised funds to build a new library), has also served on Chamber of Commerce boards in Humansville, Mo., and Hillsboro, Kan., is a past president of the Ozark Press Association and has been treasurer, a director, second vice president and, in 2003, first vice president of the Missouri Press Association. Both Gary and Helen have served on various MPA committees; Gary is a three-time past chairman of the MPA Better Newspaper Contest Committee.

The Sosnieckis have been members of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors for 20 years. Besides receiving the ISWNE's Golden Quill Award in 1998, Gary's editorials were selected as Golden Dozen winners in 1982, 1986, 1988, 1993 and 1997.

They also are currently vice presidents of the Missouri Associated Press.

In April 1999, Gary was named to the Fenton Community High School Alumni Wall of Fame in Bensenville, Ill. In June 2000, Gary was one of 163 civilians selected to attend the week-long National Security Seminar at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pa.

The Sosnieckis live in the Dove community north of Lebanon, Mo.

## GENE CERVI AWARD WINNERS

- 2002 **Bill Meyer**, *Marion County Record*  
Marion County, Kan.
- 2001 **Marg Hennigar**, *Lighthouse Publishing*, Lunenburg, Nova Scotia
- 2000 **Allan A. Seiler**, *The Pike Press*,  
Pittsfield, Ill.
- 1999 No award given
- 1998 **Jack Authelet**,  
*Foxboro (Mass.) Reporter*
- 1997 **Carol Wilcox & Cary Stiff**,  
*Clear Creek Courant*,  
Idaho Springs, Colo.
- 1996 **Charlotte & Marvin Schexnayder**,  
*Dumas (Ark.) Clarion*
- 1995 No award given
- 1994 **Jim MacNeill**,  
*The Eastern Graphic*,  
Montague, Prince Edward Island
- 1993 **Bob Bliss**,  
*The Montgomery County News*,  
Hillsboro, Ill.
- 1992 **Robert Trapp**,  
*Rio Grande Sun*, Espanola, N.M.
- 1991 **Henry Gay**,  
*Shelton-Mason County Journal*, Shelton, Wash.
- 1990 **Karl Monroe**, *Collinsville (Ill.) Herald*
- 1989 **William Rotch**, *Milford (N.H.) Cabinet*
- 1988 **Bruce Brugmann**, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*
- 1987 **James Russell Wiggins**,  
*Ellsworth (Maine) American*
- 1986 **Rollin McCommons**, *Athens (Ga.) Observer*
- 1985 **McDill (Huck) Boyd**,  
*Phillips County Review*,  
Phillipsburg, Kan.
- 1984 **Richard McCord**,  
*Santa Fe (N.M.) Reporter*
- 1983 **Homer Marcum**,  
*The Martin Countian*,  
Inez, Ky.
- 1982 **Kieth Howard**,  
*Yellow Springs (Ohio) News*
- 1981 **Edward DeCourcy**,  
*Newport (N.H.) Argus*  
*Champion*
- 1980 **Robert Estabrook**,  
*Lakeville (Conn.) Journal*
- 1979 **Houstoun Waring**, *Littleton*  
(Colo.) *Independent*
- 1978 **Tom Leathers**, *The Squire*, Kansas City, Mo.
- 1977 **Charles & Virginia Russell**,  
*Dewitt County Observer*, Clinton, Ill.
- 1976 **Blair Macy**, *Keene Valley Sun*, *Kennesburg, Colo.*



Meyer



Hennigar



Seiler



Bliss



Estabrook

# A few words from Gary & Helen's supporters:

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## A true community newspaper publishing team

I have known Gary and Helen since we were students at the University of Missouri School of Journalism (Class of 1973). Gary and Helen are truly a community newspaper publishing team. They have devoted their lives to community journalism and have brought quality newspapering to the communities in which they have served and are serving. They are dedicated in every way to excellence in journalism.

Gary and Helen are counted among the leading editors/publishers in Missouri newspapers. Their awards over a period of more than a decade and a half at newspapers in Humansville, Seymour and now Lebanon, Mo., are numerous.

The Sosnieckis are tireless workers and often put in long hours at the newspaper office in order to deliver a quality news product to their *Lebanon Daily Record* readers. Their editorial voice through the years always has been clear, concise and forceful with a good dose of common sense.

— Doug Crews, executive director, Missouri Press Association

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## Their names are symbolic with excellence

It's a great honor to nominate Gary and Helen Sosniecki of Lebanon, Mo., for the 2003 International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors' Eugene Cervi Award.

The Sosnieckis' names are inseparable. Whether it's Gary or Helen, they're legends when it comes to excellence in grassroots community journalism. They've been ISWNE members for 20 years, and Gary was recipient of the 1998 Golden Quill Award.

The Sosnieckis have a pristine reputation when it comes to quality journalism, and I can think of no others who have taken objectivity to a higher standard, if that's possible. As owners of newspapers, they have never been shy of confrontation in the name of truth, even when their own financial investments were at risk. These brave and bold people have fought the fight and continue to do so. They live and breathe journalism, and their "truth" is an example to set us all freer.

These wonderful people have been mentors to countless students from the University of Missouri School of Journalism as well as other institutions, and they've freely given of their limited time to appear on many press-association and other programs to further the cause of journalism. Plus they've been productive and active members of their communities, yet keeping proper distance to operate as unbiased news-gatherers.

— Jim Sawyer, ISWNE member, Willard, Mo.

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## Couple exemplifies community journalism

In my 39 years in the newspaper business, I have never met a couple who better exemplify community journalism than Gary and Helen Sosniecki. For several years the Sosnieckis owned and operated a weekly newspaper just 20 miles from our newspaper. I worked closely with them because we shared responsibility for news and advertising services for a couple of small communities and school districts. The Sosnieckis were the ideal competitors because they followed such high news writing practices, advertising policies and quality writing standards. Their high quality community journalism helped challenge our staff to set higher goals.

The Sosnieckis have devoted their lives to serving the newspaper industry by totally immersing themselves in their publications and in their communities. They work long hours attending meetings, making news contacts, interviewing newsmakers, writing new stories and checking and re-checking every word and every sentence of every story. Gary and

Helen have served several communities with publications ranging from small weeklies to various size dailies. But their insistence on excellence has never changed.

A well-respected resident of a Missouri community where the Sosnieckis formerly owned a weekly newspaper paid them the ultimate compliment as he was discussing how much the community missed the newspaper couple when they moved away. He noted that when the Sosnieckis moved into the community, the first few months were difficult because the Sosnieckis were so insistent upon high journalistic standards that involved objective news coverage of various community groups ranging from city council to the school board. He said the community groups were not accustomed to such objective and detailed community journalism. And community leaders who attempted to convince the Sosnieckis to avoid the sensitive issues or to gloss over community problems found they couldn't be moved "with a bulldozer." When I asked how the community and the Sosnieckis eventually became so united after such a rocky start, he commented, "I suspect the community changed."

Few community journalists can match the Sosnieckis on the positive impact they have made on a local community, on regional publications or on an entire state's journalism industry. While they have been honored repeatedly for specific news stories, for general news writing, and for editorial writing, the Sosnieckis are much more important to community journalism than the individual awards they have earned. Their dedication to public service through community journalism makes them fully deserving of the Cervi Award.

— Don Ginnings, publisher, *The Index*, Hermitage, Mo.

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## 'I have never seen their equal'

I cannot think of two more deserving recipients of The International Society of Weekly Newspapers Editors' Eugene Cervi Award than Gary and Helen Sosniecki. During this critical period, when the basic values of community journalism are being challenged by absentee group ownership and the quest for outlandish returns on investment, the Sosnieckis continue to adhere to the core principles that make newspapers our greatest community information source.

I have had the privilege of knowing the Sosnieckis for 20-plus years, but it was not until I started working with them that I realized just how great the team Sosniecki is. In the 33 years that I have worked in the business, I have never seen their equal. No matter how seemingly insignificant an editorial/news issue appears, they will go to the limit to make certain that it is dealt with on the highest professional level. I have never known them to compromise on any issue dealing with accuracy or fairness, no matter who was involved or what the subject pertained to.

I marvel at their ability to sustain this high level of public service throughout the community as journalists for over 30 years. If I had to list the criteria for the ideal community journalist, it would be modeled after the Sosnieckis. They are one example where the term "synergy" actually applies, in that the two of them exceed the whole of the individuals. That is not to say either of them has any weaknesses pertaining to weekly newspaper journalism. The opposite is true in that, individually, I would recommend them each for the Eugene Cervi Award, but the fact is, as a husband and wife team, they have demonstrated such strength as community journalists and it is a unique opportunity for them to both be recognized and awarded this most prestigious award.

— Dalton Wright, president/owner, Lebanon Publishing Co.

# Sosnieckis' publishing philosophy: 'They worked hard and were honest'

By Dr. William H. Taft

*Dr. Taft is a University of Missouri School of Journalism emeritus professor and a historian for the Missouri Press Association.*

John Ashcroft was planning to visit the *Webster County Citizen* office, and that created a problem for Gary and Helen Sosniecki, owners of the small-town *Missouri Ozarks* weekly. Ashcroft, who in 2001 would become attorney general of the United States, was a former Missouri governor campaigning for the U.S. Senate in 1994.

After Gary had noted in his "Soz Sez" column that Ashcroft hadn't visited Seymour in at least the six years the Sosnieckis had owned the newspaper, the candidate's campaign staff quickly offered to bring him to the town, and arrangements were made for him to attend a nonpartisan reception sponsored by the *Citizen*.

But it was on Tuesday afternoon, the newspaper's production day, and it had to be held in the backshop of the newspaper on the southwest corner of the Seymour square. Therein lay the problem: The U.S. Department of Agriculture had shut down the adjacent Seymour Locker Plant that fall but failed to remove all the unrefrigerated meat. And depending on the day and the weather conditions, the odor of rotting meat and ammonia from the plant's leaking refrigeration system drifted through the porous common wall and made working in the *Citizen's* rented quarters almost unbearable — not to mention unsuitable for a visit by a soon-to-be U.S. senator.

Thankfully, the odor was barely noticeable when community leaders gathered to discuss issues with Ashcroft. But it was obvious to the Sosnieckis that the 91-year-old building, home to the *Citizen* since 1941, was near the end of its useful life as a newspaper office.

On Dec. 29, 1994, more than 20 persons, present and past employees, their relatives and a family from Seymour's Amish community, helped move the *Citizen's* furniture and equipment to a new, larger home on the west side of the square — a building the Sosnieckis bought and remodeled for the *Citizen*.

Not long before Ashcroft visited, ISWNE member Dick McCord had parked in front of that old two-story brick building that housed the *Citizen*. It was 3 a.m., and McCord, a former New Mexico weekly newspaper editor, was on his way to Wisconsin to gather information for his upcoming book, *The Chain Gang*. In it, he would chronicle community journalism in the face of often unethical threats and actions by nearby large corporate newspapers. Although he had never met the Sosnieckis, he knew they were the epitome of excellent community journalists. They were fellow ISWNE members, and he had often read about them. Now he wanted to feel — although it was in an unusual way — good, small-town journalism, before he moved on.

McCord sat there silently for a few minutes, then left. He got the inspiration he needed.

The move to the new location was the shortest of many in the Sosnieckis' newspaper careers. As first-generation journalists without family roots in the business, the Sosnieckis have been free to move wherever their curiosity has taken them and where new challenges awaited. Most of it has been in the



*Missouri Ozarks*, where at different times between 1980 and the present they've owned weeklies in Humansville and Seymour and have been editors and publishers of *The*



*Daily Record* in Lebanon for owner Dalton Wright, 1999 president of the National Newspaper Association.

Their journeys outside the state have taken them to newspapers big and small in Tennessee, Illinois and Kansas. But in each Missouri town where they have published newspapers, the Sosnieckis have shared titles and split the workload right down the middle, earning reputations for improving the news quality, advertising and circulation of their newspapers — even if it took seven days a week in the office and the sacrifice of a personal life (they do not have children) to do it.

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In August 1980, the Sosnieckis returned to Missouri to buy the *Humansville Star-Leader* in a town of only 907 in northwest Polk County. At age 29, with a mortgage to pay off and no experience at selling advertising, the couple poured their hearts and souls into their little newspaper.

Circulation got an immediate boost when a young David Letterman read an item from the *Star-Leader's* Collins, Missouri, correspondent on his NBC morning show. The subject of the item, Floyd Stiles, became an instant local celebrity, and the Sosnieckis helped Letterman's staff orchestrate a "Floyd Stiles Day" on TV. Floyd and wife Zola Mae were flown to New York for Letterman's show, and

Letterman's staff shot pictures of the occasion for the next week's *Star-Leader*. Letterman bought a subscription to the *Star-Leader* (the Sosnieckis framed a photocopy of his check but cashed the original, because they needed the \$6.50), and often referred to it as his "favorite newspaper."

Although the *Star-Leader* was an offset newspaper (the Sosnieckis printed it at the nearby weekly *Bolivar Herald-Free Press*), its busy job shop, Star Printing Co., still used hot metal, requiring the Sosnieckis to stay on good terms with the dwindling number of journeyman printers in the area. Gary had to learn the basics of setting type on a Linotype, in case somebody died when no printer was available to print memorial cards for the local funeral home. Finally in 1982, with assistance from friendly competitor Don Ginnings of the weekly *The Index* in Hermitage, Missouri, the *Star-Leader's* job shop was converted to offset, allowing the newspaper to keep the prestigious and profitable job of printing Polk County's paper election ballots.

The Sosnieckis campaigned for open meetings of the board of aldermen and the school board, often doing battle with mayors and school superintendents unaccustomed to public scrutiny. After two volunteer firefighters were killed in 1984 on curvy Highway V en route to a grass fire, the Sosnieckis campaigned for improvements to the road and construction of a memorial to the young men. Both goals were accomplished.

When Humansville's only physician suddenly quit in a dispute with the health organization that brought him to town, Gary tracked him down in the emergency room of the Osceola hospital and convinced him and his wife to meet that night with business leaders in the backshop of the *Star-Leader* office. The meeting was held, the doctor stayed, and in 2001 he celebrated his 21st anniversary in Humansville.

In December 1984, the *Star-Leader* published a 40-page edition (biggest in its 108-year history) including a 28-page special section about a new nursing home that would be Humansville's biggest employer. But the Sosnieckis' biggest challenge was selling enough advertising on an every-week basis in a town the size of Humansville as the Wal-Mart in Bolivar, the county seat, drained Humansville one-by-one of its mom-and-pop businesses. For a few years the *Star-Leader* prospered, especially after a supermarket war in Bolivar boosted the weekly total of the *Star-Leader's* grocery ads from one to three. But that war took its toll on the Humansville grocer, who sold out to a small chain in 1984. The new owners immediately switched their ad from the *Star-Leader* to direct-mail. By January 1986, the last of the Bolivar supermarkets stopped advertising in the *Star-Leader* at the same time that a Humansville native announced plans to open a printing shop in competition with the newspaper.

The *Star-Leader* had been sought for several

years by St. Clair County Publishing Co., which had mailed a weekly shopper, *Buyer's Guide*, into Humansville since just before the Sosnieckis had taken over in 1980. This time, the Sosnieckis accepted the offer of St. Clair Publishing Co., and in their last editorial on Feb. 27, 1986, they wrote that they were leaving town with "mixed emotions" — relief at the end to long work weeks and trying to make ends meet, but sorrow that their dream of publishing the *Star Leader* until retirement would not be fulfilled: "There comes a time, however, when you simply run out of gas, when there is no energy left to overcome the never-ending series of trials and tribulations that owners of mom-and-pop weekly newspapers and small-town printing shops face today. Increasing competition, skyrocketing postal rates, rising insurance premiums and a declining agricultural community that is having a ripple effect on even the healthiest of small towns are all factors that make weekly-newspaper publishing today a risky business at best."

After their first vacation in six years, the Sosnieckis moved to Hillsboro, Kansas, where Gary became editor and general manager of the weekly *Hillsboro Star-Journal*. Helen worked for a year as a copy editor for the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, the biggest daily in the state, plus another year as promotions director for a hospital, nursing-home and retirement-apartment complex in Hillsboro.

But they missed the Ozarks and were anxious to return to the region they considered home, so they advertised in the Missouri Press Association magazine for a newspaper to buy and ended up purchasing the weekly *Webster County Citizen* and the *Webster County Advertiser* (a hybrid newspaper-shopper) in August 1988.

The Sosnieckis immediately bought additional typesetting equipment and different styles of types in order to dress up the papers while waiting for the day when they could afford the newest generation of equipment. That day came sooner than expected. On May 21, 1990, while the Sosnieckis were covering their biggest story in two years (a devastating tornado that struck the nearby towns of Rogersville and Fordland) the *Citizen's* last working Compugraphic typesetter broke. But by the next morning, a deadline Tuesday, the *Citizen* office was equipped with two state-of-the-art Macintosh computers and a laser printer. Thanks to assistance from Lee Beasley, former owner of the nearby weekly *Ozark Headliner*, and his wife, Melanie, the *Citizen* actually was pasted up earlier than usual the first night with the new equipment. But the \$10,000 loan for to buy the new equipment took four years to pay off.

The Sosnieckis' first years in Seymour were long and hard. Hate mail in response to their impartial news coverage was not uncommon — some signed, some not. And with mortgage payments and increasing postage and printing prices eating into what little profits the *Citizen* produced, their personal income fell to half of what it was before they came to Seymour. The *Citizen* payroll in the fall of 1988 consisted of only one woman who typed news stories two days a week and a local high school senior who came in after school to help paste up ads. The owners did the rest of the work and got any money left after expenses.

But by 1997, the *Citizen* payroll was up to seven besides the publishers: an ad compositor and sales-

person for special projects; a typesetter and receptionist; an associate editor; a darkroom technician; and three mailing helpers. The *Citizen* had grown in other areas as well. Except during the slow winter months, it averaged 16 to 18 pages an issue, up from 12 to 14 pages just a few years earlier. Twice the paper published 26-page editions.

Under the Sosnieckis' ownership, paid circulation would increase 23 percent (from 1,638 to 2,012), gross revenues would more than double, and the *Citizen* would receive 52 journalism awards from the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors, the National Newspaper Association, the Missouri Press Association and the Kansas City Press Club.

In July 1992, the Sosnieckis and the *Citizen* were featured in a cover story in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch Magazine* about the weekly-newspaper business. The Sosnieckis tried to be as involved in community activities as the *Citizen's* long hours allowed. In 1991, they organized the meeting that led to the publishing of the *Seymour Area History Book*. In 1992, they resumed the *Citizen's* sponsorship of the Good Citizen Award for community service, originated by former publishers in 1949 but discontinued three years later. During Helen's presidency of the Seymour Area Chamber of Commerce in 1990, letters identifying Seymour High School were placed on the school, a "Music in the Park" series was started and a live Christmas tree was planted in the downtown park. The *Citizen* led the campaign for Webster County to have "911" emergency-telephone service, prompting the county commission to organize a committee that led to an election that approved 911. Gary brought the idea of a community-wide garage sale to Seymour after helping coordinate one in Hillsboro, Kansas. And in a 1993 column, he issued the challenge that helped convince Seymour High School alumnus Blaine Childress to donate up to \$300,000 for a new Seymour library. Gary served as the first chairman of the committee attempting to raise a matching \$300,000, and he maintained a master list of donors through the entire campaign. The *Citizen* sponsored the groundbreaking ceremony in 1997, and the library opened the next year.

As was the case in Humansville, the Sosnieckis campaigned for openness in local government, which put them at odds with one controversial Seymour school superintendent. Supporters of the school superintendent anonymously mass-mailed a single-sheet newspaper dubbed "The Seymour Free Press" just before an election to determine if the superintendent's supporters would continue to control the school board. The so-called "Free Press" attacked the *Citizen* and its publishers, alleging that the Sosnieckis were motivated by profit and pointing out that "They have no ties to this community." The tactic failed. The superintendent lost control of the board in the election and soon resigned under fire, and Helen's aggressive reporting of school-district finances was vindicated.

The *Citizen* faced a more-significant competitive challenge after the Sosnieckis moved printing of the newspaper to *The Daily Record* in adjoining Laclede County starting with the July 24, 1996, issue. The move was made to save money — an estimated \$13,000 a year — which in turn allowed the *Citizen* to stabilize subscription and advertising rates. But on

Aug. 14, the *Marshfield Mail*, which had printed the *Citizen* since 1978, began *Seymour Today*, a newspaper mailed free to every home in Seymour.

Although the *Marshfield Mail's* owner told readers in *Seymour Today's* first issue that they still would want to read the *Citizen*, he noted that the *Citizen* no longer was being printed in Webster County. "For those Seymour retailers who would prefer that their advertising dollars go to supporting the Webster County economy rather than bolstering Laclede County's economy, then *Seymour Today* will provide that alternative as well," he wrote.

The *Citizen* and *Seymour Today* competed vigorously for news and advertising. But virtually all Seymour business owners — including some who had been critical of the *Citizen's* reporting in the past — continued to support their hometown newspaper. One set a barrel on the sidewalk in front of his business for people to deposit their unwanted *Seymour Today's*. After 17 weeks, *Seymour Today* ceased publication. Forced by the competition to spend more time managing the *Citizen's* business affairs, the Sosnieckis turned over most of their newswriting duties to Dan Wehmer, the newly promoted associate editor (and today the *Citizen's* publisher). Thus, for the first time in the *Citizen's* 90 years, its front page no longer was being written primarily by the paper's owners.

The long hours once again took their toll on the Sosnieckis, who sold the paper to Dalton Wright and Lebanon Publishing Co. on Feb. 1, 1999. As the number of independently owned newspapers in the Ozarks dwindled, they felt that Wright, then president of the National Newspaper Association, would allow the *Citizen* to operate with local autonomy while also guaranteeing its survival against better-financed competitors. Indeed, just months after the *Citizen* sale, the independently owned *Marshfield Mail*, the *Citizen's* primary newspaper competitor, was sold to another newspaper group.

"We are burned out, worn out, out of spirit and out of gas," Gary Sosniecki wrote in his "Soz Sez" column the week the sale was announced. "If we don't have the energy to do a good job, the kind of job we can be proud of, then we would be doing a disservice to the community and the *Citizen* by staying."

The Sosnieckis moved to Lebanon, where on June 1 they became editors of *The Lebanon Daily Record* and Lebanon Publishing Co., which owns several weeklies. On Jan. 15, 2000, they also became publishers of *The Daily Record* and vice presidents of the company. In their first two years in Lebanon, *The Daily Record* won 46 awards for journalism excellence, including more awards than any other Missouri newspaper in the 2001 National Newspaper Association Better Newspaper Contest.

But even as vice presidents of Lebanon Publishing Co., they remain in nearly daily contact as consultants to their beloved *Citizen*.

Gary summed up the Sosnieckis' publishing philosophy in the closing paragraphs of his last *Webster County Citizen* column:

"Helen and I have tried to give you a good newspaper the past 10 1/2 years. We haven't always succeeded, but we've worked hard at it, and we've tried to do it honestly. If you remember us for nothing else, maybe you can remember us for that: 'They worked hard and were honest.'"

# grassroots editor

*A journal  
for newspeople*



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