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GREENLIGHT



Trying to make our community a better place

BY **JEFF VONKAENEL** / jeffv@newsreview.com

John Sutter discovered gold in 1848. By 1989, the Sacramento region was home to nearly 1.5 million people. It was the state capital and had many state workers and several military bases. There was a well-established power structure, and a strong, very profitable daily newspaper.

In April 1989, we published the first issue of Sacramento News & Review. We wanted our paper to encourage change. We wanted to make a better Sacramento.

In the four months before we started the paper, I met with more than 300 people, trying to understand what readers wanted from our paper. What kinds of stories should we write? What role did The Sacramento Bee play in the community, and what should our role be?

I heard repeatedly how a small group of people ran the town. Many community decisions were made around a small table at lunch, by Bee Publisher C.K. McClatchy, public relations guru Jean Runyon and a few invited guests. Their table did not have many chairs. We hoped for a different decision-making process, at a much larger table with thousands of chairs.

We believed that by writing stories about people who were not part of the power structure, by covering ideas outside of the mainstream, by speaking truth to power and by embracing the arts, we could help build a very different Sacramento from the town envisioned by The Bee, KCRA or Sacramento Magazine. And this Sacramento would be more vibrant, more cultured, more fun, more edgy.

We knew, based on our experience in Chico, that we could produce a good newspaper. The more difficult question was, could we sell enough advertising to support a free weekly? In 1989, The Bee was a powerful force, with revenues of several hundred million dollars a year. It had resources to burn just to make life miserable for us, and it had the reputation of putting other newspapers out of business.

So we had to find our own niche, in editorial and advertising. Local arts and

music was of little interest to The Bee, so we put a spotlight on music and launched the Sacramento Area Music Awards. We helped to start Second Saturday, which put a focus on local arts. We ran controversial personal, adult and marijuana ads.

A major goal of SN&R was speaking truth to power. It was hard for The Bee to speak truth to power when it was so entrenched in the power structure. Early on, we took a critical look at the area's developers. More recently, we opposed Mayor Kevin Johnson's "strong mayor" initiative and took a critical look at the downtown arena project. And we extensively covered law enforcement activities.

Within the pages of our paper and on our website, people throughout our community can get to know each other. The downtown state worker, the first generation American in Citrus Heights, the artist in Midtown and the retired citizen in Roseville—all can connect by reading stories about their fellow citizens.

As we begin our second 30 years, the news landscape is very different. The Bee is shrinking. The internet provides massive amounts of information, much of which is unvetted. There is an even greater critical need for solid, dependable and accurate journalism.

While much has changed in the media world, we are still a small group of people who believe in Sacramento, who want to tell its stories and who want to have a positive impact on our community.

Speaking for those of us who work here in 2019, and for the hundreds of people who have worked at SN&R over the last 30 years, we are so appreciative of you. We are grateful to you for reading the paper, for advertising in the paper and for letting us distribute the paper in this town. Thank you. □

Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.