

News team rose to the occasion

The Daily Astorian missed one edition, printed Saturday, got the word out

By **PATRICK WEBB**
For The Daily Astorian

I never liked the name Great Coastal Gale of 2007. But whatever you call it, the most spectacular weather since my move here 20 years ago was exciting.

As managing editor of The Daily Astorian, the storm created two weeks of terrific journalism. We missed one day of publication, printed an unprecedented Saturday edition, and demonstrated that some really do their best work under pressure.



Patrick Webb

It reminded me that putting out a paper is a team effort. The news staff did sterling work in incredible circumstances. Their efforts were enhanced by colleagues from all departments. Without the eyes of the circulation and mailroom staff, we would not have uncovered half the details we published.

The drama began Sunday night, Dec. 2, 2007. For once, forecasters were correct.

I had just returned from visiting my ailing father-in-law in Vancouver, Washington, and had the foresight to wash my suitcase full of clothes before I returned home. As usual for a workaholic editor, I stopped by the newspaper office to check messages before driving the final few miles home to the Long Beach Peninsula.

I would not go there for six days.

The Coast Guard had closed the Columbia River Bar, reporting 11-foot swells. Weather forecasters announced, "Sustained south winds of 45 to 60 mph, with gusts of 80 to 100 mph are possible, with the strongest winds expected on headlands and exposed beaches of the Oregon Coast."

I started editing all the unrelated stories, knowing that by Monday I would have to focus entirely on the storm. That lasted until mid-evening when the power went out. I checked into the Comfort Suites. I was not going to risk the Astoria Bridge.

What followed was a week of unscripted drama. We survived by relying on good neighborliness, not expecting outside help. Hundreds of trees toppled power lines. Phones were silenced. Rain poured and winds blew. Naselle reported one 147-mph gust. The use of "hurricane force" was not an exaggeration.

Serious flooding in Vernonia and Centralia-Chehalis demanded help from state and federal authorities, plus TV coverage. We were somewhat forgotten folks — and U.S. Highways 30 and 26 were blocked with felled trees, so no one could reach us.

I first called Carl Earl, our operations expert, who would perform outstanding work, setting up a generator, keeping the office safe, and handling logistics with calm-headed production manager John Bruijn. Next, I called our publisher, Steve Forrester. His rapport with leaders at Pacific Power would prove crucial in making sure the North Coast was not forgotten.

Overnight, and in the early hours of Monday, I worked with my deputy, Sue Cody, to marshal our reporters. We reminded our outstanding photographer Alex Pajunas not to take risks. His image of a house washing away east of Astoria would become the storm's signature photo.

Kara Hansen and Cassandra Profita, two of the most talented reporters I supervised in my 38-year career, formed



THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Reporter Kara Hansen, right, types on a laptop in the darkened Daily Astorian offices during the storm. Deputy Managing Editor Sue Cody designs a page in the background. Barely seen behind her is reporter Joe Gamm.

our front-line attack in Astoria, with Pamela Robel doing terrific solo work in Seaside, and Sandra Swain pitching in. Each morning, Robel and I would text back and forth, discussing strategy for covering South County.

Hansen has vivid memories. "One image that has always stuck with me was watching a Dumpster rolling like a bale of hay past the Maritime Museum. But also court happening by candlelight and work happening by flashlight," she recalled.

Profita had similar memories. "I remember standing outside the county's emergency operations center in the rain, waiting for the public information officer to come out of a meeting of officials and give the paper a discouraging update when there was no power, no highway access to town, increasingly bare shelves at the grocery stores, lines of people with gas cans at the Shell station and reports of stolen generators," she said.

Our challenge was twofold: Find a way to print a newspaper without electricity and regularly update our website.

Monday's planned print edition was history; our backup generators could power a couple of computers, but not the printing press or platemaking device. Forrester decided to call the Daily News publisher in Longview.

They arranged to print our paper on Tuesday — and for however many days were needed. Readers might find that odd, considering we are independently owned private-sector competitors, but it was an excellent gesture by the Longview paper's management.

For Bruijn, one early challenge was designing narrower graphic page templates to fit Longview's presses. For me, and copy editor colleague Max Charlton, it meant pages we had already designed were too wide. We settled into a daily pattern. Reporters would gather the news during the day, checking in with emergency agencies, compiling human interest stories of neighbors helping neighbors, and sharing limited computers plugged into a generator.

With Cody supervising in the daytime, Charlton and I began working a modified swing shift, designing pages,

taking an early-evening dinner break with reporters at The Labor Temple. Page designs were copied onto computer disks. The first day Crindalyn Lyster, our online editor, ferried them to Longview where they were printed and the papers trucked back to Astoria. A similar pattern followed with other drivers, all risking treacherous conditions on Highway 30, awash in water and downed timber.

Lyster and Laura Sellers, director of audience development, posted stories on our website from Longview hotels. This provided a valuable service to worried relatives of coast residents scattered all over the United States. "We were told later by some readers that dailyastorian.com was the only way they could keep up with what was happening on the coast," Sellers said.

Ham radio operators augmented the work of the National Guard, and other true heroes included Pacific Power linemen and Clatsop County road crews. For up to five days, 22,000 were without electricity.

Coast Community Radio performed superb work, even when a tree crashed on its studio roof, prompting a story headlined, "It's a bloody miracle we're still on the air" by our versatile sportswriter Gary Henley.

Each afternoon I joined KMUN general manager Dave Hammock for a half-hour chat show to relay updates. We both intuitively kept the tone positive. Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen did similar on-air work, reassuring constituents with an impromptu charm that even his critics admitted was timely and terrific.

The storm touched our Daily Astorian family. It was heart-breaking to report when carrier Peggy Crom's house at Woodson was picked up by a mudslide and washed onto Highway 30.

Meanwhile, back at the office, one of the most rewarding sights in my career — people clustered in the dark around the news rack at 949 Exchange St., waiting for the delivery. Forrester joined them, thanking them for their loyalty, also eager to see his paper.

After four days, the power came back on.

It began the second phase of coverage: the impact of the storm. With our news team nearing exhaustion, we called in reinforcements: Two experienced reporters from our sister paper, the Capital Press in Salem. Mateusz Perkowski and Mark Rozin were brilliant.

For the front of the Saturday edition, Rozin's poignant image of Ric Marley feeding his 6-week-old son, Elric, at Camp Rilea inspired a tabloid-style headline that harkened to my British newspaper roots: "Hold on, little baby, help is on the way."

Perkowski said, "The thing that stood out for me is how much everybody helped each other. There was a definite sense of unity that was touching."

As the second week dawned, I thought we needed to print more positive news to soothe the community's mental health. My intuition was echoed by Mikaela Norval, director of tourism for the city of Seaside, who called for the restoration of normal life. By week three, this strategy was well under way, although stories featuring a critical review of the government response were still front-page news.

I am a work-ahead guy, so this seat-of-the-pants stuff stretched me, but it was stimulating, despite long hours, the cold office, the risk of tripping over generator cables and irregular meals. In subsequent years, our newspaper group shifted to a central cloud-based computer system with pages that can be created anywhere with Wi-Fi access. We presume the Band-Aid approach to news production would never be repeated. But if it did, I am confident Earl and Bruijn would be up to a similar challenge.

My favorite memories are of people thanking the paper.

Cherryl Franco of Woodinville, Washington wrote: "My mother is a resident of the Extended Care Unit at Seaside Providence. The information blackout was hard to deal with. A ham operator finally contacted me through St. Vincent's in Portland to convey my mother's safety. I counted on The Daily Astorian to give me information online and God bless you for being there. ... You are a part of my lifeline to my Mom. Thanks so much."

Patrick Webb was managing editor of The Daily Astorian from 2001 to 2014.

STORM FACTS:
Sustained winds reached 75 mph, gusting above 140 mph

"We were told later by some readers that dailyastorian.com was the only way they could keep up with what was happening on the coast."

Laura Sellers
Director of audience development

TUESDAY | Dec. 4, 2007



WEDNESDAY | Dec. 5, 2007



THURSDAY | Dec. 6, 2007



FRIDAY | Dec. 7, 2007



SATURDAY | Dec. 8, 2007

