

**Extension Journalism:
Teaching Students the Real World and
Bringing a New Type of Journalism to a Small Town**

By Al Cross

Associate Extension Professor, School of Journalism and Telecommunications, and
Director, Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, University of Kentucky

al.cross@uky.edu

Presented at Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium XIX,
Co-sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media at Kansas State University,
the National Newspaper Association and the NNA Foundation
NNA Annual Convention and Trade Show Phoenix, AZ, Sept. 12-15, 2013

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ABSTRACT

Since January 2008, students in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications at the University of Kentucky have covered the rural but newsy community of Midway (city population 1,647, census tract and ZIP code about 2,500), about 15 miles from the campus and in the same local telephone calling area, but in another county. Their work has been published on a web site and blog maintained by their instructor, who is an associate professor in the university's Extension Title series of faculty appointments.

The primary objective of the project has been to give soon-to-graduate journalism majors real-world experience in covering a rural community, its issues and its people, in mild competition with a countywide, weekly newspaper that does not publish news on its website. Students are required to cover city council meetings and are assigned beats from which they develop story ideas. Their stories can be presented in straight text, video package, photo gallery or a combination of platforms.

The secondary objective is to provide coverage of local government and public issues, as well as timely features, to a community that once had its own newspaper but lost it 75 years ago. The city government has been highly factionalized, but the weekly newspaper has downplayed that. The project's coverage of council meetings is more detailed, and it does not take no for an answer when seeking public records; when the mayor refused to give a reporter the city budget he had proposed to the council, the project sought a binding opinion from the state attorney general and won, making new law in Kentucky on that point. After the weekly paper published a one-source story about the departing president of the town's private college, the project published a story revealing why the president was asked to resign, and the weekly ran the story.

Another objective is to show the potential value of online journalism to rural communities and perhaps to the county newspaper, which did not put news online at the start of the project but now has occasional Facebook posts and is considering its next online move. The newspaper and the project cooperate; the paper sends its pertinent pages to the instructor when it sends them to its printer, for review by students in that evening's weekly class meeting. The editor of the paper speaks to the class, and occasionally publishes stories by students in the class.

The project also constitutes research into methods and best practices of online community journalism; involvement of students in reporting and photography outside their normal ambit; the direction, supervision and editing of those students; avoiding conflicts between the need to publish information in a timely, useful manner and the need to provide the best instruction; and building and maintaining community relationships that facilitate reporting and readership while upholding journalistic principles. For example, when the instructor told the mayor about the project, the mayor said the city would be happy to take over the website when the project was over; the instructor replied, "I don't think it's a good idea for an agency of government to take over an organ of mass communication." The long-term plan is to largely turn over the project over to a volunteer community board, with continuing oversight and technical assistance from the instructor and continued involvement of students.

REVIEW: Community websites with student reporting are common, but not in rural areas

The idea of a community news outlet with stories reported and edited by journalism students is not new. When the University of Missouri opened the first school of journalism on Sept. 14, 1908, it also started publishing the Columbia Missourian, a newspaper that covered not only the university community but the surrounding town of Columbia, which had a population of

5,651 at the 1900 census and a daily paper that had been founded in 1901. Both still publish, and the community is no longer rural; Columbia's population nearly doubled by 1920, exceeded the 50,000 threshold for metropolitan areas by 1970, and at the 2010 census stood at 69,101.

In the last decade or so, dozens of college journalism programs have established websites to provide news coverage of communities that lack their own local news outlets or get scant coverage from outlets that cover a metropolitan area. The form, structure and administration of these sites vary widely, but generally a member of the journalism faculty acts as the *de facto* editor and publisher and students contribute reporting, photography, video stories, audio podcasts, web editing and sometimes copyediting. In some cases, professional journalists and community members contribute content and/or collaborate with student journalists.

Examples of community news sites produced solely by students and faculty include the Hunts Point Express, www.huntspointexpress.com, in which students at Hunter College and cover the Hunts Points and Longwood areas of the Bronx (one of several such sites in New York City); the University of California's Mission Loc@l, <http://missionlocal.org>, covering the Mission District in San Francisco; Texas Christian University's The 109, <http://www.the109.org>, covering ZIP Code 76109; California State University's 10 Valley, <http://10valley.com>, covering the San Gabriel Valley's largely Asian and Latino community; La Salle University's Germantown Beat, <http://so-media.lasalle.edu/germantownbeat>; and Columbia College's Chicago Talks (www.chicagotalks.net) and Austin Talks (<http://austintalks.org>), covering five Central Chicago ZIP codes and "Chicago's largest neighborhood."

Most such sites are aimed at a local audience, though some have a broader mission; for example, The Miami Planet at the University of Miami, www.themiamiplanet.org, says it "focuses on South Florida and its environment and is aimed at a worldwide audience.

Few student-produced community news sites serve rural areas. The University of Montana's Reznet News, <http://www.reznetnews.org>, covers the six Indian reservations in the state. Perhaps the most rural site serving a single community is The Rockbridge Report, <http://rockbridgereport.washingtonandlee.net>, a multimedia site produced by Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Va., has covered Rockbridge County, census population 22,307, since 1985. Also notable is West Virginia Uncovered, <http://wvuncovered.wvu.edu>, a site created by West Virginia University to help the state's rural, weekly newspapers adopt and embrace online, multimedia reporting. Students and faculty produce stories and provide training for the papers, but the site does not function as one serving a single community.

Establishing a rural community news site

The challenges of establishing and maintaining a student-produced community news site in a rural area are considerable, including travel time for students and faculty, students' schedules, their initial unfamiliarity with the community, and the lack of cooperation they may encounter with community members who are unfamiliar with the site.

Another obstacle is the availability and commitment of the faculty members involved. Typical journalism-faculty assignments include little time for field work and public service, but assigning, monitoring, editing and publishing student work takes more time than grading typical class work.

In the case described here, the faculty member, this writer, has an assignment that appears to be unique in journalism and perhaps uniquely suited to creating and establishing a news site for a rural community. My faculty appointment in the University of Kentucky School of Journalism and Telecommunications is in the Extension Title series, originally created for

faculty who support the work of the federal-state-local Cooperative Extension Service, the 99-year-old national network of specialists who bring new knowledge and best practices to local communities – originally agricultural, then rural, now universal.

My appointment is in the Extension Title series because I am director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, which was created to help rural journalists define the public agenda in their communities through strong reporting and commentary. The Institute publishes The Rural Blog, a daily digest of events, trends, issues, ideas and journalism from and about rural America, at <http://irjci.blogspot.com>. It is a source of information and inspiration for rural journalists, primarily at rural newspapers.

As an associate professor in the School of Journalism and Telecommunications, 20 percent of my effort is in teaching, generally one class per semester. In the fall I teach Community Journalism, JOU 485, a broad course dealing with both the editorial and business sides of community news media but also including a strong reporting and writing component. When I began teaching in the 2004-05 school year, my spring course was on special topics, varying each year but generally dealing with elections and public issues such as the future of tobacco-dependent communities.

In search of a special topic for the 2008 spring semester, I was inspired by two things: my drive to work in Lexington from home in Frankfort, the most direct route for which took me through the town of Midway, population 1,647 (2010 census); and a University of North Carolina news site, The Carrboro Commons (www.carrborocommons.org), with student stories about the town of Carrboro, a town of 19,000 bordering Chapel Hill. Creation of the site in December 2006 quickly inspired some Carrboro residents to start a weekly newspaper for the

town, which had never had its own paper.¹ The Carrboro Citizen, which republished some Carrboro Commons stories, ceased publication in October 2012, but some Carrboro residents may revive it.²

Could the Carrboro experiment be replicated in Midway? There were several differences: Carrboro is almost 12 times as large as Midway, and is an easy bicycle or bus ride from the UNC-Chapel Hill campus, while Midway is 15 miles and 25 minutes from the UK campus, in another county. Also, UNC's journalism enrollment is much larger than Kentucky's, limiting the pool of available students.

However, there were some similarities: Jock Lauterer, the UNC lecturer who runs Carrboro Commons and the Carolina Community Media Project, is a former community newspaper editor and publisher; I had been a weekly newspaper editor and manager during the first three years of my career, in 1975-78, had maintained contact with many community editors and publishers during my career at The (Louisville) Courier-Journal, which for most of that time included the entire state of Kentucky as its coverage area. Also, my primary job at UK is to help rural journalists cover issues, much as Lauterer helps those in North Carolina with the craft of journalism, and a site for Midway could provide a laboratory for testing the application of broadly accepted "best practices" in journalism to a small community. My route to work would make it easy for me to check on things in Midway regularly, and I knew there was plenty of news in Midway, a bucolic railroad town with several good restaurants, antique shops and other tourism-related businesses. Finally, a news site for Midway would be a service to a rural community that is geographically isolated from the rest of its county and once had its own newspaper, the Blue Grass Clipper, which died in 1938, about the time highways supplanted

¹ <http://blogs.web.jomc.unc.edu/carrborocommons/?p=230>

² <http://blogs.web.jomc.unc.edu/carrborocommons/?p=7075>

railroads as the main transportation arteries. Midway residents are reminded of that in every edition of The Woodford Sun, the weekly newspaper serving Midway and the rest of Woodford County, which runs news items from old Clippers on its Midway page each week.

The Carrboro Commons' inspiration of The Carrboro Citizen also suggested that a news site for Midway might spur beneficial change at The Woodford Sun. The Sun has been owned since 1942 by the Chandler family, first by A.B. "Happy" Chandler, who was a U.S. senator, commissioner of baseball and twice governor. His son, Albert B. Chandler Jr., has been publisher since 1957. The Sun has a strong news product and a healthy business position; its household penetration in Woodford County (pop. 25,000) is approximately 48 percent, good for a traditional weekly paper published in a near suburb of Lexington, a city of 300,000.

The Sun has a website³, but the only news it offers are obituaries, agendas of government meetings and local club meeting schedules. The Sun's management says putting news online would cannibalize its print circulation of approximately 5,200, which is its only basis for advertising. However, the newspaper serves a county that has some of the highest income and education levels in Kentucky, and a population that is strongly oriented toward Lexington, so its policy may be short-sighted at a time when Americans are increasingly getting their news online.

As a former editor and manager of weekly newspapers, I presumed that the Sun might view creation of a news site for Midway as a source of competition, so the first person I approached about the idea (outside the UK School of Journalism and Telecommunications) was Stephen Peterson, managing editor of the Sun. In a visit to his office in the county seat of Versailles (pop. 8,568), I told him that our intent was not to supplant the Sun as a source of news for Midway, but to supplement it; that we would make student stories available for republication in the Sun; and that if we stopped using the site, the Sun would have the right of first refusal to

³ <http://woodfordsun.com>

take it over. Peterson had spoken to my Community Journalism class, and I invited him to speak to students in the new course, which was titled Advanced Writing for Mass Media: Online Community News Site, JOU 499-401. I named the site Midway Messenger.

The second outside person approached about the project was Midway Mayor Tom Bozarth, because I expected coverage of city government to be a linchpin of the students' coverage and wanted to pave the way for it. Bozarth had been mayor for a year, and one of the issues he was dealing with was the city's website, which needed improvement. When I described the project to him, he immediately suggested that the city could take over the Messenger website when I was through with it. I immediately replied, "Well, I don't think it would be a good idea to turn over an organ of mass communication to a unit of government."

That conversation was a harbinger of the Midway Messenger's relations with Bozarth and other city officials, which would be more adversarial than they had been accustomed to having with The Woodford Sun – but not as adversarial as the relationship of a metropolitan newspaper to its primary government. In that would be lessons about community journalism.

Turning students into journalists who serve a community

From the start of the project, the initial assignment for students in JOU 499-401 has been to cover a meeting of the Midway City Council. This gives them an opportunity to meet several of the major players in the community, see them in action, familiarize themselves with issues in the community – and do it as a group, which adds to their comfort level. I try to accompany any student on his or her first reporting trip to Midway, and for the first council meeting offer to provide transportation; that gives us an opportunity to discuss Midway, what we see on the road

leading to it, and what may happen at the meeting. (Students in the course must have passed a 300-level reporting course that includes coverage of a Lexington city council meeting.)

Each student writes his or her own story about the council meeting, and I blend them together under a multiple byline. The meeting is held on Monday or Tuesday evening; at class on Wednesday evening, we compare the different approaches to the stories and I note common mistakes that they need to avoid. The follow-up assignment is to compare, in writing, their composite story to the one in *The Woodford Sun*.

We are able to do that in real time, because shortly after the project began, Steve Peterson agreed to send me PDFs of the pertinent pages of the *Sun* as soon as he shipped them to his printer, usually late Wednesday morning. He does this each week without being reminded, and a review of those pages has become a standard item in each class session, including those in my Community Journalism class in the fall, as an example of a well-edited weekly newspaper. It almost always provides several story ideas, and such timely tips are invaluable. Stories in the *Sun* also provide an opportunity to background the students on issues and personalities.

Because the project has proven successful, students in the fall class are now given the option of covering Midway as the larger share of their reporting and writing assignments. Other students in the course are also encouraged to write one or two Midway stories. That has made the project even more successful, because it provides coverage during most of the year.

One pitfall of college-produced community news sites is the lack of coverage during vacations, especially in the summer, which can give such sites a transient, dilettantish feel and lose some of the community connections built up during semesters. My Extension Title appointment, which is year-round, makes it easier for me to take time to cover meetings and write stories during those periods, though the threshold for publishing a story is higher; it must

have immediate news value. (I drive to and from work through Midway on most days, just to keep an eye on things, and stop in about once a week.)

For example, I have done vacation-time stories about the city council's actions regarding a failed industrial park that threatened the town's financial stability; the resignation of a former mayor from the council, which began healing a long factional dispute; and the dedication of a Midway branch library, something the town had sought for years.

Even during semesters, it's more practical for me to do certain stories because of my background as a political writer in the nearby state capital of Frankfort. Those include stories on elections, the legislature's change of the city's official classification, and local residents' involvement in state government and politics.

Our coverage is not always done in Midway. Because the town is surrounded by prime farmland, much of it on which Thoroughbred horses are raised, we cover the horse industry and land-use controversies, which have dominated the politics of Woodford County for 40 years. If possible, I accompany students to events and/or initial interviews on such broader topics – to make sure they get the story we need and to give them guidance on reporting and writing.

But on most stories, students just have a discussion with me about the topic and how to approach it, and do at least the initial reporting on their own. Both courses are platform-agnostic, so broadcast students can produce video or audio stories, and those inclined toward photography can do photo essays if the subject matter fits.

A member of the founding Midway Messenger class, Monica Wade, wrote in an email, “The experience was invaluable in that it gave us what we really needed as students: the opportunity and freedom to teach ourselves how to be journalists and to watch our hard work and dedication come to life via our publication.”

“The workshop, hands-on style of instruction, made it seem more of an internship than a class,” wrote Richard Yarmy, a student in successive fall and spring classes. He said his experience taught him “how reporting on a community connects you to that community — events take on more personal importance and heighten your interest level.” He said the work also resulted in “honing writing skills in a real time environment covering topics that had significance to a real community, its concerns, challenges and opportunities.”

A student from Versailles, Morgan Rhodes, wrote: “I hear students in other majors complaining about how they feel ill-prepared for the real world after their college experience. By writing for the Midway Messenger, I felt extremely prepared. . . . I felt confident in interviews after graduation and could pull from my experiences in Midway to answer questions about situations journalists can encounter. Besides the opportunity to gain real experience, a place to publish my work and to adapt my writing to a targeted, online audience, I am also grateful that I was forced to cover a variety of stories. From city council meetings to vultures, I learned how to approach people of different stations and stories from different angles. I gained a lot of confidence in my interviewing abilities and confidence in coverage of events outside of sports.

Rhodes, who was in the spring 2012 course, said writing for an online but small-town publication was especially valuable: “In this job market, it is more important than ever to be able to write live. It truly is an art to keep coverage up-to-date through continuous editing, links and photographs. Along with online journalism, there is also an art to writing for a small town. I learned that small-town audiences value news just as much if not more than larger cities and appreciate coverage. Seemingly overlooked often, small towns are hotbeds for interesting stories and deserve full coverage.”

For Julia Myers, the course in spring 2013 was a rite of passage: “While all of my journalism courses at UK provided me with useful skills to improve my writing, JOU 499 was the only course that gave me a realistic taste of what being a journalist is all about. The deadlines, source requirements, and the reporter/editor relationship between me and the professor made it feel like I was working in a newsroom. I have always been comfortable writing, but this course really forced me outside of my comfort zone. . . . JOU 499 gave me the tools, experience and confidence I needed to think of myself as a journalist, and not just a student.”

Autumn Harbison, who was in the first Midway class and is now a lawyer, says the concept could be replicated. “I loved my experience writing for the people of Midway. I’m from a relatively small town so I know how rural journalism sometimes has its problems. Every community, no matter how small, has news and its citizens deserve a publication of its own. I’m proud that we could do that for Midway. Blogs are so easy to manage and accessible. There is no reason a publication like this couldn’t be implemented in more areas through university programs or even as a teaching exercise for high school journalism classes.”

A different approach

Because we are attempting to prepare students for almost any sort of job in journalism, the standards for reporting, writing, editing and presentation in these courses are essentially the same as those at metropolitan newspapers and broadcast stations. That means we do stories, and take approaches to stories, that are not found in most rural community newspapers.

One example was a project favored by virtually everyone in Midway, construction of a nursing home and assisted-living housing complex. After 12 years of effort and many disappointments, the city, the developer and local volunteers finally found financing and a

suitable piece of property, which needed rezoning. In advance of the zoning hearing, we did a story that not only detailed the volunteers' efforts but the views of the adjoining farm owner, who had never expected what she called "a subdivision" next to her homestead.

The most continuing example of our different approach has been our frank treatment of the political situation in this little town. For a few years, the six-member council was split between factions aligned with Mayor Bozarth and with Midway Renaissance, a volunteer group that conducted many civic activities and improvements. Our stories mentioned and sometimes highlighted the factional split; one by Dick Yarmy began, "The March 21 Midway City Council meetings unfolded like a drama in two acts. Act 1 was an example of city government at its best. Act 2 showed the strain and tension of two factions reaching to understand each other."⁴

The Woodford Sun covered the meetings and reported the disagreements and split votes, but rarely if ever referred to the factions. In class, I said that is not uncommon among community newspapers, which may figure that most anyone in a town who cares to know about such a thing knows it already, from observation and word of mouth. But I noted that Midway is a bedroom community for many residents who work in nearby towns and may not be as much into the talk of the town as those who spend most of their waking hours in Midway.

The presence of the factions made covering city government more interesting for students, and gave them valuable experience. In an email, Yarmy said he learned "how to evaluate newsmakers' personality and communication styles . . . to identify a source's agenda in qualifying information, [and] to be mindful not to 'carry their water'," the phrase that I often use in cautioning students to take care that their reporting and writing fulfill the journalistic standard of independence.

⁴ <http://midwayky.blogspot.com/2011/03/last-weeks-council-meetings-drama-in-2.html>

Making law, and an adversary

Frank, professional news coverage often pleases one side more than another, and in this case it made our relationship with Mayor Bozarth more adversarial. That became even more so after we paid closer attention to the city budget, the government's basic policy document.

We noted in 2009 that the city was sitting on more than \$1 million in cash though its non-utility budget was less than \$1 million, but our initial report overstated the amount because the student reporter didn't fully understand the budget and didn't ask enough questions, and I was guilty of the latter omission.

The next year, when the mayor mentioned at a council meeting that he had sent copies of his proposed budget to council members, I had my student reporter write out an open-records request during the meeting for a copy of the budget. The mayor replied that he did not have to release the budget until the council had approved it, which was a departure from past practice and seemingly a reaction to the previous year's reporting.

With the help of the Kentucky Press Association, we appealed the denial of the request to the state attorney general, whose decisions in open-government cases have the force of law unless overturned by a court on appeal. There had never been a decision on this exact point, probably because it's standard practice for local governments to release their proposed budgets, and some earlier decisions did not lean toward openness, so this decision made new law. The city did not appeal.

The next year, when the council openly discussed the budget at a meeting, the mayor refused to give it to us unless we filed a written open-records request, to which the law allowed him three business days to respond. We obtained the proposed budget from a former mayor who had joined the council and the anti-mayor faction.

Earlier, the mayor had started a weekly column on the Midway page in The Woodford Sun, and in one edition had praised the newspaper for how it covered Midway and contrasted that with coverage provided by “other publications” from outside the county. (This may have been one reason that we had a record number of page views, 4,550, in May 2011.)

All this prompted me to ask for a private, one-on-one meeting with the mayor, at which I explained to him that our approach to coverage had to be as professional as possible in order to provide the best real-world instruction to students, and that we were not going to change our approach. Regarding his desire for more positive coverage, I noted several feature stories we had done that reflected well on Midway. We discussed several specific instances of coverage and, I think, left the meeting with a better understanding of each other. I later assigned Dick Yarmy to write a profile of the mayor, the news peg being that he was on the ladder to become president of the Kentucky League of Cities.

Around this time, the mayor had been voicing his displeasure with the U.S. Postal Service and plans to change some of the operations at the Midway post office. This was part of a national plan, which we were covering on The Rural Blog, so I began sharing information with him on that topic that I thought he might find useful. A few months later, he used the last three sentences of his column to compliment the commentary I had delivered the night before on Kentucky Educational Television’s election-night coverage. I thanked him for that, and mentioned that Yarmy had completed the profile but I was holding it for a less busy time. He replied, “Thank you. Really enjoy learning about politics in the state.”

The frequency of our emails increased. It seemed that the mayor’s new statewide role, and mine as a political commentator who writes a fortnightly column for The Courier-Journal, had provided us an area of common ground outside Midway.

An unexpected investigation

At 4:35 p.m. on Tuesday, March 20, 2012, I received an emailed news release from Midway College announcing that its president, William Drake, had resigned, saying that he had “largely accomplished” the major goals the trustees set for him when he got the job 10 years earlier, the major exception being a pharmacy school being built 140 miles away in the hometown of a donor who had promised most of the money for it. Two months earlier, the college had announced that the school would be operated by the University of Charleston (W.Va.). “With the shift of that project to now become a partnership with another institution, I feel my work on this initiative from concept to date is complete and now is the time to move on,” the release quoted Drake as saying.

The release did not mention a new job for Drake, so the clear implication was that his resignation had been requested – and it was easy to infer that the pharmacy school might have been the reason. I was able to confirm that quickly with sources in Midway, but was not in a position to launch into an investigative story. If that was going to be done, I wanted students to do it. I had two or three students whom I thought capable of doing such work, but we were past midterm, their story plans had been set, and they had demanding class and/or work schedules.

The Woodford Sun ran the news release verbatim on its Midway page. The next week, it started on its front page a 2,000-word story about Drake with only one source: Drake. It accepted his stated reason for leaving, and its only mention of future work was that “He believes he may be called to lead a similar institution,” in the same way that ministers are called in his denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

When I read this story, I was very disappointed in the Sun, and knew that the Midway Messenger had to step into the breach and do the best job it could of telling the community what

had caused the resignation of the chief executive of the city's largest employer and taxpayer. I took the story to class that evening and asked for volunteers to work on the story with me. One of the students I had in mind stepped forward, and two others helped out because they were in advantageous positions. One lived in Woodford County and interviewed students at the college; the other was from a town near Paintsville. He interviewed the donor-trustee, who was not very cooperative, but he also looked up public records on the donor and the pharmacy school building, took pictures of the site and placed it on a map.

We had about a month to do the story, and the going was slow, partly because it was a busy time for all of us. I was able to confirm with a trustee I knew that Drake had been asked to resign due to his mishandling of the pharmacy-school project, but the details were still unclear, so we didn't have much of a story. Other trustees wouldn't talk, but word got around that we were making inquiries, and during finals week, we got a call from a source who claimed to know what we needed to know. At about that time, the University of Charleston announced that it would not complete and operate the pharmacy school.

The source met with me and the lead reporter on the story, Cassidy Herrington. The source provided several good leads, some of which I chased and some of which Herrington chased. In a day or two, we had a much fuller understanding of what had happened, and documentation to back it up. We went to Drake's home in an unsuccessful effort to interview him. Herrington wrote the story, which I gave about the same intensity of editing as a similar investigative piece at a metropolitan newspaper. Because I added findings from my own reporting, she acted as a secondary editor.

On Monday, May 7, the day after Herrington received her degree, we published a story that began pretty much as she wrote it: "Midway College's ambitious plan for a pharmacy school

in Eastern Kentucky was a ship that sank before it ever sailed, taking the college's president with it. The private college twice withdrew its applications for accreditation of the school, amid doubts from accreditors. . . . The debacle has raised questions about the management, health and future direction of Midway College . . ."⁵

When I asked former students to comment for this paper on what they liked and didn't like about working for the Midway Messenger, Herrington was the first to reply. She wrote:

Al's class was the most important one I took in journalism school. It underscored the most basic, yet fundamental, principles of journalism: reporting accurately and fairly, crafting a story, and holding those in power accountable. It also gave me hope that journalism, contrary to the naysayers, is definitely not "dead."

Before writing for the Midway Messenger, I understood journalism as noble career path that requires nothing more than a pen, a notebook and a knack for writing. The Messenger was a humbling wake-up call. I learned that first, it also requires guts, and second, some people regard journalists as less than noble — more like scum.

Al Cross began sessions in our newsroom [classroom] with each student announcing what story he or she was covering. If the story was too fluffy, Al didn't hesitate to say so. He had a copy of each student's schedule, and he knew when each writer was out reporting — I knew this because on several occasions, I received text messages instructing me to ask more acute questions.

Gathering up the chutzpah to call sources after 5 p.m. — or even more difficult, knock on their front door — was a tedious lesson that I'll never forget. To this day, when I'm covering a story, I remember sitting at Al's desk with the telephone positioned between us. The person on speakerphone was lying, and Al kept shooting glances at me to continue asking questions.

This was the first time that my reporting angered politicians and CEOs. The Messenger gave me my first taste of investigative reporting and helped me develop a stronger voice — because I realized the people in this small town needed to hear the story.

Prior to Midway, my perception of small towns and rural communities was naive (and probably ignorant). The Messenger opened my eyes to the corruption and backdoor decision-making that happens in governments of all sizes and at all levels of authority. To the misfortune of this community and countless others, there wasn't a newspaper to report it.

But this is where the Messenger reestablished my faith in journalism, particularly online journalism. The field is experimenting and rediscovering itself, and I believe that experiments like these will help inspire the next generation of journalists to tirelessly pursue truth — because it has certainly inspired this one.

⁵ <http://midwayky.blogspot.com/p/midway-college.html>

The week after the story appeared, The Woodford Sun reprinted it.

Summing up and looking ahead

Herrington's story was so important that it still appears on the home page of the Midway Messenger's website, www.MidwayMessenger.org. Most Messenger stories are published only on the blog, <http://midwayky.blogspot.com>, but those about very important subjects or a significant degree of timelessness also appear on the home page.

One of the longest-tenured stories on the page is a multimedia presentation on Midway restaurants and other businesses by Autumn Harbison, who wrote this about it: "Developing ideas for the Midway Messenger forced me to think about journalism being alive in a whole new way. That's what led me to make the multimedia package highlighting the sights and sounds of Midway. I'm still very proud of how that came together since it was my first multimedia piece. Writing for the web is a different animal than writing solely for a hard-copy publication. I'm doing some of that now, but the Messenger is how I got my feet wet in learning how."

Harbison's package is an example of how students do stories not just for Midway, but for the world. That would be true to some extent even if tourism were not a major business in Midway, because we are online and available to most of the world.

That's another difference in the Midway Messenger and the Woodford Sun, but we are not as different as we were when the project started. I'm a little more like the weekly editor and manager I was more than 35 years ago, and the Sun is putting some news online via Facebook, as many weeklies have begun to do in recent years.

I asked Steve Peterson to write a few paragraphs for this paper about the usefulness of the Midway Messenger to the Sun and the people of Midway. Here is his full reply:

When Al Cross approached me some years ago about cooperating in a rural journalism education project centered on Midway, my first thought was that I would be encouraging a competitor; moreover, a competitor whose overhead costs would be underwritten by a major university.

As with most print news outlets, The Woodford Sun had been (and still is) experiencing doubts about our long-term viability in the face of online news providers, and supporting -- at least in principle -- a free online alternative to our paper seemed to go against our interests. And while I manage the news side of The Woodford Sun, we are too small an organization for me to ignore important business issues. I do not have that luxury.

However, I agreed to Cross's proposal for two reasons:

First, I felt it was critical that journalism students writing for online publication have a deep understanding of how local governments work -- the functions of various elected officials, the breadth and limitations of their authority, what their responsibility to the public consists of -- just as we who trained for print media did. A reporter cannot shed light on the critical civic issues they must write about unless he or she grasps these basics.

In many ways, Midway is the perfect laboratory for a group of students to learn these fundamental elements. It is too small to support its own traditional newspaper, but its elected officials still must grapple with contentious issues of public importance. Being a smaller community, Midway provides a more intimate setting for a student journalist to come to grips with these issues and write about them intelligently. Despite my initial misgivings, I came to understand that an online outlet for these reports made perfect sense.

Second, I was quite familiar with Al Cross's work as one of the state's most respected journalists, so I was confident that his students' work would undergo scrupulous oversight before it ever appeared on The Midway Messenger. That, for me, was a critical consideration. Obviously, I was a student journalist once and know from experience how sloppy journalists-in-training can be. I was fortunate to have a top-notch teacher and faculty advisor in the late Maria Braden, who more than once had to steer me in the right direction. I felt that Cross would fill that role for his students very well.

On the whole, I have come to realize that the relationship between The Woodford Sun and The Midway Messenger has been much more complementary than competitive. We are a small weekly with two reporters who have an entire county to cover. I made it a priority to promote Midway stories to a higher prominence in the newspaper when I was named managing editor in 2001, and have done that as best I can. However, as a practical matter, with our limited resources, we cannot place the kind of direct and exclusive focus on Midway that Cross and his students have managed.

Because of that, The Midway Messenger's stories have frequently drilled down to a level of detail we are often unable to accomplish. To that end, Cross and the Messenger have provided us with timely original reporting on several occasions, which we have gladly published. The Messenger has also provided those readers who rely exclusively on new media rather than print

access to very good reporting about Midway and what matters to its residents. It also provides that information to a potentially much wider audience of readers who may not live in Midway but are interested in what is happening there.

I cannot help but believe that covering Midway and writing for The Messenger has been of great benefit to Cross's students. After visiting and speaking to Cross's class nearly every year since the project began, I often wish I'd had a similar innovative learning experience when I was in journalism school.

That was a gratifying response. So was the comment that Helen Rentch, chair of the Midway Nursing Home Task Force, made to me at the groundbreaking ceremony for the facility: “We’re so happy that you are a part of our community.”

And I am glad to be part of it, too, even if I cannot come close to fulfilling the function of a true community publisher – someone who lives in the town and keeps his finger on its pulse every day. But like such publishers, I try to publish with the interests of the town at heart.

While I consider the Messenger a success, the blog has only modest traffic, about 2,500 page views per month. I suspect the major reason is that I have done very little to promote it, outside the usual online presentations and occasional promotion on social media. That is partly because I know we will not always have the personnel available to cover stories that need to be covered. I tell people in Midway, “You can’t always rely on us, but you should always look to us.” For example, we do things that the Sun can’t or won’t, such as posting boil-water notices and proposed city budgets and ordinances.

That would be less of a problem if members of the community were involved in the project, and their involvement could also make the project sustainable after I reduce or end my involvement. (I can retire with full benefits in eight years.) I’m trying to plan for that by compiling a diverse list of Midway residents who could act as both an advisory board and stable of contributors.

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