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SCHEER: Back again, a bit busier and a bit wiser

By Mark Scheer
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I'm back.

Again.

For those keeping score, this is a fourth go-round for me with CNHI, owners of the Lockport Union-Sun & Journal and Niagara Gazette newspapers.

The recycling program in the City of Niagara Falls should be this good.

When Managing Editor Matt Winterhalter called to ask if I'd be interested in coming back, I happened to be dealing with extensive car repairs while trying to manage a daily commute between Niagara Falls and Buffalo with gas prices topping \$5 per gallon.

For reasons beyond our control, my wife and I have also greatly expanded our role as caregivers to our two youngest grandchildren, ages 1 and 3.

This is on top of having part-time custody of another grandson who is now 5.

Raising children at any age can be difficult.

Raising children at our age can be downright exhausting.

This new reporting position lets me work closer to home while giving me the sort of flexibility my family needs at this time.

I was somewhat surprised to learn that, despite all my swearing at him out of frustration during the pandemic, Publisher John Celestino still wanted to bring me back.

Following a corporate meeting where CNHI CEO Donna Barrett stressed the need to recruit and retain quality people, Celestino apparently requested permission to create a new reporting position for me.

"Mark is an exemplary content producer and editor," Celestino said. "His addition to the staff will undoubtedly take us to a new and higher level. I could not be happier about this."

The new reporting gig puts me back on a familiar beat: Niagara Falls and Niagara County.

I have covered local government and politics in this community on and off since 1999.

I return with much more experience.

For the past year and a half, I worked under the guidance of award-winning journalist Jim Heaney, the executive editor of the Buffalo-based non-profit news organization Investigative Post.

Heaney's name probably sounds familiar. He worked for years at the Buffalo News before branching off to start his own investigative news outlet.

His biggest claim to fame: Uncovering the Buffalo Billion bid-rigging scandal.

Jim's about as tough an editor as you'll ever find and his story editing sessions could be downright agonizing at times.

On more than one occasion, he praised my reporting and writing abilities.

It was just the sort of professional validation I felt I needed when I left the Lockport Journal and the Gazette at the end of 2020.

Investigative Post's partnership with WGRZ Channel 2 allowed me to do something I never did before: Television news reporting.

I'm not any good at it but at least now I know the basics of how to handle myself in front of a camera.

Dabbling in TV convinced me what I have suspected for some time: video can be a powerful reporting tool.

In the age of TikTok and streaming coverage of the Johnny Depp trial, newspapers can't just be places where people can only read news stories.

It's my hope we'll eventually find a way to incorporate more video into our story-telling.

In the modern era of news delivery, I feel it's a must.

I return with no illusions about where traditional newspapers stand in a world now-dominated by fake news and Facebook rumor-mongering.

I'm encouraged, as always, by the silent masses - young and old - who still love a good read.

I know many of you are out there are keeping track of things on your smart phones and laptops.

I know some of you are still out there, sitting in coffee shops or at kitchen tables, reading away with actual newspapers in your hands.

Newspapers can still do what two-minute video clips can't and that's tell in-depth stories offering greater detail.

Investigative Post prides itself on getting to the bottom of things.

I'm sure many would agree, there's no shortage of need for more of that around here.

My personal struggles and my family's challenges have opened my eyes to the way a lot of things work — and in many cases don't work — around here.

The system tends to ignore the needs of the very people it is supposed to serve.

Neglected properties. Overgrown weeds. Potholes. Unplowed streets.

These are the seemingly simple problems everyone wants fixed that never seem to get fixed.

Bigger issues like the economy, housing, child care and education keep presenting themselves as well despite all the lofty promises of improvement made by politicians spending gobs of public money seemingly each and every week.

This county — Niagara County — is home to perhaps the biggest disappointment of all — the City of Niagara Falls which should be a shining beacon among global destinations and instead continues to languish amid high crime, high poverty and blighted conditions.

There's no shortage of work to be done for a reporter around here, that's for sure.

I intend to do what I've always tried to do in each stint I've had with the local newspapers before: Work hard, dig deep and keep it interesting and informative.

Mark Scheer welcomes comments and news tips at 716-282-2311, ext. 2254 or by email at Mark.Scheer@Niagara-Gazette.com.

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