Albany Student Press, independent at 100 at UAlbany

Alumni staffers to attend gala for feisty campus newspaper

By Paul Grondahl
Published 9:33 pm, Thursday, April 7, 2016

When current and former staffers of the Albany Student Press gather Saturday at a gala to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the University at Albany’s campus newspaper, there will be a little swagger in their step.

They wear as a badge of courage the fact that they are fully independent, the only student group on campus that does not take money from the Student Association, does not have a faculty adviser and tells it like they see it.

Their autonomy personifies the paper’s long-standing motto: "Making Enemies Since 1916."

"The ASP has always been a little sassy," said editor-in-chief Kassie Parisi, a senior who’s been on the paper’s staff since her freshman year.

A few dozen alumni staffers from past decades are expected to attend the gala, including some who work as reporters, editors and photographers at media outlets throughout the Capital Region.

They call themselves ASPees. One snarky wag who aspires to become an investigative reporter suggested ASPwipes — with the tagline "we wipe it clean."

Things tend to get a little punchy as midnight approaches each Sunday as a weekly 12-hour marathon to lay out that week’s edition grinds on.

The office walls contain a few cherished talismans from back in the day, including a Picasso-esque portrait on a white board done by former staffer Ted Bean and a poster of a train crashing through a building with an expletive in bold type.
There's also a black-and-white photo of former Albany Mayor Jerry Jennings, deeply tanned, circa 1980, apropos of nothing.

They haven't had time to dig into the archives to pore over the 1916 editions, when the ASP was a mimeographed two-page booster sheet called State College News and the school was the New York State College for Teachers.

One of the paper's most famous alumni is Harvey Milk, who wrote sports stories for the paper and graduated in 1951. He became a martyr to the gay rights movement after he was assassinated in 1978 at age 48 at San Francisco City Hall, where Milk was the first openly gay man elected to a major political office in America. Milk's life and career was memorialized in books, movies, a library and arts center and Time magazine named him to its list of 100 most important people of the 20th century.

Parisi and her sidekick, Madeline St. Amour, a senior who is managing editor, have been dubbed the "dynamic duo" by Thomas Palmer, a faculty member who teaches digital media and also is editorial design director at the Times Union.

Kassie and Maddie, as they're called, work so closely in tandem that they tend to finish each other's sentences.

"They stopped a slide into entropy at the ASP and showed leadership skills in taking charge of the redesign," Palmer said. "They have an entrepreneurial start-up sensibility. That's an important mindset for journalists that will help make them successful in the complicated audience-building business model of the future."

The two are credited with overseeing a bold redesign of the 6,000-circulation eight-page color weekly; a doubling of the staff to nearly two dozen; operating in the black on a lean $26,000 annual budget and increasing the ASP's reach by distributing it at off-campus sites that include coffee shops and diners.

They also enhanced the ASP's website, beefed up its social media presence and negotiated a printing contract of the ASP at the Times Union that provides color on every page without additional charges.

"These two exceptional young women have breathed new life into the ASP," said Rosemary Armao, director of the UAlbany journalism program.

The two editors were presented with a first-ever award by the journalism faculty to recognize their efforts. "They made a lot of sacrifices," Armao said. "I expect we'll be hearing a lot from them in the future."

To spend an hour with the dynamic duo in the cramped ASP office on the third floor of the Campus Center —which they share with Albany Student Television, or ATV — is to have one's faith restored in the future of journalism and to erase any jadedness.

First of all, they apologized for the office orderliness. A student removed piles of old papers and tidied up the mess the other day, which proved a bit disorienting to the two editors.

"It's never been this neat. It's kind of freaking me out," Parisi said.

They're not buying into the doom-and-gloom scenario that hangs like a dark cloud over newspapers these days. They're not fleeing their chosen fields (both are journalism majors) after hearing horror stories about thousands of journalists being laid off as mainstream media struggles to cobble together a new business model in the midst of a disruptive digital revolution.

"I'm optimistic. News is news," said St. Amour, who lives at home in Niskayuna, has a part-time job as an engraver at Things Remembered and completed an internship at the Times Union.

"Journalism just needs to do a better job at marketing itself and explaining why it's more important than ever," she said.

"No matter whether it's in print or on a digital platform, telling stories and doing quality journalism still matters," said Parisi, who lives at home in Delmar and is working as a paid intern at Politico's Capital New York online news organization. "I refuse to get bogged down in the pessimism. It's gone through up-and-down cycles, but that doesn't mean journalism is dying."

The duo's fierce commitment to journalism and typical 40-hour work weeks for no pay has made the ASP a must-read on campus and beyond, with a lively mix of news, photos, arts and entertainment and sports coverage.

"They've been incredible leaders in transforming the paper and bringing it into the digital age," said Holly McKenna, a journalism lecturer and internship coordinator who had both in a feature writing class in which both excelled. "They'll go far in the business."

They will uphold a longstanding ASP tradition at the final staff meeting in May. Parisi will bring a bottle of champagne and will raise a glass in toast. And then they'll put the last issue to bed, signalling the end of their college journalism careers.