

Baptism by Flame

Wobbema shares the Transcript Publishing fire experience with journalists in Wyoming and Colorado

and “rise from the ashes.” Vorland Land Company offered office space to continue operations. The fire department, once the scene was secured, allowed the Voigts access to the building to recover the graphic design computer, which Wobbema said was absolutely crucial. Advertisers called with ads. Subscriptions flowed in. Words of encouragement and support were constant.

Support was also offered throughout the state of North Dakota and the North Dakota Newspaper Association (NDNA). Wobbema shared that messages of support and offers of help were already flooding in within hours of the breaking news of the fire. People wanted to help, and the publishers of other North Dakota newspapers sent news articles, desks, chairs, and even office supplies.

The story gained national attention because of a call the following Tuesday afternoon from MSNBC and the Rachel Maddow Show. “It’s probably the only 15 minutes of fame that I will ever have in my lifetime,” Wobbema laughed. “And that’s okay with me! Because if that’s what I have to do to get fame, I don’t want it!”

The fact that Maddow did not just one, but two segments on the New Rockford Transcript story was phenomenal. Wobbema included in both of her presentations that if she could pick someone to tell her story, it would be Rachel Maddow.

“She got everything right, is a fantastic story teller and she really put us in the best possible light,” remembered Wobbema. “When you have someone on national television telling her viewers that if they have not paid to get behind the paywall of their local newspapers, to please do so, that’s powerful.”

Maddow’s viewers also “showed up” with their support of the Transcript. Subscriptions came in from people who didn’t have a clue where New Rockford, ND, was and messages of support also flowed in. “The support from the local community, the state of North Dakota and extending nationwide is what got us through that first week, that first month,” Wobbema said. “That,

and supporting each other as we hunkered down in Vorland’s office to get the paper out and back on its feet.”

So, even as their hearts and lives were so tied into the business that was in flames in front of them, they still looked at it as a community story to report, as a piece of news. They were snapping pictures, talking to the firefighters, ambulance members and community members who had joined them to watch the fire.

However, there was more work to be done. There were messages to respond to, a video to make and share with the Rachel Maddow Show, and accessing the fire safe to see what was left of the newspaper archives. They videotaped as they pulled the books out of the safe. Transcript employee Sandi Clapper accessed the safe headfirst, through a 2-by-2-foot hole. The water squished underfoot as she stood in the dark of the safe and handed books, one or two at a time to the others, waiting in an assembly line until all 100-or-so bound file books were loaded into Voigt’s vehicle and brought back to the new Transcript office. Although none of the books were lost, there were a few that were damaged but still intact. Then they started preparing the new office by painting, installing new flooring and adapting the new office to fit the newsroom’s needs.

The response from other journalists at the conferences was encouraging. They approached Wobbema after her presentation and told her that there were parts of the story where they were almost in tears. These were people who could totally relate to the feelings that Wobbema and Voigts had throughout the entire process.

The message that Wobbema wanted to convey to the other journalists attending the conferences is that community journalism is alive and well and that newspaper readers will rally to support you. The words of Katie Ryan-Anderson’s “baptism by fire” came back to Wobbema as she was preparing her presentation. She thought about how fitting those words had been for her because the whole experience had affirmed her belief that community journalism is alive and well, right here in New Rockford, North Dakota, and throughout the country.

“If you think about it, I was new in the journalism business, so it was a perfectly fitting analogy to use a baptism to describe it. The whole experience just cemented my whole inclusion into the industry,” related Wobbema. “As a result, I felt like I truly belonged. It affirmed my belief that this is where I’m supposed to be and I feel like I’m in the right place. It’s one thing to feel like I’m in the right industry, it’s another thing to feel like I’m in the right place. And this is my place.”



New Rockford Transcript publisher Amy Wobbema spoke to the Colorado Press Association on Friday, April 21, sharing how the community supported her and the Voigts after the business' office was destroyed by fire in August 2015. Photo credit: Thomas Cooper/Lightbox Images, Littleton, CO

by Allison Lindgren

“Hello, my name is Amy Wobbema and I was literally, figuratively and ritualistically baptized into the newspaper business by fire, and this is my story.”

This introduction to start Wobbema’s presentation to the press associations in both Wyoming and Colorado was a spin on a phrase originally coined by Katie Ryan-Anderson in an article she wrote in North Dakota Living, titled “New Rockford Phoenix: Weekly newspaper arises from ashes.”

New Rockford Transcript owner and publisher Amy Wobbema returned Sunday, April 23, from speaking to the Colorado Press Association in Denver. In January she also spoke at the Wyoming Press Association in Cheyenne, and the story she shared was about this community.

Wobbema was initially contacted by Jim Angell, the Executive Director of the Wyoming Press Association, who had seen the clip about the New Rockford Transcript fire on MSNBC’s Rachel Maddow Show. The Wyoming Press Association consists of many small community newspapers, just like North Dakota. After speaking with Wobbema, he felt the story about the local community’s support of the paper would resonate with their members.

The CEO of the Colorado Press Association, Jerry Raehal, started his career in Wyoming and he knew Jim Angell very well. Angell told Raehal about the New Rockford Transcript story and that Wobbema was speaking at their conference in Wyoming. He recommended that Raehal also invite

her to speak at the Colorado conference. Since Raehal was leading some of the sessions at the Wyoming conference, Wobbema had the opportunity to meet him prior to traveling to Colorado.

The support of this community was an important aspect of the story for Wobbema, because sometimes journalists may feel they’re unpopular, especially when the paper covers things that are controversial or not positive, feel good stories. As a result, newsmen and women may not feel the community’s support, so when that support is made so evident, it’s a story that journalists across the nation appreciate.

Her presentation came from the perspective of a woman who was relatively new to the newspaper business. Wobbema had begun her career at the newspaper just six months prior to the fire. It is also told as someone who, just weeks before, had declared her intent to purchase the New Rockford Transcript from Craig and Bonnie Voigt, only to stand there that Saturday and watch the business burn to the ground right in front of her.

“Really, the focus of the presentation was on what I went through with that experience and how I felt the support of, particularly this community, the readers of the New Rockford Transcript and how they embraced us and supported us,” stated Wobbema. “Everyone, from the readers to the advertisers, former residents and the community, as a whole, really showed up.”

She shared that it was because of that support that the Transcript was able to recover