NebraskaPressWomen.org
Community of Communicators

Potter's Pointers



Photo by Ruth Brown

Longtime journalist Lori Potter showed some of her favorite photographs and told the stories behind the pictures. Here she points to a pelican in her picture of Sandhill cranes.

HENDERSON – Lori Potter of Kearney took everyone back to the basics of photojournalism at the NPW fall conference, sharing some of her favorite photos and what she learned while taking them.

Potter has spent nearly five decades taking photos that tell stories. Her wildlife photography is on display at the Kearney Community Foundation office through the end of the year.

Displaying what she calls her Pelican on the Platte photo, which shows a sky full of birds rising off the river at sundown, Potter emphasized that the best way to remember places is to photograph them, rather than photographing yourself at that place.

Even the photo of herself she shared of her trip to Thailand in the early 2000's showed Potter crouched on a riverbank, camera in hand while elephants were being washed. She let someone else document her presence, preferring to put her focus on the experience.

Potter said she's grateful for the people and places she's met as a reporter, from crime scenes and breaking news to the press pool for a United States Senate Armed Services Committee meeting while following Sen. Ben Nelson for the day.

Regardless of the subject or venue, Potter said, certain "rules" always make for better photos, such as:

- When covering breaking news, take the "money shots" right away, but then look for something different. Her fire photos included close-ups of a crane surrounded by smoke and a firefighter silhouetted against a burning building.
- When covering a feature story, try to get all the main elements of the story in a single shot. Her photos of the dedication for a bridge didn't just show the structure, but the river, wildlife, and people involved in the project.
- People make better photos than things. When covering installation of a memorial bench, Potter took the photo everyone wanted, with the family standing behind it. But then, she had the family sit down and lean in, making them the subject and improving the photo.
- Keep shooting. Especially in the age of digital photography, Potter said, there's no reason to stop taking photos. She shared a photo series taken at the release of a golden eagle by raptor recovery volunteers. The photos started with the eagle wrapped in a blanket, held tightly. They continued to the release, then past it when the eagle flew off over a field, the blanket in its talons. The series ends with a second volunteer carrying the blanket back. That's a part of the story, too.

Telling Stories from the Heart(land)



Photo by Ruth Brown

Grace McDonald, KOLN/KGIN "Pure Nebraska" reporter, was the featured speaker for the conference. She showed selected videos and told more about the people and the circumstances involved.

By JAN TREFFER THOMPSON

HENDERSON – If it exists in Nebraska, Grace McDonald has probably not only been there and seen it, she took pictures and wrote about it, too.

As the reporter for Pure Nebraska, a show from Lincoln's KOLN/KGIN-TV, has spent three years traveling the state, meeting Nebraskans and telling their stories. She shared some of her experience in a presentation called "Grassroots and Grace: Stories from the Heartland" at NPW's fall conference in Henderson.

Raised on a farm near Rockville, McDonald wrote youth columns for the Grand Island Independent while in high school. She interned at the Kearney Hub and KOLN while at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, then was offered a job as the station's weekend reporter.

Three months in, the Pure Nebraska position became available and McDonald knew it was exactly what she wanted to do.

McDonald said she communicates and receives story ideas from her bosses at the station, but most of the time she's a one-woman show. She follows story leads anywhere in the state, often finding herself in places without GPS or cell service. She reports, shoots, edits and writes the stories that appear on air.

The work has taken McDonald from ranches devastated by wildfires, to a meeting at St. Ann's Church in Lexington where families dealing with the recent Tyson meatpacking plant closure had gathered.

When a producer told her Smithsonian museum officials were going to return artifacts from the Battle of Bluewater Creek to Lakota representatives at Ash Hollow State Historical Park, she planned a three-hour stay in Lewellen. But a chance meeting with one of the families involved earned her an invitation to a second, private ceremony honoring victims of the massacre.

Six hours later she had yet to get an interview with anyone, but she had experienced so much.

"We were on no schedule. I was whatever they wanted to do," she said, including the smoking of a peace pipe. "It allowed me to feel a little bit of the peace they were feeling."

Then there was the source McDonald interviewed three times, Lyle Divis. The first time, Butler County Schools had arranged a bus parade past Divis's home, to honor the retiring bus driver and offer support in his fight against cancer.

The second time, McDonald contacted Divis as the caretaker of a church in Loma, wanting to preserve its history. But when she got back to the station, she'd lost her video and had to visit him again. Divis didn't mind repeating everything, she said, though by that point his health was very poor.

She went back one more time, for Divis's funeral. "It showed me how important those relationships are, when I'm going out to do these stories," she said.

Opening up to sources and viewers personally didn't come naturally, McDonald said, because she had been trained as a news reporter to stay removed and objective. But her station encourages reporters to connect with the public on a personal level, and she's embraced that, especially on social media.

McDonald said posts that get the most engagement are those that let viewers look behind the scenes, at the calves almost knocking her down while she set up a tripod, or what her hair looked like after shooting outdoors on a windy day – or "Brown E's" her nephew gave her as a joke.

And those personal connections can be important in many ways. McDonald said she's always getting tips and story ideas from her colleagues, but when the diesel fuel prices became a big story, the station's investigative reporters turned to her, asking "Do you know any farmers?"

She did.

Making a Difference for the Future of Ag

By JAN TREFFER THOMPSON

HENDERSON – Kerry Hoffschneider of Henderson has spent a decade writing about farmers who make a living using sustainable practices.

Now, she's sharing that idea with the next generation.

At the fall conference, Hoffschneider updated NPW members on the nonprofit organization she recently helped found, Difference Makers -- Difference in Action. The program spreads awareness of environmental and food security issues, and how those relate to Nebraska's agriculture industry.



Photo by Ruth Brown
Kerry Hoffschneider, co-founder of "Difference Makers - Difference in Action," told about the non-profit student-led program that aims to use agriculture to make a lasting impact on our communities.

A former regional reporter for the York News-Times, Hoffschneider launched the Graze Master Group 10 years ago. That organization consults with producers who use or want to adopt more sustainable methods.

About a year ago, she began working with York County Future Farmers of America members. That partnership developed into the nonprofit, which has spread to three other schools in Nebraska and one in Iowa. Students not in FFA and community members have joined as well.

Hoffschneider said the group's formula is for her or other representatives to visit schools, which then develop projects to educate and help their local communities. The nonprofit funds those projects, or helps organizers find funding through grants and sponsorships.

East Butler Public Schools, for example, is starting a food bank. At York Middle School, staff choose students regularly who get $100 gift cards from Dollar Fresh as rewards for effort and behavior. Graze Master then matches the $100, which the students can use to benefit their school or community.

NPW Leadership Changes with Election of Officers

New officers were elected at the fall conference, and a new board of directors is being formed. The status of all positions is as follows. Anyone interested in an open position should contact President Mary Jane Skala

President: Mary Jane Skala
Vice President: Joan von Kampen
Secretary: Marsha Hoffman
Treasurer: Karen Nelson
Communicator of Achievement: Bette Pore
Hall of Fame: Joan von Kampen (part of VP's duties)
High School Contest: Sherry Thompson/Sara Giboney
Historian: Mary Pat Hoag
Membership: Kerry Hoffschneider
Communications committee: Jan Thompson, chair; members: Terri Hahn, Sherry Thompson, Ruth Brown
Professional contest: Mary Jane Skala
Member services: still open
Professional development: open
Scholarship: Mary Kay Quinlan
Legislative/First Amendment: open
Past president: Terri Hahn



Photo by Ruth Brown
New NPW officers elected at the fall conference are president Mary Jane Skala of Kearney, vice president Joan vonKampen of Lincoln and secretary Marsha Hoffman of Council Bluffs. Karen Nelson of Bertrand was elected treasurer but was unable to attend.

Learning About Henderson's Heritage





Photos by Ruth Brown

TOP LEFT:
A tour of the Mennonite Heritage Park started outside the Gathering Room, a multipurpose building that housed the fall conference.
TOP RIGHT:
Suzanne Freet Ratzlaff, Heritage Park board member, told the history of Mennonites in the area while giving a tour of Mennonite Heritage Park and its Immigrant House museum.
AT RIGHT:

Attending the NPW fall conference at Mennonite Heritage Park on Oct. 17 were:
Back row from left: Glennis Nagel, Grace McDonald, Ruth Brown, Shannon Siebert, Joan vonKampen, Jan Thompson, Kerry Hoffschneider, Terri Hahn, Mary Jane Skala and Robert Pore.
Front row from left: Melanie Wilkinson, Bette Pore, Mary Pat Finn Hoag, Lori Potter, Sherry Thompson, Victoria Ayotte Brown and Laurie Cicotello.





President's Column



Greetings!

I accept this new NPW position with a mix of eagerness and a bit of terror. I was president of Ohio Press Women 30 years ago, and I assume this will be like riding a bike. Once you learn how to do it, you never forget.

First, I want to thank Terri Hahn, Kerry Hoffschneider and Shannon Siebert for planning a superb fall conference. The speakers (Grace McDonald, Lori Potter and Kerry Hoffschneider) were excellent, the room was perfect, the lunch was delicious, we had plenty of time to socialize.

Looking ahead, I am excited about:

*Officers working with me: Joan von Kampen of North Platte, vice president; Marsha Hoffman of Council Bluffs, Iowa, secretary, and Karen Nelson of Bertrand, treasurer. They are experienced, qualified women who will bring new ideas to NPW.

*Jan Thompson's efforts, with her committee, at a new mission statement.

*Younger members stepping up to help and learn from veteran members.

*Younger members and new members with fresh ideas

I have booked a site for the spring meeting. It will be at the St. Benedict Center in Schuyler on May 8. See details elsewhere in this newsletter. Mark your calendars now.

Please don't hesitate to call/text/e-mail if you have ideas, comments, complaints, whatever regarding Nebraska Press Women. I can't do this job alone. I depend on all of you.

I look forward to serving you for the next two years.

Mary Jane Skala
NPW President

Communications Contest Deadlines on the Horizon

By MARY JANE SKALA
KEARNEY -- Pay 2027 dues by Dec. 31 if you plan to enter the contest.

The 2027 NPW Professional Communications Contest will open Dec. 1. Any work done from Jan. 1-Dec. 31, 2026, will be eligible. This includes all writing, public relations, books, speeches, news released, videos, etc. Full details are available at nfpw.org

BE AWARE: NPW dues for 2027 MUST BE PAID by 11:59 p.m. Dec. 31 if you want to enter the contest. "Paid" means received, not just postmarked.

No exceptions! No dues received? No entries accepted. It's that simple.

NPW dues are $30 a year. Pay online at npw.org, or mail a check to Karen Nelson, 74371 E Road, Bertrand NE 68927.

You can also pay dual NFPW/NPW dues at $123 at nfpw.org. If you're already a dual member, you received an e-mail about that in October.

If you pay state dues only and win a first-place award in the contest, you must be an NFPW member to have your award moved on to the national contest. You can pay NFPW dues at that time.

2027 NPW Professional Communications Contest Deadlines

Jan. 1- Dec. 31, 2026 -- Professional Contest entries must be published, printed or broadcast during these dates

- Tuesday, **Dec. 1** -- Contest opens
- Noon, Wednesday, **Jan. 13 -** Early Deadline to submit entries without paying the $30 late processing fee
- Noon, Wednesday, **Jan. 27** -- Final book deadline; book judging begins Jan**. 28**
- Noon, Wednesday, **Feb. 10** -- Final contest deadline
- Thursday, **Feb. 11** – Affiliate and at-large contest judging opens
- Wednesday, **March 10** -- Affiliate and at-large contest judging ends
- Wednesday, **March 17** – Membership deadline for first place winners to advance to national contest
- **Friday, March 19** -- Affiliate contest directors confirm entrants are members and advance Affiliate entries to national contest
- Monday, **March 22** -- National judging begins
- Monday, **April 19** -- National judging ends
- Monday, **May 10** – Affiliate & At-Large winners' lists distributed to Contest Directors
- **June / July** – National winners list is posted online
- **September 2027** -- National winners honored during NFPW's annual conference.

Volunteers Needed for High School Contest

By SHERRY THOMPSON

The 2027 NPW High School Communications Contest opens Dec.1. It's open to students in high schools across Nebraska. Last year was our largest contest ever with 508 entries from 21 schools.

As the contest has grown, so has the need for volunteers. Sara Giboney will co-chair the contest this year. We also need volunteers to help with tasks such as compiling spreadsheets, making certificates, tracking lunch registrations, judging and more.

If you judged last year, Sara will contact you in early January. If you didn't and would like to judge, let Sara know. Her email is saramgib@gmail.com.

Please let schools in your area know about the contest. Contest and entry information will be on the NPW website on Dec. 1. The deadline to enter is noon on Feb. 11. Winners will be recognized at the spring conference during lunch.

If you would like to find out more about how to help, contact Sherry Thompson, co-chair, at sherrythompson@cox.net.

Nebraska Represents at NFPW

Thompson Named National Runner-up



From NFPW

Sherry Thompson of Omaha was named the runner-up for the 2026 Communicator of Achievement Award from the National Federation of Press Women.

Thompson was recognized during a celebration at the organization's annual conference Sept. 24-26 in Ellicott City, Md.

Thompson, an active member of Nebraska Press Women, operated a communications business, Sherry Thompson Writing and Editing, for much of her career. Additionally, she had held communications, grantwriting and consulting roles with Saving Grace Perishable Food Rescue. After serving as a board member for the Women's Fund of Omaha, she joined the staff as a communications and research manager. As an officer and advisor for the Omaha Salvation Army Women's Auxiliary Board, she coordinates Tastes and Treasures, a highly successful fundraiser supporting local programs.

Alongside her community service, Thompson has served Nebraska Press Women as president, vice president, treasurer, website coordinator and high school communications contest director. During this time, the number of high school contest entries more than quadrupled. She was a director of the Nebraska Women Journalists Hall of Fame and was a leader of the planning committee when the Nebraska and Iowa affiliates hosted NFPW's national conference in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Teri Ehresman of Island Park, Idaho, retired journalist and communications director for the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho National Laboratory, was named NFPW's 2026 Communicator of Achievement. This award has been given for 69 years.

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Marsha Hoffman (from left) of Council Bluffs, Iowa; Mary Pat Finn-Hoag of Norfolk; Erin Wirth of Lincoln; and Mary Jane Skala of Kearney represented the Nebraska Press Women at the 2026 National Federation of Press Women Conference at Ellicott City, Md., in September.

Photos Courtesy Mary Pat Finn-Hoag

TOP : Mary Pat Finn-Hoag (third from left) holds a candle for Barb Batie of Lexington during the memorial service conducted during the 2026 National Federation of Press Women Conference in September near Ellicott City, Md. Recognized were NFPW members who had died since the previous conference. Batie died on Dec. 25,2025. The memorial ceremony was narrated by Mary Jane Skala (at podium), NFPW assistant historian.

ABOVE LEFT: NFPW president Debbie Miller (left) of Arkansas presented the 2025 sweepstakes communication contest awards to Mary Jane Skala of Kearney. Skala was the second runner-up with first runner-up honors to Lori Potter of Kearney, who was unable to attend the 2026 NFPW conference.

ABOVE RIGHT: The 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence was featured in various ways throughout Ellicott City, Md., location of the 2026 National Federation of Press Women Conference in September. One of the conference's three tours included a day in Ellicott City, which dates to 1772.

Spring Conference Details



St. Benedict Center near Schuyler will be the site for NPW's Spring 2027 conference

By MARY JANE SKALA
SCHUYLER -- The NPW spring meeting will be Saturday, May 8, at St. Benedict Center near Schuyler, a retreat center located four miles north of the intersection of Highway 15 and Highway 30 in east central Nebraska.

This is a beautiful, quiet, non-profit, ecumenical retreat and conference facility run by Benedictine monks. It has 60 guest rooms, a large dining room, delicious food, a bookstore, a gift shop, a library, a lake, walking paths and benches.

Rooms are just $55 per person for a single and $44 per person for a double. All rooms have private baths.

The rooms have no television, but you can walk around the lake at sunset (days will be long by then), relax with friends in the cozy sitting areas or curl up and read in the large library.

It's about 45 minutes from Omaha and an hour from Lincoln, so I hope our high school contest winners from those cities and beyond can come for the awards presentation.

I am excited. The monastery is a jewel. I've been there often. I've heard speakers like authors Kathleen Norris and Sister Helen Prejean ("Dead Man Walking") there.

Watch for more details. Mark your calendars now.



NPW in the News

From Mary Pat Finn-Hoag

Member Phyllis Buell of Elmwood was featured in a recent edition of the Midwest Messenger.

Past President's Column

By Terri Hahn
Saying farewell and thank you!

As I've concluded my second stint serving as NPW president, I want to say "thank you" to my board and NPW members for allowing me to serve you these past four years.

It's been a pleasure.

Yes, journalism is facing challenges, that's not news. But wherever I look, I see passionate people working hard to serve their readers or viewers and the community in general. And many of those passionate people are fellow NPW members. Some are working for legacy media organizations; others have taken the non-profit route. Some are in broadcasting, others in education. Still others have given their hearts to community journalism.

I love that the members of this organization have chosen such diverse career paths. We all benefit from the variety of ideas and varying points of view that diversity brings.

As Nebraska Press Women concludes its 80th anniversary year, I am feeling optimistic about its future. I will admit there have been some times over the past 12 months, I've wavered a bit in that optimism. I don't think that will come as a surprise to anyone.

But now that I look at the new leadership team, I'm certain they have what it takes to take NPW forward. Mary Jane Skala has served as an officer at both the state and national levels and has managed our professional communications contest for years. Joan von Kampen, our new vice president, knows this state from one end to the other about as well as anyone I know. Marsha Hoffman is a past NFPW president and will do an excellent job as secretary. Karen Nelson is our new treasurer. Joan, Marsha and Karen are all new to the board and I can't wait to hear their ideas for the group's future.

Again, thank you to all of the board members I've had the honor to work with, not only during the past four years, but the two terms I served before that. It takes everyone on that board to lead this group. And that's my invitation to anyone who hasn't served a board position to seriously think about it. If you'd like to serve, I bet Mary Jane would be glad to have you. It's a great way to get involved.

Flatwater Free Press Welcomes Reporter to Kearney

By BARB SODERLIN

KEARNEY -- You are invited to join the Flatwater Free Press for a free happy hour event to welcome our newest reporter, Pierce Gentry, to Nebraska!

Pierce is our first reporter based in central Nebraska and has been busy covering stories from detasseling to data centers. Join us for a happy hour Wednesday, Nov. 11 in Kearney to welcome him to the community and learn more about Flatwater's expansion.

Wednesday, Nov. 11
4 p.m. to 6 p.m.
With brief remarks at 5 p.m.
Location: Nest:Space, 2224 Central Ave. in Kearney

- Enjoy drinks and appetizers
- Meet Pierce and his editor, former Kearney Hub staff writer Jeff Robb
- Grab your free copy of our new 2026 Flatwater Free Press Commemorative Edition
- Learn how you can support local news through the Kearney Area Community Foundation's Give Where You Live campaign

Register at https://flatwaterfreepress.org/events/meet-flatwaters-tri-cities-reporter/

Thompson Recognized as Communicator of Achievement

By MARY JANE SKALA

Jan Treffer Thompson was unanimously named the 2026 Communicator of Achievement at the fall meeting in Henderson.

A senior lecturer in English at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, she has done freelance writing for the past 21 years. She also worked at the Scottsbluff Star-Herald and the Kearney Hub.

Raised on the Treffer Ranch in southern Custer County, she graduated from Broken Bow High School in 1986. She earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from UN-L, a master's in English from the University of Nebraska at Kearney in 2003, and an M.F.A. in creative writing from UNO in 2008.

As a general assignment reporter in Scottsbluff and Kearney, she covered breaking news and wrote features, special sections and enterprise projects. She wrote for special sections. She helped design, launch and produce "Bravo," the Kearney Hub's entertainment section.

In 2005, she became a lecturer at UNK and is now a full-time senior lecturer. She had a WordPress blog for several years, including sermons, eulogies and feature stories.

A freelance writer since 2005, she has written for regional newspapers and magazines. She has done copywriting and editing of promotional material, along with fiction and creative non-fiction. She has ghostwritten a book-length memoir.

An NPW member for nearly 19 years, Jan has served on many committees. As membership director, she developed a new brochure. She added valuable content to the new NPW website in 2010.

She served on the committee that hosted the 2025 fall conference in Red Cloud. She created the flier, did the online work and created the first-ever video that was included on NPW Facebook posts.

Jan is now the NPW newsletter editor and leads a committee of younger members that is studying how to grow NPW.

On the personal side, she is the accompanist at Overton's First Christian Church and produces the church newsletter.

"Jan Treffer Thompson represents NPW's future. Many of us are aging out of leadership positions. Jan has demonstrated the organizational and leadership skills needed to carry this organization into the future," Ruth Brown wrote in her nomination.



Learning the Accordian

By MARY PAT FINN-HOAG

Community newspapers contain a wealth of information -- from public notices to obituaries to local government meeting recaps.

I like to focus on upcoming events, especially when I'm traveling.

That's how I learned, while in Houston, of an international quilt show there, featuring more than 1,000 incredible quilts from around the world, and a farmers market in Colorado

only miles from our path where I feasted on the juiciest peach I'd ever eaten.

Readying for the recent Nebraska Press Women's fall convention in York and Henderson, I read on the justmelaniew.com website that York would host the 21st annual October Czechfest the day after the convention.

Perfect! I'd stay over.

I'm half Czech. I'd wear the colorful Prague T-shirt I found in Prague, Czechia, in June and purchase kolaches to share back home.

When several NPW members heard I'd be at the Czechfest, they challenged me to take accordion lessons, one of the featured activities.

I tried! A man with the patience of Job tried to teach me how to finger the buttons and push and pull the bellows.

It proved challenging. I can't read music (and often joke that I can't even carry a tune in a bucket).

I thanked the instructor and resumed taking photos of the young accomplished accordion players in the room.

During the convention, Melanie Wilkinson, a NPW member who launched justmelaniew.com in mid-2023, had told me she'd welcome photos from the Czechfest since she'd be unable to attend.

Even after almost 10 years into retirement, my reporter/photographer skills kicked in, and I enthusiastically shot away.

I was thrilled when Wilkinson used 10 of my photos for her online publication.