

# Rural journal revived



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Reporter Pat Caldwell, center, talks to *Malheur Enterprise* publisher Les Zaitz about a story he is developing, while working on deadline for the newspaper Monday in Vale.

## Pulitzer-finalist Les Zaitz transforms tiny, dying weekly into award winner

By KATHY ANEY | *East Oregonian*

Les Zaitz was on a glide path toward retirement. No one could blame him for thinking about powering down. He had racked up some remarkable accomplishments during his journalism career. Some 44 years ago, Zaitz jumped into journalism right out of high school, starting at the Salem *Statesman Journal* and eventually maturing into the *Oregonian's* senior investigative reporter. The two-time Pulitzer finalist raked in scores of journalism prizes.

A couple of years ago, Zaitz envisioned retiring with his wife, Scotta Callister, at their Grant County ranch. He would ride horses and fix fence and maybe write a book.

Instead, he doubled down on journalism.

It all started when someone told him the *Malheur Enterprise* was for sale. The tiny newspaper in Vale, a town of fewer than 2,000 people, was on the verge of going under. That troubled Zaitz.

"I realized, here's this paper that's been here 100 years," he said. "I'm a big believer in community newspapers and could not buy the idea that it could just shut down."

He appealed to his wife, who had just retired from her job as editor of the *Blue Mountain Eagle* in John Day, and his brother Lyndon Zaitz, publisher of the *Keizertimes*. The trio bought the newspaper in October 2015 and set about turning it around.

"The paper in my judgment at that time was arguably the worst newspaper in Oregon," Zaitz said. "It was full of government press releases."

Over the next two years, the newspaper morphed into a tiny powerhouse. This month, the weekly won a national writing award, beating out such industry giants as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Circulation has seen healthy growth. By summer, Zaitz will have five reporters, up from one, including two summer interns from the University of Oregon.

Zaitz looks at the little weekly as something of a laboratory. Sitting at a table in the newspaper's break room,

he explained how the *Enterprise* is bucking the trend in a time of shrinking and dying newspapers.

"I've always been struck that as the newspaper industry went through grinding change in the past decade everyone was struggling for answers and the answers typically came from major news organizations," he said. "The rest of us were just expected to scale down what they were doing to fit our operations. Well, what if we turned that around? There are a hell of a lot more smaller newsrooms than big ones in the country."

Zaitz insists the newspaper's transformation wasn't magic, it was simply gaining the trust of readers by giving them what they want.

Because Zaitz still worked at the *Oregonian*, Callister ran the paper the first year. She got rid of press releases that masqueraded as news. She added an editorial page, improved the format and made other "nuts and bolts" changes.

About a year and a half ago, Zaitz retired from the *Oregonian* and came out the scene like a tsunami hitting the beach. Callister re-retired to the ranch.

Pat Caldwell, one of the paper's two reporters, said Zaitz was a force from day one.

"He was like Jimmie Johnson

See MALHEUR/4C



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Publisher Les Zaitz looks over mug shots for a story with reporter Jayme Fraser on Monday at the *Malheur Enterprise* in Vale.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Reporter John Braese takes notes while talking with a source at Vale City Hall on Monday in Vale.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

The small agricultural community of Vale has limited news outlets covering local issues in the largest county in the state.