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# national news

## Popular demand

After four money-losing years The Texas Triangle decided to call it quits, but loyal readers decided otherwise

by Richard Shumate

Still staring at a mountain of debt after months of searching for a way to keep the presses rolling, Kay Longcope and Barbara Wohlgenuth decided, reluctantly, that they had no choice but to pull the plug on the adventure they called *The Texas Triangle*.

Four years of their life and financial resources had been sunk into the scrappy, award-winning Austin-based weekly that garnered national attention in 1995 after it became the target of an organized boycott by the Christian right. But by this past September, the *Triangle's* debt had grown to \$30,000, and Longcope and Wohlgenuth concluded that the paper's financial woes weren't fixable.

"We looked long and hard at the bottom line. We owed more money than we had coming in," says Longcope of their decision to cease publication with the Oct. 10 issue. "We had simply reached the end of our financial resources."

What Longcope and Wohlgenuth couldn't know when they made that heart-wrenching announcement was that this was not to be the last chapter in the story of *The Texas Triangle*. But it didn't take them long to find out. Word of the *Triangle's* impending closure started racing through Austin. "And that's when everything went nuts," says Longcope.

"I think people were stunned," says the Rev. Ken Martin, pastor of Austin's Metropolitan Community Church. "We just all kind of took for granted that the *Triangle* was going to be there. We realized how badly we were going to miss it."

Most of the Austin community, says Martin, had no idea that the newspaper was in such danger. ("It never occurred to Barbara and me to stand on the corner with a tin can," says Longcope.) And what helped turn shock into resolve was the gleeful reaction of an Austin-based Christian right group to the *Triangle's* demise.

Wyatt Roberts, head of the American Family Association of Texas, launched a boycott against *Triangle* advertisers in September 1995. He quickly claimed credit for forcing the *Triangle* to close, even though Longcope says the boycott "had nothing whatsoever to do" with the paper's financial problems. (In fact, the boycott caused a temporary jump in ad sales, as people outraged by Roberts' tactics rallied around the paper.)

Austin's lesbian and gay community was galvanized into action. Within days, a group of community leaders met with Wohlgenuth to talk about possible ways to revive the *Triangle*. Open meetings were held in both Austin and Houston, the paper's other primary market, so that readers and the *Triangle's* owners and staff could brainstorm about ways to keep the newspaper going.

People sent in small contributions, \$25 or \$35, with letters about how much the newspaper meant to them. A straight gay-friendly pastor turned over a \$100 funeral honorarium, saying he wanted a "resurrection" of the *Triangle*. By mid-November, \$3,500 had been raised, two additional fundraisers were in the works, and Longcope and Wohlgenuth were in negotiations with outside investors willing to pump new money into the paper.

Buoyed by all of that, the *Triangle* resumed publication Oct. 24, missing just one issue.

"The community was as unified around this as around anything I've seen in the three years I have lived in Austin," says Kathy Taylor, executive director of the Cornerstone Gay and Lesbian Community Center. "The message from the audience [at the community meeting] was that we don't want to see it closed."

Of the community's reaction, Longcope says that "frankly, I was stunned. And obviously very much encouraged."

Longcope and Wohlgenuth, who are life partners as well as business partners, started the paper in 1992 after they moved to Austin from Massachusetts. Longcope, a Texas native, had retired after a long career as a journalist with the *Boston Globe*. When she got back to Texas and saw that Austin's lesbian and gay community had no locally based news publication, she decided to start one.

Longcope says she also remembered how isolated she felt as a teenager in rural Texas coming to terms with her sexual identity as a lesbian.

"One part of our mission was to reach out to young people—young gays and lesbians—to let them know they had a place to turn to," she says.

One thing that set the *Triangle* apart from many other gay and lesbian publications was that it refused to accept advertising of an overtly sexual nature, turning down potentially lucrative ads for 1-900 phone sex numbers and

bar ads with next-to-naked hunks.

Longcope believes accepting those ads would alienate the mainstream advertisers the *Triangle* wants to cultivate. She says she also wants to create a publication that represents the mainstream of gay life—one that could sit on the coffee table even if Mother was coming for a visit.

Despite the paper's financial difficulties, Longcope told the audience at one of the community meetings that she will not abandon that policy. The comment sparked applause.

Though Austin and Houston have been its primary markets, the *Triangle* also circulated in other parts of Texas—places where it had little advertising support. Longcope now concedes that "we went statewide way too fast."

The long-term strategy for keeping the *Triangle* alive involves focusing on the Austin and Houston markets. The revived *Triangle* has a separate edition for each city, with a front page with news specific to Austin or Houston. New investors, some from out of state, should be on board early next year, and some of the additional money will be used to make a push for more advertising revenue in the lucrative Houston market.

The new and improved *Triangle* debuted on Oct. 24 with a one-word front page headline: "Thanks!"

"This week we are giving you a 28-page paper, crossing our fingers and hoping that, week to week, we can do as well or better," Longcope wrote in an open letter to readers. "To us, that is the best way to repay all of you who have called, sent e-mail, written letters or checks or advertised.

"We want you to get value for value so that, together, we continue to build community."