

**Pulitzer Ethics Project: Genevieve Kurtz, Salisbury University**

Fifteen years ago, the big ambitions of a small arts organization in Montgomery County, Maryland, aligned with the ambitions of an influential newspaper publisher in the county.

Together they helped bring a world-class concert hall to the suburbs – but did the publisher and the newspaper cross the line?

For roughly 18 years, Chuck Lyons served as the publisher and president of *The Gazette* newspapers in Montgomery and Prince George’s counties, and was revered as a socially responsible business leader and high-profile figure in the community. *The Gazette* papers, owned by The Washington Post Co., closed and printed their final editions in June 2015 after suffering financial struggles.

During his time at *The Gazette*, Lyons served as president of the Strathmore Hall Arts Center board and was a chairman of the steering committee for Strathmore’s concert hall – a project that received \$88 million in funding from Montgomery County and the state in 2001.

“I think he did a lot to really grow the Gazette newspapers and to make it very well-known and respected in the community,” said Steve Simon, a major civic activist in Montgomery County who pushed advertising and conducted business and media relations with the Gazette. “My observation was that he felt that the publisher of a newspaper really should play a very active community role. He didn’t just want to only focus on the editorial quality and separation of editorial from advertising.”

Keith Haller, a veteran Montgomery County public relations specialist who has worked with several non-profits and arts groups, worked closely with the Gazette papers over the years managing marketing campaigns, conducting newspaper readership studies and more. Haller said Lyons wore both the editorial hat and the publishing hat – and that editorial and business issues got mixed regularly.

“He had very high-minded goals here and he did other very seminal things to bring the community together and get people to volunteer on the broad scale,” Haller said. “He was trying to shape the future of Montgomery County as one of the top ten most important people in the county.”

Nelson Pressley, a theater critic for *The Washington Post*, is an expert in the performing arts community in the region and has covered a wide range of shows and concerts at Strathmore. Pressley said it’s not uncommon for news publishers and executives to have ties to outside organizations and nonprofits, and notes that The Washington Post sponsors cultural events like the Helen Hayes Awards.

“That’s a part of being a good corporate citizen and I don’t think it’s uncommon among major newspapers in major cities and smaller newspapers in smaller towns [to] support worthy causes or cultural causes,” Pressley said.

Pressley said critics are never told by their publishers to review shows favorably or give critical coverage to events, even if the publisher or newspaper has ties to the organization being covered.

Josh Kurtz, a former reporter and political columnist at *The Gazette*, recalled that his coverage of the Strathmore funding debates was closely watched by the public. While it was legitimate to cover what was happening at Strathmore, Kurtz said that others may have had opposing views.

“You always had a sense that other arts organizations in the county thought we were giving too much ink to Strathmore or playing their performances too prominently,” he said.

Though Lyons did not impose on what his reporters wrote about Strathmore, he was not afraid to offer his opinion. Kurtz reflected on a column he wrote that criticized the amount of state and county money being poured into Strathmore, and questioned the need for the arts venue.

“I remember Chuck was disappointed in me when I did that,” Kurtz recalled.

In situations like these, Simon said it's important to have a conversation in the newsroom about where the line between business and editorial stands.

"The publisher has to have enough trust in the editorial team," said Simon, who formerly worked as a managing editor at a competing newspaper. "[Reporters] have to kind of stand their ground and you have to have the guts to speak up to your publisher. They don't always agree with the stories in the paper at all, but they need to respect that."

Haller said that he never considered the position Lyons held at Strathmore and at *The Gazette* as a conflict, unlike others at the time.

"In hindsight, it was probably too close from an ethical newspaper standpoint," he said.

With newspapers competing for survival in a shrinking industry, they are forced to operate as a business and keep their profit, stakeholders and reputation in mind.

"The reality is it's going to be harder and harder to expect newspapers going forward to have the very strict borders between their editorial and business side of the house," Simon said. "It's tough enough for newspapers to exist in these days."

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