**“Newspapers: leading the way in our communities”**

by Andrew Johnson, NNA president

*(Laura walks a blindfolded Andrew to the podium)*

Greetings from your new NNA president. The visual in front of you is a bit ridiculous. However, it clearly shows what a person who runs a newspaper looks like without NNA or what a community looks like without a newspaper. I can not imagine not having NNA or a newspaper in my community in these challenging times.

One of the small weekly newspapers I operate is the Dodge County Pionier. “Pionier” is spelled “ier.” It is a German military term that means a “sapper.” A sapper is the engineering team that goes out in front of the troops to determine which is the best route to move the troops. NNA is out in front getting information back to you to make sure you are on the right pathway just like the Pionier is for the people in the Mayville community.

The true meaning of blindfold illustration in the context of democracy is said best in words by Susie Kaeser, Heights Observer, Cleveland Heights, MN. In her column “A news desert diminishes democracy” Kaeser says “…these days, being informed is exhausting, but being uninformed is terrifying. It makes you vulnerable and powerless and disables your capacity to participate as informed citizens.” Nothing else needs to be said for the value of community newspapers and the NNA who enables them.

Never has NNA been more important than now. NNA is a cooperatively owned trade association by community newspaper people like me and you. I am NNA. You are NNA. It is a member operated and driven organization. NNA is the only national organization dedicated specifically to advocating the interests of community newspapers. There is no one else. In most cases, it is also true that there is no one else who will be the face of your community other than your paper.

In our generations, we have never faced a national problem like the newsprint tariff that went on top of an already challenging business like we have over the past year. These have been scary times for the people in our business. However, our mission and purpose are far greater than the challenges we face. I like what John Wayne said: “Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway.” Lots of NNA people have “saddled up.” What we do is really hard. Amazing progress has been made. Look at our impact on the tariff case.

What kinds of things need to be done to carry us forward in order to meet the challenges, survive and even thrive. Tonda Rush recently told me that in the past “we could just get scotch tape and put NNA back together after a difficult time. She said this time is different -- “we are out of tape.” In other words, the same old will not work going forward. I believe the answer lies in operating NNA with a set of ideas, not a detailed answer plan…that probably would not work anyway. The ideas that will give NNA the best chance or highest probability to survive and serve its members include focus, simple and clear plans, and key partnerships. The NNA executive committee is clearly committed to these ideas. This is not a one president plan – but a multi-year well thought out plan created by some of the smartest people in the business. Susan Rowell has been leading this effort for much of the past year.

NNA will continue to have a Relentless focus on community member newspaper advocacy. No doubt tough decisions will need to be made. Direction and decisions will always have our members in mind. We will make every reasonable effort get feedback and listen to our members during such a critical time. Being present and active is a key part of being focused. NNA is only as strong as its members that are involved. Everybody can do something. Informing our members on how to run a newspaper business in these times; provide real-world examples of what really works at other papers. We want to get more of the right information to our members faster.

It has been a challenge to run newspapers when the exact future of how they will take shape is not clearly known. It is compounded by the fact the newspapers come in many types and sizes. What works for one may not work for another. Newspaper executives of community newspapers desperately need good information about the community newspaper industry and ideas to succeed in the same way a flashlight is used to light a hiking path through the woods at night. The way may not be clear immediately. However, if we keep knocking, seeking, the right pathway will become clearer. We need to be smart and strategically use every resource we have to get the job done. For me, NNA helps give me the confidence that I am leading my paper in the right direction for the circumstances. NNA board members are carefully leading NNA the same way with a focus on a plan that will really work and is easy to understand. In the end, it is our hope and intention to make NNA a robust advocate for community newspapers.

A rope made of several strands will not easily break and is much stronger than the individual parts that make it up. This past year NNA has experienced this first hand with becoming a key member in the STOPP coalition. When I testified at the newsprint tariff hearing I witnessed first-hand what it was like to work with many partners with the same goals. We need more of this. We will seek out more partnerships with NNAF as an educational resource for members, State press associations (use of IPA as manager and WNA as convention partner in Milwaukee next year), NAM, ISWNE, vendors with great ideas that work, and key staff members from our member newspapers and related trade organizations. We can also partner with others for the greater good of our country and fellow mankind because we truly have the power to this. It is the right thing to do.

I want to close with a real story about newspapers doing the impossible. In January 2014, I learned about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) Faces project from a news release from Wisconsin Public radio and television. The Faces project is an effort to locate a photo of every service member listed on the Vietnam Wall in Washington D.C. The photos will be projected in a new Education Center that is going to be built near the WALL. Six million of the government’s military records were destroyed in a fire in St Louis in 1973. The challenge is how to find these photos. There are at least 58,300 names on the WALL. In March 2014, I told the NNA board about the VVMF Faces project. They embraced it and offered to help. At that time, over 24,000 photos were missing. Only one state, Wyoming, which had a small number, found all their photos. In Wisconsin, more than 450 photos were missing out of 1,162 totals. I along with Beth Bennett, executive director of the WNA, met with public radio and television executives to see how we could help with the project.

They had been working on finding the photos for several years but were at a standstill at the time. I remember telling him that small community newspapers can help find the photos. I also told them that newspapers work on deadlines and we will make it our goal to find every photo in Wisconsin by the next Memorial Day (2015). They told us that this is impossible. They said “we really won’t find them all. We will just keep this process going for years.” I am here to report to you that we partnered with the WNA and newspapers across Wisconsin and worked together to find the missing photos. We also partnered with UW-Milwaukee journalism school which found the last missing photo on the Friday before Memorial Day 2015. Fast forward to 2018, 34 states found all their photos and approximately 2,000 are missing as of Aug. 31 of this year. Only 16 states left. Let’s help them and our country finish this project. There is no one else who can do this job better than community newspapers.

Like the running of your newspapers, NNA is on a journey. It is challenging. We are in a unique industry. I don’t exactly know where our journey will take us. But I do know that I am teaming up with the right people in the right organization, NNA. This will give me as well as other NNA member cooperative owner newspapers the best chance of making a difference in the communities we serve. It will take courage and belief in community to implement the three ideas I have outlined today. Newspapering is a way of life, not a job. NNA members need each other more now than at any other time in history. Focus, clear and simple plans, and key partnerships will help NNA, as well as our newspapers, thrive into the future with confidence. It is going to be different, but it is also going to be good! NNA will help lead the way so community newspapers can be “Pionier” or leaders in their communities.

*(Andrew puts on cheesehead hat)*

Instead of being blindfolded, I would suggest you get a cheese head and come to NNA’s convention in Milwaukee next Oct 3 and 4th. We will be focusing on ideas on how newspapers become leaders in their communities. In addition to many partners, we are especially teaming up with the Wisconsin Newspaper Association (I hope you noticed my red jacket) and Quad Graphics – the nation’s largest printer of newspaper inserts -- to create an extra special experience. We are also partnering with Pfister, a five-star hotel that is in walking distance to Lake Michigan shoreline.

Like NNA, this is an experience you won’t want to miss.