

POST MORTEM

Ginny Frey is not ashamed to call herself an addict. The 76-year-old DeWitt resident is addicted to newspapers. Like a lot of active seniors, Frey, who ran the Senior Companion program for the InterReligious Council (now Interfaith Works) for 12 years, has forever been reading *The Syracuse Post-Standard* every morning and the *Syracuse New Times* every week. On Monday, Feb. 4, she had to go cold turkey as for the first time in her adult life there was no daily paper waiting on the doorstep.

For as long as anyone alive can remember, you could get a daily newspaper delivered to your home in and around Syracuse. For many years there were two papers, one to read before you went to work, and another waiting for you when you got home. The afternoon *Herald Journal* ceased publication in 2001. Effective last week, *The Post-Standard* comes home-delivered only three times a week, as the venerable news organization seeks to become a digital-first news source that also prints a newspaper. Like New Orleans and Detroit before us, which now have thrice-weekly delivery, greater Syracuse will find out what life without a daily home-delivered paper will be like.



Michael Davis Photos

"Personally I'm going to eat my breakfast with an iPad instead of a newspaper," says Thomas Costello, the 83-year-old auxiliary bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Syracuse. "I'm not looking forward to it. It's been part of my routine for years."

Here's the short version: In August of last year the leadership of *The Post-Standard* announced they would be cutting to thrice-weekly home delivery in early 2013; the date for switching to Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday delivery was first set at Jan. 1, then moved back to February. A new company, Syracuse Media Group (SMG), was formed and a new president with experience in enhancing digital media and downsizing papers, Tim Kennedy, was brought in to oversee the operation.

Michigan native Kennedy's last newspaper posting was with the Allentown (Pa.) *Morning Call*, a Tribune company daily. During his four years in the Lehigh Valley Kennedy presided over two rounds of staff cuts, watched profitability sliced in half, weathered the bankruptcy of the Tribune's parent company and yet, when he was fired in April 2010, he left a paper

that to this day publishes and delivers seven days a week. His arrival in Syracuse coincided with the announcement of further reductions in staff at *The Post-Standard*.

From late August until early October, when personnel decisions were revealed, several who worked at the paper described going to work in the newsroom as "like going to a funeral." In fact, morale was so low, no photos from *Post-Standard* photographers were entered in the annual Syracuse Press Club awards. The turmoil, says one employee, was just too great to overcome.

"It was brutal," says one former staffer who asked not to be named. Those who were let go were asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement as a condition of receiving severance pay, agreeing not to say anything that might be considered "materially damaging" to the company. When asked about the irony of a news organization imposing a gag order, Kennedy called the clause a "pretty standard practice" in the industry. No current employees of SMG, with the exception of Kennedy, spoke to *The New Times* for this story.

"Everybody was constantly trying to figure it out," says another former employee.

"They said it would take three to four weeks, and instead it took five. Then one Monday we all were called in, one by one, alphabetically, to find out if we had a job or not. Some people were shocked when they were let go. No one wanted to be there."

By the end of that first week in October when the casualties were counted, more than 100 people had been fired, although some were offered the option to compete for a new job (or a mutated version of their old job) with the new company.

Digital Divide

Hundreds of years of reporting experience and knowledge of Syracuse history were wiped out in a day. Dick Case, who has worked for one or both Syracuse newspapers since the year Fidel Castro marched into Havana, is gone, fired at age 77. Award-winning education and community reporter Maureen Nolan, music editor Mark Bialczak, police reporter Robert Baker and other fixtures are all gone. Court reporter Jim O'Hara, with his unequalled grasp of the justice system, is gone. Most of the copy editors, long considered the quality control department of any newspaper, were sent packing. Those fired were



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kept on through the transition; their last day on job was Thursday, Jan. 31.

At a Jan. 18 press conference Kennedy stood beside Rogers, the publisher since 1979 and now chairman of SMG, in an unfinished space at the corner of South Warren and East Fayette streets and announced plans to move 150 news and advertising staff from their Clinton Square headquarters into 28,000 square feet in the under-renovation Merchants Commons. The pair described themselves as “pioneers” making a “bold move into the digital world,” but it is a move that has not been without pain and peril.

The speed with which the *Post* made its move, just months after the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* changed to a three-days-a-week publishing schedule, shocked observers and employees alike. “We thought we had time, maybe years,” says one former staffer. “It turned out to be just months.”

Others wonder whether the change might have come too late. Clearly something had to be done, but the question remains: Is the new model sustainable? SMG is betting heavily that it will work, but according to Steve Davis, chair of newspaper and online journalism at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, print editions still make most of the money earned by newspaper companies. “No one has figured out as of yet how to make a profit on online editions.”

The shift comes after years of declining subscriptions and advertising, staff cuts and mandatory furloughs during each of the past two years. Advance Publications, the parent company of the Syracuse Newspaper (singular deliberate), is a privately held company that does not release revenue figures, so there is no way to know whether or not the paper is making money, or how much money, but we do know that circulation has fallen significantly in recent years.

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations, *The Post-Standard's* average Sunday print circulation for the year ending March 31, 2012, was 135,246 (down 12.7 percent from 2009). The weekday circulation figure of 76,569 is a drop of 7.3 percent in the past year, part of an alarming 28.6 percent slide since 2009.

At the same time Syracuse.com, the paper's website, receives more than 1.3 million monthly visitors, and the company claims that 78 percent of Internet users in our area visit the site. “Digital is exploding,” says Kennedy during an interview at Freedom of Espresso in Armory Square. Kennedy moved with his family to Manlius from Pennsylvania in August to oversee the transition. “We have to be able to serve that market. Five years ago there was no such thing as a tablet or an iPad. We have to be able to publish on all digital platforms, including the next thing to come along.”



Loyal reader Ginny Frey isn't happy that The Post-Standard no longer sits at her front door every morning.

In addition to the Syracuse.com website (which lists stories in much the same way a Twitter feed works), the company is also offering subscribers an online paper seven days a week, known as the ePostStandard. The ePostStandard costs \$2.99 per week, but can be had for just \$2 if you bundle it with home delivery of the Sunday paper.

That digital offering, a facsimile of the printed paper, is of no help to Ginny Frey's pals. “My friends are livid,” says Frey. “There are lots of older people who are very active and read but who just haven't gotten computers. They are angry that the whole world assumes that you have to have a computer.”

Website Story

The powers that be at SMG remind readers they are printing a newsstand-only version of *The Post-Standard* on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, for distribution at retail outlets in Onondaga County only. Kennedy says that it will be a 16-page edition with a print run of about 12,000.

Some industry observers view that as a prospect with a short lifespan. “My guess is that those papers {the newsstand-only version} will probably go away within a year or two,” says Davis. “My gut tells me that all news organizations are going to be all digital in a certain window of time, we just don't know what that window will be.”

For the time being, a news staff that once included hundreds of reporters will become a staff of dozens of “content creators” with instructions to write first for the web, with an eye on the words and phrases favored by Google (available jobs posted on the SMG site ask applicants to list their top search engine terms). Sixty new positions were created.

Rogers claims that the paper will have as many or more reporters as it did before the move, but that optimistic count ignores a reality of a decade of shrinkage. “Comparing the newsroom today to what it was in the past is like standing on a street corner in Utica and comparing it to that same street corner a hundred years ago,” says Hart Seely, a veteran writer who was offered a job but left the paper rather



Meet the press: The Feb. 6-13 edition of the Syracuse New Times rolls off the press (above) at the Syracuse Newspaper building.

than continue the march into the digital era.

Before *The Herald Journal* folded in 2001, he recalls, "There were two work forces battling each other. You had an extra set of eyeballs on every politician." Now the news force is a shadow of its former self, and Seely fears not just for the paper but for the city. He cites how the paper pushed for the cleanup of Onondaga Lake, and helped expose the corruption of former Mayor Lee Alexander.

"I just don't see how a website can get everyone in Syracuse on the same page," Seely says. "At the least there will be a whole generation of 50-somethings who don't look at the website. I know a lot of really cool people who just never got into the online thing. They are being pushed aside."

The turmoil that overtook Clinton Square through the autumn months has given way to a certain calm as reporters and editors wrap their heads around a new mission as a digitally focused enterprise. Even among those who have been shown the door, through their sadness you can hear deep respect for the professionalism of those who are staying and will keep trying to turn out quality news.

New faces began showing up in the newsroom, some of them overlapping with the people they were replacing and many of them sequestered in a conference room so they weren't sitting next to those soon-to-be former colleagues. The new "content providers" work under a system that ties a portion of their compensation to the amount of online traffic they generate, according to some who no longer work there.



Longtime columnist Dick Case was among those let go in January, while Tim Kennedy stands inside Syracuse Media Group's new building at East Fayette and South Warren streets.



In most cases the severance was generous. Case reported that he received one year's pay plus a continuation of medical benefits. Seely, a part-timer with the paper, received a half year of salary. Former staffers don't sound bitter—most of them love the paper and the people who work there—just profoundly sad, and worried for the enterprise to which they have dedicated much of their lives.

Case plans to volunteer in his retirement at the Onondaga Historical Association. "It's a totally new world," he says as he leaves after 53 years, "and I don't have any part of it. I feel a little sad. They're appealing to a younger age group, but there are a lot of older people who like to hold a newspaper in their hand. Me, I'll get by. I'll turn on the radio when I need to know what's going on."

And the bishop with his coffee and his iPad? "I'm going to have to learn some new habits," says Costello. "I'm not sure I'm going to like it, but we will adapt. It may even enhance how we get our news."

Next week the *Syracuse New Times* continues its examination of Syracuse's evolving daily newspaper.