

Every now and then, a good idea will make it – The Legislative Gazette



Gazette photo by Dylan Hirsh

Forty years goes quickly.

I was teaching at SUNY New Paltz. I had already started two fifteen credit full semester programs, including the first full-time internship program, placing students in legislative and district attorneys' offices.

Long before that, I had been named publisher of the Fire Island Sun one summer and had experienced a trial by fire that left me very

unhappy. I was saddled with keeping the books, selling the ads, even doing the payroll. Let me just say that I really was not good at it. I got through it somehow but when they offered me the chance to do it again, I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. The big takeaway, however, was that I had learned what needed to be done to run a newspaper. So I proposed to the college administration at New Paltz that we start The Legislative Gazette.

It took a lot of persuading. The powers that be were concerned that we would tick off the solons in government but, with the help of my fellow professor, Gerry Benjamin, I prevailed. We got real lucky when Glenn Doty, a former managing editor of the Middletown Record, showed up and took the reins of the paper. He assigned beats to each of the students and taught them how to write. Years later, hundreds of students have been through the program and two of them have shared in Pulitzers. Doty was succeeded by one of his mentees, James Gormley, who has done a magnificent job of holding the project together while teaching a pretty full schedule at New Paltz.

Now we are celebrating our 40th birthday. It turns out to have been a pretty good idea. At the beginning, though, we weren't too sure. There were no stipends in those days, so one of our best students, Anne Erickson, put on a fundraiser at a local watering hole where she was waitressing. The state's Lieutenant Governor, an unknown by the name of Mario Cuomo, showed up and shamed his colleagues in the legislature into coming even after some of them had tried to kill the project. That was the night we knew we were in business.

I got a lot of credit that I really didn't deserve. It was just an idea and somehow the heavens provided. Unlike some other publishers who take over newspapers with all kinds of help, we had no one but somehow, some way, the whole thing worked.

At one point they tried to kill the paper and there was this one Republican Senator, Norman Levy, who stood up in front of his colleagues, and said, "Is this why you got elected, to kill a student newspaper?" He always denied that he did that but I know he did. He's gone now but I'll never forget him. When we got the word that the newspaper was dead the fearless young student, Anne Erickson, gave out with an expletive and visited some reporters at the New York Times and UPI who called some legislators and the project was saved.

We are living in a time when the president of the United States calls the press the "enemy of the people." But all these students, some now in their sixties and retiring, learned their craft at The Legislative Gazette and showed that, every now and then, a good idea will make it through even though on paper, had we proposed the idea to Ford Foundation, they might have laughed.

So here we are at 40. SUNY New Paltz deserves a great deal of credit for doing the right thing. There were a lot of very good educators who had courage, a rare commodity in academia these days.

When we had our reunion in Albany there were lots of hugs, some tears, lots of wonderful war stories and a lot of mutual respect.



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Gazette interns reunited in Albany last month to share war stories, hugs and tears.