Branching Out: The Eagle then and now the students' voice

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Susan Polster, adviser for the Eagle newspaper at USU Eastern, helps staffer Emma Campbell on a news story.

Susan Polster, editor and mentor for 40 years of fledgling college journalists

PRICE — Each fall semester begins with a whirlwind for Susan Polster, adviser for the long-time newspaper at Utah State University Eastern.

A tenderfoot news staff, some as young as 16 years old, greet her. And within two printed editions of the Eagle, she’s teased out sports reporters, opinion writers, feature editors and newsies. She’s schooled layout designers and photographers in Photoshop, Illustrator and color charts for newsprint and computer.

“It’s getting people to find a niche,” she said, describing a schedule that takes about six weeks to refine.

She sighs. “I wish there were more of me.”

A year from now, USU Eastern will mark its 80th anniversary — Carbon College was founded in 1938. It was renamed the College of Eastern Utah in 1964 and became USU Eastern when it gained affiliation with USU in 2010.

As for Polster, she recently earned her 40-year pin — all but two of those years spent as a media instructor and newspaper adviser and now as an associate professor of journalism.

So, here’s the lead for this story: Polster has shepherded the newspaper and its young journalists for nearly half of the college’s entire existence.

Through those years, Polster and the Eagle have found their way together through late nights and angry calls from coaches. Polster was a new University of Utah public relations graduate when she joined CEU as a high school recruiter. The Eagle, for its part, pushed out unremarkable twice-monthly issues.

Now, with a staff of nearly 30 student journalists, the Eagle, along with the Eagle Online, regularly scopes out additional wall space for framed awards. In May, for instance, the newspaper won seven first-place trophies in the 2017 Utah Press Association competition among all of Utah’s universities.

Gone is the darkroom and the waxed strips of news copy. And gone, thankfully, are the X-ACTO blades, late-night sword fights and subsequent dashes to the emergency room. (“I’m, ‘OK, there’s another X-ACTO knife in the stomach,’” she remembers.)

In 2015, the newsroom moved from bottom-level offices in Old SAC, the original student activity center, into airy offices in the new West Instructional Building. In all the years between large typesetters (the Eagle was for years laid out in office of the local newspaper, the Sun Advocate) to small screens, the paper remains what Polster describes as “the heart of the college.” And, as a forum for students, it helped bridge the transition from CEU to USU Eastern.

On this day, Polster is helping establish a phone link between her young reporters and five USU Eastern baseball players who have been stranded on their home island of Puerto Rico in the days following Hurricane Maria.

The five athletes will be the lead story in the next issue of the Eagle, which is printed every other week — a thousand copies carried to all campus points.

Her staff of 28 meets weekly to brainstorm story possibilities. Tuesday late nights are the chaotic, exhausting, pizza-fueled deadlines.

Among Polster’s first jobs is to crush the habit learned by many new college writers — padding essays with “flowery adjectives and adverbs,” she said.
“I’m like, ‘Guys you can’t do this,’” she regularly says as she underlines empty words and suggests edits for leaner and clearer news stories.

And in initial meetings with novice journalists, she tells them the whole campus is theirs to investigate and explain. Only two subjects, she counsels them, are out of bounds: religion (“I hate it when they start on religion because there’s no win-loss record there”) and abortion (“There are really very few people on the fence”).

“I tell them, ‘If you really want to get me beat up, then take on those two subjects,’” she says. “But can I stop them? Absolutely not."

When one recent editorial, praised the beauty and virtues of another Utah college, Ephraim’s Snow College, she got some push-back from student editors of the Logan campus’s Utah Statesman.

“They asked me, ‘Why would you let a student write that?’” she remembers. “And I said, ‘Why not? It was really weird. Because the newspaper should be their voice, voices of USU-Eastern students. It says that right on the flag.’"

Student writers hear one additional Polster mandate: They can chide and tackle any department or issue, but “don’t take on specific individuals,” she said. “I tell them, ‘If you want to take on the housing department, fine, but not the director.’"

An old newspaper mentor once gave her some simple advice that continues to guide her. “He said, ‘Susan, give them bylines. Make sure they have bylines and make sure when they take a picture they have their name under it,’” she says. “That’s what they’re most proud of.”

It’s still all about the bylines, even as the newspaper has gone online. “When you get your byline, your paper goes from a C paper to a B paper,” she said. “When it goes online, it makes an A paper. Everybody and their dog can read it online, and they can comment on it. That’s pretty exciting.”

Her days are full between newspaper deadlines and teaching classes in mass communications, media writing and graphic design. But there’s always time for one link to the passage of years: former students.

Many have transferred to majors in the Logan-based Department of Journalism and Communication; some have gone on to law school or careers at Utah’s biggest newspapers. “With Facebook, it’s funny to hear all the stories,” she says.

She’s just posted a back-and-forth with a former editor who now teaches junior high in Logan. “She said, ‘I still have to have pizza on Tuesday night, and I can’t go to bed early.’”

Polster laughs, “I tell them when they graduate: ‘You’ll have your life back on Tuesday nights.’”

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