

From Campus to Community: Reimagining News Coverage

FROM CAMPUS TO COMMUNITY:
REIMAGINING NEWS COVERAGE

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The University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI) bucked a trend when it decided to *start* a journalism/mass communication/professional communication program in 2008. At a time when other programs are downsizing or closing, it determined to take a gamble, believing that the skills students acquired in this area would help them in any area of life after UMPI.

UMPI is located in the heart of Aroostook County, the largest county east of the Mississippi. The County, as it is called, consists of 89 percent forest, 10 percent clearings and 1 percent water. A population of 72,000 lives on 6,671 square miles, giving a population density of 11 people per square mile. The two cities in the County – Caribou and Presque Isle – are small: not even 10,000 people. The rest of the population is widely scattered across smaller settlements.

Maine tells a tale of at least two distinctive regions: south and north. Southern Maine encompasses the major share of the population, the central government, the coastline, the majority of the state's media – just to name a few things. During the 2008 election, much was made of the dichotomies: southern Maine was characterized as liberal, lattes, fairly urban, minivans, jogging and racket ball. Northern Maine is noted for its hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, pickup trucks with gun racks in the back window, relative conservatism. Exercise in northern Maine entails hiking or sledding into a rustic camp and getting close to nature. Industry in northern Maine has traditionally involved logging and potatoes. But as the areas involving wood products – lumber and paper – have languished, so has the economy.

People who live in northern Maine remark that those who don't live in Maine think that Bangor is in the north. In actuality, it's not even halfway up the state. Bangor is home to our closest daily paper, the Bangor Daily News, the best paper in the state. It's also three hours south of Presque Isle. To get coverage of this area, something extraordinary must happen.

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Northern Maine does have a handful of weekly papers. Three out of four are owned by the Bangor Daily News. Although ad hoc is important to all papers, the weeklies at times are little more than shoppers. There's a great yearning for better media coverage among the people in northern Maine.

UMPI has a school paper, a tabloid called the University Times. It's designated a "club" and sustained by money from the student activities fund. Because it's a club, it is open to anyone to join, regardless of talent or experience. Neither the administration nor any department supports the paper financially. The paper does have an adviser. For some years this was a member of the English department faculty. For several years before I came to UMPI, the adviser was an adjunct who taught a journalism class or a mature student who had worked on the paper. The core staff for the paper usually came from a journalism class. There was no separation between the class/department and the paper as there is at some institutions. The paper was the core of any journalism education at the school. The adviser worked on the paper along with the students.

Few of the people involved with the paper in any capacity had any journalism experience. News coverage consisted of such items as the Miss UMPI contest: an event in which men dress up as women and hold a mock pageant (for some reason this sort of thing is very popular in northern Maine). The paper was filled with opinion pieces and letters and editorials from faculty members. Editing was low quality.

During academic year 2007-2008, the adviser left unexpectedly in the spring. The paper did stagger along until the end of the term. But there was trouble ahead. By the beginning of the next year, when I came on board, there was a meltdown among the remaining staff. There'd been no esprit de corps built up, no loyalty to anyone or anything.

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Because I was hired to develop a journalism/mass communication/professional communication program, it made sense that I advise the newspaper. I had a dream that the paper would better serve UMPI but also the greater community. We had a bully pulpit, financial support, a large potential audience. We needed to reach out to the community and find/create aspects that we could do better than anyone else. But first I needed a way to figure out how to get the paper published.

Because the previous year had ended with a whimper, there wasn't much staff carryover. I didn't meet anyone involved with the paper until after school had begun. The young woman who had been editor, Linda, was bright but tormented. She had conflicted feelings about continuing her involvement with the U Times. She had high hopes and plans. She promised great things. But she also battled a number of inner demons. Before the first issue ever came out, she evaporated into the ether. Within a short time, she left school.

The other carryover from the previous year was the assistant editor, an intensely shy, withdrawn young woman who professed to want to be a journalist and who had done an internship with a local weekly paper the preceding summer. Diana was uncertain of her skills, her goals, how she fit into the paper, what her prospects were for finishing school. When Linda failed to appear the night we were putting our first issue to bed, Diana was thrust into a leadership role she could not fill. It was clear that she knew nothing about design: she literally cut and pasted the current stories into a past issue. She didn't understand what she was doing. She wasn't able to communicate needs, plans, ideas or anything else. Diana was terrified of the idea of trying to manage any kind of staff. The staff holdovers had been tied to Linda through her badgering them. With her gone, there would be no help from any of them.

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But we still had a paper to put out. And we were way past due: it was now well into September. I was teaching a small journalism class. None of the students in the class had any journalism experience. But one of them had attended the initial meeting Linda had called to try to build up a staff. Although I barely knew the young man, I was desperate. I called Dan. He wasn't home, so I left a message. Within minutes, he returned my call. Since then we've joked that it was one of the more foolish things he's done. I asked if he could come in to help for an hour or two. Basically, from that point forward, he hasn't left.

We limped through that first issue. Diana wasn't able to give us much instruction: she herself was very unsure. I edited and proofread. Dan tried to help with layout. The issue that we produced at the end of that long night didn't look like much. Still, we were inordinately proud – and relieved. But that didn't last long.

Diana's behavior became increasingly withdrawn and depressed. We were trying to build a staff, but she didn't come to meetings. When we went to lay out the next issue, Diana appeared, looking ghastly. She lasted a half hour. She said that she was ill, had to go home and would return the next morning. That was the last I saw of her.

Unlikely Troika

So it was Dan and me. Between us, we had had about 30 minutes of training in Quark, the layout program that the U Times uses. But we got something put together. It wasn't everything that we needed, but our printers were very kind and patient. They gave us much guidance along the way. Slowly, we started crawling out of our hole, building a staff, gaining confidence.

During our first semester, we got by with a staff of three plus me. Dan, Paula and Lenore all brought differing skills and liabilities. Paula was an upper level English major. Although she

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found writing difficult, she decided to major in English because she thought that it was a key to a successful career. When she first came to the U Times, she had hopes of taking photos only. But with such a small staff, we couldn't afford to let anyone specialize. So we pulled her into writing as well. She had amazing perspectives and was the queen of the delayed lead. Editing her work, however, could reduce one to tears. Her work showed no indication that she'd ever heard of grammar, a dictionary or Spell Check. It was hard to believe that anyone at that age and level could write that poorly. Yet she was so disciplined and organized that she could go out, cover a story and write it up that same day. We couldn't get along without her.

Lenore was a quiet Canadian. She was a freshman who, like Paula, drifted into the U Times. She had led a deliberately sheltered life. She was an excellent student who spent a major portion of her time on her studies. She was a good writer but had an old-fashioned, storybook style. Although she took on some of her U Times assignments with some reluctance, she said repeatedly that they were good for her because they gave her the chance to experience things that she otherwise never would have.

Dan was a true diamond in the rough. Although he didn't have previous journalism experience, he had taken a printing class in high school. He had interest and talent in design and layout. He was a clean writer and picked up journalism style quickly and easily. The U Times also filled a void in his life. This was Dan's third school. He wanted to be a pilot and had gone to a prestigious aeronautical university – until his money had run out. Then he'd come home to finish his degree. He was a bright man with considerable leadership potential. At flight school, he'd been about to move into a position of authority. At UMPI, it was hard for him to become engaged. He was determined to get his degree and enter the Air Force. He was drifting toward a

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history degree because, of those degrees UMPI offered, he'd taken the most classes in that area.

He was a good student without putting forth much effort. He was looking for something.

When Dan became involved with the U Times, several of my colleagues warned me against him. They said that he was lazy, that he wouldn't put forth or be dependable. If we had had traditional classes, that might have been the case. But because we had a mission to bring people information they needed, because we were working on something more important than ourselves and producing a tangible product, Dan blossomed. Our journalism classes are run like a newsroom in some senses. We have our budget huddles, deadlines, assignments. Students don't want to let their colleagues down because they know that will mean that everyone else has to pick up the slack. Since he was editor, I gave Dan the chance to do some supervising and guiding. During layout weeks, Dan basically spent every waking hour that he wasn't in class or at work, working for the paper. I could never have compensated Dan for his time.

Dan naturally gravitated to design. Perhaps this was because it was the area we were weakest in. We had many writers. But no one else, including me, was proficient at layout. So Dan had a captivated audience for his work.

Because our staff was so thin, we became good at asking others to cover events for us. We would take as little or as much as people wanted to give us. Realizing that most people are nervous about writing for others and about journalism style, we assured them that we'd edit their pieces for style and content but that we'd try to preserve as much of their own voices as possible.

Community Correspondents

Without the staff to cover the surrounding communities (because of classes, work and numbers, we couldn't cover everything we wanted even on campus), we had to get creative. We

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needed members of the community to help us out. We thought that our best point of entry would probably be through the public schools. So I began sending out feelers to the high schools in our surrounding communities. From past experience, I knew that once the students got something published, they'd want to continue. I also knew that being published would elevate their work: they'd kick it up a notch, knowing that others would be reading what they produced. Since we publish biweekly, we have a very broad definition of news and of what's publication worthy. Breaking news is pretty much out of the question. For us, news is something beyond the typical, the normal – something of interest to others, that's relevant or useful. It doesn't have to be life changing. It just needs to have some sort of impact on some members of our local communities.

In an era of No Child Left Behind and numerous standardized tests, of test score accountability, teachers are understandably leery of additional requirements piled on. That's why we tried to sell this as a win-win situation in which teachers could double-dip. All the students in the surrounding high schools have writing classes every term. We explained that no student had to write for us all the time. If each student wrote a piece once a term (or, with larger schools, once a year), we'd have ample copy. With just a bit of thought, an assignment could be newsworthy and also fulfill class requirements.

There's been a lot of resistance and suspicion about this. For too many of the teachers, when they heard the word "newspaper," they thought the fit had to be with an elective creative writing class or that we wanted to establish a journalism class.

But we have had some success. Individual students at Caribou High School and Presque Isle High School eagerly embraced the chance to write for the University Times. It was difficult because they had to do this on their own time, without guidance. We wouldn't get their stories

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until the last minute, when we'd edit them and put them in the paper. We didn't have the opportunity to give the students feedback on their work. Still, the students were enthused. The young man from Caribou, who worked valiantly on the high school paper during his four years there will come to UMPI in the fall and concentrate on journalism. The young woman at Presque Isle, who will be a senior next year, will continue to write for us. According to her father, who works for UMPI, she considers writing for the paper a great opportunity.

By far our most productive connection was with the Washburn schools. They're a small district that lacks some of the resources of some of the large facilities. One way that they make up for this is by having a gifted and talented program that continues right through high school. The woman who runs that is an energetic young UMPI graduate who worked on the paper during her time here. So she was immediately receptive to our idea. Once Dan and I visited and presented our idea, she jumped at it. After that, we never had an issue without submissions from Washburn. At first the submissions were heavily literary. We got many poems and a "goddess of the issue" feature. We also got some book reviews of American literature classics. Teacher and students had assured us that nothing newsworthy ever happened at Washburn. But gradually, with feedback and scouring the school Web site, we were able to gently shift the types of stories. By our last issue, our Washburn submissions were all newsworthy: lots of photos and stories on an international food day in the kindergarten, raising funds for charity, a debate competition, school trips, the results of the spring carnival. We were starting to build some excellent coverage of Washburn High School and building a beachhead into the community.

It worked out well for Avril and her students, too. "My students had a GREAT time writing and brainstorming stories for the paper. I certainly plan to hit the ground running next year, and

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I'll spread the news with the GT directors at our first school year meeting. My students have copies of all of their articles...for many it helped pave the way for acceptance to college or some grants/scholarships.”

Thus the gifted and talented directors may be productive contacts. We're also hoping to nurture a partnership with the Caribou High School English department. Our previous contact was with the school librarian, who advises the school paper. But the paper was basically moribund, so that wasn't fruitful. The head of the Caribou High School English department is an adjunct at UMPI who has other strong ties to the school. She's also been open to other types of connections for her students with UMPI in the past. So we're hopeful. And we're looking for ways to nurture the connections that UMPI has with Aroostook County schools through Upward Bound and see if we can encourage students to submit writing to us periodically.

What's a Practicum?

So we have lots of potential to reach out into the community and provide increasingly in-depth coverage. We needed to do the same for UMPI.

Despite the fact that we started late (our first issue is dated October 2, 2008), we got on track and put out five issues (typical would be seven). My introductory reporting class made some contributions. The core staff of three really stretched themselves. We had great expectations for the following term.

My journalism class in the spring was a newspaper practicum. It was a small, mixed group. Most had no idea what a practicum was. Several had blundered in because it was an upper level English course (my program is a concentration in the English department) and they were looking to fulfill general education requirements. During the past semester, I've finished developing the

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program's courses and going through the formal proposal process. In the future, the practicum will be an advanced course that will fill the function of UMPI business incubator. It will give students the chance to run a media business. Whatever their talents – writing, graphics, design, photography, art, advertising, marketing, PR, business, to name a few – the University Times can use them. It will provide a nurturing environment in which they can try things out, leap for the stars, sometimes fall, pick themselves up and try again. It should certainly be more of a business. But it's also a petri dish in which wonderful things can develop. We provide a sheltered workshop to some degree that makes that possible.

But in the spring of 2009, the practicum was a small, mixed group of very differing abilities and skill sets. We lost a few students right away. They hadn't anticipated something that would require such a level of entrepreneurship, that would take them out of the classroom so much – that would, in truth, require so much work. Ultimately, we bottomed out at five students. Two of these, Dan and Paula, had worked on the University Times the previous semester. Their prior contacts and expectations were mixed blessings. Perhaps because I had treated Dan as a true editor and had given him considerable authority in the newspaper, he sometimes tried to take over the class. He frequently struggled with interpersonal relationships. Paula's writing continued to be a struggle, although it did improve. She learned a great deal from inputting edits. In addition to her struggles with spelling and grammar, one of her big problems was concern with what everyone else in class and on the staff did. This led to a few angry scenes, although she did make it through the term.

A few people joined the newspaper staff without being in the class. Most were current or former students of mine. One entered a U Times writing contest, won, met staff and became

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involved in that way. Most of the newspaper club staff members expect to continue to be involved. Some are going to take the introductory journalism class in the fall. It looks as though we may finally have a dedicated sports writer, something we have pined for all year.

Pausing to Reflect Upon the Journey

At the end of the academic year, we held an open house to thank the community for their support. It was also an opportunity for the community to congratulate the students on all that they'd accomplished. The majority of the staff came together, dressed in their University Times T-shirts. I felt like a proud parent.

I also invited members of the campus community and students in my practicum class to share their insights into what the newspaper means to the campus, the greater community and them. The following representative sample paints a fairly accurate portrait.

As our dean said, we're still very much a work in progress. But she added that, even now, we're a good piece for the campus community.

Sue Pinette has been involved with UMPI in some capacity for 26 years. Her husband is a professor here. She herself is an administrative assistant in the media relations office. Both of her children go to school here. So she could offer some unique perspectives on the role of the paper, its evolution and potential.

I have seen many good things emerge in connection with the U Times this past year. The newspaper itself has changed. It has a more professional look and feel. Standards are higher. A greater number of students are doing the writing, where in the past, editorials from faculty or staff often filled the pages.

The UTimes has been setting new ground in their coverage of controversial topics such as the misappropriation of funds by a student club and coverage of the Gay/Lesbian Alliance as

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a campus group. As a rule, controversial topics have been a “rare find” in any local media - print or broadcast - campus or community.

As those “spores have been planted”¹ in more and more students, the newspaper has expanded to accommodate the talents and skills of each. My daughter’s training and interest in graphic arts have an outlet at the U Times. As busy as she has been this past year with work and classes, she enthusiastically found the time to create signs, pamphlets, displays, and dabble with the new U Times Web site. I’m certain there are numerous examples of others who’ve found an outlet for their passions at the U Times. I see tremendous potential here for further writing, artwork, photographs, editorials, etc., from students, not just majoring in English, but those majoring in art, political science, business, athletics, and other programs at the university.

One of my colleagues, Mike Amey, who has a joint appointment in both the English and education departments, has often commented verbally on the transformation of the University Times. He offered a thoughtful written reflection.

Let me speak first to the way that the paper has transformed the students working for it. When I first met Dan in my advanced college composition class, I was distinctly unimpressed. Intuitively I knew he was smart, but he didn't seem engaged by anything that I presented to him. Had you told me at the time that only a year later he would be working late into the nights for the school paper and that he would be taking great pride in his product, I wouldn't have believed you.

Dan may well be the most invested of your journalists, but he isn't the only one who takes pride in the paper. Lana clearly enjoys the freedom she's been given in her columns. Strikingly, I see her developing in two different directions. On the one hand, she provides witty columns on the movies, and, on the other hand, she has embraced her role of investigative journalist, and has written stories that are extremely valuable to this community. I think it is a credit to you, her and the others that these hard hitting real news stories have been published . . .

I also know that faculty and students look forward to reading the U Times. Prior to this year, the only things that generated much discussion in the U Times were the controversial letters between students . . . and faculty . . . I think that the entire tone of the paper has been elevated and that what we're beginning to see is the development of serious journalism. In particular, I'm beginning to see the type of dialogue that good papers engender. In the paper

¹ I often joke, with much seriousness, that people make a fatal mistake with me by talking to me the first time. Once they’ve done that, I’ve planted my spores and, ultimately, there’s no escape.

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and in the community, important ideas are being discussed. Hopefully, in the long term, the paper will contribute to getting students and faculty more involved in the campus life.

I'm also really pleased by the inclusion of high school journalists. What we are seeing is the development of not only their writing skills, but also their relationship with the University of Maine at Presque Isle. UMPI needs to do much, much more to involve middle school and high school students in learning activities. We need to be hosting science fairs, film nights, excursions to the museums and cultural events - in short, we need to be doing what the U Times already does with the high schools. Let's hope that whatever the U Times has is contagious!

A Place for Everyone

There's no better way to conclude this than with some of the reflections of those who discovered the U Times for the first time this past spring. They entered the class not knowing what to expect, gave far more than they ever contemplated and made connections that they'll draw on for the rest of their lives.

Because our newspaper has a teaching mission, we don't turn anyone away. Thus the level of skill has a broad range. But since we are so chronically short staffed, we can't afford a prolonged training period before people are out covering stories: people learn as they go, with lots of guidance and support. We do try to ease people into journalism, giving them assignments at which they can be successful. But, as any journalist can recall, those initial assignments can feel like being thrown into the deep end without a life preserver.

It was certainly that way for Alice, a Canadian student in her last semester of classes. She was majoring in education with an emphasis in English. Although she's taken at least a dozen other English classes, she kept telling herself that she was "crazy" to do the newspaper course.

I will never forget the first story that I had to cover for the newspaper. It was the battered women's shelter ski day benefit. I was so nervous. I must have looked like a lost child wandering around there. The first person that I approached to interview was a woman with the shelter, and I think she knew that I was a rookie at this, too. Nonetheless, once the day was over and I had talked to a few people, I felt better. Then it was time to actually sit down

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and write the story. Once again, I was lost. I am used to writing papers and have definitely done my fair share of English papers, but this one was different. I used the handout that you gave us the first week of class, the one that stated our writing essentials. After looking at the examples...it became a lot easier to write. Once I was done, I was so pleased with myself. Who would have thought that I could actually write some form of journalism?

Overall, I am happy that I took this class now, and looking back, I guess I wasn't as crazy as I once thought.

Alice still plans to continue on her journey to becoming a teacher. But during her time with the paper, she made valuable contributions, including creating a column on our local animal shelter that helped save and improve lives. She also gained a new appreciation for journalism. And, as she says, "At least now, if I ever decide that education isn't for me, then I have some other experiences to list on my resume."

Renee didn't plan to take the class for credit. She was an art major and an English minor in her last semester at UMPI. She had an interest in graphic arts that she'd pursued during a semester exchange program in California. After her return, she'd found little application for her graphics skills. As her mother, who works at UMPI and with whom I've discussed the U Times vision, knew, Renee needed a challenge. And so, as we joke, her mother "sold" Renee to me. She persuaded Renee to come talk with me about the U Times. Renee emerged from the conversation with new purpose. She became our graphic artist, creating posters, brochures, signs. She also did some pinch hitting, covering an occasional story. She attended classes so that she'd know what was going on. Thus, when she learned that she was three credits short of graduating, the practicum filled the niche nicely. Renee's perspectives blend words and visuals.

What makes Journalism 386 unique from many of the other courses at UMPI is its practical aspects. Many parts of the course branched into nontraditional modes of learning. From going out to cover stories to preparing the paper for distribution, the course really forces its participants to leap out of the comfortable monotony of a classroom setting. Though this can be straining for full-time students with jobs, friends and families (and who

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may occasionally feel the need to eat, sleep and bathe), it is important to understand that nontraditional work is more representational of the working world than simply reading books, reading essays, writing journals, cramming for exams and then forgetting about the whole mess two weeks later: or in my case, much, much sooner. Even more crucial to the success of the course was the fact that it required students to become involved with the community, both on and off campus. We can overlook the fact that journalism is ultimately a form of communication: that is, people interacting with one another . . .

Of course, one of the best parts of the class was the sense of community it generated. I've taken many English courses in which the students were asked to sit in a circle and discuss, but there was always this lingering sense of detachment from everyone in the room. It was like the students and sometimes even the teachers were a bouquet of helium balloons waiting to be cut loose so that they might drift off into the atmosphere, or perhaps just a very gnarly tree branch. In Journalism 386, the work on the U Times generated a sense of engagement. We all knew which stories the other students were covering, shared potential sources and insight and always managed not to choke one another in any unbridled bouts of frustration. Though restraint may have been a bit forced at times, we ultimately succeeded. All in all, it was some excellent training for negotiations in the professional world, and I felt all that much closer to my classmates for what we've managed to endure and accomplish together.

Lana was our most talented writer. She was a nontraditional student, about 10 years older than her classmates. Her writing was so good that she worked as a tutor at the UMPI Writing Center. Her career plans were to serve her country in some area of international relations. Lana had the confidence and attitude to make her a great columnist: her movie reviews were exemplary. But she also had the maturity to handle our first real investigative piece about a student club's misappropriation of funds and more widespread problems in student government. Lana threw herself into her work to the point where she sometimes became consumed by it. She struggled for balance, not only with how much time to give to journalism but how to assume different roles within it. It was hard for her not to wear her heart on her sleeve. But when she could, she created work that raised awareness and began a campus dialogue unlike anything the paper had done in the past. Despite her resentment for the black hole that journalism can be, Lana gets it. She understands what journalism can mean, can do. She plans to continue her work with the U Times. Her words provide a fitting benediction on the profession and its power.

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I love writing for the U Times. There were times while I was trekking back and forth on campus, interviewing people, that I felt bitten by the journalism bug. It is fun! It can be exciting, especially when I get a great scoop and only have a few hours to write it! “Busted” was fun to write, even if it wasn’t the biggest scoop on campus. I think that has to do with the sense of solidarity the staff shares. My favorite time to write has been in the U Times journalism lab, with you and Dan around, giving me feedback. It feels more real . . .

I’m a little offended now, when hearing or seeing how journalism writing is treated as the red-headed stepchild of writing among faculty. It is hard work, it is difficult and it is a struggle. Writing IS writing and how can it be said that journalism, or any type of writing, isn’t REAL writing? There are stylistic differences, but it’s all real . . .

So, thank you for introducing me to the wacky world of journalism – where real writing can produce emotion – whether it is anger, sadness, or indignation. Where writing can produce change, show us courage or lead to justice. Where writing can be a common voice and where writing can be the watchdog over groups/governments that would otherwise run roughshod over the masses. Thanks for the opportunity that allowed me to do real writing!

We have a long way to go to live up to our slogan: Journalism for Northern Maine. But our other mantra is that the ‘Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with a Single Step.’ And we’ve just kept putting those steps together. Now we’re ready to put our track shoes on and take journalism here where it hasn’t been before. Please wish us happy running.