

Columbia Journalism Review.

The voice of journalism

Support CJR.

Our work is only possible with your help. Make a gift to CJR now »

GazeboNews

News and "stuff" for two affluent Chicago suburbs



(<http://www.gazebonews.com>) LAKE BLUFF, ILLINOIS — When, in 2006, Adrienne Fawcett moved to Lake Bluff, Illinois, a leafy suburb thirty-five miles north of downtown Chicago, the local news scene was in repose. “I felt the people I was

talking to in the community had a better sense of

what was going on than the media covering the community,” she remembers. At the time, the town of 5,722 was primarily covered by the *Lake Forester*, an unhurried weekly newspaper known for its high school sports coverage, its well-thumbed police blotter, and its opinion columnist, an elderly resident fond of concluding his pieces with the phrase “See you next week... maybe!”

Read more about GazeboNews

Lake Bluff is a village plucked from a John Hughes movie—all wooded ravines and Colonial-style houses and golden retrievers and autumn fun runs. (Hughes, a longtime resident of neighboring Lake Forest, is buried a mile from Fawcett’s house.) Its small downtown features four restaurants, three banks, a local history museum, a war memorial, and an expansive village green anchored by a white gazebo. It was the fourth town Fawcett had lived in that contained a public gazebo. When, in 2008, she decided to found a local news website, it didn’t take her long to settle on a name.

GazeboNews (<http://www.gazebonews.com>) covers Lake Bluff, Lake Forest, and a few surrounding municipalities. “I wanted it to be a platform for people to communicate. A town square online,” Fawcett says. The site features news briefs on matters of local interest (“New Address for Lake Bluff Postman (<http://gazebonews.com/2011/11/06/new-destination-for-lake-bluff-postman/>)”), longer articles, photo features, editorials from community members, and event listings. Stories range from hard news—ongoing coverage of a middle school principal’s bizarre sexting scandal (<http://gazebonews.com/2011/11/27/where-did-sexting-story-start-and-other-details/>)—to lighter topics, like this feature about an interesting local tree (<http://gazebonews.com/2011/11/23/an-autumn-harvest-of-sorts/>). The site has room not only for PSAs about missing pets (“Can You Help Find a Lost Pug? (<http://gazebonews.com/2011/11/14/can-you-help-find-a-lost-pug/>)”) but for follow-up stories when those pets return (“Bug The Pug Is Home For Thanksgiving (<http://gazebonews.com/2011/11/23/its-a-bugs-thanksgiving/>)”).

In order to keep the site lively, Fawcett often posts third-party content she deems to be of some wider interest—community announcements, Sunday sermons, press releases (“as long as there’s no spin,” she notes). She calls this model Authentically Borrowed Content, and she will occasionally fold this material into her coverage of an ongoing story. Recently, a Catholic girls’ school petitioned (<http://gazebonews.com/2011/11/02/woodlands-to-lake-forest-let-old-main-go/>) the city of Lake Forest to remove the “historic” designation from an abandoned building the school wants to demolish. “It’s a big story for me,” says Fawcett, and she has augmented her original coverage by posting documents relevant to the dispute, like the presentation (<http://gazebonews.com/2011/11/01/preservation-group-dont->

lower-the-bar-for-old-main/) that the Lake Forest Preservation Foundation delivered to the City Preservation Commission. “It’s an example of how I can cover a story with a small staff,” she says.

She had great success in 2010 covering the adventures of a wild turkey that took up residence at a prominent Lake Bluff intersection. Fawcett’s youngest daughter, Teresa, broke the story (<http://gazebonews.com/2010/05/09/why-did-the-turkey-cross-the-road/>), which soon took on a life of its own. The turkey became a local celebrity, inspiring an entry in the town’s famed 4th of July parade, a picture book (<http://gazebonews.com/2010/09/22/the-turkeys-tale/>) sold in local gift shops, a life-sized portrait (<http://gazebonews.com/2010/10/21/turkey-affle/>) raffled for charity, and a name-the-turkey contest co-sponsored by GazeboNews and a community church. (The winning name: Jeff.) Her daughter, exhilarated by the experience, came away from it determined to be a reporter. “Or a dentist. She’s not sure yet,” says Fawcett.

Fawcett began her journalistic career in the 1980s, as a night-shift obituarist for a small newspaper in Indiana. From there, she moved to the *Middletown Times Herald Record* in Middletown, New York, and then to *Advertising Age*, in Chicago, where she worked as a features editor until leaving to raise her family. Two years after moving to Lake Bluff from Pennington, New Jersey, with her children in school and the local news scene in stasis, Fawcett founded GazeboNews, though not without some hesitation. “I thought, ‘Do you have the guts to do that?’” she recalls, seemingly referring to both the challenges inherent in such a venture and the potential skunk-at-a-garden-party effect of being a reporter in a small town. “Then I thought, ‘Nobody knows me. Who cares?’”

Today, though the site’s traffic numbers are modest—14,000 unique visitors and 60-70,000 pageviews per month, according to Fawcett—it is well-known in town.

GazeboNews features an active, largely civil local commentariat, and residents are quick to offer news tips. “Sometimes people will ask to speak to the IT department,” says Fawcett. “I don’t think they know we have such a small staff.” Beside her husband, who helps with the technical aspects of the site, Fawcett is assisted by two paid freelancers, a photographer, a part-time bookkeeper, and a former *Chicago Tribune* reporter named Mike Conklin, who heads the site’s five-member advisory board.

The site is headquartered in Fawcett's house. Its overhead costs are low, and she meets them with a variety of revenue streams: display ads from local businesses, real estate listings. New advertisers are greeted with a "Welcome Advertiser" story in an advertorial section of the site called Business Bulletins (<http://gazebonews.com/category/business-bulletins/>); non-advertisers can purchase a Bulletin for fifty dollars a week. A recent foray into sponsored content saw a Lake Forest boutique underwrite a photo essay on fashionable boots (<http://gazebonews.com/2011/10/25/fashion847-boots-are-big/>).

She is considering whether to launch a voluntary subscription program. "It's not working for a lot of people, but I'm in a pretty affluent environment, and people like [the site] a lot, so I'll give it a shot," she says. "You never know. Someone might say, 'Hey, I'll give you a lot of money, Adrienne.'"

It hasn't happened yet. But the site is nevertheless profitable—no small feat in a region that, of late, has been unexpectedly glutted with local news. In 2010, Patch (<http://lakeforest.patch.com/>) came to town, joining a market that, besides GazeboNews and the *Lake Forester*, also includes a free monthly magazine called *Forest & Bluff* and an outpost of the *Chicago Tribune*'s hyperlocal venture, TribLocal (<http://triblocal.com/lake-bluff/>). Patch asked Fawcett to edit its new site, but she declined. "I didn't want to give up what I had built. My daughter didn't want me to give up the site," she says.

Instead, she is entrenching. A recent Knight fellowship gave her ideas for how to improve the site's multimedia offerings. This October, she joined twenty-two other hyperlocal news proprietors in founding a trade organization (<http://www.blockbyblock.us/2011/10/01/breaking-indy-online-news-trade-association-forms-at-bxb11/>) for independent online news sites. "Competition is motivation," says Fawcett, and she is motivated to stay the course and keep serving a community she has come to love. When asked where she fits on the local news spectrum, she hesitates for a moment. "I don't think the spectrum is settled yet," she says.

GazeboNews Data

Name: GazeboNews

URL: www.gazebonews.com (<http://www.gazebonews.com>)

City: Lake Bluff and Lake Forest

State: Illinois (/tag/illinois)

Coverage Type: General (/tag/general) Hyperlocal (/tag/hyperlocal)

Business Type: For-profit (/tag/for-profit)

Institutional Support: No Institutional Support (/tag/no-institutional-support)

Revenue Sources: Local Ads (/tag/local-ads) Sponsorships (/tag/sponsorships)

Justin Peters is editor-at-large of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.