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Passon takes charge of NEW Media publications

Journalism career
has taken editor all
over Wisconsin

By **LEE PULASKI**
City Editor

Kevin Passon has been named the new editor-in-chief for NEW Media, but just as important, he's coming home.

Passon, who was born and raised in Shawano, took charge June 26 of NEW Media's three publications — the Shawano Leader, the Oconto County Times Herald and the Wittenberg Enterprise and Birnamwood News — as he took the reins from Warren Bluhm, who has been the interim editor since March 2021. Bluhm will be returning to his previous duties as news editor, which includes coverage of Oconto County.

"I grew up in downtown Shawano, just a block over on Washington Street," Passon said. "My former house is now a garage, I see. It was not a large house, but I had seven brothers and one sister. I was second from the youngest, and I still have a couple of brothers who live here in town."

Passon graduated from Shawano High School in 1982 and continued his education at St. Norbert College as a history major. At that time, journalism wasn't even on his radar.

"I started working at a Radio Shack fresh out of school," Passon said. "I was going to go to law school, but then I realized I was far enough in debt at that point, and I didn't want to get in any more debt, so I passed on that."

Passon was living in Waupun and working at the Radio Shack when, in 1987, he learned from family members that the Waupun Leader News was looking for a freelance writer. He took on the challenge, and two years later, he became the editor for that newspaper.

"I've been in the newspaper business ever since then," Passon said, noting it was only him and one other full-time person there handling sports



KEVIN PASSON

and advertising sales. His work eventually got him a position with the Beaver Dam Daily Citizen after he served an editor for three merged weekly newspapers, which included the Leader News. A former editor in Beaver Dam later tapped Passon to be the editor of the Oconomowoc Enterprise in 2000. After six months, he was promoted to publisher for that paper and stayed there until 2011.

"In that time, I was twice elected to the board of directors for the WNA (Wisconsin Newspapers Association)," Passon said.

In 2011, Passon's publisher position was eliminated in what he described as "massive cutbacks," which led him to explore some other avenues for his livelihood. This included public relations work, freelancing, copywriting and even being the editor for a magazine.

"I even sold cars for six weeks," Passon said. "I was trying to figure out what to do."

After losing the copywriting position in 2014 — when the company closed — and weathering a divorce, Passon learned there was an editor position in McFarland, near Madison.

"I didn't want to get into newspapers again," Passon said. "I had been out of the business for almost three years now. I thought, well, I just got through this divorce, and I want to get out of town, so I'll apply for this job at a weekly paper in McFarland, and I'll do it for a year."

When he went in to interview for the McFarland job, he was told there was a position nearby in Monona that he'd be better suited for. The plan was still to just work there for a year, but he was there for six. During that time, the McFarland and Monona newspapers merged, and then they were bought by Adams Publishing Group in 2018.

"I thought I would just do some-

thing simple — go in, write my stories and then go home," Passon said, noting that he eventually was also asked to be the editor of the merged newspaper and a number of niche publications the company ran.

That time in southern Wisconsin also reunited Passon with a high school friend, and the two married in 2019.

Passon returned to the northern part of the state when an editor position opened in 2020 with the Antigo Daily Journal, which had made the decision to cut its print publication back from six days to three days. Passon and his wife, Lisa, saw it as an opportunity to move back closer to home.

"I had a couple of brothers, step-brothers and a stepsister still living in the Shawano area," Passon said. "She had a couple of adult kids in the area — one in Marion and one in Clintonville, as well as one in Madison. For me, it was a transfer in the same company."

Now that Passon is back in Shawano, he and his wife are eager to reunite with old high school friends in person. He's also eager to get some doughnuts from Fannita's Bakery, noting that there were two bakeries in the downtown area when he was growing up.

"There's a coconut doughnut with cream filling and white frosting on top," Passon said. "It's the only place in the state I could find these doughnuts. Every other place we lived, they didn't make them and hadn't heard of them."

After taking some time to observe the newspapers and how they operate, Passon is going to be pushing for more digital material and working to make sure that news stories are provided online first and then in print publications.

"Because of physical constraints, there might be only room for a 12-inch story in the paper, but we've got another 12 inches ... that's supplemental information that will go online with the story," Passon said. "We'll put more photos online. That's going to be the biggest change initially."

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