

Did Winsted Disappear?

By Charlene LaVoie, Community Lawyer

June 15, 1995 NOTE: This column was sent to the *Register/Citizen* on May 23, 1995. It became evident that the *Register/Citizen* would not publish this column in its entirety, if at all. Citizens of Winsted continue in contact with this office to express their displeasure over the changes in the newspaper and the obvious lack of coverage of Winsted news and events. Some members of the community suggest an organized boycott of the *Register/Citizen* to send the message. Citizens must evaluate the intentions and actions of the absentee owners of the *Register/Citizen* in order to decide whether it deserves the support of this community. It is for the purpose of disseminating this information and starting a community discussion of the issues that this column was distributed to area news publications.

Did Winsted disappear? What has happened to local news reporting? Citizens are angry and refusing to read *The Register/Citizen*.

In October 1993, *The Register/Citizen* newspaper was sold to the New Jersey-based *Journal Register Company*. The Oct. 19, 1993 *Register/Citizen* editorial states, "The *Register/Citizen* embarks on a new mission: one of setting high standards for news and what is important to the people and communities we serve." The editor assured citizens that the newspaper's visibility in Winsted would continue with a satellite office in Winsted.

But after the takeover of the newspaper, *The Register/Citizen* abruptly closed the historic news office in Winsted. The Oct. 19, 1993 *Hartford Courant* story reminded us that "for more than 100 years, the old brick building at Main and Union Streets was where the lives and times of Winsted people became news." Although we were assured by *The Register/Citizen* publisher that Winsted would have an office, the tiny Main Street office at a new location was not opened until March 1994.

A review of certain events since this takeover is in order to understand where we are now.

1. *The Register/Citizen* immediately replaced the eloquent and thoughtful editor David Parker. Instead of relevant, well-written, local editorials, the paper now routinely prints editorials from all over the country, which rarely have any connection to local issues. In addition, the new editor publicly commented on the increased competition from the *Hartford Courant* and *Waterbury Republican* by stating, "We are kicking their butts." *Litchfield County Times*, Oct. 28, 1994.

2. In March 1994, *The Register/Citizen* fired a seasoned reporter and forced a top editor to quit for refusing to fire the reporter. The subsequent lawsuit attracted much ugly attention from local and national media. For example, the fired reporter appeared on the NBC Today program. In addition, *Connecticut Magazine* (February 1995) awarded *The Register/Citizen* the Worst Newspaper of the Year Award. The entire episode, brought about by a reporter's story that the paper's delivery system had some problems with the first-ever Sunday edition, begs the question — if *The Register/Citizen* is so intent on not revealing such a minor problem in circulation, to what lengths might it go to hide more serious problems?

3. *Connecticut Magazine* (February 1995) awarded *The Register/Citizen* a second "Worst Award" for taking syndicated writer Bob Conrad's name off a political column and using it as an editorial as if it had been written by someone on the staff. *Connecticut Magazine's* conclusion: "What was once a decent, trusted community newspaper is now nothing more than a dopey money-maker for its New Jersey-based parent corporation."

4. The unwelcome intrusion of commercial advertisements (and sometimes national news) on the pages traditionally reserved to thoughtful dialogue, idea sharing and com-

munity discussion — the editorial/letters to the editor/opinion column pages and the elimination of Robert McCarthy (Winsted's own) and Donella Mendrows (an outstanding columnist on environmental issues) as regular opinion editorial contributors and the decrease from every week to once or twice a month of Ralph Nader's In The Public Interest column (Winsted's own) — reveals the new owner's meaning of "redefining" the newspaper.

5. For a short time after the takeover, *The Register/Citizen* printed a Winsted edition which carried important and relevant Winsted stories on the front page. Now, not only is there no Winsted edition, there is no Winsted news coverage. In the past several weeks, there are often days when there is not one story printed about Winsted. The reporting staff in Winsted has been whittled away to one reporter. It is whittled even further because that one reporter now covers three other towns in addition to Winsted.

6. There is an increasing presence of journalism in bad taste, used for shock value rather than to inform. For example, the recent May 12, 1995 front page headline, "Mao Held In Hooker Murder," clearly demonstrates a lack of regard for the public and women in particular.

7. And this brings us to what many citizens consider the final straw. On May 1, 1995, the town of Winchester held its annual town budget meeting. There was no *Register/Citizen* reporter in attendance because the reporter was assigned to cover the Barkhamsted election. As a result, there was no coverage or news story in the "local newspaper" about one of the most important yearly events in Winsted. It is important enough to be attended by every newspaper in the area and broadcast by Mad River TV 13. Good thing, since the "new mission" of *The Register/Citizen* looks more like mission omission.

It is time to demonstrate to the absentee owners of *The Register/Citizen* that citizens of Winsted know the difference between journalistic attention to community events and the "facelift" referred to in the Oct. 19, 1993 *Register/Citizen* editorial which promised readers the addition of color and the emergence of *The Register/Citizen* with a "bright new look." As one reader wrote in a letter to the editor: "Lately I am saddened by the lack of local news. What we need is a good, old-fashioned hometown newspaper. Section D (business section) is a total loss to me and the Lifestyle section is interesting to some, I suppose, but what about our lifestyle?"

Fishers and recipes do not make up for the lack of local news, the lack of coverage and the lack of reporters. From where we stand, it seems that *The Register/Citizen* lacks a public policy regarding local news coverage and that advertising policy has replaced substantive local coverage. *The Register/Citizen* owes the citizens in Winsted a public forum to explain its policies so that we may determine whether to continue to read and subscribe to *The Register/Citizen*. We look forward to such a forum.