



NebraskaPressWomen.org
Community of Communicators

AI's Role in Today's Journalism



Photo by Marsha Hoffman
Matt Waite kicks off the 2026 Spring Conference at the University of Nebraska Lincoln's Anderson Hall

By JAN TREFFER THOMPSON

The remains of a small aircraft hang from the side of York's water tower. Concrete and steel from Kearney's Archway Monument crash into Interstate 80 traffic, the tourist attraction sagging like an old clothesline.

Fortunately, the only place these events actually happened was inside an artificial intelligence. Matt Waite presented these and other examples of deepfaked images while discussing uses of AI at the Nebraska Press Women spring conference.

A professor of practice at the University of Nebraska Lincoln's College of Journalism and Mass Communication, Waite shared insights on the benefits and dangers to journalism emerging from fast-evolving AI tools.

"People are in two camps," Waite said, either completely on board or completely against using AI to produce news, which thwarts efforts at real discussion on the issue. He describes himself as an "AI pragmatist" instead.

"I want humans to go do human things," he said, "and if there are things AI can do that enable good journalism, do that."

Waite has embraced new technologies throughout his journalism career. As a news technologist at the Tampa Bay Times, he became principal developer of the fact-checking site PolitiFact. It was the first website to win a Pulitzer Prize, for national

reporting in 2009. At UNL since 2011, Waite founded the Drone Journalism Lab and now teaches data journalism and sports data classes. Waite detailed two ways AI is affecting community journalism today. One of those relates directly to the fake information often spread through social media.

The photo of a collapsed Archway Monument, which made the social media rounds in 2025, sparked Waite's interest in AI image generation. He now teaches a class in which students (and Waite) create their own deepfake photos and videos, social media posts and other content. A photo of York's impaled water tower was part of that course.

(SEE WAITE, Page 3)

No Replacement for Local Reporters

By JAN TREFFER THOMPSON

When fire trucks showed up outside a Middle Eastern grocery and restaurant in Lincoln, someone told the community why they were there. When officials ruled the fire as arson, someone asked officials hard questions and published the investigation's findings. Now, someone will follow up until the case is solved.

"Who told that story?" UNL professor Chris Graves asked as she opened her presentation at the NPW spring conference. "And what happens when the answer becomes 'nobody'?"

Graves, who has taught at UNL since 2020, won a Pulitzer Prize in 2018 as part of a Cincinnati Enquirer reporting team. She covered several major national stories, and her work has been used in academic and legal research.

She said despite bleak industry numbers, the outlook for community journalism is hopeful simply because it's needed.

"These are the stories that can't generated by an algorithm," Graves said, which must be found and reported by people with firsthand knowledge of their communities.

Admittedly, Graves said, recent decades have been unkind to the news industry. Jobs and entire publications have gone away, leaving 50 million Americans living in counties with one or no news sources.

(SEE GRAVES, PAGE 4)



Photo by Marsha Hoffman
UNL professor Chris Graves discusses the importance of local reporting.

Change is the Only Certainty

By JAN TREFFER THOMPSON

Change has been a constant in the communications industry, a pair of presenters at the NPW spring conference said, but a willingness to adapt has guided them through.

Ruth Brown and her daughter, Valerie Jones, shared their experiences over six decades in the communications industry. Brown is an associate professor emerita of the University of Nebraska Lincoln, while Jones is a professor of advertising and public relations at Lincoln's COJMC.

Brown said she got her first job while in college, at the Lincoln Journal. A part-time copy editor, she learned to read upside down and backward to proof the typeset pages in the composing room. After getting married and moving to South Dakota, she secured a job at the Brookings Register because she knew how to use the California job case to set headlines.

But by the time she and husband Eric moved back to his hometown of Lexington to take over KRVN Radio, entirely new skills were in demand. The station needed to start designing its own print materials. Brown didn't know "desktop publishing," but said that's when she adopted a new mantra: "Give me two weeks." Whatever skill an employer needed, she figured, she could learn if she had two weeks before having to produce anything.

Brown later built on her experiences to get a teaching position at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. Part of her job was to develop distance learning classes, which she had experienced as a student while getting her doctorate. Later, she said, she got a job on the UNL journalism faculty because they needed someone who could teach distance classes.

In the meantime, Jones had entered the communications industry while in high school, working for KRVN. Studying sociology and communication studies at UNL, she secured internships in advertising and public relations that led to work for major brands on cutting-edge promotional strategies.

Jones's career has taken her to major advertising firms, through layoffs and freelancing, and into teaching. Her focus as first an adjunct and now a full professor has been on digital analytics used to target advertising, with her research into AI and voice assistants earning her a Fulbright Scholarship to Australia.

"I appreciate when things happen you don't want to happen," Jones said. "It pushes you in different directions, to do things you didn't think you could."

Both women said embracing and adapting to change has been key to their success, as well as the strong professional and personal networks they developed. Above all, Brown said, it's important to believe in your own abilities.

"Don't be scared. Recognize your value and be comfortable in it," she said.



Photo by Lori Potter
Ruth Brown, (left) and Valerie Jones discussed how they've adapted to a changing communications industry.



Photo by Lori Potter
Mary Kay Quinlan, (far left), associate dean emerita of the University of Nebraska Lincoln, moderates a panel of young journalists at the spring conference. Sharing their experiences and outlook on the industry were (from left) Jackie Durada, Zach Wendling and Andrew Wegley.

Voices of Tomorrow

By JAN TREFFER THOMPSON

The social media age has created new challenges for journalists, but three young reporters say they remain hopeful and committed to the job.

NPW's spring conference included a panel discussion with Andrew Wegley of the Flatwater Free Press, Zach Wendling from the Nebraska Examiner, and Jackie Ourada from Nebraska Public Media. All shared their perspectives on journalism and its role in today's society as young reporters and editors.

Mary Kay Quinlan, associate dean emerita of the UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communication, asked the panel what drew them into journalism and what they've learned since they've been in the industry.

All panelists named reader feedback as one of the most surprising and difficult parts of today's journalism. Online interaction through social media or email, Wegley said, contains more vitriol than he thought possible.

"People say nice things, but they love to say mean things," he said, adding he was disappointed by how reader feedback changed when he moved from the Journal Star to Flatwater. "Now everybody loves the work we're doing,"

he said, but it's the same work he was doing at the Lincoln paper that earned so much criticism. For him, that underscored the contentious and flawed ideas people often hold about their local news sources, blaming them for what's perceived as "bad news."

Wendling, who primarily writes about the Nebraska Legislature, said he's been intrigued by watching how politicians frame themselves to their constituents through the press, and how different their public and private selves can be.

"You see a different side of folks in this industry," he said. "You start to learn who people are."

(SEE VOICES, PAGE 7)

Press Women on Tour



At left, NPW member Ruth Brown of Lincoln examines a gigantic quilt on display at the International Quilt Center in Lincoln. The spring NPW conference included tours of the quilt museum and Nebraska Public Media on April 24 (Photo by Mary Pat Finn Hoag).

Above, press women tour the recently upgraded Ron Hull studio at Nebraska Public Media, where several of the regular programs, including "Big Red Roundup" and "Backyard Farmer," are produced (Photo by Lori Potter).

At right, Becca Jewell, Nebraska Public Media director of major and planned giving, guides press women through the Ron Hull studio (Photo by Mary Pat Finn Hoag).



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“Swatting down this fakery” is a new job for community journalists, Waite said, who are responsible for chasing down internet rumors about their communities.

Products such as Google’s SynthID, which flags the use of Google AI tools, and sites such as thehive.ai that check content for AI generation are useful, Waite said, but so are the foundational skills of traditional reporting.

“Basic journalism works really, really well” to separate what’s fake from what’s real, he said. That means talking to the people involved, going to the places mentioned, and asking hard questions about whatever photo or story is making the rounds.

Journalism written by or with the help of AI has had an entirely different effect.

AI tools can help reporters gather and understand information; Waite recommended products from Google, Anthropic’s Claude, and especially NotebookLM that creates specialized chatbots accessing only the documents reporters give them, without uploading that data to the larger internet. NotebookLM can summarize documents, include footnotes to source material, and even produce podcasts with “hosts” that discuss the information. These products can improve reporters’ efficiency and accuracy, Waite said.

He added that agentic coding, or software development driven by AI “agents,” lets journalists with minimal coding knowledge create their own websites and databases to gather or present information. Waite shared software he created that mines Nebraska government websites for public records, which are usually posted as PDF’s, and turns them into a searchable data set.

While readers consistently say they don’t want to read articles written by AI, Waite said, few people have concerns about published “boilerplate” stories generated this way, which free up human reporters to follow more important stories. He cited the example of the Associated Press’s quarterly earnings reports, which plug company names and updated numbers into a standardized formula and are now generated by AI.

“If it’s short, consequences are low, complexity is low, people will accept some AI writing,” he said.

But Waite cautioned against using AI tools to edit copy written by humans. Many reporters think AI tools can be grammar and style checkers, but instead their changes twist sentences into a hybrid “AI style” that’s evolved from the massive amounts of texts that have been fed into these models.

“It will move (your writing) into a space that no other human writing occupies, using words in a way humans don’t,” Waite said, often changing meaning as it does so.

And with the speed AI tools are being developed, Waite said, their uses for journalists are sure to change and expand just as quickly.

“There is a place for this . . . the problem is we don’t know what that is, we don’t know what rules are, and there are dangers all around,” he said.

NPW Spring Honorees

Batie Newest Hall of Fame Inductee

By BETTE PORE

Nebraska Press Women inducted Barb Bierman Batie into the Marian Andersen Nebraska Women Journalists Hall of Fame April 25 during the NPW spring conference in Lincoln.

Bierman Batie, a veteran reporter and photographer who worked for Cozad, Norfolk, North Platte and Lexington newspapers, then went on to be a correspondent for the Midwest Messenger and other publications, had been an NPW member for 41 years when she passed away last December. She had served in NPW offices and on its board most of those years.

From 2013 to 2016 she took time from her freelancing career to serve as marketing director for the Nebraska Rural Radio Foundation, helping raise money, promote and distribute scholarships for non-traditional students in agriculture. She was a member of the Nebraska Sesquicentennial Commission from 2014 to 2018. She was the only reporter invited on the Nebraska Governor's Trade Mission to Germany in November 2019 and was invited into the Nebraska Hall of Ag Achievement membership in 2022.

Bierman Batie is the 38th woman inducted into the hall of fame, which NPW created in 2011. More information on the hall and a nomination form are available on the NPW website, nebraskapresswomen.org.



Don Batie accepts the award honoring his late wife Barb Bierman Batie as a member of the Marian Andersen Nebraska Women Journalists Hall of Fame from director Bette Pore.



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Communities without local news sources see lower voter turnout, less trust in government and public institutions. "People don't fill the void with good information," Graves said, but with national sources that can be unreliable and polarizing.

Those numbers, however, aren't the whole story.

News outlets aren't closing because of their work, Graves said, but "because we built a business model that worked on ad revenue the internet broke."

Business models can be fixed, and Graves sees many people in Nebraska doing that repair work.

"Nebraska is already building," she said, noting the non-profit model adopted by the Flatwater Free Press, the Nebraska Examiner and National Public Radio's Midwest News Room. These publications represent a new approach to journalism, which is based on collaboration rather than competition. This approach is working in small towns as well, she said, citing 27-year-old Alana Kellen who bought her hometown Madison Star-Mail newspaper because "If I don't do it, who will?"

Graves painted an image of Nebraskans working together to provide and secure local journalism throughout the state, and reminded the audience that UNL's journalism college plays a key role in that effort.

"We are working in collaboration with them, building the new generation of eyes and ears on Nebraska government," she said.

Press Women Win Awards in Professional Contest

By MARY JANE SKALA

Seventeen members of Nebraska Press Women won awards in the 2026 Professional Communications Contest. Awards were presented at the group's spring meeting in Lincoln April 25.

Lori Potter of Kearney, a freelance writer whose articles appear in the Flatwater Free Press, the Minden Courier and Harvest News, took home 17 awards, including 10 first place, four second place, two third place and one honorable mention.

Mary Jane Skala of Kearney, a general assignment reporter and personal columnist for the Kearney Hub, won 15 awards, including nine first place, five second place and one honorable mention.

Melanie Wilkinson of York, editor of the online publication justmelaniew.com, won eight awards, including three first place, two second place, two third place and one honorable mention.

Four staff writers from the Flatwater Free Press won 10 awards collectively, including five first place, four second place and one third place.

Out of 109 entries in the contest, 28 won first place in their respective categories and were forwarded to the National Federation of Press Women's 2026 Professional Communications Contest. Winners in the national contest will be announced in late July, with awards presented Sept. 26 at the NFPW Communications Conference in Ellicott City, Md.

A full list of winners is on pages 5 and 6.



Photo by Mary Pat Finn Hoag
Professional contest winners present at the spring banquet were (front row, left to right): Janelle Atyeo of Sioux Falls, S.D.; Lori Potter of Kearney, second place sweepstakes; Mary Jane Skala of Kearney, first place sweepstakes; and Delores Meister of West Point. (Back row, left to right): Sara Giboney, Destiny Herbers, Sara Gentzler, all of Omaha; Carla Chance of Cedar Creek and Terri Hahn of Osceola.

2026 NPW Professional Communications Contest winners

(number after name = number of awards)

NATALIA ALAMDARI - Omaha, Flatwater Free Press (2)

First place: 7-Q, Social issues: "Spinning rides, swirling rumors: Talk of ICE raid mars county fair's attempt to showcase Mexican band." Aug. 25

Second Place: 5-C. Feature, online, "Desperate for teachers, Nebraska schools turn to the faraway Philippines," May 23

JANELLE ATYEO - Sioux Falls, S.D., Midwest Messenger/Tri-State Neighbor, (3)

Honorable mention: 2. Continuing coverage or unfolding news. "World Livestock Auctioneering Championship Coverage," May 30

Honorable mention: 7-C. Business. "Do your homework: Growers carefully assess needs when purchasing pricey inputs for 2026." Nov 14

Honorable mention: 7-N. Religion: "Kids, community and Christ: Rural church fosters relationships to build following of young families." Feb. 21

CARLA CHANCE – Cedar Creek, freelance (11)

First place: 9, Headlines.

Second place: 2. Continuing coverage or unfolding news. "No Kings rally decries authoritarian rule. "'No King' protestors gather in defiance of authoritarian rule." "50501 movement sounds rally cry" The Daily Record, May 16, June 27 and Nov. 3

Third place: 1-A, news story, print. "Law Day 2025 Constitution's Promise: Out of Many, One" The Daily Record, May 1

Third place: 5-A, Feature, print, "New Library A Novel Concept" and sidebar: "Check Out Everything Library Has to Offer." The Daily Record, April 17

Third place: 6-B, Personality profile, 750+ words. "Pacific Street Blues a hit among listeners" and sidebar, "PSB Program offers course in musicology." The Daily Record, Dec. 3

Third place: 7-C. Business. "Lost Pets of Omaha Fetches Thousands of Happy Tails" and sidebar, "Lost Pets Nonprofit Offers Free Tips, Services." The Daily Record, Sept 24.

Third place: 7-G, Govt/politics, "Plaque commemorates OBS's 150th anniversary." The Daily Record, Oct. 31

Third place: 7-I. History. "Historic home purchase to help preserve Omaha's heritage." The Daily Record, Jan. 30

Third place, 7-Q. Social issues. "Attorney Advocates for Immigrants' Rights." The Daily Record, Aug 29

Honorable mention, 3. In-depth reporting. "Award Winning Author and Attorney Lawrence Dwyer Chronicles Historic Milestones" and sidebars. The Daily Record, June 6.

Honorable mention, 7H. Green-environmental, "Fueling 'power' to the people." The Daily Record, Oct. 17

SARA GENTZLER - Omaha, Flatwater Free Press (2)

First Place: 2. Continuing coverage or unfolding news. "YRTC Kearney abuse allegations," Oct. 10.

First place: 7-M, Health. "Dysfunction, turnover at Omaha Planned Parenthood Clinic further limiting abortion access," May 1

SARA GIBONEY – Omaha, College of St Mary (2)

Second place: 40A. Electronic newsletter. "Journeys" alumni newsletter, Dec. 1

Honorable mention: 46B. PR/external communications. "Journeys" magazine, Nov. 19

TERRI HAHN - Osceola, Grand Island Independent (3)

First place: 18. Single page, section or supplement edited by entrant. "Occasions," pages E1-E4. Jan 4

Second place: 18. Single page, section or supplement edited by entrant. "Occasions," pages E1-E5. Jan. 11.

Third place: 7B. Arts & Entertainment. "Prepping concert a major undertaking." Dec. 20.

DESTINY HERBERS - Omaha, Flatwater Free Press (3)

First place: 3. In-depth reporting. "We don't know the real number of Nebraskans dying from drugs. It's costing us." Sept. 18

Second Place: 7-C. Business. "Nebraska Public Power District bought land for \$5 million — from NPPD executives." May 16

Third place: 7N – Religion. "Omaha televangelist: a pastor allied with Trump. His church is booming – and buying serious real estate." March 7.

KERRY HOFFSCHNEIDER – Waco, freelance, (1)

Honorable mention: 12-D. Books, short stories, verse or non-fiction for adult readers. "Hope Stories for the Heartland."

DELORES MEISTER – West Point, freelance (2)

Third place: 7-H. Green/environmental. "Ideas sprouted at Spring Garden Expo." West Point News, May 8

Honorable mention: 4. Editorial/opinion. "A Flag Day Gathering." Dodge Criterion, June 18

CARLA POST, Ayr, freelance (4)

First place: 5-C, online feature. "Handmade helper: 92-year-old Nebraskan moves snow with a tractor he built from scratch 65 years ago." Midwest Messenger, Dec. 11

Third place: 7-A, Agriculture. "Spreading sunshine: Flower a farm business grows from seeds of a heartbreaking journey." Midwest Messenger. June 20.

Third place: 8-A, Columns, general. "Way Up North: Wayne Gerlach." Webster County Sun, Feb. 13

Honorable mention: 5-A. Feature, print newspaper. "Blue Hill: Golls reach landmark anniversary." Webster County Record, June 12

2026 NPW Professional Communications Contest winners Continued
(number after name = number of awards)

LORI POTTER - Kearney, freelance (16)

First place: 5-B. Feature, magazine/newsletter. "Something Different to Try" and "Frequent video postings carry ag interests from pumpkin patch and maize of home in England to wheat fields of the American Great Plains." Harvest News, Aug. 1
First place: 7-A. Agriculture. "Kearney County Crops and Cattle 2025 Outlook." Minden Courier, March 13
First place: 7-B, Arts & entertainment. "The Jason Wulf Band." Harvest News, Dec. 1
First place: 7-C. Business. "One to the Next: Business transaction for Ivan Wiebke, Travis Dorn crosses generations, blurs family line." Harvest News, May 1.
First place: 7-G. Government or politics. "According to Plan." Harvest News, July 1
First place: 7H. Green/environmental. "Spring Migration: A Different World." Kearney Hub, March 4
First place: 7-P. Science/technology. "An eye toward the next need: Applequist Manufacturing sole American maker of stripper header, builds in Smith Center, Kansas, on log legacy of fabrication innovation." Harvest News, Oct. 1
First place: 21-A. Single photograph, news or feature. "Sunset at Rowe Sanctuary" North Platte Telegraph, April 5
First place: 22. Photo essay. "Buffalo County Fair." Kearney Hub, July 29
First place: 23. Photographer-writer. "Lions, camels and goats: Century-old carousel fell into disrepair." Flatwater Free Press, Aug. 13
Second place: 6-B. Personality profile, 750+ words. "After his first 81 years." Harvest News, June 1
Second place: 7-L. Personal essay. Potter's Wheel, Minden Courier, March 13.
Second place: 22. Photo essay. "Working Cattle at Callaway ranch." Flatwater Free Press, Feb. 7
Second place: 21-B. Single photo, sports. "Rodeo bronc rider." Kearney Hub, July 8.
Third place: 2-1B. Single photo, sports, "Rodeo calf roper." Kearney Hub, July 8
Honorable mention: 21-C, General photograph. "Field Work at Sunset with Sandhill Cranes Flying." Flatwater Free Press, March 5

KRISTEN SINDELAR - Clarkson, Midwest Messenger (5)

Second place: 7-A. Agriculture, "Are economics driving corn production westward?" Oct. 3
Second place: 7-H. Green/environmental. "Bison remain heartbeat of prairie at Niobrara Valley Preserve." Sept. 26.
Second place: 23. Photographer/writer. "Top U.S. contenders flock to Nebraska for sheep-shearing contest." Oct. 24
Honorable Mention: 6-B. Personality profile, 750+ words. "Extra reason to smile at this year's Madison County fair." Aug. 1
Honorable Mention: 8-A. Columns, general. "From OB nurse to midwife: calving season promotion." April 11

MARY JANE SKALA - Kearney, The Kearney Hub (16)

First place: 5-A, Feature, print, "From out of the ashes, love and kindness for Axtell family." May 29
First place: 6-B. Personality profile, 750+ words. "Retired surgeon in Kearney paints and writes a memoir," Sept. 6
First place: 7-I. History. "Kearney man re-enacts a historical character few think about: a mortician" Oct. 25
First place, 7-J. Hobby, construction, design. "Bats, wasps infest Kearney home. Then National Guard friends immobilize to help." July 24
First place: 7-L. Personal essay. "Chicagoan pooh-poohs Nebraska. Let's invite him to come stay awhile." Dec. 13.
First place: 7-N. Religion. "Father Paul: a poignant farewell to Prince of Peace." June 21
First place: 7-T, Travel, First Place, "Kearney audience hears unforgettable stories from nurse who volunteered in Gaza." Sept. 20
First place: 8-B, Column, humor. "No lifeboats. No lights. No Toilets. But the Pilgrims made it." Nov. 22.
First place: 8-D. Column, personal: "The real winner of the Indy 500." May 29
Second place: 7-B. Arts and entertainment. "MONA map is a work of art. Literally." May 17
Second place: 8-A. Columns, general. "The choreography of branding day on a farm near Elm Creek." May 2
Second place: 8-D, Column, personal. "I left my heart in Cataract Canyon." Oct. 25
Second place: 7-E, Education. "What is your child doing online? Speaker at Kearney school aims to empower parents." Sept. 18
Second place: 7-M. Health. "Kearney woman is 35, happily married and mom of 2. This fall, she was diagnosed with ALS." Dec. 11.
Second place: 7-Q. Social issues, "Suicide steps out of the shadows. Rates are dropping." Oct.30
Honorable mention: 8-A, General column, "Do loved ones visit us after they die?" Nov. 1

LAUREN WAGNER – Omaha, The 77 Million

First place: 1-C, online news story. "In class and TikTok, South Dakota interns preserve Lakota language." Aug. 5
Third place: 3. in-depth reporting. "National teachers' union shortage." May 21

DIXI WELLMAN - Waverly, Midwest Messenger

Third place: 8-C. Informational column. "Swimming with swine," May 22
Third place: 8-D. Personal column. "Small towns have much to offer." June 25
Honorable mention: 8-C, Informational column. "Think small. Keep your dollars close to home," Dec 18
Honorable mention: 8-D. Personal column. "Feeling the power of gratitude," Nov. 17

MELANIE WILKINSON – York, justmelanie.com

First place: 8-A. General columns. "Blue typewriter with a red and white keyboard."
First place: 37-C, Personal blog, "The World According to Riki." March 3
First place: 35. Personal website. Justmelanie.com
Second place: 9. Headlines, justmelanie.com. June 5
Second place: 8-B. Humor columns. "The alleged attack of the flies,"
Third place: 1-C, online news story. "Shucklage pile burning 35 days with no end in sight; neighbors worry about health, animals, properties." May 2
Third place: 5-C, feature, online. "Moms turn grief into action." April 9
Honorable mention: 5-C, online feature. "127-year-old 'Waiting for Papa' painting from Greenwood Cemetery to be restored, donations needed."

EMILY WOLF - Lincoln, Flatwater Free Press

Second place: 1-C. online news story. "Gunned down in broad daylight: Killings spotlight limitations as domestic violence spikes in Nebraska." April 18

NPW Honors HS Winners



Photo by Lori Potter

All the high school contest winners present at the 2026 spring conference in Lincoln pose shown with their awards.

By SARA GIBONEY

Nebraska high school students recently received awards in the Nebraska Press Women (NPW) High School Communications Contest.

Students from 21 schools submitted 508 entries that were judged in 23 categories. Those categories included writing, photos, graphics, broadcast or video, and yearbook categories. The contest was open to high school students across the state.

This year's contest set records for number of entries and number of schools participating. The largest category, sports writing, had 52 entries. This was followed by news story with 45 entries and feature story with 43. Sixteen of the 23 categories had 15 or more entries.

One of the benefits of the contest is the feedback provided by the judges, who are all professionals in the communications industry. Special thanks to the NPW members who served as judges.

Lincoln Southeast High School accumulated the most points based on contest results and received the Sweepstakes Award. **Marian High School** was runner up and **Elkhorn North High School** placed third for the Sweepstakes Award. All three schools received awards.

Winners were recognized during NPW's spring convention luncheon April 25 in Lincoln.

Schools with winning entries are Adams Central Jr/Sr High School (Hastings), Bellevue East High School, Bellevue West High School, Bryan High School, Dorchester Public School, Elkhorn North High School, Gretna East High School, Gretna High School, Lincoln Southeast High School, Lincoln Southwest High School, Marian High School (Omaha), Millard North High School (Omaha), Millard South High School (Omaha), Omaha Buena Vista High School, Omaha South High School, Papillion-La Vista High School, Plattsmouth High School, Westside High School (Omaha) and Westview High School (Omaha).

For a list of award winners by school, see the news post online at <https://www.nebraskapresswomen.org/2026/05/08/nebraska-students-win-npw-communication-awards/>

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Ourada said her greatest surprise was "how understaffed newsrooms are," and how few people are left to gather and present the news. Her comments underscored a concern all three expressed about the future of local journalism, but Wending and Ourada said they also see the potential for new growth in the industry.

Wending predicted independent journalists and publications will take over more local journalism, while Ourada said she sees the tide of public opinion turning toward local news once again.

"I think people are really realizing they do need to support this," she said. "People are going to wake up and appreciate the reporters who are showing up" at the places and times that matter.

Nebraska has 21 National HS Winners

By SHERRY THOMPSON

Nebraska high school students earned four first, four second, two third and 11 honorable mention awards in the National Federation of Press Women High School Communications Contest. Winners were announced during a May 13 awards ceremony held via Zoom.

First-place entries in the Nebraska Press Women High School Communications Contest advanced to the national round of competition. The contest recognizes students in 23 categories that include writing, photography, graphics, layout, broadcast, video and yearbook.

Nebraska's national winners are from 11 schools: Bellevue East High School, Bryan High School (Omaha), Elkhorn North High School, Gretna High School, Gretna East High School, Lincoln Southeast High School, Marian High School (Omaha), Millard North High School (Omaha), Millard South High School (Omaha), Westside High School (Omaha), Westview High School (Omaha).

First-place honorees are:

- Columns or blogs - **Lida Prochaska, Lincoln Southeast High School**, Lincoln, Nebraska, Innovation or Imitation? AI's influence in today's classrooms.
- Cartooning - **Macaiah Dodd, Westside High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Apollo Asks #3.
- Graphics/photo illustration - **Izumi Huang Fujiwara, Marian High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Nebraska's Food Insecurities.
- Yearbook Layout - **Sarah Mesfin, Bryan High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Homecoming.

Second-place winners are:

- News Story - **Lailah Duncan, Bellevue East High School**, Bellevue, Nebraska, Former Bellevue East student cured of sickle cell disease.
- Video Feature Story - **Will Mahan, Westside High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Driven by Heart: Westside Golf Team Takes State Runner-Up Amid Coach's Personal Battle.
- Yearbook Photo - (tie) - **Addilyn Nikodym, Gretna East High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Straight from the Heart.
- Yearbook Copywriting - **Parker Neville, Millard North High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Quacking the code.

Third-place winners are:

- Double-truck Layout - **Katherine Dietz, Eleanor Thibodeau, and Izumi Huang Fujiwara, Marian High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Going Analog in 2026.
- Best Newscast - **Adam Taylor, Sydney Kjeldgaard, Sofia Bunch, Jenna Steinke and Cory Nguyen, Lincoln Southeast High School**, Lincoln, Nebraska, Knight Pride News: Dec. 5 Episode.

Honorable mention winners are:

- Feature Story - **Mary Jane Kushiner, Gretna High School**, Gretna, Nebraska, Ruth's Religion: Senior Navigates Her Faith in Suburban Gretna.
- Sports Story - **Lauren Hicks, Marian High School**, Bennington, Nebraska, Athletes Utilize NSAA Transfer Portal.
- Reviews - **Niharika Kandari, Elkhorn North High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, The Unfairest of Them All.
- Environment - **Kristina Gevorkova, Lincoln Southeast High School**, Lincoln, Nebraska, When the Storm Strikes.
- News or feature photo - **Syra Qureshi, Marian High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, High in the sky.
- Sports photo - **Regina Ho, Millard South High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Spotlight on the Mat.
- Single Page Layout - **Evangeline Ahern, Lincoln Southeast High School**, Lincoln, Nebraska, Spooky Movies to Sink Your Teeth Into.
- Radio or Podcast Prepared Report - **Hunter Veylupek and Lucas Boyer, Westside High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Warrior Weekly: Episode 2.
- Radio/Television Interview or Talk Show - **Jordan Farmer, Westview High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Fireside Chats with Jordan Farmer - Wolfes & Lyons.
- Video News Story - **Kate Efav, Marian High School**, Omaha, Nebraska, Government Shutdown.
- Video Sports Story - **Cory Nguyen and Mason Sheehan, Lincoln Southeast High School**, Lincoln, Nebraska, Rolling Toward Victory: The LSE Bowling Team brings focus, fire, and team chemistry to every frame.

Member Voices

Opinion: Protecting the Pillar

By MARY PAT FINN-HOAG
NPW Historian

The statistics are startling — speaking for themselves — and hitting too close to home for us in the media world.

According to the Medill State of Local News report:

- From 2005 to October 2025, the number of U.S.-published newspapers declined from 7,325 to 4,490.
- Daily news circulation that averaged between 50 million to 60 million at the turn of the century dropped to slightly above 15 million.
- In 2005, an estimated 365,460 people were employed by newspapers; that number now stands at 91,550.
- In Nebraska, at least 10 daily and weekly newspapers closed from 2024 to 2025. Nine counties are now "news deserts" with no local paper. And 55 counties have two or fewer full-time journalists.

The Norfolk Daily News recently addressed the decline of community newspapers in a seven-part series titled "Protect the Pillar." The title refers to the fourth pillar of democracy, along with the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government.

In introducing the series, associate editor Austin Svehla wrote: Walter Cronkie once said, "Freedom of the press is not just important to democracy; it is democracy."

These words from the late, great journalist remind us that a free press is not optional to a democracy — it is the very foundation of an open society.

While freedom of the press is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, its impact is greatly diminished if there is no local, community newspaper for citizens to rely upon.

Community papers have been hit with a loss of advertising to social media, higher production costs, a decline in mailing service and challenges in hiring staff. This all comes at a time when citizens across the nation want quality, community journalism, seemingly more than ever before.

Without support for quality, local journalism, not only will communities suffer, but so will democracy as a whole.

The "Protect the Pillar" series can be found at: norfolkdailynews.com



Fall Conference to be Oct. 17 at Henderson

By TERRI HAHN

The fall conference will be Saturday, Oct. 17, at Mennonite Heritage Park near Henderson.

Terri Hahn, Kerry Hoffschneider and Shannon Siebert are organizing the conference.

Founded in 1995, the 8.5-acre park preserves the 1874 settlement history of 35 German Mennonite families from Russia. It features a replica Immigrant House, a 1911 barn, a country church, a schoolhouse, and a farmstead.

The park hosts events including a Heritage Festival in September. Conference activities will be in the Gathering Room, a building that opened in April. Park representatives will offer tours as part of the afternoon program, with golf carts available for those who need some help getting around the park.

The Dutch Kitchen in Henderson will cater the luncheon, where our new Communicator of Achievement will be announced.

The conference will also include the election of officers for 2027-28. Keep an eye on your inbox for more election info.

The board will meet Friday evening at Chances R in York. As of now, board members will need to book their own hotel reservations in York.

To get to the park from York, take I-80 west to exit 342. The park is about a mile and a half south of the interstate.

The fall conference is a "drive-in, drive-out" event, usually in the eastern part of the state so the majority of members (who are not on the board) don't need to stay overnight. The conference will end by midafternoon. And in case you are wondering, the Huskers play at Oregon that weekend and kick-off time hasn't been announced.

Organizers are working on the program, but if you have any suggestions, feel free to reach out.

For more information about the park, check out <https://www.hendersonheritage.org/>

Letter to the Editor

Dear Fellow NPW members,

Well, I admit, I haven't attended NPW meetings. So, when I saw the treasurer's report, I was surprised at our wealth. Shouldn't we raise (I mean REALLLY raise) the monetary awards given to high school students and their schools? Shouldn't we consider establishing a new award for a high school journalism instructor?

Please consider.
Kate Sullivan

Committee Seeks Input on Strategic Plan

The world looks much different than it did 80 years ago, when Nebraska Press Woman was formed. Since last fall, an ad hoc committee has been considering how the organization could change as well to remain relevant and strong into its next century.

Kerry Hoffschneider, Glennis Nagel, Lori Potter, Jan Treffer Thompson and Shannon Siebert are a strategic planning committee tasked with reviewing NPW's current strengths and weaknesses, outlining goals for the organization's future and recommending actions to achieve those goals. In short, the committee is answering three questions: Who are we, where are we going, and how will we get there?

Committee members addressed the first question by gathering information about current trends in the communications industry and data about NPW membership. At the spring conference, they presented the membership with a recommended new mission statement for the group, which will be considered at the fall conference. It's hoped the mission statement will provide direction for the next step in the strategic planning process, which includes setting specific five-year goals.

Before the fall conference, member input will be crucial. A summary of the committee's findings, including the proposed mission statement, is being sent with the Summer 2026 newsletter; members are asked to review the information and contact one of the committee members by Sept. 1 with questions or opinions on the mission statement and organizational goals.