

WKU's College Heights Herald celebrates 100 years

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an open house to celebrate the Western Kentucky University journalism students, faculty and alumni gather for at the Adams-Whitaker Student Publications Center on Wednesday, 100th birthday of the College Heights Herald at the Adams-Whitaker Student Publications Center on Wednesday, Jan. 29, 2025. GRACE MCDOWELL / DAILY NEWS

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Generations of journalists who've cut their teeth reporting at Western Kentucky University's student-led publication, the College Heights Herald, congregated Wednesday in the newsroom to celebrate the publication's 100th anniversary.

The publication has won national recognition time and time again. But for many of the 50 to 60 in attendance, and myriad others over the decades, it's considered as a foundational part of their learning at WKU — and for some in attendance, their lives.

"These are the people who made my life like it is, and I can't thank them enough," said former Herald Director of Publications Bob Adams, widely known as "Mr. A," who served the university for 46 years before retiring in 2012.

When the Courier-Journal's David B. Whitaker became WKU's director of student publications in 1970, he professionalized the Herald and the WKU Talisman, transitioning them from publications that focused on "campus events and such" to ones that were news-generating operations, according to the current director of publications, Chuck Clark.

Students are regular winners of the Hearst awards, widely recognized at the Pulitzer Prize equivalent in college journalism. Since 1981, the Herald has accumulated 25 of the Associate Collegiate Press's Pacemaker awards, the top national honor nationwide for student-run media outlets — eight since 2020, Clark said. And, as recently as last week, three students and the editorial board were recognized in a standout prize at the Kentucky Press Association's annual convention — the 2024 Jon Fleischaker Freedom of Information Award for the student publication division, presented by the Associated Press.

The Herald has kept up with technology, as well.

“To me, it represents progress,” Adams said.

Launched early in the COVID pandemic, the weekday email newsletter reaches some 24,000-25,000 subscribers, Clark said. That's in addition to the monthly print edition, which has 2,500 copies printed, reduced from 3,000 due to university budget cuts, Clark said.

“They've really continued the success that we enjoyed with the students when I was here; they seem to be getting better and better; they're doing things a lot differently, but they're doing them so well,” Adams said.

And, like Adams, many in the room said the Herald has been transformational to their growth.

“It's a place for students to find their voice in journalism, to learn more about communication; it's a bridge where, as students, they go from learning just about what's important to them personally to what's important to the community ...,” Herald faculty adviser Carrie Pratt said. “It's a transitional period for young people to learn also about how journalism has a role in democracy and how all the systems work.

“Students who work at the Herald are honing their skills to be better communicators,” Pratt continued.

“Nowadays, not all Herald graduates are going to jobs in journalism; in fact, a lot of them are doing things outside journalism, but they are taking that skill set of working in a newsroom, of working on a deadline-oriented story or magazine or the website, and they're taking that skill out to the next thing they do.”

Robert Carter, who was on the publication in the 1980s, said, “Even when I haven't been involved in something journalistic, it's still amazing how much I fall back on things that I learned (at the Herald), and that will probably be the case until the day I die.”

Added Judy Hughes, editor in chief in 1977, “I'm very grateful for the people here who saw something in me that I didn't really even see in myself, to take a leadership role in the Herald”

The current editor in chief, Price Wilborn, spoke of balancing responsibilities: among them, learning to lead a group of 50 last semester, navigate interpersonal relationships and confront people as needed.

“All these hard and soft skills both that I've learned have been so foundational as to who I am now, and it's just been a slowly building thing since I joined the staff,” Wilborn told the Daily News.

Adams expressed pride in the current students in his final remarks.

“Doing what you know is right is still the most important thing, and that's what you're doing, and that's why I'm so proud of everything that you do.”