

Remarks by Sandra Mims Rowe, editor of the Oregonian, winner of the National Press Foundation's 2003 Editor of the Year Award.

I edit a newspaper that is older than the state it serves and from which it takes its name. The Oregonian was a newspaper before Oregon was a state. We are the oldest continuously operating business, the holder in effect of Oregon business license No. 1.

In 1850 there was no state, no city, only a territory of some 700 settlers. There was no railroad, no telegraph. The Oregonian literally created community. It gave Portland a voice.

I believe the honor you give me tonight is largely because The Oregonian still gives voice to its community.

It is the voice of a fiercely independent people, a fair number of them descendants of those who walked across America to chase a dream a century and a half ago. Others, also chasing dreams, moved in the Depression, and during the hippie movement of the 1960s, or drifted north from California in the '90s.

Ten years ago when I moved to Oregon a friend told me people come to Oregon to "get fixed up." And when they come, they adopt the Oregon ethic as their own. More than 40 percent of the metro region's population was born outside the state, twice the national average.

A popular bumper sticker proclaims: "Oregon native since 1987." When they have one that says "Oregon native since 1993" I'm buying it.

The Oregonian is the voice of conservative ranchers in the Eastern Oregon high desert, folks who graze cattle on several thousand acres and resent the power and the liberal ways of Portland. It is the voice of the decimated timber industry, which just 20 years ago defined the state, and the voice of environmental extremists who occasionally pitch

tents in trees in an effort to hold off the chain saws. It is the voice of the high-tech worker in Portland's "Silicon Forest," the economic engine of the state.

That diversity makes for a mix of politics and values that's hard to characterize, a place of strong feelings and connections, perhaps best summed up by my favorite bumper sticker, "Keep Oregon weird."

Today The Oregonian defines community in ways large and small. We do it by being the largest newspaper in the country to still publish free obituaries -- more than 10,000 last year.

We give voice by revealing the lives of people who struggle and persevere -- like the story the struggle for life on a preemie ward that prompted hundreds of letters, including this one:

"I am a crusty old fart that over 76 years has built defenses around his heart of tungsten alloy and reinforced wire mesh. In one moment your words made them disappear. The tears flowed and now, as I write these words, they start again."

Readers yearn for more humanity in newspapers and find not enough of it; they yearn for stories crafted with sweat and caring that reflect a reality they know exists. They know that storytelling can help them through a day, that understanding the adversity others endure and mostly rise above broadens their own lives and elevates their spirits.

As much as anything, those stories shape and bind a community.

We also define and give voice to community by bringing clarity to complexity. As 2003 dawned, Oregon was widely cited for its economic crisis, even enduring ridicule in Doonesbury for cutting as many as 19 days from the school year.

The Oregonian committed itself to giving readers an unvarnished account of the choices facing the state. We reshaped our beat coverage to give context to Oregon's unraveling image of itself and provide insight into a historic political and economic shift not years later, but as it unfolded.

Local newspapers still give a community voice - not a remote, institutional voice filled with the posturings of politicians and bureaucratic pronouncements, but a voice of substance and caring, a voice authentic and uniquely useful, a voice that reflects the face of the age at that time and in that place.

More than ever, this task demands editors alive with passion for their communities and their readers – editors who understand that as inheritors of rich community legacies they have debts that must be paid, editors of courage and conviction who feel their responsibilities and honor their hopes and ideals.

Newspapers need editors who understand that everything they do, everything they print, contributes to the character of their newspaper.

Today when some local newspapers are increasingly similar to each other, I am more than blessed to work for an owner who believes that newspapers give a community voice only if they are fiercely independent and brimming over with the soul and the substance of the community.

Done well, that's expensive journalism.

Ten years ago, during what now seems the infancy of the corporate consolidation of news outlets, I asked Donald Newhouse if he ever requested that one of his newspapers pursue a content initiative he liked at another. He looked at me as if I had lost my mind.

"Why would I do that?" he asked. "You and the publisher are the only ones who know what makes a great newspaper in Portland."

It is this independence, this freedom that has allowed The Oregonian to define local not as parochial or limiting, but as expansive and inspiring.

I think it is more than coincidence that I am the third editor among the last eight you have honored as Editor of the Year who leads a newspaper owned by the Newhouse family.

I thank the Newhouses for the privilege and the pleasure of editing a great regional newspaper. There is no journalism more worthwhile or rewarding.

This is a wonderful award, and I will cherish it. Thank you.