

Publisher Carol O'Leary earns Lifetime Achievement award

Honored by Abby-Colby Crossings Chamber of Commerce at Saturday banquet

By Kevin O'Brien
Tribune-Phonograph

When introducing Carol O'Leary as this year's recipient of the Lifetime Achievement award, chamber of commerce member Jenny Jakel used O'Leary's many years of stitching together Christmas parade costumes as a metaphor for her overall impact on the greater Abby-Colby area.

"Everything she's done is a stitch in our community, to hold our communities together," Jakel said. "As longtime owner of the *Tribune-Phonograph* and several other weekly newspapers throughout Central Wisconsin, O'Leary helped establish a strong foothold for local journalism in communities stretching from Medford to Loyal and Edgar to Cadott.

"Newspapers are not dying, and we intend to keep it that way," O'Leary said, before accepting her award at Saturday's annual banquet of the Abby-Colby Crossings Chamber of Commerce.

O'Leary was accompanied by her daughter, Kris O'Leary, and son-in-law, Kevin Flink, who took over ownership of the *Tribune-Phonograph* and *The Record-Review* in 2011. Also in attendance were five of her seven grandchildren, with two of them, John and Lucinda, carrying on the family tradition by working at the *Tribune-Phonograph*.

Carol continues to be co-owner of Central Wisconsin Publications and publisher of *The Star News* in Medford and the *Courier Sentinel* in Cornell.

A native of Savanna, Ill., Carol moved to Abbotsford in 1971 with her husband, J.A. O'Leary, and they purchased both the *Tribune-Phonograph* and *The Record-Review*, which covered the villages of Edgar and Athens at the time.

The O'Learys' original home in Abbotsford was the old Tribune building on Main Street, where they worked and lived with their three kids — ages 7, 6 and 2 at the time. They also owned the old *Colby Phonograph* building, which is now Amber's Cafe.

"Both buildings were not exactly excellent working conditions but they really seemed like castles when Jay told me that he had bought the derelict former White House Dairy building in Abbotsford," she said.

The O'Learys were able to repurpose the old cheese factory into what is now the home of the TP Printing Company and Tri-Star Printing, a printing press operation that prints multiple newspapers read by thousands of area residents.

For the next three decades, the couple continued to expand their business, forming Tri-Star in 1976, starting the *Central Wisconsin Shopper* in 1981, and purchasing *The Star News* in 1987.

The sudden death of her husband in 1997 forced Carol to take on a greater role in the newspaper business and rely on help from family members and advice from other publishers. She also became more active in state, national and international press organizations.

"I found a new passion for travel as I participated in work study missions and international conferences," she said. "Getting outside my comfort zone made me more aware of how much people the world over are more alike and more tolerant of the differences."

Besides being a longtime member — and former president — of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association (WNA), Carol has also served on the boards of the Inland Press Association and the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors (ISWNE). She has served as ISWNE's vice president and is also a member of the National Newspaper Association.

In 2018, Carol was inducted into the WNA Hall of Fame, which was created in 2001 to honor trailblazers who have made significant contributions to the Wisconsin newspaper industry.

Her induction into the hall of fame was a hard-earned achievement. After taking over as owner of a printing plant and publisher of four weekly newspapers and two



KEVIN O'BRIEN/TRIBUNE-PHONOGRAPH

Carol O'Leary, left, accepts the Lifetime Achievement award from fellow Abby-Colby Crossings Chamber of Commerce member Jenny Jakel on Saturday.

shoppers, she continued to expand her family's business with the help of her daughter and son-in-law.

In 2010, the family purchased the Loyal-based *Tribune-Record Gleaner* from Dean Lesar, who stayed on as the *Tribune-Record Gleaner's* editor.

When Trygg Hansen, the publisher of the *Cornell and Lake Holcombe Courier* and the *Cadott Sentinel* passed away in 2011, the Hansen family reached out to the O'Learys to make sure the communities wouldn't lose their local papers. The O'Learys bought the two publications and later combined them into the *Courier Sentinel*, which earned a Newspaper of the Year award in 2018 from the WNA.

Besides her passion for newspapers, Carol said her other love is making costumes for the Abbotsford Christmas Parade, which she has been doing since the Sesame Street float was added to the parade in the late 1970s.

"The school art teacher taught some ladies how to make heads out of paper-mache, and I was hooked," she said. "The head-making process has evolved over the years, and today's heads are more flexible, a process I learned from seeing some costumes made by Rent a Robe, which went out of business at least 20 years ago."

When it became clear that the basement storage closets at St. Bernard's Catholic Church in Abbotsford could no longer hold the hundreds of parade costumes, Carol bought a house on Spruce Street for additional space that now serves as the chamber's office.

Carol told chamber members that she is looking to expand that building so it can continue to accommodate the growing cast of parade characters as the parade marks 50 years in December.

Jim Schiferl, who nominated Carol for the Lifetime

Achievement award, said her support of the parade "has been critical in keeping it alive and well for many years."

In addition to her countless hours as the parade's unofficial seamstress, Carol has contributed financially to the growth of her local communities, donating to new libraries in both Abbotsford and Medford and also to the local hospital in Medford.

Carol has also been very active in the local business community over the years, serving as the Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce's first-ever female president and working as the chamber's secretary for years before it combined with Colby's chamber and hired an office director.

During her acceptance speech on Saturday, Carol recognized members of her family and longtime employees, many of whom were in attendance to watch her receive the award.

After more than 50 years in the newspaper business and 40-plus years as parade seamstress, Carol said she is honored to receive the award from her local chamber of commerce.

A 2018 article co-written by *The Star News* news editor Brian Wilson and Kris O'Leary — published just before Carol's induction in the WNA Hall of Fame — discusses the expansive legacy of Carol's efforts to support quality newspapers.

"Throughout her years of service in the newspaper industry and community, Carol O'Leary has been committed to the need for strong local journalism at the local level," the article states. "This is reflected in the hundreds of state and national awards won by staff members in her newspaper group."