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The Lamorinda Weekly-Looking Back and Forward

By Andrea A. Firth



March 14th marked the three-year anniversary of the launch of the Lamorinda Weekly, and this is the 81st issue. By many measures, this biweekly newspaper, which serves our three-borough community, has been a successful venture.

Our first issue was 16 pages long and had 35 articles, 5 staff writers, three photographers and 50 ads. Our last issue, at 32 pages, had 53 articles, 13 staff and contributing writers, five photographers, three columnists, 11 submissions from the community (now that's what we call a success story), and 150 ads. Our internet use has grown by 313 % over the last 12 months; we now have about 1,000 visitors a day with 2,500 daily page views.

Given the economic downturn and the collapse of many mainstream media outlets, to experience business growth in this environment, especially with a print newspaper (which we also publish online), might be considered remarkable. While we are feeling pretty good about the viability of our little community paper, we ask ourselves why it works and what more we can do to ensure it continues on this path.

Recently Richard Hernandez, an award winning photojournalist and Fellow with the UC Berkeley School of Journalism, came to the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church to give a presentation about the future of print journalism. Could he predict what lies ahead or help us on our journey? Hernandez left the San Jose Mercury News after a 20-year stint, because he felt that the innovation at the paper had stalled. Hernandez's presentation came without a crystal ball. He admitted, "I don't know what lies ahead for print journalism."

However, Hernandez remained cautiously hopeful, "There is a lot of hype around the 'print is dead' story," he stated. And as the crisis in the newspaper industry has unfolded, he has seen a move toward the smaller, monthly and bimonthly community papers.

"In 2006 I started a company for database design and marketing services," states the Lamorinda Weekly's publisher Andy Scheck. "At the time, local businesses did

March 14 - 16, 2007: 25,000 copies of issue #1 were thrown on driveways by about 25 people

not have many opportunities to connect with the community. I heard many people discuss Lamorinda's need for a good local newspaper."

From the outset, the Lamorinda Weekly's model has differed from the traditional newsroom cluttered with a sea of desks, computers, and phones and buzzing with the din of a large staff. Ours is a virtual newsroom. The sales, marketing, production, and management for the newspaper are conducted from Andy and Wendy Scheck's home office-two desks in the family room that looks out to the backyard. Andy's son, Jonas, helps with the layout of the paper from his home in Germany, and Wendy's daughter, Amanda, contributes graphics working from the laptop in her bedroom. Other than a weekly editorial meeting of six core staff held around the Schecks' dining room table, all of the paper's business is carried out in the virtual world. The writers, photographers, and editors have their own spaces and communicate over the web and by phone. Some of us have never met face to face.

"All of our work is done using digital technology," explains Andy. "Email is our main form of communication." Wendy elaborates, "The virtual nature of the paper is one of the main reasons it works so well. We are able to live two or three lives at one time by reporting, writing, photographing, editing or selling while doing other things. I think everyone who is involved with the paper is fairly altruistic by nature and they also hold themselves to very high standards. We share a sense of pride and accomplishment within the team that is really very satisfying on a personal level."

One of the key elements essential to creating a newspaper that brings value to the reader is providing content that is important to the reader, Hernandez explained; "The future depends on the needs of the community, the involvement of the community, and the voice of the community."

"Almost all of our staff and contributors live or work in Lamorinda. Our writers are reporting on events that take place within the scope of their daily lives. They have connections that naturally bring them close to stories that

other people in the community also care about," says Wendy. "To make it all work, we have an editor who demands that they keep a neutral voice and sets a high bar for editorial integrity. Even though they might write about things close to their hearts, they also reach outside their own experience and put a lot of time and effort into researching, interviewing and listening in meetings," explains Wendy.

"We select team members based on their involvement within the community," Andy adds. "And because we live here, we listen to our readers daily. I hope I will not insult our advertising customers, but in fact, our most important customers are our readers."

The hope for print journalism lies in our ability to be innovative and responsive to the community, according to Hernandez. Andy believes, "Innovation comes from our readership. We're open to suggestions and our 'newsroom' is more all over Lamorinda than in our office." Wendy adds, "I think that our readers value the paper because it helps people feel connected and gives them a real sense of community."

Lee Borrowman contributed to this article



Photo Doug Kohen

Meet the Publishers—Andy and Wendy Scheck

When Andy and Wendy Scheck left the high-tech industry in 2005, they wanted to start a local business, so they looked around for a niche that needed filling. Andy recalls having a conversation with a friend who suggested a newspaper and the concept clicked. "I knew enough about desktop publishing, database publishing, web and graphic design to get started," says Scheck who set to work on a business plan the next day. A critical component of his original model was the framework for community participation in the paper. "During the last week of December in 2006, Andy produced a prototype with our first printer and we met with representatives from each of Lamorinda's communities to get feedback," says Wendy. "The response was very positive. I used the prototype to sell ads, and we published our first issue a few weeks later." The Schecks originally planned on a weekly publication, but moved to a biweekly format after the first month. "That change saved the paper," notes Wendy. The Schecks believe that community involvement is fundamental to what makes the newspaper thrive. They are active members of all three Chambers of Commerce in Lamorinda, and offer discounted advertising rates to charitable organizations. Andy, a Rotarian, recently launched our Community Service section after a conversation with a local community organization, offering a space for submissions from those involved in service projects. For the Schecks, the community's voice is paramount. They make every effort to publish all letters to the editor and article submissions that they receive (which meet the paper's guidelines). Although not exactly a democracy, the paper is horizontally structured—among the senior staff, everyone gives input and has a voice. Both Andy and Wendy are very good listeners. In addition to his role as publisher, Andy developed the proprietary database for the paper's website that archives all of the content online, and he lays out the paper himself. Every other weekend, the couple rarely leaves their Moraga home. Andy works day and night to prepare the week's issue with Wendy's help; Wendy also handles advertising sales and marketing operations for the paper. L.Borrowman, A.Firth

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