

Pulitzer story becomes a major motion picture

Art Cullen was on a traditional career path, moving progressively to bigger and better paying newspapers and positions before he ended up winning a Pulitzer Prize in 2017.

He certainly never imagined along the way that he would ultimately be scraping for dimes to support local journalism as he does as editor of a small town newspaper in Iowa.



Photo from The Storm Lake Times

At [The Storm Lake \(Iowa\) Times](#), Cullen said it's tough to make payroll with a huge drop in advertising revenue, while postal rates and health care costs have steadily increased, issues affecting newspapers across the country.

The paper is still struggling even after its story was made into a [documentary](#) that ended up a darling of the festival circuit, from Seattle to Provincetown, Massachusetts. That film about the paper debuts Nov. 15 on PBS stations nationwide.

Cullen has a national and even international platform, but the bread and butter stories concern life's triumphs—blind bowler sets strike record, [picked up by ESPN](#), among others: And, of course, teen Pork Queen visits school, [pig wearing diaper in her arms](#).

The Storm Lake Times, published on Tuesdays and Thursdays, also covers serious environmental and political issues. The documentary includes its reporting on the fraught Iowa caucuses of 2018 and Covid outbreaks at nearby meat and poultry processing plants.

The idea for the documentary came from Jerry Risius, now of Brooklyn, who grew up on a hog farm near Buffalo Grove, Iowa, and heard about the guy with a similar background who won a Pulitzer. Risius was a producer for Anthony Bourdain's shows, looking for another project after the celebrity chef's death. Beth Levison served as co-director and producer, attracted to the project in part after she read Cullen's [New York Times pro-immigrant Op Ed](#) from 2018.

Cullen said while some in the newsroom were camera-shy, he and Risius "became good buddies." Just as journalists don't show sources their stories, he had no idea what the final film would look like. "It turned out to be a pretty good piece of journalism," Cullen said. "It could have gone any way — portraying us as hicks."

Seattle Times editor Brier Dudley compared Storm Lake to Spotlight, winner of six Oscars in 2016, including Best Picture, about the Boston Globe's investigation of Roman Catholic priests' abuse of young boys. (Based on a true story,

Spotlight used actors to portray the journalists.)

“It’s a compelling bookend to such big-city newspaper movies,” Dudley wrote, “pulling back the curtain on thousands of smaller papers that play a critical role in binding and informing most of the country.”

Cullen won the [Pulitzer Prize for opinion writing](#) in 2017, a credential that led to his publishing commentary in prestigious, influential places such as this recent [Washington Post piece](#) criticizing U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley’s decision to run for re-election at age 88.

Video from Greetings for Iowa via Youtube

As he told Dave Davies in a lengthy Fresh Air interview on public radio:

“My brother John had the crazy idea of starting a newspaper in our hometown in 1990, about the worst time, in retrospect, you could imagine starting a print publication in rural Northwest Iowa....I was kind of tired of corporate journalism, working for a large, publicly traded company. And so I came home.”

His older brother John was the publisher, Art the editor. Each opted to take Social Security early and stop taking salaries to use scarce revenue to pay other employees with no layoffs. Since John’s retirement, Art is the publisher as well as columnist and editor.

On Oct. 6, the day of Art Cullen talked to GJR, the Poynter Institute published a [bleak list](#) of small newspapers, most the sole source of local news in their communities, that had failed or disappeared into mergers during the pandemic, creating even more “news deserts.”

The absence of trusted community coverage is another blow to U.S. democracy with its First Amendment predicated on journalism as a fourth pillar of checks and balances on the three branches of U.S. government. Now, no one is performing

the crucial watchdog function in those places, accelerating the spread of misinformation.

Storm Lake was screened in select movie theaters across the country in summer and early fall, including the town itself, and will have similar [showings](#) in Los Angeles and New York next month before its public television debut. Cullen is clearly enjoying the experience, often participating in on-stage Q&A sessions with local moderators.

Cullen said it was strange to see himself and his newsroom on a big screen, and he picked up a few donations through these screenings, but the more durable accomplishment last year was working with other small town editors to form the Western Iowa Journalism Foundation. The IRS approved its non-profit status in January. Executive director Becky Vonnahme, an experienced grant writer for rural concerns, runs it from her home office, while she and her husband, a third-generation Iowa farmer, also raise five sons, "surrounded by cornfields, cattle, pigs and windmills."

An independent board has been selected. Initially, "Grant applications from independent or family-owned newspapers in Carroll, Crawford, Greene and Buena Vista counties will have priority until the foundation's long-term operational funding goals have been met," the website advises. Applications can include lines for paying salaries as well as funding special projects, because budget cuts mean "limited opportunity for enterprise or in-depth features on local issues, minimal investigations on accountability of local spending or failure to question school district oversight."

One [Western Iowa newspaper](#) involved is La Prensa, Iowa, serving the growing Spanish-speaking population working for regional employers such as meat-packing and poultry/egg processing. In addition to jobs, these enterprises produce bad smells and pollution, all matters (and solutions) taken up in the Times and its rural counterparts. They also provide

welcome diversity, Cullen notes.

He describes himself as left of many people in his potential circulation area, especially those who voted for former President Donald Trump. But while his politics tilt Democratic, he has no confidence that proposed federal legislation would help small news outlets, least of all “fly-over places” in the Middle West.

The latest economic blow came when Iowa’s Fareway Grocery chain stopped its weekly circulars. Not only was that the first thing many subscribers read, Cullen said, but there is no obvious way to replace the lost revenue.

For now, he sees writing a grant application to, say, pay the salary of his lone full-time reporter, is the way to go. That reporter is his son, Tom, and much of the rest of the small staff is also related. Art Cullen’s wife and Tom’s mother Dolores is a photographer, feature writer and illustrator.

The documentary shows Tom Cullen discussing ideas for producing more revenue. The Storm Lake Times has a website and its digital subscriptions have increased this year at a monthly cost of \$6.99.

In his Oct. 6 Editor’s Notebook, Art Cullen demonstrates his chops, incorporating politics, research and opinion about the infrastructure bills pending in Congress with optimism about economic and environmental benefits to the Upper Midwest, but starting with worries of his readers about the huge price tags. He predicts, ‘Based on models by Princeton University economists and engineers, the Upper Midwest will explode with jobs over the next decade in a transition to clean electricity and transportation.’”

In the meantime, Art Cullen is applying for grants – from behemoths Facebook and Microsoft as well as the new foundation, And, he’s no longer keeping the perilous finances of the hometown paper a secret from its readers and potential

subscribers: "We have to explain to our leaders and readers that we are in this boat...that democracy is in peril." He firmly believes that local ownership is key to journalism excellence, whether in Boston, Seattle, Minneapolis or Storm Lake. Paid print circulation is 2700 on 8-10,000 households, he said, "and used to be 5500."

Cullen said the documentary and the website (there's also a Facebook page) have been factors in a slight improvement in finances. "Maybe we hit bottom, he mused. "Maybe we broke even in July, even made a couple of bucks."

His son is still in his 20s, not married, "but looking," his father said, adding what he'd like to see in a daughter-in-law: "a nice, good-looking" woman interested in selling ads for The Storm Lake Times. Full salary, not commissions."

Nancy Day, a former reporter and editor for AP and newspapers in Illinois and California, former journalism professor at Boston University and Columbia College Chicago, Nieman and Fulbright Fellow, is now back to freelancing.