



Breaking news. Obscure news.
Free for your website or blog.



- HOME
- NEWS SOURCES
- RESOURCES
- AJR CONTENT
- AJR INFORMATION
- SEARCH

| Thursday, September 27, 2007

- » Newspapers » Magazines » Television Networks » Television Affiliates » Radio » News/Wire Services » Media Companies
- » AJR Study Guide » Journalism Awards » Journalism Orgs » Media Monitors » Reporters' Tools » Writing Aids » Media News Online
- » Current Issue » AJR Archives » State of the American Newspaper
- » About AJR » Submissions Guide » Media Kit » Reprints » Order Back Issues » Letters to the Editor

AJR Features

From AJR, **December 2006/January 2007**

Santa Barbara Smackdown

A behind-the-scenes look at the turmoil that engulfed the Santa Barbara News-Press after owner Wendy McCaw and her top lieutenants flattened the wall separating the executive suite from the newsroom.

By **Susan Paterno**

Susan Paterno (paterno@chapman.edu) is an AJR senior contributing writer.

Related reading:

- » Clarification
- » The Sound of Silence

- Print this story
- Digg this story
- Save to del.icio.us
- Share on Facebook
- Bookmark on Google

advertisement



THE
PETER JENNINGS
PROJECT
FOR JOURNALISTS
AND THE
CONSTITUTION

MARCH 7 - 9, 2008
APPLY NOW!



The day before the Santa Barbara News-Press imploded last July, the paper's top editors gathered at Editor Jerry Roberts' rambling hacienda to discuss the future under owner Wendy McCaw. The last few weeks had been brutal. With McCaw and her boyfriend – the paper's restaurant critic – now copublishers, Roberts was ordered to kill a story about the editorial page editor's drunk-driving sentence. Two weeks later, the paper published the address of an empty lot where actor Rob Lowe intended to build a mega-mansion exceeding his neighborhood's zoning limits, prompting McCaw to issue harsh reprimands to several editors and a reporter. When she put the editorial page editor in charge of the newsroom, then left with the restaurant critic on a monthlong Mediterranean cruise aboard her multimillion-dollar yacht, the editors figured it couldn't get much worse.

But it did, and here they were, wondering how they came to be having lunch amid blooming fruit trees, lush foliage and waving palms, grimly discussing their bleak futures. They talked about how "there was no benefit to doing what we were about to do," says then-Managing Editor George Foulsham, about how families would suffer, about the emotional stress, the uncertain job market. They debated staying, says former Metro Editor Jane Hulse, "but there was a feeling of hopelessness that we couldn't fight. I think all of us were pretty certain we were leaving. But there was no vote or plan." Instead, there were "hugs all around," Hulse says, and they left to face their inexorable fate.

More than half of the 50-member News-Press newsroom has resigned or been dismissed since then. Those remaining, including replacements, have affiliated with the Teamsters union, working in a climate of fear and paranoia ripped from the pages of Kafka's "The Trial," "like you've passed into another dimension," says one. The last few months have been "a period of extreme disorientation for me," Roberts said recently, echoing the feelings expressed by many left fighting, due in part to McCaw's attempt to silence everyone from former and current employees and competitors to community members, the Teamsters, the Santa Barbara Independent, even Vanity Fair and AJR, by threatening or filing lawsuits against them.

McCaw has consistently refused to comment on the upheaval at her newspaper, says Communications Manager Agnes Huff. "Mrs. McCaw doesn't do any interviews." In response to my initial efforts to speak with News-Press executives, Huff told me in an e-mail, "News-Press management and staff are unable to grant any interview requests at this time." I continued leaving messages for managers, prompting Huff to e-mail me again: "I advised you that no one from the News-Press will be available to provide you with any interviews. It would really be appreciated it [sic] if you could..not continue to call and e-mail News-Press employees when you have been clearly advised of the paper's position."

In her few public pronouncements, McCaw has blamed the turmoil on "disgruntled ex-employees" who tried to use the newspaper "as a personal arena to air petty infighting" and to



Need a laugh? For funny errors and clever headlines, [click here](#)

496

1,756 blog reactions

advance their own agendas. She has denied breaching the wall, that inviolable barrier separating news from opinion and journalists from moneymakers at America's newspapers. But after buying the paper from the New York Times Co. in 2000 and promising to have no role in newsgathering, McCaw began whacking away, her lieutenants firing one editor after another, presiding over the dismissal or resignation of five publishers in five years, destroying friendships, families and livelihoods, until it was Jerry Roberts' turn to bend to her will.

Roberts spent his final years at the News-Press fiercely protecting the wall against McCaw, who flattened it last summer, prompting him, Hulse, Foulsham and six others to quit within days of one another. They were "brothers in arms," an editor says, cast as workaday heroes fighting against a onetime billionaire in a timely allegory about what it means to control the news, a stark reminder that independent owners are hardly a panacea for the media's multifaceted problems.

"Mrs. McCaw never fully understood that she didn't just buy a mouthpiece for her own views," says Linda Streaan, News-Press managing editor from 2003 to 2005, now managing editor for Great Schools.net. "It really comes down to a tragic misunderstanding of what the mission of a newspaper should be." Those remaining at the News-Press realize the battle is far from over. "We're going to stay here for as long as it takes," says one veteran. The issues "are so much larger than us," she adds, a point reiterated by former Washington Post reporter and Ronald Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, who lives in Santa Barbara. "This is an extraordinary display of courage," Cannon says. "If they win, it would be a hell of a victory for American journalism." And if they lose? "If they lose, it means the only thing that matters is who owns the paper. And the owner doesn't have to answer to anybody."

Ownership, ironically, was a big reason Jerry Roberts left the San Francisco Chronicle after 25 years, the last five as managing editor. In 2000, the family-owned Chronicle was sold to Hearst, now the nation's ninth-largest newspaper company. Life under the new owners was "exhausting and difficult," says Streaan, Roberts' deputy managing editor for news in San Francisco. It "just wasn't fun anymore." Roberts left in 2002 to teach at Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley. But before a single class, he was in Santa Barbara entertaining a job offer.

Streaan was taken aback. Urbane and "big city," says Streaan, Roberts "didn't strike me as a Santa Barbara sort of guy." Nestled between wide, white sand beaches and gently rolling ranchlands, Santa Barbara is trademarked "the American Riviera," with 300 days of sunshine a year, \$1.2 million average home prices, subsidized housing for families with annual incomes of \$160,000, a University of California campus and a host of Hollywood celebrities among its 90,000 residents. Not only had the city captivated Roberts, but McCaw also had assured him she wanted the best local paper in America and would allow him to "run the newsroom the way he wanted," Streaan says.

McCaw moved to Santa Barbara in the mid-'90s, one of America's richest women, the result of a bitter divorce from cellular phone magnate Craig McCaw. Nearing 50, she bought the News-Press, an odd purchase for someone whose public persona was so reclusive Santa Barbarans joked she wanted the paper to keep herself out of it. Though her previous newspaper experience consisted of reading one, her company, Ampersand Publishing, paid a reported \$100 million (some put the figure at \$150 million) for a 48,000-circulation paper with about \$30 million in revenues and 11 percent profit margins.

The newsroom staff was euphoric, and the paper's popular publisher, Allen Parsons, told AJR at the time that he was excited to embrace the future with McCaw (see *The Beat*, September 2000). In the next two years, though, her largely unexplained directives led to confusion, turmoil and turnover, with benefits and overtime pay slashed, newsroom decisions challenged and executives fired or forced to resign after refusing to do her bidding, say former reporters, editors and executives.

At the party to celebrate the paper's sale, Publisher Parsons told a couple of editors shocking news: McCaw was replacing him with her 44-year-old attorney, Joe Cole. Though Parsons says the decision was mutual, most in the newsroom had a different impression. "Twenty minutes after her big welcoming party, she fired the very popular publisher – an absolutely wonderful man," says a veteran reporter. "That's when we realized, uh-oh, what is she all about?"

In short order, McCaw went from recluse to renown, details of her personal life splashed across the front pages of the News-Press and the Los Angeles Times. Her 1995 separation "devastated" her, the Times reported, but her pain translated into a billion-dollar settlement. Her \$2.65 billion net worth in 2000 helped her acquire a \$30 million Gulfstream jet, estates in Pebble Beach and Santa Barbara, a cobalt blue Porsche 911 and a 193-foot yacht with a crew of 14 and a helicopter on deck. She bought a BMW for the fiancé she later sued, the same one who filed a multimillion-dollar lawsuit on her behalf against the California Coastal Commission to try to block legally mandated public access to the beach below her 24-acre cliff-top estate.

Under McCaw, a Libertarian, News-Press editorials evolved from respectful, cautious, reasonably argued pieces to raucous assaults, sometimes on the paper's own reporters, with attacks on the coastal commission, affordable housing and the local rodeo, an affront to McCaw's animal rights sensibilities. Through her executives, McCaw worked her will: "It was always about news content and news reporters," says an insider no longer at the paper. "If one story wasn't the way she wanted it, it was off with their heads," with Cole "just doing her bidding."

(Cole declined to be interviewed, saying he has "confidentiality obligations beyond those binding other past News-Press employees." He added, "My family's financial future would be

adversely affected by any breach of those obligations.")

Pretty soon, Business Editor Dave Bemis recognized a pattern. "The person at the top tries to keep a separation between the newsroom and the ownership, and eventually he's fired. We finally realized: Anything that isn't an immediate yes, she sees as a no. And you can only say no for so long until you get fired." Bemis resigned in May 2002, a few days before 17 reporters and editors signed a letter to Cole questioning "the newspaper's commitment to journalistic integrity." But they never sent it. The next day, as improbable as a snowstorm in Santa Barbara, a *deus ex machina* arrived.

On his first day, Jerry Roberts met a bewildered staff. The previous editor, Jesse Chavarria, was there one day, gone the next, recalls then-News Editor Don Murphy, so no one had any idea what to expect. Roberts' credentials "stunned" the staff, says former senior writer Scott Hadly. His pedigree – the Harvard-educated son of a factory worker and a drug store clerk – gave Roberts the right combination of street and polish. As soon as he arrived, "everything turned around," says then-City Hall reporter Joshua Molina, now working at the San Jose Mercury News. "We were all optimistic."

McCaw appointed as publisher Will Fleet, a prominent member of the California Newspaper Publishers Association and longtime First Amendment advocate. While Fleet busied himself producing strong financial results, Roberts remade the paper, emphasizing local content, visual storytelling, graphic design and "kick-ass breaking news," a former editor recalls. Supportive and protective, Fleet rarely visited the newsroom and never interfered with newsgathering, say former News-Press editors who worked with him at the time, allowing Roberts to publish stories about McCaw's \$460,000 coastal commission fine and her \$14.8 million legal loss – still on appeal – to former fiancé, attorney and business partner Greg Parker. But trouble was looming.

The News-Press story about Parker omitted the arbitrator's description of McCaw's conduct as "oppressive," "despicable" and "evasive," a witness who denied "events even in the face of written evidence to the contrary." McCaw hired a publicist "to place articles in her newspaper complimentary to herself and derogatory of Parker," the ruling said, prompting the Los Angeles Times to question whether McCaw "had crossed the line from covering the news to slanting it." Forced to defend his new boss against events that occurred before he arrived, Roberts told the Times he had covered McCaw as he would "any other powerful person."

Soon, though, he realized he needed an ally, someone who shared his passion and vision, who believed as strongly as he in principles and ethics. He called Linda Strean.

In June 2003, Strean arrived at the News-Press as managing editor, adding an even bigger jolt to an already energized newsroom. She and Roberts entertained the troops with humorous

banter, "as if Linda completed Jerry's thoughts," says Hadly. The next two years were "the most fun I've ever had in journalism," says former Metro Editor Hulse. Given to wisecracks and hail-fellow-well-met backslapping, the 50-something Roberts, a "bearded, bespectacled Bugs Bunny," the city's alternative weekly wrote, endeared himself to the staff with precision editing – "he could make stories sing," says Murphy – and an ability to ask tough questions. "He brought the News-Press to a whole new level," says Molina.

As metro editor, Hulse "worked the longest hours I ever worked in my life," she says. She was hardly alone. "We did it because we wanted to please these people who had really high standards." Roberts added local columnists, including Arthur "Nipper" von Wiesenberger as restaurant critic. A well-known restaurateur, food writer and consultant to the bottled water industry, von Wiesenberger was also McCaw's boyfriend. Though the appointment seemed "a little weird," Streaan says, von Wiesenberger "was the best in town, so it made sense."

As the newsroom strengthened, the paper's opinion section grew more virulent under the direction of Travis K. Armstrong, a 38-year-old openly gay American Indian, former San Jose Mercury News editorial writer and registered Democrat. Armstrong attacked "local politicians," from "lefty wankers to main-street corporate types," who quickly learned, wrote Santa Barbara Independent Executive Editor Nick Welsh, "the best they could expect was a stiff-arm to the head." Streaan and Roberts mostly ignored him, Streaan says, but Armstrong's columns "created lots of problems for our reporters. Whenever we went into the community, we had to listen to complaints."

Profit margins reached record levels of 25 percent in 2003, say those familiar with the paper's finances, and the News-Press consistently won local, state and regional journalism awards for its coverage. But its success was not enough to save Fleet: The day he returned from his honeymoon in August was his last at the News-Press. "He was just gone," Streaan says. "There was no reason given." (Fleet declined to comment for this article.)

Roberts added publisher to his editor title, recusing himself from daily newsroom decision making. The arrangement worked well, Streaan says, until spring 2004, when McCaw insisted on previewing stories mentioning Brian Cearnal, a prominent Santa Barbara architect she was suing for malpractice. An ugly scene ensued in June when McCaw ordered Roberts to publish a piece touting her alleged legal victory over Cearnal, Streaan says, a story that had no comment from the architect and whose facts were disputed by his partner. After a while, McCaw wanted Roberts to publish four pages of her boyfriend's restaurant reviews. Though McCaw "continually pursued it," Roberts "kept arguing against it," Streaan says, and refused to implement her directive. Finally, McCaw stopped meeting with Roberts and then "quit speaking to him."

By January 2005, the musical chairs began again: Cole replaced Roberts as publisher; Roberts

returned to the newsroom; Strean quit in March, and George Foulsham, a former Los Angeles Times editor, took over as managing editor. For reasons no one can adequately explain, Joe Cole went from being McCaw's enforcer to "the fence," says an editor no longer at the paper, "the person who protected us."

In late April 2006, Cole announced he was retiring "at the ripe old age of 50," says a former editor, with McCaw and von Wiesenberger becoming copublishers. A week later, von Wiesenberger challenged a story about Travis Armstrong's drunk-driving arrest, an objection that not only betrayed his inexperience, say Don Murphy and other editors, but also exacerbated the mistrust between the newsroom and the publisher's suite.

With von Wiesenberger in charge, the editors "seemed anguished," Hadly says; there were "feelings of impending doom." The angst spilled onto the pages of the Santa Barbara Independent, which provided a comprehensive picture of the paper's internal squabbling, prompting McCaw loyalists to try to smoke out moles with inquisitions and threats, Hadly says. The sight of McCaw and her executives playing whack-a-mole, slamming down one rumor as another popped up, proved exceedingly amusing to the hundreds of bloggers weighing in on the spectacle and the characters they dubbed Spendy McFlaw, Travisty, Nipper, Baron von Weaselburger and Agnes Huff and Puff.

While bloggers reported what McCaw wanted squelched, another newsroom drama was unfolding. Michael Todd, the business editor widely admired for his intelligence and acerbic wit, made a joke to part-time photographer Ana Fuentes that she construed as a death threat. Though much of what transpired between them is disputed, neither argues the basic facts: Todd saw Fuentes in front of a downtown store in late May; when he next saw her, he made what he considered a joke about hitting her with his car. Everyone agrees Fuentes laughed, though she says she thought it was "weird," and the rest of the story is unclear. Fuentes remains convinced Todd wants to hurt her, though she has no idea why. Todd was doing nothing more than joking around with a colleague, he says. "It certainly wasn't serious or threatening." (The News-Press pursued a restraining order against Todd in connection with the Fuentes episode in July, costing him close to \$7,000 in attorney's fees, he says, before dropping the case in late October.)

The paths carrying Todd, Fuentes, McCaw and Armstrong converged on a Friday morning in June, when reporter Dawn Hobbs returned from the courthouse with a report on Travis Armstrong's drunk-driving sentence. After Hobbs tried to interview him, Armstrong came "unglued," says a reporter, accusing the newsroom of "targeting him." Orders "from on high" forced Roberts to kill Hobbs' story, says then Deputy Managing Editor Murphy, who went home and tearfully confessed to his wife: "I can't work there anymore," a prospect that frightened them both. Murphy, days shy of his 60th birthday, faced an uncertain job market and few local prospects. After nearly two decades in Santa Barbara, leaving meant uprooting

Murphy's ill, 93-year-old mother-in-law from her friends, church and doctors.

While Murphy launched a job search, Roberts left for a planned vacation in Greece, and McCaw went "balls out at the newsroom," a former editor says. Armstrong read "every story on the front page," says then-reporter Camilla Cohee, including her account of the Rob Lowe zoning dispute. Speaking at a televised meeting, Lowe asked the city to grant him a variance so he could build a 14,260-square-foot mansion. Armstrong sent an e-mail to two editors saying Lowe had called him and both he and Lowe were concerned about Lowe's address being published in the story. But the editors had left for the day, and Cohee's editor, Michael Todd, says no one forwarded the message to him. The next day, the News-Press published Cohee's story, address included, and von Wiesenberger called Cohee from Paris inquiring, "Would Rob Lowe be happy with the article? If I were Rob Lowe, would I think it's fair?"

After seeing the story, McCaw was livid, says a former editor, and issued reprimands to Cohee, Todd and two other editors, including one who had read it for the first time in the paper.

Todd and McCaw exchanged a series of blistering memos, with Todd censuring McCaw for granting a celebrity privacy rights exceeding "those given to average citizens." McCaw suspended him without pay pending an investigation into the Fuentes incident, blasting him for "careless news judgment," for prompting the Lowes to cancel their subscription and for potentially damaging "relations with other high profile readers."

"It was not good," says Hadly. "Josh [Molina] and I had a running joke: that we were going to walk in one day and Travis would be our boss." It didn't take long for McCaw to prove them right. She appointed Armstrong interim publisher, then left for a Mediterranean cruise aboard her yacht with von Wiesenberger. While they were gone, Armstrong ordered Cohee to rewrite a routine story about a local city council member's resignation "to reflect the editorial position of the paper," Murphy says. Reporters and editors stood by stunned as Armstrong directed news coverage, "violating every journalistic principle I could think of," says then-Metro Editor Hulse. Executives threatened to terminate anyone "sharing or leaking..information involving the News-Press to any other news organization," according to a News-Press memo. Murphy was sure he'd "be asked to do something I just couldn't do," that he'd be marched through the newsroom and out the building. "I would have found that very difficult," he says, choking back tears.

He resigned, handing his key, parking pass and badge to Director of Human Resources Yolanda Apodaca, who asked why he was leaving. He politely recited the litany of ethical breaches he'd witnessed, apologized for not giving two weeks' notice and left. He accepted another job, and a substantial pay cut, at the San Luis Obispo Tribune, arranging to share an apartment two hours away so his wife and mother-in-law could remain in Santa Barbara. Shortly thereafter, Managing Editor Foulsham also resigned, citing the same reasons Murphy

had articulated.

Roberts returned to work July 6, McCaw's 55th birthday, reporting to the editorial page editor, unable to protect the newsroom. "He believed a lot in the newspaper," says Streen. "He'd worked so hard, he'd overcome meddling attempts before," but finally, he "realized he couldn't do it anymore." He had breakfast with Apodaca, submitted his resignation letter and offered to help with the transition. Returning to the newsroom, he found Hulse, who handed him her two weeks' notice.

What happened next was a scene out of "The Battle of Algiers," a former editor says, with Armstrong "roaring" into Roberts' office, "face all red," yelling, "I want you out of here right now!" Someone shouted: "Jerry's getting kicked out!" prompting reporters and editors to rush forward and form a tight ring around Roberts, while Armstrong, tugging on Roberts' sleeve, repeated, "C'mon, you've got to get out now!" The chaos intensified: Reporters and editors were yelling, hugging, crying. Above the din, completely out of character, came Jane Hulse's pitched voice: "Fuck you, Travis, haven't you done enough already?"

"Fuck you, Travis! Fuck you, Travis!" staffers chanted, applauding as Roberts made the perp walk to the street. Turning to Hulse, Armstrong demanded: "I want you out of the building." Michael Todd quit, as did star columnist Barney Brantingham, followed by Sports Editor Gerry Spratt the next day. The newsroom burst with emotion, hardened journalists weeping as Hulse threw her belongings into a box, quickly said good-bye and walked to her car.

Gathering around Hulse, they realized McCaw had won. Armstrong had brought down Roberts, and the wall. Hadly wrote a story about the resignations, gave it to the copy desk and left for a meeting with his colleagues and a union representative. Around 10 p.m., Armstrong killed it, replacing it with a note to readers. The resignations, he wrote, reflected "differences of opinion."

In near real time, news of the upheaval – with some of the most unflattering photographs of McCaw imaginable – appeared on the wires, the Independent's Web site, the well-read LA Observed blog, followed by pieces in the Los Angeles Times and 150 other publications. McCaw's publicist attributed the resignations to people who disagreed with the owner's request for more local news, a position that contradicted the paper's numerous awards for local coverage and confused readers, who demanded to know what really happened.

"Boycott the News-Press" bumper stickers appeared on cars around town, and hundreds of readers cancelled subscriptions. The Independent, "inundated with letters, phone calls and e-mails," was happy to publish what the News-Press rejected, says Executive Editor Welsh. Relaxing aboard her yacht in the Adriatic with Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, McCaw seemingly failed to grasp the tragedy unfolding back home. She told New York Times

reporter Sharon Waxman the fault was not hers, attributing the unrest to "personality differences," admitting that, amid the turmoil, she was reading the News-Press only "occasionally."

In Santa Barbara, though, the battle was escalating. When more than a dozen reporters appeared at Armstrong's office with a petition demanding an end to the "intolerable conditions," the restoration of newsroom ethics and support for a nascent union, he ordered them back to work. The next day, in the aptly named De La Guerra Plaza adjacent to the News-Press building, hundreds of supporters gathered to watch staff members, dressed in black, their mouths sealed with duct tape, greet a roaring crowd that chanted "Shame! Shame! Shame!" and waved signs, "Free the News," "No More News Suppress," "Stop the Travesty!" while Armstrong watched from his office window.

Within minutes, images of gagged News-Press reporters and editors shot around the world on the Internet. Rather than give interviews – Armstrong refused to return calls even to his own reporters – he and McCaw communicated through commentaries. In her first front-page column, McCaw accused "disgruntled ex-employees" of manipulating "facts to divert attention from the truth" and infusing the news with inaccurate, biased reporting. Editors had used the paper "as a personal arena to air petty infighting" and to further "their own agendas." She praised the newsroom's new leaders, including former reporter Scott Steepleton, who became the newsroom's highest-ranking editor, for having a "dedicated commitment to quality and higher standards."

Meanwhile, reporter Scott Hadly struggled to deal with the quagmire his life had become. "I don't have any money, I have a mortgage payment, I have two little kids, but I was physically sick over this moral dilemma every day." After reading McCaw's column, he wrote his resignation letter. "She put something on the front page that was patently untrue. It was so offensive to me," Hadly said in an interview. "It was like she was undermining my own work there for eight years."

Presentation Editor Colin Powers resigned next, disgusted at what he calls McCaw's "vicious and unfounded" column, at seeing positions filled with "opportunists who possess the requisite loyalty." Those who resigned left "because the hands of the executive suite and op-ed department had extended their reach so far into the newsroom that their fingertips were on the reporters' keyboards," he wrote in his resignation letter.

Human resources manager Apodaca forbade Roberts from retrieving his belongings, hiring a delivery service to return enough boxes to fill a storage room, along with an envelope one of the workers handed his 16-year-old daughter, a cease-and-desist letter from McCaw's attorney that basically said: "Shut your pie hole or we'll sue you to kingdom come," says the Independent's Nick Welsh, who along with several others received similar letters.

Sidelined by McCaw's cease-and-desist letter and her ongoing litigation threats, Roberts decided he nonetheless had to speak out, had to make clear to the community that ethics were behind the stand he and the others had taken. When the organizers of a community forum invited him to speak in late July, he agreed, arriving at the downtown Victoria Hall Theater to hundreds of cheering supporters.

In his first public address since resigning, Roberts enumerated the many ways McCaw and her loyalists had failed to "distinguish between advocacy and reporting, obliterating the metaphorical wall that stands to separate them." Several prominent journalists spoke that night, supporting those who had sacrificed so much for principle. Recounting a moment from his own career when San Jose Mercury News Publisher Joe Ridder killed a political exposé, Lou Cannon said: "I had four kids and I wasn't willing to give up a very good job on a matter of principle. These nine people did." He added: "It's going to be a long fight. Do enough people in Santa Barbara care about honest news to mount a long-term campaign? I hope so, because their fight is our fight."

It didn't take long for McCaw and her supporters to unleash their fury, attacking what they called a "cabal" trying to silence the paper, chastising the Los Angeles Times for soliciting subscriptions in Santa Barbara, assailing Times editor John Arthur for sending a one-line e-mail to his old friend Roberts telling him to "hang in there." McCaw and von Wiesenberger prowled the parking lot taking photos of a car with union stickers and placards as "evidence for possible cease-and-desist letters," according to a letter the Teamsters sent to the National Labor Relations Board protesting the paper's labor practices.

Reporters drove to work in tears, arriving feeling "like puking every day," says one. Fed up, they scheduled an appointment with McCaw, but she never showed. Associate Editor Scott Steepleton ordered them back to work, then wrote in a memo that they had knocked so loudly on McCaw's door she might have "come out of her office and [been] surprised." Their actions, he wrote, were a "clear and outrageous attempt to physically intimidate Mrs. McCaw"; he threatened to fire them if they tried it again.

Throughout summer and fall, McCaw pledged to rebuild her team, hiring self-help author Laura Schlessinger as the paper's new local columnist; a security agency with expertise in combating corporate espionage; and a slew of recent college graduates to replace the fleeing veterans. Despite the paper's anti-Teamster crusade, union supporters kept fighting for representation, while McCaw and her executives refused to meet with prominent community members and rejected an advertisement from religious leaders urging the News-Press to adopt "a public and clear commitment to...professional ethics." In his response to the clergy, von Wiesenberger compared them to "tyrants, charlatans and religious intolerants," scolding: "It is dismaying...to see religious leadership so willingly embrace a cause that they have no facts about and do not choose to understand," an opinion McCaw and Armstrong repeated in a

series of columns and editorials that included antiunion diatribes, attacks on competitors and accusations against those who would "silence News-Press editorials."

McCaw's attorney sent a threatening letter to prominent lawyers providing legal assistance to News-Press journalists; then Steepleton fired the features editor for allowing health columnist Michael Seabaugh to make a passing reference to Laura Schlessinger's preaching "against tolerating diversity" as "a waste of time." The News-Press publicly apologized to her without consulting Seabaugh. (Schlessinger declined to comment. See "The Sound of Silence," page 45.) Calling the features editor's dismissal "unconscionable," Seabaugh, too, resigned; he now writes for the Santa Barbara Independent.

McCaw was so determined to discredit Roberts and his allies that she assigned publicist Agnes Huff to dissuade the Society of Professional Journalists from honoring them with an ethics award. The e-mail Huff sent to the organization contained factual errors, referring to the "Santa Monica" News-Press, and was "not at all germane," says Gary Hill, chair of the SPJ ethics committee.

A week before SPJ's Chicago convention, a News-Press reporter called Jerry Roberts at home asking about a confidential \$500,000 breach of contract action McCaw had filed against him. When Roberts inquired how he knew about the secret arbitration filing, the reporter replied that McCaw's attorney had delivered a copy to him at the News-Press, says Roberts' lawyer, Andrine Smith. A few days later, Huff publicly blamed Roberts for revealing the existence of the confidential legal action to the Los Angeles Times, a charge both Smith and Times reporter James Rainey dispute. "There were plenty of folks both inside and outside the newsroom," says Rainey, "who knew about it."

If McCaw wanted to scare Roberts into silence, she failed miserably. At the SPJ convention, nothing about his appearance made him seem anything but ordinary: the brown tweed jacket, the navy tie, the gray hair and beard, the steady, dependable cadence of his remarks. But as he recounted the events that brought him to the podium, his words betrayed the extraordinary courage and bravery of the more than two dozen who have quit or been fired in the last four months. Passing the sword to those "who stayed behind to fight," Roberts beseeched the audience to struggle every day "to ensure the values, principles and ethics that define public interest journalism."

The crowd leapt to its feet, stomping, applauding, whooping, as Hill heralded Roberts and the others as heroes. Everyone in the hall "realized the kind of sacrifices these guys made," Hill says. "Any journalist can picture themselves in that situation, and wonder, 'Do I have the courage and principles to do what they did?'"

Fall descends gently on Santa Barbara, the mist lingering longer, the yellow and orange of the sycamore and maples mingling in the palette of palms and evergreens. In the newsroom, fall

brought union representation and a renewed commitment to securing a contract "with guarantees that the wall will not be breeched," says a reporter, even though McCaw officially contested the 33-6 vote with the National Labor Relations Board. Fall also found McCaw on her yacht again with boyfriend von Wiesenberger, now using the title "Baron," the Dallas Morning News reported, with "more pressing business than putting down [a] staff insurrection."

While McCaw and her jet-set friends sported beach chic and Bohemian casual while sipping glasses of Veuve Clicquot on the sands of St. Tropez, more and more News-Press employees, trapped by financial obligations and a lack of jobs, pondered ways to survive. Some considered joining a lawsuit claiming the paper willfully violated overtime laws. Others plotted union strategies, determined, as one says, "to stay and fight for the paper's integrity." Still more resigned. Starshine Roshell, an 11-year veteran who lost her column in August after publicly declaring her support for the newsroom and the union, gave Scott Steepleton her resignation letter, said, "Fuck you" and walked out. Huff issued a press release scolding Roshell for her "use of profanity," prompting a 45-year Santa Barbara resident to e-mail Steepleton: "I don't know Starshine Roshell but I do know that she is one of the best writers at the News-Press... I don't know what she said, but I'm sure you deserve it. You stink!"

The battle for the newsroom's soul will likely continue far into the future, with neither side backing down. In the midst of a union-sponsored subscription boycott, the paper's seven-day circulation has declined 5 percent since March to 39,725, according to figures the News-Press released publicly in October. As the struggle escalated, Associate Editor Steepleton required reporters to sign affidavits denying leaking information to the press, intensifying a campaign of intimidation that has union leaders and newsroom veterans worried that News-Press executives will fire them just as they did Melinda Burns, an award-winning, 21-year News-Press reporter and union leader, in late October.

As difficult as their lives have become, the newsroom staff has encountered overwhelming community support, with frequent acts of kindness bestowed by random citizens: free meals at restaurants, free services at an office supplies store, free cups of coffee "and more free drinks than I can count," says Michael Todd. "A million little things from nameless people."

Nearly all those who left have new jobs and new lives, including Jerry Roberts, who has no plans to return to daily journalism, preferring to teach, write and help his former reporters and editors find work, he tells me on a glowing October day as we stroll past the bubbling fountains of an impeccably appointed beachfront restaurant. Tan and fit, he sits down at a table facing white sailboats cutting a path through the sparkling ocean, clearly exhilarated at the good fortune that has brought him to Santa Barbara. Despite the hours spent battling McCaw's legal challenge, the heartbreak he suffers for the disrupted lives of his colleagues and the disappointment he feels at seeing what his beloved News-Press has become, Roberts has

moved on. "I don't have any bitterness.

I had a great ride. You don't get that a lot in this business," he says, pausing, his mood turning somber as he recalls the trials of the last four months. "Everybody's lost that now."

The realization brings him back to a tearful farewell party two weeks earlier at editor Don Murphy's house, the last hurrah for the Roberts newsroom. As the night wore on, it became clear to them that "what we had for a couple of years was really special. We built something together, a really good paper. You don't see that when you're in it, but you have to appreciate it. You have to look back and remember: There was a time, and there were these people, and it was all working really, really well. That's how you heal."

He pauses again, his gaze lingering on the sailboats, then wryly delivers the kicker: "I myself went home, took a sleeping pill and went to bed."

Editorial assistant Hallie C. Falquet contributed research to this report.

###