

CATHY WURZER: You may have heard this-- Saint Cloud's 93-year-old newspaper, *The Saint Cloud Times*, is in danger. The last reporter at *The Times* is leaving in February. You heard that right. *The Saint Cloud Times*, which covers a population of more than 200,000 people, won't have any reporters, months after cuts by parent company Gannett decimated the paper's staff.

In its wake, digital outlets are hoping to fill the gap, including Nora Hertel's Project Optimist. Nora is a Saint Cloud-based journalist who's worked at *The Saint Cloud Times* between the years of 2017 and 2021. And she is on the line. Nora, welcome to the program.

NORA HERTEL: Hi, Cathy. Thanks so much for having me.

CATHY WURZER: You're welcome. Thanks for joining us here. You know, it must be tough being a former *Saint Cloud Times* staffer to, gosh, hear about this, that the last reporter's leaving next month.

NORA HERTEL: Yeah, it has been particularly sad. In the last couple of months, there were layoffs of two young reporters in August, a resignation at that time, and then buyouts of some of the most veteran people in the newsroom in November. And then, there weren't any leaders in the newsroom anymore. They have-- I believe they're still hiring, so it's likely that they will bring on more reporters, which is good news. But the three reporters that remained at the end of the fall have all left or decided to leave because it's really disheartening to be left over in a newsroom when you don't have editorial leadership on staff, on site.

CATHY WURZER: Well, gosh, as recently as 2014, the paper had 36 staff members. By 2016, it had 20. So I mean, you could see the writing on the wall. And then, the last handful of reporters were trying to keep it going, I guess. Can you tell people just how disheartening it is when you're trying to do the work, and you're looking around you, and it doesn't like-- you're the only person standing almost?

NORA HERTEL: Yeah, so I-- this has been the story that I've been living since I became a journalist about 10 years ago. I knew that the industry was struggling. We could see it in shrinking newsrooms as I was studying journalism. But to live it is different.

I started working in a newspaper-- a Gannett paper-- in Central Wisconsin in 2014. And within months of me starting that position, they launched a national initiative called Newsroom of the Future, which is very-- an ironic name because that restructuring came with a 2%-- or with, I'm not sure if it's 2% but with a huge reduction in staff. So they made everybody reapply for their jobs.

And then, some people did not get hired back. I was hired back. But instead of just covering the city and the county in Central Wisconsin, I was hired back to cover the city, the county business, education, and nonprofits, as well as a day or two of breaking news here and there.

CATHY WURZER: Wow.

NORA HERTEL: So it's just very hard, you just can't keep up on all news.

CATHY WURZER: No. No, you cannot. I mean, most reporters have one beat. You had five and then some with the breaking news on top of that. Wow.

Some people would listen to this and just kind of shrug and say, well, you know, this is business, whatever. No one's reading a newspaper. But talk about what gets lost when you do have a paper like *The Times* struggling. And that is an area of the state of Minnesota, as I mentioned, 200,000 people are in the Saint Cloud area. That's not nothing.

NORA HERTEL: Right. Yeah. So several years ago, there were studies that showed that people didn't recognize or understand that local news was struggling. I do think people are starting to see that because when you don't have as many reporters doing that work, there's not as much accountability. There's not as much follow up on how public money is spent. So there's kind of a risk that local leaders or other people may take advantage of public resources because no one's watching as closely as we used to.

I also think there's something that's harder to measure. I think that newspapers are really important for building community. People love seeing their business on the front page. They love seeing their kid featured in the sports section when they perform really well in a competition. I mean, it's just very important for bringing people together in the community. And when you don't have that, you have people going to national news, going to partisan news. And it's a factor in polarization.

CATHY WURZER: So there's a news vacuum in Saint Cloud. You are trying to fill it with your digital journalism startup Project Optimist. Tell me about that.

NORA HERTEL: Yeah, so Project Optimist is digital only. And my focus is solutions journalism, which is rigorous and evidence-based reporting on responses to problems and not just problems itself. And so my niche is not just Saint Cloud. It's environment and business in Central Minnesota. My home base is in Saint Cloud because that's where I have a lot of connections and where a lot of my story ideas originate.

So, yeah, as I did my market research, I knew that there would be a need for more reporters period, but I also got the sense from people that the news is-- not only is there less of it and it's less reliable, but that it's depressing. And that's not just at the local level. That's when people are consuming-- national news tends to be even more negative than regional and local news. But that negative news just seems to be increasing.

You know, we have a war right now. We have the polarization that I mentioned. Climate change is happening, and the effects are more and more visible. And all these things are stressful to read about. And the news tends to focus on what's wrong and what the problems are.

And solutions journalism doesn't ignore that there are problems. It's just that the frame is on a response to the problem. And did that response work, or how did it work. And it just gives people more of a sense of possibility, more of a sense of hope instead of just getting that bad news hammered into them.

CATHY WURZER: You are going to be joined in the Saint Cloud area of Central Minnesota by, of course *NPR News* has long had a Saint Cloud collegial bureau, but *The Star Tribune* opened its own Saint Cloud bureau. The Forum Communications company, owner of the *Fargo Forum*, is opening its own digital site in the city. So you will have some competition. So do you think the solutions journalism model is the way to rise above the competition?

NORA HERTEL: Yeah, I do think that that's one of the most significant things that distinguishes Project Optimist. But I also would say-- and maybe this may sound Pollyanna-ish of me-- but I really don't think of those other reporters as competition. There are so many less reporters now than there were 10 and 15 years ago. And I just-- I'm happy that Forum is opening a bureau. I'm happy that *The Saint Cloud Times* plans to hire more reporters. I'm happy that *The Star Tribune* is there. That reporter is a good friend of mine.

You know, as far as I would say is there's not enough reporters there. I would welcome even more because there's a lot of stories that are worth telling, interesting, important to the community there. And yeah, I'm not worried about competition because I have a regional focus. I have a focus on solutions journalism. And I want to be a part of-- I want to be collaborative rather than competitive.

CATHY So what is your website for folks? Can folks find it?

WURZER:

NORA HERTEL: Yeah, so my name originally was The Optimist. And the website is theoptimist.mn. You can also go to join.theoptimist.mn. I've got a newsletter. I'm planning some community events this year to bring people together across controversial issues in constructive dialogue. So there's information about those events and sign up for the newsletter at theoptimist.mn.

CATHY All right, Nora, thank you. Best of luck.

WURZER:

NORA HERTEL: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.