

After two decades, familiar face at Daily Union moves on

It was September 1998 when the Daily Union found itself without a city reporter. Fall always is an awkward time because all of the spring college grads have been scooped up by then. We were, well, not desperate, but becoming a tad panicked.

So we took a chance on the lone applicant.

He didn't have many clips or any internships to share, but he had received his bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater that August and, more importantly, seemed to have a great personality and enthusiasm for the job. Our gut told us he would make a good newshawk, and it was right.

Now, nearly 21 years later, Ryan Whisner has moved on. That cub reporter who worked his way up to ace reporter and then regional editor at the Daily Union started a new chapter in his journalism career today.

He has moved "up the street" to the so-called Creamery Building, where he is editor of Green Industry Pros magazine at AC Business Media.

To say that we are sad to see Ryan leave would be an understatement. But at the same time, we are so happy for him both personally and professionally. He simply is the most recent of many Daily Union alumni who have been lured by — to quote the no-nonsense Ross Perot — that "giant sucking sound" to Johnson Hill Press/Cygnus and its various incarnations and spinoffs through the years. We've been told that the local trade magazines love receiving a resume from a Daily Union employee because they know he or she has been well-trained. That's true, and, in fact, Ryan joins three other former Daily Union reporters at AC Business Media right now.

During the past two decades, Ryan has been one of the well-known faces of the Daily Union. He never really knew what he might be assigned to do, but did whatever it was with passion. When he covered his first clay stomp at Fort Atkinson's Purdy Elementary School, Ryan returned to the office covered in "mud," a huge smile on his face. Photographing the Christmas or Memorial Day parades, he would sit smack down in the middle of the street to get the best angle, forcing the marching bands and scouts to walk around him like the parting of the Red Sea. After taking pictures of the Fort Half-Marathon runners for several years, he decided to get off the sidelines and join them. Many exhausting jogs and 5ks later, Ryan finished his first



Christine Spangler

Friday marked the last day of work for Ryan Whisner of Fort Atkinson, who has been a reporter and regional editor at the Daily Jefferson County Union for more than 20 1/2 years. Ryan has accepted a job as editor of Green Industry Pros magazine at AC Business Media, located in the "Creamery Building" in Fort Atkinson. He is pictured about to dig in to some farewell treats during a "pigout" at the Daily Union and Hoard's Dairyman/W.D. Hoard's and Sons on Thursday.

half-marathon, and didn't stop there. That was a major feat considering that being in shape never has been associated with journalists.

Commencements, county fairs, ribbon-cuttings, groundbreakings, egg hunts, traffic crashes, barn fires, whatever, you could be sure Ryan would be there with camera in hand. When the sirens sounded, he'd toss on the caution tape-yellow jacket with "press" emblazoned on the back that his in-laws gave him for Christmas and take off on the run. Sometimes he added the firemen's boots that enabled him to slosh through floodwaters.

Ryan was a newspaperman's newspaperman. He covered the countless city council and county board meetings with an unbiased and critical eye, not afraid to call out the sources he had come to know well if he thought something might be amiss. He spent a lot of time in the circuit courtrooms, as well, writing about homicides, drug deals, assaults,

arsons and countless other cases gavel to gavel.

A favorite courtroom memory was when Ryan was covering a murder trial, waiting patiently, camera to eye, for the defendant to look his way. The man finally did and, as the camera clicked, sneered, "Put that in your newspaper!" We did.

Unfortunately, though, a big part of a reporter's job is not always fun. Snapping photos as people are watching their house go up in flames and then asking them what happened is not easy to do. Arriving at the scene of a traffic crash only to find out you know some of the injured is not either. And it is even more difficult when you have as big a heart as Ryan does.

As it did the entire community, the tragic crash that claimed four Fort Atkinson High School students as they drove home from a GOP Lincoln Day Dinner 18 years ago scarred Ryan deeply. He knew these teens from covering the schools, and now here he was writing about their last moments, covering their funerals. Sadly, with tears brimming in his eyes, they would not be the last such fatalities about which he would have to write.

Similarly, there were the deaths of young people who gave their lives for their country. Any journalist will tell you that writing about and photographing funerals with military rites, zooming in as the U.S. flag is folded and presented to the mother or wife, is surreal. You go through the motions, but strive to do your best to honor the memory of the young man or woman being laid to rest. Again, Ryan did so with class, heartfelt empathy and not a few tears.

We could go on and on, but readers probably get the picture, and the many who know Ryan, or at least saw him at the museum or the science fair or fire scene understand what we're trying to say.

Schooling is very important, but the true learning often takes place out on the streets. That certainly was true for Ryan Whisne, prided himself on practicing "shoe leather journalism." Trusting our gut on a green, eager J-School grad nearly 21 years ago was one of the best decisions we ever made.

We know Ryan will do well at AC Business Media, making his mark as a magazine editor. But we also know that the fire in his belly that made him a great newspaper reporter will never go out, and that his ears will perk up and eyes will peek out his fifth-floor office window when the firetrucks, sirens blaring, race by.

Best of luck, Ryan. We miss you already!

FOND FAREWELL

And that's the way it is: Ryan Whisner ends 20 years as news whiz

By Ryan Whisner
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For the past 20 years, I have been a reporter, editor and storyteller at the Daily Jefferson County Union.

The list of stories I was working on or wrote at any given time was seemingly endless ... until now.

After today, Monday, April 22, my byline no longer will grace the columns of the Daily Union.

In my new role as editor of Green Industry Pros magazine at AC Business Media, I will enjoy the view from Fort Atkinson from my window seat on the fifth floor of the Cream-

ery Building (Verlo).

My role as a journalist will continue, just in a new capacity. I strive to encourage people to keep connected with the world and hold their public officials accountable via the ongoing local news coverage at the Daily Union.

I remember many of my stories through the years, but in the back of my mind always will remain the tragic tales, particularly that of Dan, Ellen, Courtney and Bridget, who lost their lives on April 20, 2001, at the intersection of U.S. Highway 18 and County Highway G.

Before and since that day, it has

been my responsibility to share the grief, the sadness and the goodness of the community when a child lost his or her life, usually in some tragic accident. I forever will carry the four and all those who followed in my heart.

For every tragedy I chronicled, there were many happy events, as well. And then the countless hours of budget committee meetings, infrastructure reviews, political shenanigans, pancake breakfasts, ribbon cuttings, high school graduations, middle school concerts, elementary school art walks, museum gatherings, community celebrations, county fairs, service club fundraisers, river flooding, storm reports and so much more.

I dare not try to estimate how many flapjacks or Jones Dairy Farm sausages I have consumed over the

past two decades. I don't think my doctor would appreciate it.

Let's forget to mention the hours spent sitting in the city council chambers, county board room or in the courtrooms.

On any given day in court, I would be reporting on sexual assault of minors, drug-related homicides, domestic abuse, accidents, war casualty funerals or suicide.

I recall my managing editor once remarking, "What's a week without a heroin story?" as I continued to chronicle the ongoing opioid epidemic that has plagued the Jefferson County area and beyond.

No two days ever were the same at the Daily Union. Every day, I had to become an instant expert in this, that or the other thing and be forced to cast aside any bias or opinion and convey the most ob-

jective version of the truth and tell the story the right way. From 6 a.m. to sometimes — all too often — midnight, I would work to meet the daily deadline.

I have considered it a privilege to be part of the community through my role at the Daily Union. Fear not, though: This is merely a transition. A new reporter soon will be on the scene to join the superb team of journalists at the Daily Union and continue to provide the local news coverage in Fort Atkinson and across Jefferson County.

For all of you who have kept up with my stories the past 20 years, I thank you for reading, and may the force be with you.

And to quote Walter Cronkite, "And that's the way it is," Monday, April 22, 2019.

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