



DATE 02/21/2006 7:15 AMFOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

This is part of an occasional series by the Sanpete Country Travel and Utah Heritage Highway 89 Alliance on the people and places along U.S. Highway 89.



Newspaper Editor Living Her Small-Town Dream

As a child, Suzanne Dean, editor and publisher of the Sanpete Messenger, dreamed of running her own newspaper and living in a small town.

“I grew up in Salt Lake City, but I spent quite a bit of time at my grandparents’ house in Joseph City, Arizona, then a town of about 500,” Dean

says. “My grandmother’s house fronted on Route 66. In Joseph City, I got a taste of a close-knit town, everybody pitching in on community projects, and an environment where a wide spectrum of types of people were accepted in the community. I think that’s where I started thinking about someday living in a small town.”

Dean achieved her goal of running a newspaper early in life. When she was only 12 years old she started a neighborhood paper with the help of some friends. But it took a bit longer for her to realize her small-town dreams. “I had always thought Manti and Ephraim were some of the nicest small towns along U.S. 89 – in fact in the whole state,” Dean says. “I had thought several times that if the Ephraim Enterprise/Manti Messenger combination came up for sale, I would be interested.”

But there were a few things that Dean needed to do first, starting with going to college. She spent her freshman year at Utah State University where she enrolled in a class on community journalism. “I think that’s where I started thinking about buying weekly newspaper.” She later transferred to the University of Utah, graduating with a bachelor’s degree in journalism. Following graduation, Dean did the exact opposite of moving to small town – she went to New York City. She enrolled at Columbia University and graduated with a master’s degree in journalism.

“Between Columbia and buying the Messenger, I did a bunch of things,” Dean says. That included working at the Deseret News and Standard-Examiner newspapers, teaching journalism at both the University of Idaho and University of Wyoming, working on a PhD in communications, and working for the University of Utah’s public relations department for seven years and for Magellan Behavioral Health, a national corporation, for a decade.

“By the time I left the U of U Public Relations Department in 1992, I was getting pretty serious about the weekly newspaper idea,” Dean says. “When I got to Magellan, I started putting money away for it.”



Then one day, she heard that Max Call, the then-owner of the Manti Messenger and Ephraim Enterprise, was putting his newspapers up for sale. “I decided to write Max a letter telling him about myself and my interest in buying a weekly newspaper.”

The two signed an agreement in the fall of 2000 and in March 2001, Dean arrived in town to take over the reins. “I recruited stringers from throughout the county, started covering all the town council meetings and both the North Sanpete and South Sanpete school boards, and started soliciting subscriptions from all towns in Sanpete County, not just Manti and Ephraim.”

In September, 2003, with quite a bit of fanfare, Dean changed the name of the paper to the Sanpete Messenger. One of her goals was to expand the paper countywide, so in August, 2004, she bought the Gunnison Valley News and Salina Sun, the latter of which she later sold to “friendly owners” with whom she has some business arrangements.

“In the past five years I believe we've given the community a taste of a much more professional newspaper,” she says. Before Dean came on board, most of the newspapers in the county relied heavily on reader submissions. “Anybody could bring in a self-written article. The paper would edit it a little, but for the most part, they'd print it verbatim. Occasionally, the papers would send someone out to take pictures of a car wreck. But for the most part, they didn't cover the news,” she says.

“Now we put a huge effort into covering the news. We take on controversial issues, including naming names, and write hard-hitting editorials. Since I came to town, we've covered a hurricane, a bank collapse, a multi-million embezzlement that led to the bank collapse, published school administrator's salaries and reported on a negative state audit of the Student Life area at Snow College,” she says.

The efforts of Dean and her staff have been validated by their professional colleagues. The paper has won the "general excellence" award in its circulation category for four consecutive years. Staff members have also earned four National Newspaper Association awards in areas such as spot news, editorial page and investigative reporting. In addition, Salt Lake City's City Weekly named the Sanpete Messenger the “Best Feisty Rural Newspaper.” And in March, Dean will be inducted in the Daily Utah Chronicle's Hall of Fame, where she will take her place alongside fellow members Sen. Bob Bennett and Fred Kempe of the Wall Street Journal.

But success has not come easily. “Some local people don't like our approach—they think we should only report ‘good news’ and shouldn't embarrass local people by reporting on their mistakes.”

Dean has also had to spend a lot of time at work. “For the first five years, I worked 80-90 hours per week. That virtually always translated to a seven-day work week. This year, I'm



trying to cut back, take a little personal time, and get some rest on weekends. Still, I invariably put in way more than a 60-hour week.”

Dean still edits the paper, writes much of the news, and oversees all of the business matters, sales and marketing. “Being an independent weekly newspaper publisher is a very tough job, especially in a market such as Sanpete County where there are competing newspapers,” Dean says.

“But like other small business owners, I guess, I continue to forge ahead, grapple with the editorial and business crises as they hit, strategize about expansion, and try to turn the strategies into action.”

All of her hard work is producing results. The newspaper’s circulation today is at least two and a half times its circulation when she took over, and its revenues are up 85 percent. Dean’s future goals include setting up newspaper offices in three regions of the county: Gunnison Valley, Manti-Ephraim and North Sanpete, and expanding the paper to include two sections, one containing countywide news and the other news from the respective regions. She also strives to live up to her company’s mission statement that promises to make the Sanpete Messenger “the best little newspaper in America.” “I plan to visit newspapers around the country that have won national “general excellence” awards to learn how they achieve such remarkable news products,” Dean says.

For more information Contact:

Monte Bona
Sanpete County Travel and Heritage Council
(435) 462-2502