

Rural journalist overcomes challenges

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"Stop the presses!" Okay, maybe that phrase is never heard anymore except in old movies. But other newspaper traditions, such as covering breaking news, focusing on local coverage, and producing a newspaper on time, still remain in rural Kansas. Today we'll meet a newspaper publisher who rose to the best traditions of Kansas journalists while facing a tremendous challenge: her newspaper office was totally lost in a fire.

Linda Mowery-Denning is editor and publisher of the weekly Ellsworth County Independent-Reporter. Linda is from Indiana originally. Through a friend in Topeka, she came to Kansas and ultimately got a job at the Salina Journal where she worked for nearly 27 years, covering news stories in communities around Salina.

One of those communities was the rural town of Ellsworth, population 2,946 people. Now, that's rural. This town had a shock when its long-time newspaper publisher, Karl Gaston, was killed in a tragic auto accident. Townspeople grieved for the family,

and then worried about the sale of their local newspaper.

"A friend of mine and I got the crazy idea that we would try to buy the newspaper," Linda said. They made a bid but a company from Georgia named Morris Multimedia bought the paper instead. Still, Linda and her friend were so intrigued by the community that they decided to create a competing newspaper to serve Ellsworth. The Ellsworth County Independent was born.

"The workload was incredible and the competition was stiff," Linda said. Ultimately, Linda's partner went back to Salina but Linda continued to produce the paper. Then she was approached by the owners of the newspaper chain about a merger, which was finalized in 2001. Linda became editor and co-owner of the Ellsworth County Independent-Reporter.

"They've been great," Linda said of Morris Multimedia. "They don't interfere and they've been very supportive."

Then came Sunday, June 19, 2011. Linda was home when she got a call from her business manager, whose husband is a firefighter.

"I think she was trying to ease me into what had hap-

pened," Linda said. "She told me, 'There's a fire downtown at Douglas and Second Street.' I was trying to think, 'Hmm, what building is that?'" And then it hit her — that's her own newspaper's building.

By the time Linda got downtown, there were smoke and flames shooting through the top of the newspapers' building. An attorney in the next block was carrying files out of his office in case the fire spread.

But firefighters came from all over and contained the fire. "The firefighters did a remarkable job," Linda said. For the newspaper staff, this was not only a huge loss, it was a news story to cover.

Linda and her staff swung into action, taking pictures and interviewing people. Meanwhile, Linda was thinking about how to produce a newspaper. Her first call was to the school superintendent to ask about using the high school journalism department, and he didn't hesitate to agree. Fortunately, Linda had the page templates on her laptop computer which she had with her at home.

The next morning, the executive director and the president of the Kansas Press Association were in Ellsworth to

help. Offers of assistance came from all over. Remarkably, that week's edition of the Ellsworth County Independent-Reporter was produced on time, as it has been ever since.

"I'm so proud of our staff," Linda said. "There was never a thought that we wouldn't put out a newspaper that week. And I can't say enough good about the support we have received from the community."

"Linda's coverage of her community is amazing. I am especially impressed with her positive attitude — even through a very challenging year," said Gloria Freeland, director of K-State's Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media. "Linda has provided leadership for other community newspapers through the excellent example she sets for her own."

"Stop the presses!" Okay, maybe that phrase isn't used any more, but the traditions of local coverage and on-time publication still remain. We commend Linda Mowery-Denning and all those involved with the Ellsworth County Independent-Reporter for making a difference by demonstrating that, in rural Kansas, even a fire isn't enough to stop the presses.