

EDITOR'S COLUMN

I don't say this to be dramatic, but 2023 has been the SICKEST season of my life ever. To be clear, I don't mean that in the "that's sick, bro" way, I mean that in the cold and flu season way and in the bronchitis/COVID-19/constant earache way. Myself and Valley Sentinel Managing Editor Taylor Scott have been literally sick with some brand of illness basically since the ball dropped and Dec. 31, 2022 morphed into Jan. 1, 2023 [insert COVID germ emoji here for foreshadowing].

We've shared many times that we really, truly are a small business and when you see the paper each week, it's produced mainly by us — myself and our managing editor and an incredibly dedicated group of community contributors. Because of that, and because we in our capacity as individuals are part of our larger community, we sometimes like to give a little glimpse of some behind the scenes action, and lately, that's been so, so many illnesses, a little bit of burn out, and a high point or two.

I personally contracted COVID-19 for the first time ever earlier in March, I'm not sure how I evaded it for this long but it finally got to me and to be honest, it really took me out. I'm of course over the worst of it and testing negative again, but I still have some lingering symptoms and fatigue. Luckily, I am fully vaccinated and boosted (and maybe developing spidey senses after having the cocktail of J&J, Moderna and Bivalent vaccines shot into my arm? TBD) so my sickness was likely much less intense than it could have been. It wasn't necessarily any worse than a cold or flu but it was much different. The fatigue that came with COVID was insane, I still find myself very tired or needed to rest after some activities.

The cough was loud and took your breath away, but it was dry and did nothing to get rid of the fountain of mucus pouring into my sinuses. I was also sick with symptoms much longer than with just a cold or flu. I was sick, with no improvement, for at least 10 days, and still have some lingering symptoms, more than two weeks after testing negative. While it wasn't any worse than other sicknesses I've had — it was rough. In addition to COVID, we've experienced a variety of cold-like illnesses and bronchitis, and to be honest, even though we're (thankfully) somewhat healthier now, all of these illnesses take a huge toll on you and on so many aspects of your life.

When you're so constantly sick, with barely any time to fully recover, get your life back on track, get your business back on track — it wears you down a little. Physically and mentally. When physically and mentally you can't do anything other than be sick, you're not in your typical routines and that shows in your work, in your social life, in your relationships and in your own mind. When you can't show up for those aspects of your life, you feel like a bad employee, a bad business owner, a bad partner, an absent friend, the list goes on.

Most people don't know just how close we are each edition to not publishing, whether it be an editor finishing up a big story that runs out of time to lay out the paper, or a press schedule that flexes its inflexibility, or any other of a million things that can happen all at once any given publication week.

There is so much more that we want to do and will do, from finding new and interactive ways to engage with our readers, to holding events and building community, but the reality is - on a good day - we are roughly 1.5 people, with amazingly talented contributors, all of whom have other jobs or obligations. We're not a huge operation or a corporate newsroom full of reporters, graphic designers and paginators — we're an all volunteer publication that is one illness, hard deadline or misbehaving graphic away from having to skip or postpone any given edition — and that's what happened.

Ultimately, as small business owners we very seldom get sick days. This month, we really had to wave the white flag and force a few into our schedules, and we're so grateful to our community for allowing us those, and giving us grace as we have a human moment.

On a slightly more uplifting and inspirational note, being sick on repeat did uncover a fun and invigorating experience — The Newsroom. Not ours, the fictional broadcast newsroom from the HBO original The Newsroom.

This was a show I watched when it first came out in 2012, as a very, very young aspiring journalist who'd just scored her first article in her monthly high school newspaper, a riveting pre-season write-up about the girls volleyball team, this show spoke to me so deeply about the type of journalist I wanted to be when I grew up.

The show follows infamous TV news anchor Will McAvoy, who has a reputation for bringing in the highest ratings and doing whatever he thinks will get him those ratings, even if that means sacrificing the more informed newscast — until his boss hires a new executive producer to light a fire under him and force McAvoy to return to the cut throat, fact-focused news reporting they believe American voters need to be best informed.

The pair and their newsroom of young, inexperienced associate producers and interns set out on the journey that is News 2.0. They have a set of rules on doing the news, which include leaning away from two-sided storytelling (because as we're all rediscovering, some stories have one side, some have two and some have five. Two-sided storytelling isn't reliable storytelling - plus can we all acknowledge that if it is objectively raining outside, it isn't in the public's best interest to give a meteorologist and a rain-skeptic-conspiracy-theorist equal ink or airtime?) and instead focusing on facts and bringing truly credible and authoritative sources as guests on the show, instead of talking heads who further fact devoid polarization. The show follows their wins and losses and moments of lost faith, as the parent company pits effective news against entertainment and the constant need for ever more and more viewers to keep advertisers advertising (and executives rich).

Ultimately, News 2.0 puts the trust back in the hands of its viewers — it presents them with the facts and allows them to determine how that impacts their lives, their votes and their beliefs.

This show demonstrates effective and strong journalism — but it also contradicts nearly everything I was taught in journalism school. My education focused heavily on two-sided story telling, it emphasized that readers can't be trusted to think critically and the need for equal column inches and equal airtime to a source from each "side", it emphasized that reporters are blanketly unethical if they accept a class of water from a source during an interview, it teaches us that the perception of that glass of water is more important than the impartial, fact-based reporting we produce, that our readers or viewer can't be trusted to separate that glass of water from the 2000 word article you just published uncovering a corrupt local government, or sharing a girl scout's dream of being an astronaut or simply reporting on the construction that started up on Rainbow Road yesterday (just kidding). Those assertions only grew and became more gross and negligent as I left journalism school and entered into the real-world journalism industry, an industry that has grown and morphed into a hedge fund's best interest first, a don't write more than 600 words because no one bothers to read past the headline anyway, a don't write on that topic it doesn't get us any clicks or views, a pay us and we'll hand over the news industry. That is not good news.

As I watch my way through the journey of News 2.0 again, for the first time in nearly 10 years, as I lick my wounds from being chewed up and spit out by the corporate journalism world and navigate the journey that is my own news 2.0, I leave every episode holding back tears because it is a blaring alarm reminder of the journalism 14 year old me watched and screamed "I can't wait to do that someday."

The "industry" might not be doing News 2.0, but at Valley Sentinel we hope we are. Myself and our managing editor watch this show and see constant points of agreement and ways in which we've worked to make News 2.0 happen for our community — without even realizing it. I can't say thank you enough for allowing 14 year old me to live out my News 2.0 dreams. All of this to say—we took some time to celebrate our wins, nurse our wounds and illnesses, and do a deeper dive on some ongoing reporting. We hope you can appreciate that we care more. We look forward to showing you just how much. (And go watch The Newsroom, you won't regret it.)

— Nicole Aimone, Editor-in-Chief

SUNSHINE WEEK ROUND-UP



MARCH 12-18, 2023

Sunshine Week, held annually in March, was launched in 2005 by the American Society of News Editors (now News Leaders Association), aims to promote open government and shine light into the dark recesses of government secrecy.

Lone Rock lawsuit, open meetings update

Gary Ernest Grass, esq., Legal Editor

A couple months back, I wrote here that the Valley Sentinel was suing the Village of Lone Rock. It feels like time for an update, and I wanted to talk about our two cases -- one not yet filed and one possibly almost done, and why they are so different.

As you may recall, Lone Rock's Village Board had a special meeting back last October on Halloween night and did not let the Valley Sentinel know about it until afterwards. The following day there was another meeting. The Valley Sentinel received its legally required notice more than 23 hours late, which was pretty bad since the paper was only entitled to 24 hours of notice to begin with.

We followed this with a couple of requests for public records, mostly concerning those meetings. Our requests were ignored. It is clear the clerk got the emails which made the requests, because we received a response addressing the clerk's understanding of why the meetings were legal, but despite repeated inquiries, we got nowhere on the records.

Public records and open meetings are closely related issues, and each is treated in its own subchapter of Chapter 19 in the state statutes. But they are in many ways different animals.

A public records lawsuit can be filed immediately by the requester as soon as they have a cause of action. An action arises when the custodian of a record explicitly refuses access to the record,

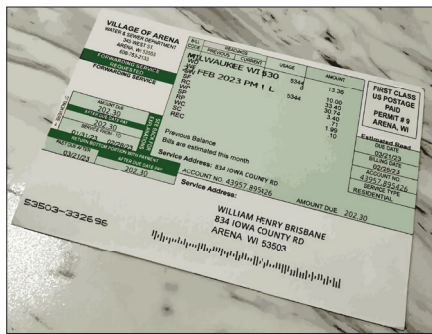
supplies a copy with unwarranted redactions or omissions, or attempts to charge an exorbitant fee. Alternatively, one can simply wait and sue when the delay becomes unreasonable, but if the case is filed too soon, a court may say that the party suing jumped the gun and should have given it more time. The centerpiece of the action is demand for an extraordinary writ, issued from the court to the records custodian, ordering release of records. In addition there may be an order to pay court costs, attorney fees, actual damages or a small set amount for each violation.

We filed that suit and were quickly talking to Lone Rock's attorneys about what we wanted. Did we just want the records? Yes, of course! We also wanted a small amount to cover our filing fees and so on, but mainly we wanted the records. The Village started to give us records. We haven't reached a complete settlement yet, but a large part of the case has been effectively achieved its purpose by triggering the release of records that we wanted. Sorry we had to sue to get there, but it seems we did. It's still possible some records will be denied or so delayed that we will not be able to settle on those, but we are optimistic. We anticipate that we will get everything we are entitled to and that this experience will encourage the Village to better comply with the laws moving forward.

Open meetings cases are a little continued on page 5

ON THE COVER

"Estimated read" (2023) Illustration, by Julianna Williams



This composite illustration is representative of a Village of Arena water bill with an estimated read. In February and March 2023 an astounding 85% of water bills in Arena were estimated reads.

While the village clerk tells us the issue has been fixed now after an antenna upgrade, this isn't the first time Valley Sentinel has gotten complaints about Arena's water bills.

Water bills continue to be a much-discussed topic, join us as we take a dive into audits and public records on pages 1, 14 and 15 of this edition to try to make sense of the numbers.

Submit your artwork or photography for cover consideration: editor@valleysentinelnews.com

