Jim McLean: Hello, I'm Jim McLean, a member of the Kansas Oral History Project Board and a former reporter for Kansas newspapers and public radio stations. Today is December 11, 2025. I'm in Marysville, Kansas to interview Sarah Kessinger, former Statehouse reporter for Harris News Service who is now the editor and publisher of *The Marysville Advocate*.

Our videographer today, as always, is former State Representative Dave Heinemann. Our producer is Susie Murphy. This interview is part of the Kansas Oral History Project's series exploring the contributions of reporters, editors, press secretaries, and others to policy making in Kansas. The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation that collects and preserves oral histories of Kansans. It is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants.

We've done most of the interviews, Sarah, at either the Statehouse or Red Rocks, the home of William Allen White, the late Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, of course, but today we're here in your offices at *The Marysville Advocate*. Marysville, of course, is a town in northeast Kansas, population what? About 3,400?

Sarah Kessinger: Three thousand.

JM: Three thousand. Thanks a lot for participating. We really appreciate you hosting us today.

SK: Thank you.

JM: We generally start with some biographical questions, talking about your career in journalism, which has been varied. You've really done a lot over the years before ending up here. How did you get your start? You got a journalism degree from K-State (Kansas State University) in the late eighties, something like that?

SK: Yes, in '87. I had a degree in journalism and Spanish, both. I went from there to down the river to KU and did a master's degree in Latin American Studies. During that time, I did an internship in Mexico City at *The Mexico City News*, covering various issues there. It was like a six-month internship. Then I came back to the States and graduated from KU, went out to Garden City, the *Telegram*.

JM: The *Garden City Telegram*.

SK: And took a job as an education reporter there, covering their school board and their schools, a fascinating place to work. It was, of course, during a great boom in migration to that area by people from around the world.

JM: So, you worked at the *Telegram* for how long?

SK: From '89 to '94, about five years I worked out there. I started a weekly newspaper in Spanish for them.

JM: For the *Telegram*?

SK: Yes, for the *Telegram* while I was there as well and worked as an assistant managing editor as well there.

JM: As you mentioned, that was a really pivotal time for the community of Garden City. There'd been the first wave of immigration from people in Southeast Asia. Was that about the time when a lot of Latinos were arriving in Garden City to work in the meat packing industry and elsewhere?

SK: Right. The big packing companies, IBP at the time, which is now Tyson, and Monfort were the two big plants in the Garden City area, and Holcomb area. They were recruitingout of northern Mexico – workers – and they would hop on the bus and come on up and go to work in the plants.

JM: Was it your idea to start a weekly for that population in Garden? Were you recruited and hired for that purpose? Was it just something that happened after you'd been there for a while?

SK: It was the company's — Jim Bloom was the publisher there at the time, and he was very interested in the diversity of the community and thought this would be a good product to try there. They were very supportive. I was really amazed. The newspaper continued to publish [the Spanish-language weekly] for 20 years after I left there.

JM: Then you took a big move. You went down to Texas.

SK: Right.

JM: What prompted that?

SK: I wanted more experience in a Spanish-speaking area of the country. I was interested in, of course, Latin America in general. I moved down to McAllen, Texas, took a job there as an assistant night metro editor on their news desk. It was just as NAFTA [North America Free Trade Agreement] had passed — there were all kinds of activity on the border at that time, a lot of business stories, a lot of migration stories. It was a fascinating time, really.

JM: One of the byproducts, one of the things that happened because of NAFTA is that area right across the border became a huge manufacturing center.

SK: Yes, the Maquila Region. That was controversial on one hand. On the other hand, it brought a lot of jobs to people who had never had that level of income before as well. So, it was a double-edged sword, I think. It also brought a lot of people up from the interior of Mexico to live on the border. The border region struggled with that increase in population. The city was having to handle just the growth at the time. It eventually, I think, turned into where it was kind of a stop-off point for some people who then moved on into the United States to jobs in the US elsewhere.

JM: That experience probably gave you some perspective, that one, and your experience in Garden City gave you probably a perspective on what's happening contemporaneously on what's

 

happening in the country now and all the controversy about immigration, specifically the southern border.

SK: Right.

JM: You were there at a very, very different time when we were essentially trying to promote a lot of commerce between the two places and not trying to restrict.

SK: Yes. The communities down there were cross-border communities. If you walked down the street, people flowed from English into Spanish and Spanish into English, back and forth, and that was a reflection of the entire culture down there. Now, it's just I think been jarring for that region to have a wall. I don't know how much of that is now covered by or restricted by a wall, but to have that much of a division in their community, which was again an international community right there.

JM: Were there people who actually lived in Mexico who crossed the border every day to work and went back?

SK: Yes.

JM: It was just free-flowing?

SK: Yes. People grew up that way. It was common. Immigration law was, I would say, less restrictive at that time, and it was just considered part of the local business scene that you had to have this cross-border —

JM: And it was one of the things that people who promoted NAFTA wanted to see happen.

SK: Right.

JM: It was quite different times.

SK: Yes.

JM: You were down there for approximately how long?

SK: I stayed there for three years and then decided to move back to Kansas, closer to my family. It's quite a long trip down that far, and I had two children at the time.

JM: People don't know how big Texas really is.

SK: Yes.

JM: It's huge.

SK: It is huge. We called it Deep South Texas. It wasn't just South Texas; it was Deep South Texas. Anyway, I decided to move back to Kansas and was looking around a bit, and the Harris

 

News Service job was open. I was in touch with some of my former co-workers, and they invited me to apply, and then I got the job working in the Statehouse, which was an entirely new experience for me. I had not been in a government setting, covering government all the time like that before.

JM: So, the late nineties, roughly 1998 was when you showed up at the Statehouse?

SK: Right, ’98.

JM: We’ve talked to previous people who were Statehouse correspondents for Harris News — John Marshall, Mike Shields, Dave Ranney all did reporting for the Harris News Service, and Leroy Towns who I think was one of the early people to staff that bureau. At the time, you were working not only for the *Garden City Telegram* but later at the Statehouse for the Harris newspapers. Those were important newspapers around the state. That was a big job. You were talking, reporting to a large portion of the population of the state through these various papers.

SK: Yes, I think it said something about the Harris Group that they would invest in a bureau in the Statehouse. It was that important to them that the public be aware of what their legislators were doing and what was going on at the state level, all state officials. Then the newspapers themselves were very strong. The publishers were strong editorial writers. Every community had, I think, really good voices in their newspapers for speaking out on issues and writing about them.

JM: So, seven papers in the Harris chain at the time? Parsons, where Clyde Reed was the publisher and editor, Chanute, Hutch (Hutchinson), Salina.

SK: Hays and Garden City and then Ottawa.

JM: And Olathe had been but was no longer at this point.

SK: Yes.

JM: Again, important newspapers that did really good, strong, vocal reporting but also there was a commitment to covering state government because all of those papers generally speaking subscribed to the Associated Press (AP). So, they could get the day-to-day stuff out of the Statehouse.

SK: Right.

JM: But you and other Harris reporters would try to cover issues that were really important to the various communities in the chain. Your coverage was different than what was flowing out of the wire services.

SK: Right. We were told not to duplicate the wire services because our papers did use AP. We were looking for the stories that were more either localized to our communities or just other issues that weren’t getting as much attention but were important.

 

I think, too, it was a good time to be in that field because we had good reporters in our communities covering those issues and covering school finance or health care or issues that resonated in the Statehouse. They were covering those in their communities, and then we could supplement that, or we could work with them. We did some group projects with our papers where we would cover some of the —

JM: We talked extensively with Mike Shields about a huge series of stories that you did around the water issues around the state. You would tackle big projects like that from time to time.

SK: Right.

JM: Cooperatively among the newspapers.

SK: Yes, exactly. We did one on local government which I thought —

JM: On transparency issues related to local government?

SK: Yes, transparency. Just the fact that Kansas has more local government units than any other state in the country. It was a really, I thought, eye-opening series, and each paper contributed to that. It was good, solid reporting and kind of taught everybody what's coming down the road as far as consolidation because we've got so many government units. How are we going to sustain this?

JM: That's one of the critical issues when you have that many levels of government with a shrinking tax base. How do you sustain those various levels of government and how do they operate the services that people expect?

SK: Yes.

JM: That was a really interesting time, a far cry from what we have today. You had strong newspapers in important communities around the state that were well-staffed, doing good local reporting supplemented by your reporting from the state government.

SK: Yes.

JM: It seems like that wasn't that long ago, but it seems so different than it is today.

SK: Yes, it was. I would say the relations overall in the Statehouse were much more amicable overall. People worked together better between the parties. People were respected for their time and knowledge for what they had done and learned and the homework they had undertaken to learn about issues and address issues that Kansans were facing. That slowly eroded as this kind of rancor, this bitter infighting in the Republican Party and then just this polarization of the two parties in general nationally was on the rise. But Kansas was seeing it first or was among the first to see it.

JM: One of the casualties of this increased partisanship, tribalism, whatever you want to call it, as I recall from my days at the Statehouse, and I'm eager to get your thoughts on this. You talk

 

about there was a level of collegiality and respect, not only among legislators but there was a respect for the process that included the Fourth Estate, meaning the media.

SK: Yes.

JM: There wasn't so much suspicion. There wasn't so many allegations of fake news or slanted news or liberal bias, or whatever you want to call it. That's one way they spoke to their constituents was through the media. What were your relationships like with legislators then as a reporter? You were really in touch with the legislators from the areas that you were reporting to.

SK: I learned a lot from them, and they were very respectful to me as far as making sure I got the information I needed. They understood that my role was to provide that information to their communities. We were working together [to inform]. If I was doing a story that they didn't like, it wasn't always pleasant, but they understood that I had a job to do. I was trying to provide an unbiased report on what happened or what the issue was, who the players were, and what the reasoning was behind each side of that.

I feel like the first five or six years, it was pretty smooth sailing as far as just getting enough— [During review of the transcript, Kessinger added to complete her thought: *". . . necessary information from cooperative lawmakers. Before more bitter infighting set in among Republicans."*]

JM: Access. You had access to them, and you felt there was a cooperative relationship there, somewhat adversarial but still they understood you had a role to play, and you understood they had a role to play. There was a mutual respect there.

SK: Yes.

JM: You said for the first five years, it was smooth sailing. Did it change before your tenure at the Statehouse was over?

SK: I left there in 2008. I don't feel like my access was ever really affected. Kansas Statehouse in general was very open. After 9/11, things did change some. The security in the building changed, but I don't really feel that affected our reporting at all. The issues of 9/11 were still pretty distant.

JM: So, you left prior to some of the big partisan sea changes at the Statehouse like in 2010 when Governor Brownback was elected.

SK: Right.

JM: And things had become more partisan since then.

SK: Right, but it was already getting more — the debate and the infighting in the Republican Party was definitely [harsher] — it goes back to when David Miller had challenged Bill Graves in — was it '98? I'm trying to remember what election that was.

 

JM: We'll check with Dave. Dave Heinemann will remember it. Let's think about that. It would have been that. He would have been running for his second term.

SK: Right. That was when you started to see just really people who couldn't talk to each other within their own party. There seemed to be such division and the rise of cultural issues, too.

JM: The culture war issues, yes. That was all starting to be more pronounced then for sure.

SK: Right.

JM: So, you left the Statehouse, and you decided — your father had run *The Maryville Advocate* for several years, many, many years, and you decided to come take the paper over. Was he still alive when you made that decision?

SK: Yes.

JM: He decided that he'd had enough of it. He wanted somebody else to take on the burden of running a weekly newspaper?

SK: He was battling Huntington's disease at the time. I think he was ready to retire and had looked around, had tried to sell the paper, but was not finding the person who would come here, live here, run the paper. He wasn't going to sell to a chain that was outside of the community. He didn't want to see that.

JM: Like so many people did.

SK: Yes. He didn't want that to happen. So, I decided I'll come home and give this a try. I had never run a business before, and I've learned a lot since then. He and my mom both were asking me if I'd like to come back.

JM: We shared an office for a while in the Statehouse when I was working for [*The Topeka*] *Capital-Journal*, and you were working for Harris. I don't think I was still working there when you made that decision, but I remember there were discussions. That was a tough decision for you to come back home.

SK: Yes.

JM: Again, run what essentially is a business.

SK: Yes.

JM: You wrestled with that decision. Why did you finally decide to go ahead and do it?

SK: Coming back here, Marysville has got a lot going for it. It's a nice, diverse economy, community. My whole family is here. My siblings live here. I just decided I was tired of the bitterness in the Statehouse to a certain extent, covering that. I had done it and was ready to move on to something different, a new challenge.

 

JM: Let's talk a little bit about Marysville to create some context here. It is a nice community. It's a railroad town, always been a railroad town, and you have stable industry here, really successful industry plus you have the black squirrels. It's in a part of the state where it is a bit of a regional hub, isn't it?

SK: Yes.

JM: Talk a little bit about Marysville.

SK: We are one of the top ag-producing counties in the state. Agriculture does very well here. We've got three implement dealers in the community and large Landoll Corporation [manufacturing] which has made a huge difference in this town and the Union Pacific Railroad coming through. We're part of the North Platte District, and that has brought a good payroll to this community, and Landoll as well, a good twenty-five-bed hospital, a critical-access hospital here, a good school system, throughout the county, very good school systems, that have been very stable. We are seeing some population decline as the population ages out in the county, but Marysville's population has been stable because of Landoll largely. They have a workforce of about 800 people.

JM: And Landoll makes farm implements. They're also famous for making trailers, livestock trailers and things like that. But also, you were explaining, they've diversified now. They make all kinds of things.

SK: Right. They have a government contract section that does a lot of work for all kinds of—well, governments in other countries as well as in the US. Their trailers, all very, very large trailers of all sorts, you'll run into them all over the country now. There's been some small trailer manufacturers that have spun off from Landoll, that people who maybe got their start there and have started their own smaller shops — Titan Trailers in the southern part of the county is a long-time livestock trailer manufacturer and then Sharp Manufacturing as well. We've got those two mainly, and then Landoll itself is also building forklifts and tillage equipment for agriculture.

JM: So, they diversified and they're still doing well, and they still have a large work force here. A lot of rural communities don't have those attributes.

SK: Right.

JM: So, you are one of the largest weekly newspapers in the state, right?

SK: Yes.

JM: What's it like, you said you were tired of the grind of the Statehouse and the partisanship and just all that goes with that. You came back here. You're still a journalist doing incredibly important work for your community covering local news primarily, but you're also running a business. What kind of transition has that been for you?

 

SK: It's been an education. You see things you didn't know that maybe you didn't really understand before, being on the employer side of things. Then there's challenges, like health insurance is a big weight on the back of small businesses. That's for sure. That makes things hard to assure that your workers are covered, and they're going to be able to stay with you because we can't maintain a staff without health insurance. So, that has been a big challenge.

And then just all the — we did have a press for the first four years that I was here, and then we decided to shut it down because of the cost. Just running a big piece of equipment like that and learning about that was another big challenge.

JM: You printed the paper here initially.

SK: We did, yes. That was very common. Almost all newspapers printed their own or at a nearby newspaper. So, I had to figure out where to get printing done and what to do with our press after it was closed and how to help the press man find another job. He went on to the *Salina Journal*, which is where we ended up going to print as well. Then a few years later, we moved over to St. Joe [Joseph], Missouri to NPG Printing because of the quality issues. They do a great job.

JM: I would imagine — I've done a lot of reporting on rural Kansas and small communities. The newspaper industry is a bit of a bellwether industry in some respects. There was a time — I said we've been doing some of these interviews at the Red Rocks, the William Allen White home in Emporia. When he bought the *Emporia Gazette* in the late nineteenth century, it was one of several papers in Emporia. Most towns of any size had more than one newspaper.

The industry has changed so dramatically. You have been on the board and served as president of the Kansas Press Association. What would you say is the state of the newspaper industry in Kansas at the moment?

SK: Well, it's in transition. I'm hoping it's moving towards something more robust than what it is at this point. I feel like a lot of the medium-sized newspapers in the state have sold to chains or were owned by chains that sold them to larger chains or larger groups of newspapers that weren't willing to invest in their newsrooms. Sadly, a couple of years after I left Harris News Service, the Harris Group was sold to the GateHouse chain of newspapers nationally. That has not gone well for those communities. They're losing the good newspapers that the Harris papers were. I feel like they're shells of what they once were. I think *The Hutchinson News*, which was a large staff —

JM: Kind of the flagship of the Harris chain.

SK: It was the flagship, yes. That's where Harris Enterprises was based, and they set the tone for reporting in that part of the state and the same with the *Salina Journal*, a good writers' paper. All of these papers were good photographers' papers. They just covered their communities well, and I think they did financially well, but probably not well enough, unfortunately, to get to remain in the hands of that company. So, by the time they sold, once they started to deplete their product, which is the news, you can't sell papers if you're not going to have news. It just doesn't work. You've got to have local news. You've got to have that local input. You've got to have local

 

voices, columnists, letters to the editor, all of that. All those pieces make a newspaper what it is, and that's why people pick it up or subscribe and become [regular readers] they want it weekly. They're looking for it. Or daily.

JM: Right.

SK: I'm a weekly. But, anyway, without that [regular dose of local news], you're not going to sell your product. That's what they've found, I think, that it's been harder and harder for those papers to sell to advertisers and to subscribers, both.

And at the same time, we've got the rise of the Internet and social media and all of that that is drawing interest, people's interest towards the social media realm where they can get a lot of information, but it's not always accurate and it's not always relevant to what's going on in their community even though they may think it is. Sadly, I think that has really cut into the younger, mainly the younger generation's understanding that a newspaper is there as a resource for them to become better informed and better citizens of their community.

JM: To some extent, it's been kind of a perfect storm. I mean, you have the rise of social media and that information is so accessible, but it's not curated, not edited in the same way. It's asking a lot of people I suppose to have them really understand the difference between the information they can get on the Internet rather quickly and then the information that shows up in the local newspaper, the process that an editor and publishers take to make sure that the information they're presenting has been thoroughly vetted.

SK: Right.

JM: So, we've lost a little bit of that, but also communities are changing sort of radically. We were having this discussion about in the southeast Kansas town where I grew up, the downtown was full of locally-owned businesses, all of whom advertised in the local newspaper and on the radio station. Now, in that community and also here, those local businesses have given way to national chains.

SK: Right.

JM: It's harder to get them to advertise in your newspaper.

SK: It is, yes, definitely. We had Walmart advertising for several years when I first moved back here, and they hadn't advertised since they opened here — oh, gosh, it's been over thirty years ago that they — well, probably forty years ago now, that they opened here in Marysville. They didn't advertise for a number of years. Then they did in the early — starting in the mid-2000s or 2010, somewhere in there, they started to advertise with inserts. It really started to draw other regional big-box stores to advertise with us as well.

This is a relatively thriving economic area of the state. [US Senator] Jerry Moran once said we lead a charmed life up here because we have good harvests all the time. We had the good fortune of having some good manufacturers locate here, good strong businesses. So, the advertising was

 

good from the regional realm for a while there, but I felt like it pretty much dropped off during the pandemic, and it hasn't come back.

JM: What kind of blow has that been to your bottom line?

SK: It has been harder. We've had to tighten things up. We had to cut down staff hours. And now with insurance rates going up for property insurance and health insurance both, it's been tough I would say in the last couple of years.

JM: The business model for legacy media, radio stations plus newspapers, it's gotten harder and harder and harder.

SK: Right.

JM: So, as we say, communities in Kansas are not being as well served as they once were in terms of just the accessibility of local news. What's the school board doing? What's the city commission doing? That's the bread and butter for a paper like yours, isn't it?

SK: Yes, it is. I don't know where we're headed honestly on that front. Sometimes I think we may have to go to a more regional model of news reporting simply because these small towns can't sustain — how much longer can they sustain a newspaper business? But we still need that reporting. We've got to have that to keep people aware of what's going on in their communities, in their state, in their nation, how that affects them.

JM: Are you worried about the viability of your business, too?

SK: Oh, sure. I'm worried about my printer staying open because I think printers are up against the same — these big printing hubs are under intense pressure. There's great concern about tariffs hitting the news print product. That would be a blow to the printing sector. There's just numerous I would say pressure points that are increasing.

JM: What happens to a community like Marysville if the citizens don't have really good, accurate reporting about what their city government, what the school board, the county government, and various other — like even the coverage of Landoll and the other entities that are really important to community life around here. What happens to the cohesiveness of a community when you don't have that?

SK: Well, I think it fades. I think it's harder for people to just relate to why it's important to support either that — we have a local hospital that's had a sales tax, a countywide sales tax in the last six years. It passed the first time pretty easily. The second time, it only passed by eight votes. It's getting harder for people I think to understand the value of things, of those services in your community. There's a lot of rhetoric online that people believe, and that rhetoric doesn't have to be vetted like we have to vet what we report and make sure that it's accurate and make sure that we're — we have a legal liability to report the truth as well as we can.

 

JM: Taking you back to your days at the Statehouse when you were writing copy that was going to show up in newspapers around the state, and you had this multilayered service instrument for communities. You had strong local news, state reporting, a fair amount of good, fully-vetted national news in those papers as well. Citizens were really well informed. Thinking about that, it wasn't that long ago in our lifetime, our careers.

SK: Right.

JM: And things have changed so dramatically.

SK: They have, yes. It's only been a few years, really, and a lot has — like I say, we're in transition. We've got to find our footing and rebuild. I think a good example is what's happening in Reno County where the [*Harvey County Now*] newspaper has purchased a news website and is trying to make a go of a print publication there that will go, a newspaper that will be both print and online.

JM: Because *The Hutchinson News* has gone so far downhill.

SK: Right. So, they needed competition, and they're getting it. I hope that that can rebuild that community's information circuit.

JM: Ecosystem. One thing I wanted to talk to you a little bit about, we've talked a fair amount about the vetting process, the editorial process, and why is it that people can trust the information they find in their local newspaper more so than they can trust what they can just gather on their own online. You are the publisher and the editor of this newspaper. I've been reading some of your recent columns. You are living and working in a county that voted 73 percent for Donald Trump, and I've noticed a couple of editorials where you're taking Congress to task. You're criticizing the president. You're writing critical columns about the state legislature's attempt to redistrict the state. What's life like for you in a county like Marshall County just by the evidence in terms of it's pretty conservative voters when you decide to editorialize. What kind of pushback do you get?

SK: Well, I would say for a number of years, I did get letters to the editor —

JM: Which is fine.

SK: Yes.

JM: It's part of the public discourse.

SK: This is something we've always done. This newspaper has never, I don't think, not said what it thought on the editorial side of things, never backed down from that. But I think things are — I think people are less willing to — they're thinking, "I'll just go online now and read in my echo chamber on social media." I do feel like it's cost us some subscribers simply just because I expressed my viewpoint on the editorial page. That isn't in the news columns, but it's on the editorial page.

 

I always welcome writers — I welcome op eds. It does have to be based on fact — what they're saying. The points that they're making do have to reflect the truth. I'm happy to run those pieces when people ask, and I do run letters to the editor all the time that I'm not in agreement with or they contradict what I've written, but that's normal.

JM: What we're hearing a lot today, people's trust in institutions generally is falling and the media in particular, the mainstream media, the "lame stream media", all kinds of accusations about bias and so forth which I think we could pretty easily refute when it comes to newspapers. Nevertheless, that's the public perception. Is that a difficult environment to operate in?

SK: I think it is harder, yes. I think that you're getting shut out of things that you — maybe government officials who don't realize what damage they're doing by shutting out the media and not being transparent, that the public can't know what they're voting for, and that matters. It really does matter that people know if their government is spending this money on that or they're hiring this person for that reason. All of those issues, they're relevant to our daily lives. If we can't keep that in front of us, if the media can't keep that in front of the public, then we all lose in the end. It's a weaker society in general. We're not as strong, and people can't make as good of decisions down the road either if they're going to run for office and become a government official or if they're going to vote, which is so important, you know, those types of things.

JM: You talked about when you were at the Statehouse that generally speaking, the cooperative relationships you thought you had with legislators. I mean, you didn't always agree on things, and they didn't have to like every story you wrote, but it was generally speaking cooperative. You had your job to do. They had their job to do, and you had kind of a mutual understanding about that. Do you find in the current environment particularly with government officials that this process led — I think you were hinting at that a moment ago — they're less cooperative. They shut you out. They see you more as the enemy of what they're trying to do versus a collaborator. Do you sense that?

SK: Oh, yes. Sadly, just this year, we've had no congressmen visit this community that I know of. I know they've slipped up and gone to a few businesses in town.

JM: They don't let you know when they're coming?

SK: No, and post those photos on their Facebook as if they were making a public appearance in that community. Well, they're not. They're going to visit perhaps campaign donors or perhaps just people they're just going to see a local industry, but there used to be we would always get the heads up from their staff ahead of time. "You can ask the congressman questions on the side if you'd like afterward. We'll take a few minutes for you afterward." We haven't had that at all this year. I think that's a clear sign that our federal government is no longer in the business of serving the people, keeping the people informed on what they're doing.

JM: Or they don't think that you help them. They could get their message out in any number of ways. They don't feel an obligation necessarily to avail themselves to members of the media for various reasons. If you contacted the congressional office and you asked them to make sure to let you know the next time they're in town, you don't have any confidence that they would do that?

 

SK: No, I don't, not anymore. You can try to maintain those ties, but we get so busy at the local level. There's just so much going on at a community level. Whatever realm you're reporting on, you're so focused on that that if people are coming in from the outside, if they don't let you know, then you're not going to be able to cover it for that community. It's disappointing.

JM: The job is harder than it used to be in that sense, that sense of mutual trust, that you can trust me to do my job and do it to the best of my ability and to be fair. That's disappointing.

Sarah: Issues like farm subsidies and all of those are huge for these communities around here, huge. We need to be able to talk to our congressmen about what kind of policy they're looking at and why. If they're not going to talk to us and then if they're not going to stick around after their canned speech that they've given so we can ask them a few questions, it doesn't help, I don't think, to foment that public information that keeps people informed.

JM: I guess one way to put it is to say that the accountability loop has been broken.

SK: Yes.

JM: There really isn't that sense that they need to be held accountable. For one reason or another, they don't trust the local media to do that.

SK: Right.

JM: It sounds like you've got your work cut out for you just to keep the paper going although it's a lovely building, and I think Marysville might be an exception in many ways as we've discussed, both economically and probably for a newspaper like yours. You have a lot of communication with other weekly newspapers around the state?

SK: Yes, through the Kansas Press Association. We all exchange newspapers. So, we're reading what each other is doing.

JM: Other examples of people who are doing it well and succeeding.

SK: Yes. We give each other ideas. We're calling each other often for "What do you think about doing this or that? Have you done this? What is this?" We help each other out.

JM: We're sitting in front of a lot of history here. These are copies of *The Marysville Advocate*. I'm looking all the way to the forties here.

SK: Right. I think that our 1930s ones fell apart. They're that old.

JM: Just looking at this and knowing that you sit in the chair that your father once sat in, you probably feel a lot of responsibility, don't you?

SK: Yes. I feel like it's different though. He didn't have the "How am I going to get this next generation to read the news or engage in their local community?" That concerns me a lot.

 

JM: Have you done things to try to engage local readers? Have you done any experimentation in that regard here?

SK: We haven't. We've, I guess, tried to keep our website — we have a website as well as our print publication and trying to keep that, improving that so that people will subscribe to that if they prefer an online read rather than reading the newspaper, the print paper. We've just always been a very, I guess, active newspaper in that we put out special sections all the time. We put out a voter guide. We put out guides for tourism and for business. Once a year, we put out a progress edition to kind of give people a flavor of what's new in business or what the trends are.

We try to engage people through that, but a lot of newspapers have tried now to do more events and panel discussions and things like that. I've thought of dedicating more time to that instead.

JM: You cover the heck out of local sports, too.

SK: Oh, yes.

JM: Which has always been a very important ingredient for a local newspaper.

SK: Yes. This year, Axtell and Hanover are the two top eight-man [football] teams in the state right up here. Sports is everything up here for a lot of people.

JM: Friday night lights.

SK: Yes, a big deal.

JM: Sarah, I can't tell you how much I enjoyed talking to you. I appreciate you making yourself available for this series of interviews. I think it's a really important topic, a way to kind of revitalize local newspapers and local news coverage around the state. It's something that's very important to talk about. You're here at ground zero. You're doing it every day.

SK: Well, thank you for your interest.

JM: Thanks. Nice to see you again.

SK: Same here.

[End of File]

 