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## Focus on details key to Brett's successful career

APA Past President recalls years in newspaper industry

**Derwood Brett's** journalism mentor preached a philosophy that transcended day-to-day reporting techniques and essentially became the formula for success in Brett's decades-long newspaper publishing career.

The guidance to "always find in every story something of significant detail" worked well for Brett when, while at the *Mena Star*, he described how a devastating and catastrophic tornado could take down a house yet leave some delicate clothing items untouched. It worked just as well as Brett exhorted his staff to record every detail of city council meetings, weddings and other goings-on at his newspapers.

Brett even took his attention to detail to the Arkansas Press Association, where he served as president in 1989. Brett said he took the time to visit every member newspaper during his presidency, and the association was made the better of it.

His recommendation for making newspapers more profitable now as some struggle to reinvent themselves in the digital age is simply to keep focusing on the details.

"Every community deserves a newspaper that covers everything, from Little League ball games to local city council, Quorum Court and school board meetings because that's the root – that's the way the communities keep up with what's going on," Brett said. "Your local newspaper covers the community."

Brett was APA president in 1989 when he was publisher of the *Helena Daily World*. He said last week's news of GateHouse Media's announced closure of the Helena and Stuttgart newspapers was "a shame," but he stopped short of speculating about the reasons.

Though Brett didn't mention any specific

newspaper group, he said many chain-owned newspapers have seen declines in profitability because

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APA President Betty Magie passing the gavel to Incoming President Derwood Brett.

## Focus on details key to Brett's successful career

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they don't show enough of a commitment to community coverage.

"We have lost sight of our obligation," he said. "A local newspaper's job is to make sure that every person in the community is represented. Births, deaths, marriages, all those things are givens. They ought to be in the paper. ... We are an historical record. One hundred years from now when people go back and research, they don't go to TV or radio. They go to the newspapers and do archive searches. If we don't provide that service, who will do it?"

He said it bothered him that some newspapers charge customers to publish items like wedding, birth and death notices. There should be a way to both be profitable and to provide important services to the community a newspaper serves, he added.

In his stops as a newspaper publisher, he said he tried to do as much as he could



Bob Moore, Ron Kemp, Brett and Jeff Christenson enjoy catching up at an APA Convention.

– writing editorials, selling advertising and reporting at meetings – "to make each newspaper reflect the community as best that I could."

Brett, a Farmerville, Louisiana, native, got his newspaper start at the *Minden (Louisiana) Press Herald* while he was studying journalism at Louisiana Tech University. One of his instructors at Louisiana Tech was **Wiley Hilburn**, a legendary Louisiana journalist and the mentor that emphasized Brett's attention to detail. Hilburn was also instrumental in shaping how Brett would craft editorials. Brett's editorials would go on to help convince Helena voters to adopt a much-needed school tax increase and push forward an effort to establish a community college in Mena.

"(Hilburn) took an old country boy and made a journalist out of me," Brett said. "He instilled in me a drive to lead my community the best I could, sometimes dragging and kicking them into the next century by writing editorials."

Brett, 72, had a newspaper career that took him from Minden to his first publishing job at the *Washington County News* in the Florida Panhandle. From there, he moved to Mena and was publisher there for a decade before moving to Helena.

From Helena, he returned to Minden as publisher for a brief time before coming back to Arkansas.

He left the newspaper business for a stint as communications manager for the Electric Co-operatives of Arkansas and then as manager of Clay County Electric Co-operative before retiring 13 years ago.

Brett now resides in Mount Ida, where he refers to himself as a "consummate, full-time volunteer."

He has served as president of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce and he is currently a board member for Healthy Connections, a network of community-based health clinics. He's headed to Washington, D.C., next week on a trip to lobby members of Congress on behalf of the state's community health centers.

He said he still pays close attention to the activities of Arkansas newspapers and to members of the APA. Brett was one of more than a dozen former APA presidents who attended the annual APA convention this past summer.

"Most of us, I think, had the same desires for his or her local community, to make a difference," he said, reflecting on his camaraderie with other APA members during his career. "Yeah, to make money, too. We had kids to support and employees to support and we did it for all the right reasons. We felt like we were making a difference."