

Hot off the press

News about the local news, 2023



BY JON ELLISTON

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By some measures, 2023 was a volatile year for Asheville-area media — the good kind of volatile. Several local outlets surged their news operations, bringing new resources, programs and reporters into the mix. Here are some highlights from a year that suffered no lack of local issues begging for media and public scrutiny.

- As part of a self-declared “Big Switch” to a “news-forward footing,” Asheville-based Blue Ridge Public Radio ramped up its reporting staff. Among the organization’s many hires, in May, veteran North Carolina journalist **Laura Lee** became news director; in June, **Laura Hackett** came on board to cover Asheville and Buncombe; in October, **Jose Sandoval** joined as afternoon host and reporter; and that same month, **Felicia Sonmez** was introduced as the radio’s growth and development reporter. Now, breaking news: National nonprofit Report for America announced in early December that WCQS has been awarded the services of an early career journalist, whose work RFA will co-fund.
- In March, longtime local journalist **Karen Chávez** was named executive

editor of both the *Asheville Citizen Times* and the *Hendersonville Times-News*. She began with the *Citizen Times* in 2000 and served in several editorial positions before becoming “the first Latina in the newspaper’s more than 150-year history to lead the newsroom,” the newspaper noted.

- February brought the debut of “The Overlook with Matt Peiken,” a thrice-weekly podcast by local radio veteran **Matt Peiken**, formerly of Blue Ridge Public Radio. On the program, Peiken showcases a variety of artistic, political and journalistic voices from “the growing, complicated city of Asheville.”
- *Asheville Watchdog*, the non-profit investigative online outlet launched in 2020, extended its mounting reportorial coverage with work such as the 12-part series “Down Town,” which explored Asheville’s concerns with homelessness, mental health services, crime and public safety over the summer. The series was a finalist for the Institute for Nonprofit News’ 2023 Best Investigative Journalism Award. Meanwhile, the N.C. Press Association awarded the series a first-place finish for its News Enterprise Reporting category. *Asheville Watchdog* earned

six additional NCPA awards this year. The online outlet also added investigative journalist **Andrew R. Jones** to its staff and welcomed **Keith Campbell** as its managing editor. Reporter **John Reinan** also joined the *Watchdog* team.

- *Asheville Blade*, which describes itself as “a leftist local news co-op focusing on hard-hitting journalism, in-depth investigation and sharp views from our city,” became national news this summer as trespassing charges against two *Blade* reporters, **Matilda Bliss** and **Veronica Coit** (who were reporting on a public park clearing by Asheville police) wended through the courts. The case raised hotly debated questions about First Amendment and local press freedoms. Stay tuned: For the second time, the reporters are appealing their trespassing convictions.
- Don’t stop the presses: After announcing in November that it might have to cease publishing, *The Fairview Town Crier*, a free monthly newspaper that has covered the community for 26 years, said in its December issue that after making two key hires, “*The Crier* will live on.”
- **Angie Newsome**, founder and executive director of Carolina Public Press left the organization in October. Newsome was replaced by **Kara Andrade**, who left shortly after taking over. Amid the changes, former Managing Editor **Frank Taylor** rejoined CPP in his previous role and **Lisa Lopez** assumed the role of interim executive director. The organization also won 14 NCPA awards.



Jon Elliston. Photo by Jack Sorokin

- *Xpress* welcomed two new reporters, **Greg Parlier** and **Chase Davis**, to the news team this year. Meanwhile, **Lisa Allen** came on as an editor. Reporters **Justin McGuire** and **Jessica Wakeman** both received NCPA awards this year: McGuire earned a first-place finish for Sports Feature Writing; Wakeman won two third-place finishes for Editorial Ledes as well as News Feature Writing. Reporter **Brooke Randle** received an honorable mention by the Association of Alternative Newsmedia for Election Coverage.
- Raise a glass for **Tony Kiss**: No recap of 2023’s comings and goings in our mediascape would be complete without noting the death, in August, of this local media icon. The 68-year-old journalist was nigh synonymous with Asheville’s brewing industry, which he helped catapult as “The Beer Guy,” one of his many reportorial guises for the *Asheville Citizen Times* (and later as “Carolina Beer Guy” for *Xpress*). Kiss was remembered for his tremendous personality and deep imprint on Asheville’s arts, culture and journalism. X

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