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Madison, Isthmus

From the editor

Next stop: Madison

*Isthmus to host the annual convention
for AAN Publishers in July 2025*

I recently traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, for the annual meeting of the Association of Alternative Newsmedia. The group was founded in 1978 in Seattle, Washington. Then it was called the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, very much reflecting the reality at the time of its 30 founding members, including the *Phoenix New Times*, *Willamette Week* and the *Chicago Reader*. These weekly publications offered a true alternative to the staid offerings of most city dailies, with edgy coverage, longform narrative journalism, and a fresh emphasis on culture and the arts.

Isthmus joined AAN in 1980, according to Vince O'Hern, who founded the paper in 1976 and remained its owner and publisher until 2014. O'Hern says he got a call from Bob Roth, founder of the *Chicago Reader*, who told him about the group. "We have an organization of papers like yours," O'Hern recalls Roth telling him. "I said there are no other papers like mine. I truly didn't know that much about the alternative press."

O'Hern went to that year's convention and *Isthmus* was approved for membership. So was the *Riverfront Times* in St. Louis. After 46 years, that paper recently laid off its editorial staff after being sold.

O'Hern says he always found the annual AAN conventions, hosted in different cities by member papers, of particular value. "You heard from other people and other papers what they were doing, what new ideas they had," he says. "You learned how to run an alt weekly. It was a great way to keep up to date with the alternative newspaper culture."

In the prosperous years before the internet decimated advertising sales for print publications, *Isthmus* often sent six or seven staffers from different departments to the annual conferences — editorial, sales, administration and production. "There were streams for each of these areas at the convention so it was a real place for people to learn," says O'Hern.



JUDITH
DAVIDOFF

Of course journalism would undergo seismic change starting in the mid-2000s. In 2011, the group accepted into membership its first online-only publication and changed its name to the Association of Alternative Newsmedia. "With the increasing number of apps, digital, mobile and web platforms our companies use, it was time to

reflect those changes in our name," AAN president Fran Zankowski said at the time.

In Charleston, the board of directors voted to change the name of the organization again, this time to AAN Publishers. The organization had been discussing for a couple of years whether the term "alternative" remained a useful descriptor in our constantly evolving media environment.

"The new name reflects our broad focus on local, independent media that is authentic, accountable and affirming for the communities they serve," says Todd Stauffer, the group's executive director. "AAN members stand as an alternative to corporate and hedge-fund-owned conglomerates, often serving as the paper of record on critical issues in their communities."

Other news out of the annual board meeting was extremely encouraging. Interest in the group is high — 42 outlets, including print and/or online-only publications, applied this year to join AAN's more than 120 members. The group has also been successful in working with large funders to provide grants for member papers, distributing \$1.7 million in Google Transformation Tech grants to 85 papers, including *Isthmus*.

I am also pleased to report that *Isthmus* received five awards in AAN's national contest, including top honors for best newsletter (Word of Mouth) and best illustration for Kay Reynolds' Valentine's Day-themed art for the February 2023 cover.

Also announced at the conference — Madison will be hosting the AAN conference in July 2025! These days AAN has event staff that work with the host city's



visitors bureau on the logistics, including finding and booking a conference venue. Otherwise we would not have been able to say "yes" when asked if we wanted to host, since our small staff is already stretched.

We're looking forward to showcasing our beautiful city and the important local journalism provided by *Isthmus* and our colleagues. The conference was held in Madison once before, in 2002, but I think we'll have some new things to show this time around.

IN CHARLESTON THERE WERE TWO streams of workshops, editorial/design and revenue/marketing. I straddled the two.

There were sessions on editorial collaborations, election fact-checking, equity and inclusion in coverage, and a perennial favorite, "50 story ideas in 50 minutes." One takeaway from a workshop on arts coverage — *Isthmus* appears to be an outlier in our continued efforts to review the arts. Many of our fellow papers have given up on finding qualified critics to review dance, theater, music and the visual arts, instead focusing solely on previews of upcoming performances and exhibits.

While this is a challenge for us as well, we believe reviews are an important part of arts coverage. Since the departure of longtime theater critic Gwendolyn Rice to the west coast, for instance, associate editor Linda Falkenstein has worked hard to find new theater reviewers, including Dan Koehn, Anya van Wagtenonk, Mel Hammond and Janet Clear.

On the revenue side of things, one of the workshops focused on how to take advantage of Press Forward, the \$500,000 ini-

tiative from the Joyce Foundation, Knight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation and others to fund local news. The representative from Press Forward strongly urged outlets to form collaborations with other media in their communities as a first step. The group also wants to see local community foundations involved. We and other Madison media outlets have some work to do if we are going to see a piece of this pie.

One last word about Charleston. The host paper, *Charleston City Paper*, arranged for members to have a one-hour private tour of the International African American Museum and it is a must-see. A little over a year old, the museum is built on the site of Gadsden's Wharf, where an estimated 260,000 enslaved Africans entered South Carolina, the largest single point of entry for slaves in the country. Everything about the design of the building is deliberate. Slanted wooden supports on the floor-to-ceiling windows point the gaze of visitors to the Atlantic Ocean inlet where slave ships passed on their way to port.

The "power of place" is strong here, as Dr. Tonya M. Matthews, CEO and president of the museum, put it when talking to our group. But Matthews said the museum takes great care to reinforce that the period of slavery is "neither the beginning nor the end of the African American experience, it's in the middle." Context is a recurring thread in the museum's storytelling, she added. "One of the greatest gifts of being able to understand the African American journey is being able to understand African Americans' ability to simultaneously hold the sensations of trauma and joy." ■