

February–March 2020

“It’s a Newspaper’s Duty to Print the News and Raise Hell” A Civic Duty: Digitize Neighborhood News

by Patrick Monette-Shaw

The deckhead for this article is a Wilbur Storey quote 159 years ago in an 1861 article in the then-*Chicago Times*. Back then, newspapers and journalists were unafraid of taking on the “Establishment” and raising some hell. It’s a sentiment widely held by those of us who’ve been privileged to publish in the *Westside Observer* over the years, which I strongly agree with.

As the *Observer* migrates to an on-line-only news outlet printing the real news, please continue to support us as we start our new journey in raising hell.

The City’s mainstream media are not covering the real news of our hyper-local neighborhood communities, and in particular are not covering neighborhood and local news in granular detail as we do here at the *Westside Observer*.

Indeed, 50 years ago *Time Magazine* published an [article](#) in November 1970 noting large-circulation mainstream newspapers tend to be part of the Establishment, and, therefore, part of the problem. The *Time* article reported “*San Francisco’s Examiner and Chronicle, for instance, are so comfortably settled that the ... City has become one of the worst-newspapered cities in America.*”

Time went on to praise Bruce Brugmann, publisher of the former *San Francisco Bay Guardian Weekly*, for improving the state of journalism in San Francisco.

During the past 50 years, the *Examiner* has gotten somewhat better after it added reporters Joe Fitzgerald Rodriguez, Laura Waxman, Joshua Sabatini, and others. But the *Chronicle* continues to omit covering local news in-depth, when not altogether, and buries local news often in the back pages of its paper. That leaves us still being one of the worst-newspapered cities! (For an example, see Lou Barberini’s [article](#) in this issue of the *Westside Observer* critical of the *Chronicle’s* factual veracity.)

Because the mainstream media ignores the problem of inadequate local news coverage, it’s left to our local neighborhood newspapers to flesh out details of local news.

Our Civic Duty to Dissent

As citizen-journalists, *Observer* columnists share a sense of duty to dissent by researching news that affects our neighborhoods, and to build opposition to City policies where needed. We’re here as an antidote to flesh out and publish news and raise hell! And we’re intent on evolving with the times.

The *Westside Observer* has been a leading source of neighborhood news on the west side of San Francisco for the past 12 years, and even before it took over the *West of Twin Peaks Observer*. In 2008, the San Francisco Neighborhood Newspaper Association had 20 local monthlies in the City. But with the recent news the *Observer* is ending its print edition, there will now be only eight neighborhood monthly newspapers in print in the entire City. Like other neighborhood papers, the *Observer* is expanding its former web site into an on-line-only publication.



A Civic Duty to Digitize the News: The *Westside Observer* has long been published both on-line and in-print. Now we’re migrating to on-line only, in part to save trees and slow global warming.

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The *Observer* grew into the best damn newspaper in town with great leadership from its publishers Mitch and Alice Bull, its editor Doug Comstock, and a stable of contributing authors covering the entire spectrum of topics — from neighborhood issues not covered at all by our local daily newspapers to in-depth reporting, analyses, and commentary on citywide issues also not covered in any meaningful way by the mainstream media. Our columnists are largely engaged citizens who routinely place public records requests to uncover details of stories the mainstream media neglect to research.

How Did I Get Here?

I've reflected on how I got here.

On a cool, slightly-cloudy 52-degree morning, I trudged up the 100-step staircase for my first day of employment at Laguna Honda Hospital (LHH) on May 17, 1999. I had no idea how my life would suddenly change.

I fretted the whole way up about whether I'd survive a six- to twelve-month probationary period, because I had been a very vocal "accountability" critic of the then-director of Public Health, Dr. Mitch Katz, and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation. So, I fretted about the potential for political payback, hoping I could last long enough to pass my initial probation.

I published "*The Fleecing of AIDS in America: Part 1 — San Francisco AIDS Foundation's Unfair Distribution of AIDS Walk Funds*" on July 15, 2001 after having stopped fretting about passing probation.

On July 20, 2003 I launched my first public website — TheLastWatch.com — dedicated to exposing accountability problems with "AIDS Inc." By then I was no longer afraid of Katz, or then-Mayor "Slick" Willie Brown. On October 1, 2004 I launched stopLHHdownsize.com to try to prevent eliminating one-third — 420 — of the 1,200 beds planned for the LHH replacement hospital.

In November 2004 I filed my first San Francisco Superior Court lawsuit against the City involving the downsizing of LHH, with *pro bono* representation from public-interest public-health ace lawyer Lynn Carman. The lawsuit sought to require the City use all of the Tobacco Settlement Revenues (TSR) to offset the LHH replacement project cost overruns, and sought to recover \$25 million misappropriated from the TSR account earmarked to rebuild LHH.

In February 2008, I filed a second San Francisco Superior Court lawsuit against the City involving the *Chambers Settlement* agreement, again represented by Mr. Carman. The lawsuit sought to stop the *Chambers Settlement* mandate to eliminate 420 beds from the 1,200-bed rebuild project. I lost both public-interest lawsuits.

Also in February 2008, the *Westside Observer* published my first [article](#) "*Downsizing Laguna Honda: Who Gets the Boot*" which focused on reducing LHH to just 780 beds, and which patients would be forced out, perhaps out-of-county.

In March 2012, I received a James Madison Freedom of Information Award in the *Advocacy* category from the Society of Professional Journalists–NorCal Chapter for my articles in the *Westside Observer* as an advocate for LHH's patients.

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In January 2019 SPJ-NorCal awarded the *Westside Observer* the James Madison award in the *Community News Media* category, indicating the *Observer* “stands out among San Francisco’s neighborhood newspapers for fostering citizen journalism based on public records disclosures that shed light on city government and promote community engagement.”

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A Civic Duty to Annoy

Please bear with a slight digression: While employed at LHH I audited a UC Berkeley Extension course in writing after hours, where I stumbled across a seminal September 1997 essay written by Wendy Kaminer in *The Atlantic*, titled “A Civic Duty to Annoy.” Kaminer was then a contributing editor of *The Atlantic*, a public-policy fellow at Radcliffe College, and president of the National Coalition Against Censorship.

[A Civic Duty to Annoy](#) instantly became my all-time favorite essay. Kaminer’s premise was *not* that we have a civic duty to annoy others just for the sake of aimlessly annoying them. Instead her premise was that communities are not composed solely of people who share a single monolithic point of view, and never engage in conflict. She argued communities are built on compromise, compromise presupposes disagreement, tolerance presupposes the existence of people and ideas we might not like, and one test of tolerance is provocation.

Read her essay. You’ll understand why Kaminer concluded the piece writing “*When you sit down to dinner with your disagreeable relations, or comrades who bask in their rectitude and compassion, you have a civic duty to annoy them*” — to provoke them to think, to challenge their assumptions and beliefs, and to re-examine their premises.

I had no idea the *Observer* would continue to publish me for the past dozen years. I’m grateful to Mitch and Alice Bull, and Doug Comstock, in addition to my fellow *Westside Observer* columnists from whom I’ve learned so much, including Doctors Derek Kerr, Maria Rivero and Theresa Palmer who were also my co-workers at LHH, George Wooding, John Farrell, Glenn Rogers, Nancy Wuerfel bn, Kathy Howard, Lou Barberini, and Steve Lawrence, among many other *Observer* feature writers.

If you want award-winning news for the neighborhood and the whole City, follow us in our transition to an on-line-only publication. Please join us as we continue to digitize the news, raise hell, “annoy,” and provoke debate. We promise not to disappoint!

Monette-Shaw is a columnist for San Francisco’s Westside Observer newspaper, and a member of the California First Amendment Coalition (FAC) and the ACLU. He operates stopLHHdownsize.com. Contact him at monette-shaw@westsideobserver.com.

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