2019

The Dalton Camp Award

The Dalton Camp *Award*

The 2019 DALTON CAMP AWARD

June 2019

Presented by Friends of Canadian Broadcasting

FRIENDS OF CANADIAN BROADCASTING

www.friends.ca

THE DALTON CAMP AWARD

FRIENDS OF CANADIAN BROADCASTING announced the creation of The Dalton Camp Award in December, 2002 to honour the memory of the late Dalton Camp, a distinguished commentator on Canadian public affairs, who passed away earlier that year.

The Dalton Camp Award is available to one Canadian each year, the winner of an essay competition on how the media influence Canadian democracy. The Award consists of a cash prize of $10,000 as well as a bronze cast medal by the late Canadian sculptress Dora de Pédèry-Hunt. Under the rules, the Selection Committee has the option of awarding $2,500 for the best essay by a post-secondary student.

Friends' goal is to encourage Canadians to reflect and express themselves through original essays on the link between democracy and the media.

The members of the Selection Committee are Gene Allen, Pauline Couture and Stephen Kimber. Friends expresses profound appreciation to Jim Byrd for his fourteen years of service on the Selection Committee.

The 2019 winner is Samuel Piccolo. Friends of Canadian Broadcasting is pleased to publish his essay herein and on friends.ca, where details on the 2020 Dalton Camp Award will be available.

Friends wishes to thank *The Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star* and *The Walrus* for their cooperation regarding the Dalton Camp Award.

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THE MEDAL

The late **DORA DE PÉDÈRY-HUNT** was Canada's foremost medal designer and sculptress. Among her designs are the dollar coin and a cast medal of Norman Bethune presented by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to Mao Tse-tung in 1973. In 2003, she was awarded the J. Sanford Saltus Award Medal, the American Numismatic Society's prestigious medal for signal achievement in the art of the medal.

WINNER OF THE BEST ESSAY

SAMUEL PICCOLO

Samuel Piccolo is a PhD student in Political Theory at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. He is from Ridgeville, Ontario. In 2017 and 2018, he was Principle Reporter at The Voice of Pelham, where he wrote news, features, and personal essays.

A SLEEPLESS YEAR IN A SLEEPY TOWN

SAMUEL PICCOLO

I HAVE THREE STORIES BEGINNING WITH WEATHER. AND A SINGLE OBSERVATION, DESPITE THE FORECAST.

ONE.

It's winter, a couple of years ago, and there is a great snowstorm. My university is closed. I am nearing the end of my final year, and I have a handful of essays to be writing and projects to be researching. But it is an unexpected day off, and I do not want to work. Sitting by the fire at home, I flip through the community newspaper lying on a nearby table.

I don't usually read this paper. I think that real news only appears in big dailies, that local rags are populated by whacked-out letters to the editor, grousing over minor slights, and announcements about linen sales at the Legion. Serious people don't read these things. What is there to learn in a sleepy place?

This day, though, I see an article by a since-departed native of the town, critiquing its sensibilities. I am irritated by the arguments. I think they're wrong. I think about this all day, as I'm shovelling snow, not doing schoolwork. At night I can't sleep. I open my laptop and hammer out a response. I send it to the publisher. It appears the next week: my first piece in print.

I used to think that the paper did little more than photograph the cutest children around. In my mind, it existed to cover egg hunts and recount the local hockey team's latest exploits. It does those things, but it also does so much more. I learn that nearly everything I thought about community papers is wrong.

I am pleasantly surprised that the paper in my town has something of a frosty relationship with Town Hall, which isn't enthused when its visions and revisions for a new community centre are subjected to real, critical coverage.

Having met with the publisher, I learn that people relish this uncompromising local coverage. According to the publisher's sources, nearly six in 10 adults read community newspapers, while just 41 per cent read dailies. Around 32 per cent of adults read nothing but community newspapers. In Ontario, at least, weekday readers of local community newspapers exceed those tuning in to all radio stations, and most people who read these papers read nearly every issue – thoroughly.

I learn that about half of Canada's local papers are owned locally[1], which now makes much more sense. These papers make a real difference to life in town – it stands to reason that local citizens would invest to keep them afloat. The one in my town is still owned by residents: the same 50 investors (or their heirs) who each pitched in $1,000 to launch the paper decades ago. Local ownership also provides independence. Larger regional papers seem to be swapping owners regularly, from Torstar to Postmedia to Osprey – each new parent company yoking the subsidiaries to its own trajectory. Community papers have the freedom to make their own decisions. Our paper has complete editorial independence, and I soon learn how important this is.

TWO.

Five months later. It is pouring rain. I have graduated. I have published several more essays in the community paper, and I have backpacked around Mexico. I have made and re-made plans for my year off before graduate school, and none of these arrangements has me remaining in my small town. I am 700 kilometres into a cycling tour of Ontario, just coming into Pembroke, a small settlement on the Ottawa River. I am wet and cold. I park my bike by the library, and hurry inside for the free WiFi, hewing close to the walls in hopes of staying beneath the eaves and out of the deluge. There is a note from the publisher in my inbox. The paper's sole reporter just quit. Would I come home and take the job? I think: of course – even if it is unclear why. I do not say yes right away. What of those plans to cycle around the United States? What of those plans to move to a farm community with the developmentally delayed in Pennsylvania? What of them? I know I will say yes. Give me a week to get home, I tell him the next day.

I begin in a hurry. I am writing more and faster than ever before. I am emailing and calling people I have never met, with a temerity I thought I'd never have. I work on a story about a get-together for longstanding residents that is open to their sons and grandsons, but not to their daughters and granddaughters. It is aptly called the Boys Reunion. One woman who had hoped to spend time swapping memories with old pals of her recently deceased father is outraged at being excluded. The event's organizer loses his cool with me over the phone. "If you're going to go print something that paints a black picture of the [Boys] Reunion, I'm going to make hell for you guys. And you can take that as a threat or whatever you want," he says to me, claiming that the group has good cause for barring women from buying tickets. "It's not a sexist thing, there are whole bunch of other reasons for it."[2] When I get off the phone, my innards have shifted up a foot into my throat.

"It's all right not to be liked," my editor tells me. "You want to be respected." I appreciate the importance of this lesson soon enough. A few weeks later, a town councillor alleges that the town has attempted a closed-door cover-up of its finances, then resigns. Hours before the resignation, the editor and I meet with the mayor to ask very specific questions about the town's balance sheet. He is visibly uncomfortable. I am invisibly uncomfortable – on account of his discomfort. My editor asks the questions. I bear witness. The mayor gives circular non-answer answers. Once the next issue is printed, bedlam breaks out. Council attempts to quell the outrage by holding special meetings where residents howl for the chance to ask questions. They don't get one. Another public meeting is promised, then cancelled.

After a few months, the town grows more hostile to the paper. It's a free weekly, and we have long left 50 copies of the paper inside the municipal office for visiting residents to read and enjoy. We hear from residents that these are mysteriously disappearing. As an experiment, we leave an ever greater number of papers. They all disappear within hours: trashed – some 500 in total. The town cuts all contact with us and removes the media table from the council chamber. Town employees provide conflicting explanations for this removal. The mayor goes on the radio and calls us "more of an entertainment and advertising" publication than a newspaper, even though our coverage of the town's questionable real estate deals won a provincial prize for investigative reporting.

The mayor casts doubt on our intentions by casting doubt on our ownership. He says that it's his "understanding" that the paper is now privately owned, implying that a single individual is using the paper to advance a nefarious agenda. His suggestion seems designed to make people think that our coverage is not inspired by a desire to inform the community, but to sow trouble for some other reason. He makes this suggestion even though I assured him months earlier that the 50 original community investors still own the paper.[3] Eventually there is attention from elsewhere: Canadian and U.S. journalism advocacy organizations lambaste the town, and Jesse Brown mentions us on Canadaland. The town reverses course on that allegation, but continues to ignore us, citing increasingly ludicrous justifications. In one instance, it claims that our two decades of membership in three media associations are insufficient proof of our legitimacy. They say we must join yet another association before it will speak to us again. And so on. I am increasingly surprised by how dramatic the year has become.

Then there is the apartment building story. A group of tenants at a seniors' apartment building that is partially funded by the public comes to us with allegations of illegal fees, staff entering apartments illegally and bullying by employees, one of whom is also a town councillor. We follow the story and produce a 12,000-word investigative piece – the longest in the paper's history. We go through several drafts. We seek input from our lawyer, and receive a generous amount. The building's executive board refuses to answer questions. At the invitation of tenants, we attend an executive board meeting shortly after publication. It is the only board meeting held openly. Upon seeing us and other non-tenants, including tenants' children who came to speak on behalf of their elderly parents, the board chair demands that we leave, and will not call the meeting to order until we do. We refuse. We say that it is a matter of public interest. The chair unilaterally cancels the meeting, refusing to cite the by-law that gives him this authority, refusing to produce any by-laws at all, even as tenants shout that they specifically asked for the by-laws to be present. Another board member shouts, "Out, out!" He threatens to call the police. One tenant, evidently displeased, calls us bastards.[4]

My time at the paper nears its end. I am accepted to graduate school in the United States. I write my last piece as a paid reporter: a love letter of sorts, to the town and the job. I confess that I, like so many young people, persistently long to leave the small place where I was born and raised. I admit that we imagine the small town as a holding pen where we mill about, pawing at the gates, waiting to be let out. Only then could we begin our real lives. Finally, time would speed up and things would actually happen to us. I add that a large part of me felt that working at the paper would be what parents call "a learning experience," or "character building," like eating spinach or flossing. But I was wrong, and I say so. Because I now know what it's like to really know where you're from – to walk into any shop or turn down any street and be called by name, and be asked how things are.

THREE.

Autumn has arrived in South Bend, Indiana. It is municipal election day back in Ontario, and in my town there is a landslide. I am in class when the polls close, breaking a personal rule to compulsively refresh the results on my phone, which I hide behind a book. The results come in. Not a single incumbent is returned to office. I'm told this is the first time in the town's history that the entire council is defeated.

When the paper interviewed candidates to replace me, there were a number of applicants, many of them qualified but none of them particularly young. Why? Countless small-town students with liberal arts degrees tread off to law or graduate school every year, and journalism graduates grapple for the same vanishing entry positions at the big shops. But there is a hunger for high-quality community journalism. If the work is good, people will wait by the newsstands for the delivery each week, as they did, and still do, for our paper. If it's true that all politics is local, then so too is journalism. Every story is local to somewhere. For many people, the mundane matters most: garbage, streets, by-laws. But even more important is trust. Local government offers a real opportunity for people to have faith in their democracy, since they can more easily feel as though their representatives are beholden only to them and not to a party leader, a universal desire in politics. Citizens can look legislators in the eye after each meeting, or in the Tim Hortons, or at the Legion. It is the same thing with the media.

At graduate school, we talk ceaselessly about the steep decline in liberal democracy around the world, the seemingly irreversible distrust in the media, the hopelessness people feel about the future. I am not sure exactly what to think about these broader issues on the national level – whether the solution is a more active press or a less inflammatory one. An active one seems to have worked in my town, though I don't know if such a thing could be calibrated in such a capacious place.

I do know that for a year in a small town in Ontario, I was the media. I cared about local democracy. I worked tirelessly to strengthen it. I was pleased with the results. The forecast for democracy may still be bleak, but, having stood in the rain for a year, I can say that getting wet was worth it.

CITATIONS

1. About.' Ontario Community Newspaper Association. http://www.ocna.org/about. Accessed 30/11/18
2. Voice Staff. 'Fonthill woman objects to Welland Boys exclusion. *The Voice of Pelham*. 09/10/17
3. Dave Burket and Samuel Piccolo. 'In newspaper, radio interviews, Pelham mayor misrepresents Voice journalism guidelines and ownership. *The Voice of Pelham*. 28/03/18
4. Samuel Piccolo. 'Pelham Non-Profit Housing cancels Annual General Meeting.' *The Voice of Pelham*. 02/05/18

A SMALL DROP OF INK... MAKES THOUSANDS, PERHAPS MILLIONS, THINK.

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