

Honoring courage - and caring - in rural journalism

By
Jim Evans

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What does it take to be a courageous, caring agricultural journalist?

Larry Sheedy of the Irish Guild of Agricultural Journalists (IFAJ President 1980-1984) heard about passion when he asked IFAJ members in 2004 what qualities make an ideal agricultural journalist. "It was generally considered that a combination of qualities, notably a rural background and training in both agriculture and journalism were ideal qualifications. But a passion for the job at hand was fundamental."

www.ifaj.org/pd/survey.pdf

A recent example of passion for rural journalism

Courage comes in many flavors, explained community newspaper publisher Laurie Ezzell Brown in accepting a national award on April 20 for courage, tenacity and integrity. The Ezzell family publishes *The Canadian Record*, a weekly in the town of Canadian, located in the Panhandle region of northwest Texas USA.

The Ezzells were honored with the Tom and Pat Gish Award for courage, tenacity and integrity in rural journalism. It was presented by the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues during the National Summit on Journalism for Rural America.

Laurie's father, Ben Ezzell, became editor of the *Record* in 1949. He, his wife, Nancy, and now their daughter Laurie have owned and published the paper for a half century. Nancy and Laurie have continued the tradition since his death in 1993, with Laurie as current editor. Throughout that period the Ezzells have distinguished themselves for their news coverage and commentary.

Advice to rural community journalists

Laurie offered several suggestions during a panel discussion that was part of the Summit program. Mary Jo Shafer, Knight Community Journalism Fellow, summarized them as follows:

- "Not everything's a fight. Write about the good things too." Covering the everyday life of the community is a newspaper's job, she said.
- When it's time to take a stand, "Be fierce and don't duck a fight. Don't lose your credibility...In a small town you have such a huge voice."
- When dealing with difficult issues: "Find the common ground where they'll read a little bit and ease your way into it."
- Have a sense of humor. "Don't take your self too seriously."
- "Don't let yourself be the story. It's about the community."

Tasting the flavors of courage

"I've just driven two thousand miles to whip your ass!" Ben Ezzell recalled in his book, *The Editor's Ass*. He was in the office on a Saturday afternoon when he heard that announcement from a visitor. "The blocky figure in the doorway looked fully capable of doing it." The visitor was unhappy about what he thought (incorrectly) the editor had said about a privately-operated pool at the edge of town during a city bond election to build a municipal swimming pool.

Other flavors of courage appeared in the nomination materials and news reports:

- The *Record* was "showered by praise and hate" during the early 1960s when Ezzell warned readers not to join a new conservative organization, the John Birch Society.
- An unhappy reader fired 19 shots from a pellet gun through the newspaper's door and plate-glass window following an editorial against the Vietnam War. "Someone was expressing an editorial opinion," Ezzell commented later. "It is a great American privilege." The nomination report added that another "opinion" was tossed into the Ezzells' yard and exploded under Laurie's bedroom window.
- An article by Carleton L. West reported that a mayoral candidate, upset with an editorial, beat Ezzell up. "Ezzell was hospitalized with a concussion, among other injuries. The publisher took it all with humor, though, contending at the time the aspiring but hot-headed politician was trying to express 'a legitimate editorial opinion the best way he knew how' with his fists."
- According to the nomination, Laurie quickly picked up her father's mantle. "She got the man who

wanted to be the Panhandle's newest district attorney to admit that he had a drug addiction. He lost, but sued for libel, costing the *Record* several thousand dollars in legal fees."

- She examined large-scale corporate hog production when several operations proposed to move to that region. "Her reporting and editorials over a two-year period prompted Hemphill County commissioners to pass a resolution saying they would not offer such farms any tax incentives for locating in the county. Her reporting also raised the awareness of water rights and groundwater protection in the area."
- "In 2004, the *Record* uncovered a plan by the state highway department to cut down more than 1,000 trees that lined a Panhandle highway. Laurie's research revealed that trees were less hazardous than objects placed along the highway by the state. Eventually the highway department revised its plans, targeting only 97 trees for removal."

Other recent examples of passion and courage for the job at hand

Here are examples of IFAJ members and other agricultural journalists whose "passion for the job at hand" has been recognized recently in the U. S.:

- Journalism was a calling for Sonja Hillgren, editorial director of *Farm Journal* magazine. In a tribute following Hillgren's death in late 2006, Marcia Taylor emphasized: "For her, journalism was a calling, like some people find the ministry or others dedicate themselves to medicine. ...Her work mattered, especially at a time when farmers needed real assistance."
www.ageditors.com/members/byline/jan07/president.html
- Original reporting, persistence, creativity and a focus on people were among the key skills used by reporters Pat Stith and Joby Warrick of the *News and Observer*, Raleigh, North Carolina. They exposed environmental hazards, lax regulation and other problems involving confinement hog farms in that state. You can learn about their influential series at: www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=83003

"There is no job like this."

"You can make a difference," Laurie Ezzell emphasized during the Gish Award program. "You can see the changes. You can really stop bad things from happening, which we've done a few times. A good newspaper is essential for a small town. And it's never dull."

Similarly, IFAJ members and other agricultural/rural journalists throughout the world are making a difference through their courage, caring spirit and reporting skills.

Learn more about the Gish Award, the honored newspaper and the editors' perspectives at:

"Ezzells of The Canadian (Tex.) Record win Gish Award for rural journalism"

"Remarks of Laurie Ezzell Brown, accepting the Tom and Pat Gish Award on behalf of the Ezzell family" (link found within the article headed, " Texas editor")

www.uky.edu/comminfostudies/irjci/gish2007.htm

"The Ezzell family and the Canadian Record of Canadian, Texas"

www.texaspress.com/messenger/april07/gish0407.htm

"Weekly editors know the price of courage"

www.state-journal.com/news/article/1926152

"Women rural editors share their experiences and advice"

www.uky.edu/CommInfoStudies/IRJCI/summitwomen.htm

Where have you seen courage and caring in action?

- **What examples of courageous, caring agricultural/rural journalism have you seen recently (or not so recently) in your country, or elsewhere?**
- **What tips do you suggest for carrying out this kind of journalism?**

Please send them to Jim Evans at evansj@uiuc.edu

Thank you.