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"I apparently was ready to settle down, because Wallowa County — and the Chieftain — has been my home ever since mid-September 36 years ago," she wrote in a farewell column when she retired in 2014.

Legacy of accuracy

Early on, and through the years, Dickenson became a reporter sources knew they could rely on. Multiple people who spoke to the Chieftain about Dickenson commented about her accuracy — though they admitted to being unsure when they watched her taking notes.

"She would look at you and scribble at the same time," said Rich Wandschneider, library director at the Josophy Center for Arts and Culture. "The scribble would be two or three lines. You thought, '...What is going to happen with this?' When the piece came out, she had you quoted correctly. She picked out the things to emphasize better than I could have done myself.

"I don't remember anyone ever saying Elane Dickenson misquoted them. Maybe it happened, but I don't remember."

Wandschneider's description is one Herman said she heard repeated throughout the years.

"A lot of people have said this. ... There was a feeling while you're talking to her (of) 'Is (she) going to get this story right?'" Herman said. "She would be able to sit down and write these beautiful stories. If you love the people you are writing about, it comes out."

Her efforts showed. Angelika Dietrich, who worked with Dickenson at the Chieftain for four years and became a close friend during that time and after, recounted her diligence in poring over stories to make sure they were correct and sounded the way she wanted.

"As far as work, what always comes to mind, she never went home until the job (was) done," Dietrich said. "If she didn't like a story, she would go through it over and over again."

Darlene Turner, who often worked with Dickenson in coverage of Chief Joseph Days, said she went into each interview either knowing the topic or the people very well, and she was an easy individual to be interviewed by.

"She could write stories better than most of them," Turner said. "Just being able to do it year after year after year, she learned what it takes to write a good story, and I admire anybody that can put it down in words and how she expressed herself."

Caring about the community

Elane Dickenson was not a fan of covering sports, according to her daughter, but she would nonetheless cover any game assigned to her with the same diligence as she would a council meeting, a feature or a breaking news article.



Elane Dickenson, center in the blue shirt, poses for a photo with her family in 2019. Dickenson was a Chieftain reporter for nearly 36 years, retiring in 2014.

Jenny Herman/Contributed Photo

In fact, the breadth of what she covered spoke volumes to the community, including Susan Roberts, who currently is a county commissioner and was mayor of Enterprise previously. Roberts said Dickenson was well-received in the community because of the effort she put into her career.

"I believe that was probably mostly because she did work hard," Roberts said. "She'd show up at things you wouldn't think people would show up at. She was just a hard worker. Beyond that, she cared about the people she wrote about."

"I think that's an amazing thing. Caring about the community and getting the story right. ... In today's world, that doesn't come through all the time. People recognized she cared about this community she lived in and raised her kids in."

Dickenson described the range of what she covered in her 2014 sign-off column.

"My first couple weeks on the job I covered a plane wreck, a grocery store explosion, the sale of a sawmill, Alpenfest, a suicide and a car accident, and in many ways the pace has never slowed," she wrote. "Working with an ever-changing cast of colorful characters and good friends, I've covered 35 years-plus of meetings, controversies, events, crimes, happy news, tragic news and always Wallowa County news and Wallowa County people. I've written up weddings, obituaries, engagements, graduations, business openings, new teachers, elections, parades, art festivals, trials, car shows, rodeos, Out of the Past and even an 'It's All Relative' column for a time. I've even been known to cover a sports event or two."

"I was run over by a mule at the first-ever Mule Days and sent to Las Vegas to cover the Miss Rodeo America pageant. I've been rained on, lost, stuck in the snow, sunburned."

"There (were) the cyclical things, the dog sled races, the bank robbery (reenactment), things you're reporting on year after year," Herman said. "And then new things. The school play was always

different. She really did care about all those things and all the details of the community, she really cared about it."

Remarkably, she found a way to balance her job with raising her two children — Matt was born in 1984 — on her own as a single mother.

Herman said life revolved around the weekly "cadence" of the Chieftain — which at the time was published on Thursdays. She said she grew up at the Chieftain, even helping stuff ads into papers as a youth along with everyone else on the staff — including Dickenson.

"My mom really just took such pride in telling the stories of the community. She was at every single event, so every single person knew her. As a teen, I didn't love that because my mom was everywhere taking pictures all the time. I was like she is always there, always has her camera and notebook. She documented (events) for all my friends, and all my friends' kids who lived there."

It was a full slate. But all the events she covered, chronicling Wallowa County



Elane Dickenson, center, flanked by her daughter, Jenny Herman, and son, Matt Dickenson.

Jenny Herman/Contributed Photo

history, she did so without complaint, Wandschneider said.

"She was the quintessential working mom. Every time you saw her, she was working," Wandschneider said. "My son was in plays with her daughter, which she covered, of course. You remember Elane as always having that pencil and that pad. Her contribution to the community I think, she felt, was that. There was no hard line between her position as a Chieftain reporter and her position as a community member. She covered it all."

"She was an angel without the wings," Dietrich said. "That's the first thing that comes to mind. And she was in absolute love with the community. She loved everyone in Wallowa County, and

to report on the news of the county was so important to her. She would make it personal. It's almost indescribable the way she was, and I'm not trying to exaggerate her, that's just her."

Wandschneider called her a woman who had a "generous spirit," while Roberts said she carried a true sense of empathy.

"Her innate kindness, it showed," Roberts said. "... She was not a true empath, but close. She really felt what you were feeling. I think that was why she was good at writing. When she was talking to someone ... she could feel that."

"Most of us can project sympathy, but very few of us can do empathy; you either are or you aren't (able to). And most of us aren't. She was."

Her ability to truly care about what a subject was feeling in the middle of a difficult scenario also showed.

"When she had to write a heartbreaking story of a tragedy, She really cared about that," Herman said. "She really loved the community."

County historian

When Dickenson retired in August 2014 — two weeks shy of 36 years at the Chieftain — the paper lost a person who became a county historian.

"I've learned to love local history and it makes me happy to know that I've helped record the history of the county for almost 36 years, week-by-week, as it was unfolding," she wrote in her final column in 2014.

One of her longtime tasks was compiling Out of the Past, which currently is a look back 25, 50, 75 and 100 years ago, though those timelines have varied.

Dickenson took it a step further, and put together an index to help pinpoint different events and where to find them in the bound volumes of the Chieftain archives.

"It's a weekly history lesson. It's good for the community," Swart said of Out of the Past. "It carries the community knowledge forward. She really was a student of Wallowa County history."

One recent history item she recorded — and, indeed, one of the biggest days of the past 20 years — was the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Her daughter was living and working in New Jersey at the time, across the Hudson River from New York City. As often was the case that day, there was much concern in the minds of those who had family in the area and who couldn't reach them. The two finally connected, and talked, Herman recalled, for two hours.

Two days later, the Chieftain came out, and Herman was surprised to see portions of that conversation in her mom's article about locals impacted by the attack.

"You have to understand, I'm a news person," Herman recalled of what her mom told her when they talked later.

Herman said while she was shocked in the moment, "Honestly now, reading back over those, I'm glad she captured some of the things I said to her that day."

While also an accurate writer, both Herman and Swart said she was an excellent photographer, as well.

"She just had a good eye," Swart said.

"Her photography was so incredible. I'm grateful for all of the photos," Herman said.

Always positive

Dietrich, Dickenson's colleague and close friend, said she was always able to put a positive spin on whatever was going on in her own life and that she was not one to complain.

"Elane would never go negative," Dietrich said. "She always (made) something positive out of a challenge. I always admired Elane for always making something positive out of a challenge or what could be a negative."

Herman described her mom as a woman who would not cast judgment on another, and would not speak a harsh word to or about another.

"She was — and I have done this quite a bit because she changed so much over her time of being sick — she is so smart, so warm, very open, not judgmental at all. She has pretty strong views on political views, but very nonjudgmental and open," she said. "She always had a messy house and a messy desk, but didn't notice it, and wouldn't notice yours. She didn't really see that. She really saw people for who they were, what kind of people they were. The rest was extra that she didn't notice."

Roberts called her "a very kind, very nice person."

"She was the kind of person most people think we are, but aren't," Roberts said. "Very kind, and she had a really great sense of humor if you were around her long enough to get it out of her."

Leaving a mark

Swart said the length of time Dickenson worked at the Chieftain stood out to him more than any

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