

Jewish Light changing with the times

Like most print news publications, the St. Louis Jewish Light, a 64-year-old weekly, has run into the reality of the 21st century: declining readership, declining revenue and online competition. To meet the challenges, the Jewish Light's board of trustees

and staff have made substantial changes to the paper's content, distribution and revenue sources over the past few years.

The Jewish Light's content runs the gamut of local, national and international news, op-ed, features, arts coverage, enterprise reporting, obituaries, columns, gossip, a calendar, crossword puzzles and social announcements. There are special sections and the quarterly *Oy!* magazine, each with a different focus and available in print only.

"I like the breadth of the paper," said playwright Joan Lipkin, artistic director of That Uppity Theatre Company and the DisAbility Project. "It has significant relevance through its local and national and world news. None of those things are really covered consistently or adequately through other local news outlets."

Last summer, the Light, historically a free weekly mailed to donors of the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, rolled out a paid subscription program. The response was unexpectedly positive, said Larry Levin, publisher and chief executive officer of the Light. A former real estate attorney, Levin joined the Light in June 2008. Before asking readers to pay for a paper that had always been free, Levin and the board made sure to improve the product substantially, including a total redesign with more full-color photos and graphics.

First, Levin hired Editor Ellen Futterman, a 25-year veteran of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Futterman has introduced a number of new features including her “News and Schmooze” column; annual fall and summer arts, Earth Day and college sections; investigative reports; and grant-funded special projects. In 2010 the paper’s outdated website was replaced with a colorful, interactive site. The site, stljewishlight.com, carries the weekly print edition as well as web-specific content such as video interviews with prominent newsmakers.

The redesigned website won an award from the American Jewish Press Association in June 2011. One of the regular web features is “Cohnipedia,” a column by Editor-in-Chief Emeritus Robert A. Cohn, who “retired” in 2004. Cohnipedia – its moniker a nod to Cohn’s legendary encyclopedic knowledge of St. Louis Jewish history – tackles a timely topic beginning in the print edition. Then readers are directed to the website to finish the story. Cohn also has come to appreciate having an excellent editor aboard.

“Ellen has brought in editorial discipline,” he said. “I had been kind of spoiled for 35 and a half years, where nobody really touched my copy.”

Even before joining the Light in 1969, Cohn had been editor of Student Life at Washington University and The Writ, the student paper of the university’s school of law, where he earned a law degree.

“So when I stopped being editor, I realized I benefited a lot from Ellen being a very good and judicious editor,” Cohn said.

As the Light is a not-for-profit organization, financing has always been a challenge. Born in 1947 as the “St. Louis Light,” the public relations arm of the Jewish Federation of St. Louis, the paper was funded mostly by the Federation. In March 1963, a group of high-powered community leaders decided

the paper should have its own identity, and the St. Louis Jewish Light emerged.

From 1963 to 1969, the paper could still be perceived to be the Federation's PR arm because it was run by the Federation's PR chief, Jeff Fisher (not to be confused with the new St. Louis Rams head coach). When Fisher moved away in 1969, Cohn, then an assistant to St. Louis County Supervisor Lawrence K. Roos, was recruited to be the editor. After Cohn's handover in 2004 to a new chief executive officer/publisher, there was a brief period of staff and leadership changes. By the time Levin came in, the financial situation was changing rapidly. After much planning, the trustees notified subscribers that paid subscriptions would begin in summer 2011.

"We had some skeptics who said it won't work in this day and age," said Levin, who also has experience in not-for-profit administration. "Because we proved first that we were trying to substantially improve content and provide more content, I think people trusted us and believed us."

A 52-week subscription costs \$36 for Federation donors. Discounts are available for senior citizens, students and first-time Federation donors. Subscribers also may donate to "Spread the Light," a special fund to help cover subscriptions for low-income readers. The current printed circulation is approximately 10,000 with an estimated 18,000 to 20,000 readers. The website had 35,000 page views December 2011.

About 70 to 80 percent of the paper's budget comes from advertising and 7 percent currently comes from the Federation, he said. Another new income source has made it possible to improve the paper's content. "We have been much more aggressive about getting grants to help us fund good journalism," Futterman said.

A grant from the Press Club of Metropolitan St. Louis funded a

2010 series on hate crimes that the Light ran in cooperation with the online St. Louis Beacon and St. Louis Public Radio (KWMU-FM). "The Faces of Hate" featured a two-week series of 15 stories that appeared in both the Light and the Beacon. The series won an award from the National Jewish Press Association.

"We choose consciously to focus on some areas of social justice that we think resonate with the Jewish community," Levin said.

Another grant funds "Can We Talk," an ongoing quarterly series that explores a specific topic in depth through articles, an editorial, community opinions and a panel discussion open to the entire community, Jewish and otherwise. The series is a joint project with the Jewish Community Center and the Jewish Community Relations Council. The next "Can We Talk" (set for March 19) was how the Jewish community cares for people with mental illness and developmental disabilities.

"We've tried to meld our journalistic responsibility with our collaborative responsibility within the community," Levin said. "Because resources are precious, we want to make sure they go as far as they can toward very important topics."

One of those important topics is Israel, and readers have differing opinions. "The Light has consistently supported a two-state solution of Israel and a Palestinian state, as long as the security and safety of both can be assured," Levin said. "There are a huge number of opinions about issues surrounding Israel, and we do our utmost to publish a wide

variety of perspectives from locals and from other voices in the United States, overseas and Israel itself.”

Joan Lipkin is one reader who appreciates coverage of such topics. “I think it is important to understand the culture of a community in which you live,” she said. “The Light has run so many excellent features – everything from Jews and the Civil War, to the coverage of Opera Theatre of St. Louis’ “Death of Klinghoffer’’ to the annual ‘Unsung Heroes’ magazine. It is a complicated time to be a Jew and to try to sort through the complexity of issues in the Middle East. The Light helps to ground me in my Jewish identity, both on a local and wider level.”

With only 15 people on staff, seven of them full-time, the Light is a “mean machine,” Futterman says. She does much of the writing, along with Cohn and free-lancer Dave Baugher, who briefly served as editor before Futterman arrived. She has brought on a bevy of free-lancers with well-known bylines including Eric Mink, Patricia Corrigan and Cliff Froehlich. Levin and Cohn write the editorials, which are then approved by an editorial committee consisting of members of the Board of Trustees. Plans for the continued evolution of the Light include a new focus in 2012 on “Israel Alive,” featuring stories on the cultural life of Israel, unrelated to war or politics.

“The Jewish Light will continue to serve the community, both in print and online,” said Cohn. “I think there’s a need for the print edition at least for the next 10 or 20 years and I hope beyond.”

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