

ONE TOKE OVER THE LINE?

When the Watchdog Becomes the Guard Dog

Introduction

Editors and publishers of smaller papers are accustomed to the vagaries of public opinion — what General Electric CEO Jack Welch calls “going from prince to pig, pig to prince, prince to pig.”

But publisher Greg Allen of the Wake (N.C.) Weekly had no idea how much solid waste matter would hit the climate control device when he took the law into his own hands in the name of public service, civic duty and journalistic crusading.

Allen, who purchased the thriving weekly (circ. 8,200) from his parents almost three years ago in a booming part of the state, says he became suspicious when the new mayor alleged that the local police department was soft on drug trafficking. Allen says he too had a bad feeling that the local police were turning a blind eye to drug dealers — or even worse.

Allen says he couldn't help but notice the increased drug traffic in his charming hometown (pop. 12,000). And here's the kicker, he says: “Drug sales were going on right in the heart of main street — where little girls in leotards go for ballet lessons.”

To test his frightening theory, Allen, with the help of the mayor, hired a private investigator last summer (June 2000) to go undercover and attempt to purchase drugs. It was a cinch; it was too easy. But later that fall, when the

story hit the media, it split the town right down the middle, and Allen and the Wake Weekly have become the target of much public, business and media criticism.

People either love or hate Allen and the Wake Weekly. Critics, especially the local cops, business owners and the town council, say the paper crossed the line, having no business meddling in a law enforcement issue. A few supporters quietly cheer Allen for taking such a gutsy risk, but most are reluctant to go public. Allen concludes doggedly, “I did what I thought to be the right thing at the time.”

Allen’s case begs the question: How far should a community newspaper go to find the truth?

Now, over a year later, the pot is still boiling, a few arrests have been made, but the controversy is far from over.

Here’s how it’s played out:

“We Got Trouble...”

The four-block area of downtown Wake Forest could serve as the set for the Broadway musical “The Music Man,” but the trouble in River City isn’t pool. It’s a stew of drugs, politics and journalism ethics.

But appearances can be deceiving. Even now, looking at the main drag, White Street — lined with dance studios, specialty shops and restaurants, trees and benches — it’s difficult to imagine such a donnybrook going on in such a wholesome-appearing setting.

Greg Allen, 43, was raised at his parents’ newspaper, the Wake Weekly, in a town where kids could roam freely and safely. But in the last 10 years, the population has more than doubled to 12,000 as new folks from the nearby

Research Triangle Park have made Wake Forest an affluent, transient bedroom community. Allen notes sadly that many of these out-of-state newcomers are not attuned to local history, customs, mores — and they don't care about Wake Forest as a traditional, hometown-style community. It's just a place to sleep and play golf.

Adding to the political mix: The town is also the original site of Wake Forest University, before it moved to Winston-Salem, N.C. in the '50s. Southeast Baptist Theological Seminary now occupies the stately old campus just across the railroad tracks from downtown. SBTS has a typically conservative bent and has historically been at odds with Allen and the liberal-leaning Wake Weekly.

How It Started

Allen bought the paper in January 1998, about the same time a new mayor, George Mackie, took office on the platform that he was going to “clean up the bad parts of town and rid the town of drug traffic,” Allen says.

“In March '98 the mayor went public with a list of accusations of problems within the police department,” Allen explains. “He battled that for more than a couple of years...with no help from the town board...and if George doesn't get what he wants then (he) sort of makes it public, which didn't endear him to the police department, the town administration or the town board. So it's safe to say they hate his guts.”

According to Allen, “The town board and Mayor Mackie don't agree on anything. If George is for it, then the town board is against it. It's that ugly.”

On the other hand, the paper has had a healthy relationship with Mayor Mackie, whom Allen considers a political ally (though the paper has written stories critical of the mayor in the past). The publisher scoffs at accusations that “I'm in the mayor's back pocket – or that he's in mine...” Allen reasons. “The

Wake Weekly has always welcomed and expected Wake Forest political leaders to explain their side of the story. (But) of the five town board commissioners only two have ever been in my office... George is the only one who comes down (regularly) So...I don't know how they (the commissioners) form their thoughts...much of it seems to be made up before they come to meetings.”

So, two years after the mayor's accusations, Allen secretly agreed with the mayor that they would hire a private detective named Danny Barham to investigate the claims that the local authorities were soft on drugs. Barham in turn hired a series of undercover informants.

Allen says, “Our original mission was not to go out and to buy drugs,” but that the informant would have incriminated himself if he hadn't. Allen explains, “He would have looked silly if he was out there just talking and not buying.”

By July 2000, that effort netted the private investigator both powder and crack cocaine, which were delivered to Allen at the paper.

Meanwhile, nobody at the newspaper knew a thing about the undercover operation or the “stuff” in the publisher's office. “They knew I was up to something – they just didn't know what,” Greg says, alluding to so many closed-door meetings at his office at the paper.

By September 2000, Allen says he knew he was in over his head, and arranged a meeting with Wake County Sheriff John Baker and Capt. W.L. Rowe where Allen handed over the drugs and told the officers everything he knew.

“I was a happy man,” Allen recalls, “ I turned the whole thing over — and the only thing I would get out of it was that when they made the arrests, that it would be on a Tuesday so I (the Wake Weekly) could get first dibs over the N&O (the News and Observer, the McClatchy-owned major metro daily in Raleigh and Allen's main competition).”

Now things get messy.

In October 2000, Allen claims that “somebody got wind of the story...turns out somebody in Wake Forest leaked it to the N&O.” And the story was that Mackie and Allen’s drug probe was derailed. After complaints from two local businessmen, the state suspended the private investigator’s license for six months because he supervised the purchasing of illegal drugs. The N.C. Private Protective Services Board, which oversees private investigators, ruled that the private detective’s behavior was inappropriate.

The lid blew off on Halloween 2000. And as irony would have it, Allen didn’t even get the scoop on his own story. “Channel 5 rolled up in front of the building, and began shooting the front...” Allen grins ruefully, recalling how he realized his hand was forced. “I called the staff together and explained what we’d been doing.” Later that evening another TV crew tracked Allen down at home as he was handing out Halloween candy.

That night, TV aired the first coverage on the story. The next morning, Nov. 1, 2000, the N&O broke the story in print under the headline:

*“Wake Weekly Hires Private Eye,
Detective Suspended in Drug Probe.”*

N&O reporter Kristin Collins quoted Allen as saying “I felt it was a part of my journalistic duty to pursue what the mayor said was happening in downtown Wake Forest.”

The N&O also reported Wake Forest Police Chief Greg Harrington calling the drug probe illegal and unethical, saying, “It’s a vendetta against the police department instigated by the mayor and Greg Allen.”

By the following day, Nov. 2, 2000, the Wake Weekly staff rallied to the cause (something they really didn’t have to do, Allen notes in retrospect).

Under the headline *“Probe Finds Drugs in Downtown,”* staff writer Suzanne Rook quoted Allen in the Wake Weekly’s first story on the investigation, “Because of the lack of activity in drug arrests in Wake Forest...I decided the best way to verify the apparent drug problem was to conduct an investigation ourselves...” and Allen continues speaking to his reporter, saying, “I love Wake Forest. I am proud to say I have lived here all my life. I am proud of our downtown area. It should be major concern for all of us— for the safety of our children — that drug dealing is stopped in Wake Forest.”

That same day, the N&O published their follow-up story with reporter Collins’ lead: “People in this northern Wake town are reeling from what they discovered this week: A private detective, hired by the local newspaper and aided by the mayor, prowled the downtown business district for months brokering drug deals.”

The N&O story called the investigation “botched,” and quoted town commissioner Vivian Jones as saying, “I think it’s really scary...when prominent citizens think they can take the law into their own hands. We might as well have a vigilante club...Who else are they trying to trap? Who else are they trying to accuse?”

But Mayor Mackie praised the publisher for having the guts to stand up for his town, telling the N&O reporter, “I think (Allen) has really done a public service. To me, he gets Tar Heel of the Week.” Allen himself commended that initial coverage by the N&O as “fair.”

Trading Editorial Blows

Wake Weekly Editor Carol Pelosi put her editorial shoulder to the wheel in the Nov. 2, 2000, edition of the Wake Weekly, supporting publisher Allen's risky stance: "Uncovering wrong is something that newspapers do. We try to be the eyes and ears for our neighbors. We try to find the truth.

"This week's truth is that White Street has been a drug market within two blocks of the police department. The only drug arrests Wake Forest police have made in months have been when some drugs were found during a traffic stop.

"This week's truth is that the Wake Weekly uncovered a bit of the action, surely not all, and stirred up a hornet's nest of reaction."

Pelosi's editorial also contained a paragraph that would later result in the threat of a lawsuit against Allen and the paper:

"When even I — a 63-year-old white woman — can glimpse what looks like stereotypical drug-dealing behavior in downtown Wake Forest when I am just driving down White Street, there is something wrong. Why, other than dealing drugs, would someone be standing on the sidewalk, decked with gold, talking on a cell phone? Why was there constant traffic in and out of some White Street businesses that should have a low volume of customers?"

Allen says that the individual described has threatened a lawsuit, claiming that local folk could identify him and his business by Pelosi's description, even though, as Allen says, "we never mentioned his name and never mentioned his business." A retraction was demanded, but Allen refused to write one, leaving everything hanging in limbo.

Allen says that later he found out that about this time, the Wake Forest police chief called the DA "to see if they could press charges on me for possession of cocaine," — in reference to the drug evidence Allen's private investigator had bought and delivered to the paper office. But no action was ever taken.

The following day, Nov. 3, 2000, the News and Observer weighed in with a broadside of editorial criticism, under the headline:

“Snooping out of Bounds.”

The N&O editorial writer said that while Mackie and Allen’s probe “may have come from some deep devotion to civic duty...it was devotion carried to excess and infringing on jurisdictional territory properly covered by the town’s police force.”

And the editorial closed with this salvo: “...Drug investigations are best left to the proper authorities. If citizens, be it the mayor or anyone else in town, have suspicions about drug dealing, they should take those suspicions to police or other law enforcement officials. Independent investigations like this one can easily run amok and raise questions as to what motivated them to begin with and how credible they are. This collaboration between mayor and publisher, however well-intentioned, was an ill-advised step by both.”

Reading that editorial, Allen just shakes his head. The N&O recently started a direct competition product, the North Raleigh News, which looks a lot like a community newspaper and is vying for readers and advertising in the Wake Weekly’s backyard.

A Busy Month

But the tit for tat between the Wake Weekly and the N&O paled by comparison when the story was carried nationwide by the Associated Press on Nov. 7, 2000, under the heading:

“Weekly Newspaper Publisher’s Drug Probe Foiled.”

Writer Estes Thompson quoted the mayor as saying, “I saw a child being sold drugs and I looked around and my town wasn’t what it ought to be.”

Thompson then quoted Allen: “I don’t give a hoot about the differences between the mayor and police chief...I do give a hoot about what happens in downtown Wake Forest. At 5 o’clock today, we will have a couple of hundred little girls in leotards going to dance studios right in front of these businesses.”

And AP quotes an irate local businessman, William Joyner, whose Shorty’s Famous Hot Dogs is in the middle of downtown: “The allegations of drugs being sold is just totally unfounded. We sell hot dogs, hamburgers and cheeseburgers. I’m here every day and I don’t see it.” Joyner called the undercover investigation “totally out of bounds. It sounds to me like a vigilante group.”

Publisher Allen told the AP, “We intended to do an investigation we could write a story about exposing a drug problem in downtown Wake Forest...I’m not in the newspaper business to make news. But we don’t think we’re crazy and we don’t think we’re wrong. We think we’re right to make people aware there is more of a problem than local and county law enforcement people believe.”

During the next months, the Wake Weekly pursued the story, which often painted the paper in a bad light, under headlines such as:

“Detective Found Drugs and Fear.”

“Downtown Wake Forest Business Owners Say Area Has Received Unwarranted Bad Publicity.”

“Most White Street Merchants Say They Have Not Seen Drugs.”

“Wake DA Calls Probe Ill-advised.”

Stranger Than Fiction

By January of this year, fences had been mended to the extent that the town of Wake Forest, along *with* the local police, began working together with

Allen, who privately paid for the services of another undercover informant who began buying drugs, while wearing a wire, and being witnessed by local police.

That same month, Allen says another faction in town, led by a “local big-wig” who Allen claims is “frightened he will be implicated in the drug investigation,” attempted to discredit Allen by “putting out trash about me — that I had bought some coke with two buddies in ’84 – and I admitted it,” says Allen, who writes the incident off as a youthful peccadillo. “It was just a wild-haired thing...three single guys on a summer afternoon...though you never imagine how it will come back to haunt you,” he says with a grin.

But when that story started going around town, “that I was a drug-user...” he says, “I called my parents, my wife and said, ‘Look, here’s what you’re gonna hear...’” That seemed to defuse the crisis.

Meanwhile, by March 2001, a couple of arrests were made by the local police, but progress stalled. A drug-related shooting in April allegedly involving one of the suspects has thrown a wrench in the investigation’s process.

Currently (June 2001) Allen senses a reluctance from the Wake Forest police department to go forward because the local cops don’t believe Allen’s drug informant. But Allen has a box full of tapes of incriminating conversations between the drug informant and suspected dealers. Finally, to establish the credibility of his agent, Allen says, “We’re trying to get him to take a lie detector test, but he’s fed up” and has been hard to locate. So a year after Allen’s undercover investigation began, the pot still boils.

Not exactly a normal day at work for your average small town community newspaper publisher.

Q&A for a Crusading Publisher

Q: Isn't this police work? What business does a newspaper have going undercover to buy drugs?

That's what my lawyer asked me," Allen says with a rueful grin, adding, "There's a fine line between police-work and newspaper work..."

Q: Why'd you do it in the first place?

Greg Allen was raised in a newspaper family, was in high school during Watergate and attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the mid-to-late '70s when the country was still flush with the journalistic notion of Woodward and Bernstein at the Washington Post: the crusading hard-digging reporter on the trail of dirty pols and shady public figures.

Allen says, "Back in the '60s, when a reporter went undercover to expose (a crooked politician) it was a wonderful thing. I wasn't out to be the hero...it escalated...it just sort of happened. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that....I'd have....(be buying cocaine) ...that it would go this far."

Secondly, Wake Forest is his hometown and the image of little girls going to dance class in the shadow of suspected drug dealers was just too much for Allen. He's used the metaphor before, but this time he goes into detail: "There are three or four dance studios uptown. From 5-7 every evening, downtown is completely full (of kids). Someday, some kid in her leotard is going to finish her dance lesson, and..." he pauses, envisioning a drug-deal gone bad, a shoot-out on White Street. On HIS main street. "Even if the child isn't hurt...Even for a child to witness something like this is a whole lot worse to me than the fact that I've (supposedly) hurt downtown Wake Forest (businesses)."

“If I knew it (drug trafficking) was there and I didn’t do anything — what does that make me?”

He wonders aloud how long a prostitute would last on main street before the cops hauled her away. “About 30 minutes,” he says with a grim chuckle, “...but drug trafficking is OK because you don’t see it going on?” He questions, adding, “Can we condone drug selling because we don’t see it?”

“By golly!” pounding the table, Allen exclaims, “I’m completely fed up with people saying it (drug trafficking) happens everywhere...!”

Can you describe the newspaper staff’s reaction to your summary announcement that you were sponsoring an undercover drug investigation?

Allen says Editor Carol Pelosi is “100 percent behind me.” And that this steel magnolia “caters to no one,” — meaning that if she were opposed to Allen’s tactics, she wouldn’t hesitate to be honest with him.

Of cops reporter Suzanne Rook, Allen says, “She loves it. She enjoys the excitement it’s generated...of course, they (the cops) were cold to her for a while, but she’s overcome that.”

Can you describe the town’s reaction?

“Public opinion has been mixed,” Allen says candidly. “When the story initially broke, many people speaking out were against what we had done and their main concern was that we were making downtown look bad. All the downtown business owners were perturbed. They called Mayor Mackie and me (names) because (they thought) we were trying to scare people off from coming downtown and shopping at their businesses.”

Allen says most critics say that the Wake Weekly coverage and drug investigation was “extremely bad publicity” for the town and “embarrassing to Wake Forest.”

He continues, “Of course the town board rebuffed the whole thing — called us vigilantes; we had no business doing what we were doing, especially because we didn’t we bring the Wake Forest police into it.” And the reason is that at the time Allen says he felt he couldn’t trust the local cops.

Allen describes “the abuse my wife and 11-year-old son took,” including one store owner buttonholing his wife at a local shop where she “chewed my wife out, bad-mouthed me and the paper every chance she got, public and private.”

When he sees that same woman these days, Allen admits it’s “tough to muster up a smile and wave to her...”

But he does.

“People (supporters) would come up to me in private and say ‘keep up the good work,’ but nobody would go on the record (in support of me). They didn’t want to be connected with it.”

(Community Journalism student Elizabeth Landvater, a senior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, wrote her final project on the Wake Weekly, and interviewed several Wake Weekly readers about the subject. She reported: “Unfortunately some members of the community are not as supportive as Allen thinks. One person said she was “not in favor of a newspaper getting involved in investigative matters.” She felt that his actions could have caused the paper “more harm than good.” Several other community members also felt that Allen overstepped his boundaries in the community by trying to uncover a drug scandal in Wake Forest. These people thought that the paper was one-sided in how it reported the drug scandal. The Wake Weekly printed material about

corruption in the police department, and several community members felt that was untrue....”)

Q: How has the drug investigation affected you?

While Allen says his business is still good, the events surrounding the drug investigation “really hurt my enthusiasm for the newspaper business. You know, we used to think we could fix anything with journalism... This has taken a lot out of me, I dunno...”

Q: What do you think is going to happen next?

Allen says an election in November could change things. The local political landscape has shifted in the last four years.

The mayor hasn’t decided whether to run or not, and the Seminary bloc vote influence may be less influential, Allen says, because the voting population within the city limits has more than doubled from 6,000 to 13,000 in the last 10 years — and that’s not counting “greater Wake Forest.”

Also, in November, the statute of limitations runs out, and so the threatened lawsuit would expire. It must be filed within a year of the offending publication, which was Nov. 2, 2000. Allen is hoping that the whole thing (the threatened lawsuit) just fades away. Since he hasn’t heard anything in a long time from the offended business owner’s lawyer, Allen is cautiously optimistic.

Q: If you knew what you were getting into, would you do it again?

Allen responds, “I would do the same thing over again if I had to. You have got to do what your heart says is right.”

And he throws in a Zen saying, “When you’ve shot your last arrow and your quiver is dry, then shoot, shoot from your heart.”

And, he adds with the satisfaction only a publisher can appreciate, “I (still) made money last year.” And his circulation is up. Now, he half-jokes, when the phone rings, he doesn’t know if it will be a call from the Pulitzer committee to congratulate him for public service or someone coming to haul him off to jail.

Conclusions

The salient points in this case study seem to be this:

- The Wake Weekly is an exemplary community newspaper, placing in the top five spot consistently in the North Carolina State Press Association’s annual competition for decades. This year they won third in general excellence and first in sports.
- Publisher Greg Allen regards himself as a community activist, a journalist putting his community before self, a publisher whose means justify the ends — that even though his undercover investigation crossed the line into uncharted ethical territory for a community paper, the results of successfully exposing the drug problem in his hometown have been worth the risk. And, he has come to terms with that role of watchdog/guard dog, in spite of the fact that community support for him and the paper seems timid.
- During the one-year period that this case study was examined, the author found no North Carolina newspaper people willing to say they would do what Allen did in Wake Forest. Typical reactions to the story are slack-jawed amazement, incredulity and perhaps just a little admiration. But not a single newspaper person said he or she would have done the same thing, given the same conditions in his or her towns. Universally, the attitude encountered seemed to be this: Whether you agree with Allen’s tactics or not, you have to admire his chutzpah.

- It really doesn't matter to Greg Allen what anybody thinks. He is comfortable in his own journalistic shoes. He's proven himself as a fearless, self-assured publisher of his own paper and he's running a quality, profitable community institution with a news staff that seems to be on board for the ride. If Allen is to be faulted as a leader, it's for getting so far out in front of his troops in the newsroom that they had no idea where he was taking them. But that transgression seems rectified. Allen is convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that he has done and will continue to do the right thing for his hometown. In the long run it's a safe bet that they — the town, the police, the county sheriff's department, the town council, the mayor and the paper — are going to work through this issue. Because one thing's for certain. publisher Greg Allen and the Wake Weekly are there for the long haul.

Who was it who said, "It's the newspaper's job to print the truth and raise a little hell" ...?

Probably some publisher like Greg Allen.