

For Release
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MONTANA NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION ANNOUNCES 2025 BETTER NEWSPAPER CONTEST WINNERS, HONORS FIVE OUTSTANDING INDUSTRY LEADERS, NAMES LOVEC PRESIDENT FOR COMING YEAR

Butte, Montana — The Montana Newspaper Association proudly announced the winners of the 2025 Better Newspaper Contest and honored four leaders in our industry during its annual convention.

The Better Newspaper Contest is our way of thanking the hardworking professionals in the newspaper industry and highlighting their successes and efforts. The contest recognizes the best Montana journalism from 2024. Winners were honored at the annual MNA awards banquet Saturday night. Please join us in recognizing all the outstanding journalism being done in Montana and honoring the winners of this year's contest.

This year's contest was judged by the North Dakota Newspaper Association.

General Excellence Award Winner:

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|-------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Division 1: | The Monitor | <i>Boulder, MT</i> |
| Division 2: | Choteau Acantha | <i>Choteau, MT</i> |
| Division 3: | Lewistown News Argus | <i>Lewistown, MT</i> |
| Division 4: | Daily Inter Lake | <i>Kalispell, MT</i> |

The Sam Gilluly Award for the Best Montana Daily Newspaper

Daily Inter Lake *Kalispell, MT*

The Thomas Dimsdale Award for the Best Montana Weekly Newspaper

The Monitor *Boulder, MT*

The Best Montana Online Newspaper

Flathead Beacon *Kalispell, MT*

The Mel Ruder Photograph of the Year

Larry Mayer, Billings Gazette

On Friday night, five Montana newspaper industry standouts were honored at the Montana Newspaper Association Past Presidents and Major Awards dinner. The honorees were:

- **MNA Hall of Fame: John Talbot.** As a leader in the Montana newspapers and the communities he served, John Talbot shaped positive changes that will benefit journalists and Montana citizens for generations to come. People who worked for John, whether they were in the newsroom, ad sales, circulation, composition, or the press room, would all agree: He was an ideal manager, a caring boss and a compassionate advocate for the newspaper. A longtime publisher of the Missoulian, John passed away in 2021. John and his wife, Sue Talbot, contributed the initial donation for architectural designs of a new journalism building at UM, which arose as Don Anderson Hall in 2007. After retiring in 1986 from Lee Enterprises, John volunteered for multiple causes and took the lessons he learned from a lifetime in management and created a course in media management at the University of Montana School of Journalism, becoming an integral and well-loved member of the faculty.
- **MNA Master Editor/Publisher: Anton Kaufer.** An innovator in the publishing industry and a dedicated community leader, Anton Kaufer is Hagadone Media Montana's Regional Publisher, overseeing eight brands in the state: Daily Inter Lake, The Western News, Hungry Horse News, Whitefish Pilot, Bigfork Eagle, Lake County Leader, Mineral Independent and Clark Fork Valley Press. Kaufer has been a trailblazer in his leadership position as the group of newspapers maintains steady readership in print while forging into new media opportunities to expand audience reach. Kaufer is the immediate Past President of the Montana Newspaper Association Board and is active in his community, serving on the boards for Boys and Girls Club of Glacier Country, Glacier AERO and Montana West Economic Development. He was the Evergreen Chamber of Commerce's volunteer of the year in 2021.
- **Dick Crockford Distinguished Service Award: Vonnie Jacobson.** A career journalist, Vonnie Jacobson grew up on a grain farm in the Big Sandy area and has worked in newspapers since her first job at the Lewistown News Argus in 1977. She worked at the Argus through 1998 as a copy editor and a sports editor before being promoted to editor. After Vonnie and her husband, Rick, moved to Fairfield, she worked from 1996 to 2008 for the Fairfield Times, also serving as reporter, editor and photographer. In 2008, she joined the staff of the Choteau Acantha and has worked here as a reporter and photographer ever since. She was planning to retire this summer, but after the fire at the

Acantha building in January, Vonnie is delaying her retirement for a year to provide the stability Jeff and Melody Martinsen need as they work to get back into their building.

- **Dick Crockford Distinguished Service Award: Missy Robertson.** A go-to answer person who knows the ins and outs of our complex business, Missy Robertson plays a vital role at all the Lee Enterprises western papers. She goes above and beyond to help anyone out with any issue and on those rare occasions she doesn't know the answer, Missy will contact someone who does. She has worked for Lee for more than 30 years, primarily in the creative services department at the Montana Standard. Her talent as an artist, patience with employees and clients, and enviable leadership skills are what make Missy more than qualified for this honor. Missy has mentored several artists over her career and has always shared her skills and design approach. Missy has won several MNA Better Newspaper awards in her career, many of them for premier publication designs.
- **John Kuglin Open Government Award: Melody Martinsen.** The Montana FOI Hotline board is rejuvenating its long-dormant award honoring champions of open government. The award has been renamed the "John Kuglin open government award," commemorating the FOI efforts of the late chief of the Helena Associated Press bureau. The inaugural winner of the new award could not be a more deserving choice: Melody Martinsen, co-owner and editor of the Choteau Acantha, who has been leading the push for government transparency in Montana for decades. Melody served on the FOI Hotline board since 2001 and as president since 2013, before stepping down recently to concentrate on rebuilding the Acantha's offices, which were severely damaged by fire. In March 2023, Melody rose to object when an advisory council appointed by the governor refused to provide any details for its decision to recommend two candidates for appointment to replace a retiring and publicly elected judge serving her region. The Acantha, joined by the Montana Free Press, sued, and last month the Montana Supreme Court upheld Montanans right to attend open meetings, finding the public's right to know clearly exceeded the council's decision to protect the candidates' privacy.

As the MNA wrapped up another successful year, members thanked outgoing president Erica Yakawich, regional sales director with Lee Enterprises and Amplified Digital, and welcomed new president Eric Lovec, owner of The Ekalaka Eagle.

"It has been an absolute privilege to work alongside Erica Yakawich this past year during her term as president of the Montana Newspaper Association," said MNA Executive Director Brian Alfrey. "Erica brought to the role a remarkable blend of leadership, strength, and unwavering commitment to the mission and members of MNA. Her deep understanding of our industry, shaped by her work as regional sales director for Lee Enterprises, helped guide us through a dynamic year with focus and energy.

"The convention she hosted this past weekend in Butte was a phenomenal experience for all who attended—thoughtfully organized, forward-looking, and a true reflection of her dedication. On behalf of our entire association, I extend our heartfelt thanks to Erica for her exceptional service," Allfrey said.

Lovec purchased the Ekalaka Eagle in 2014 and works diligently to serve the readers and advertisers of the Ekalaka region in southeast Montana.

"I'm truly honored to pass the torch to Eric Lovec as our next president," said Yakawich. "Eric brings years of experience and a deep commitment to the mission of the organization. With his leadership—and with the continued support of Brian, Jim, and the MNA team—I'm confident the association and Montana newspapers are poised for continued success."

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For more information on Award Winners:

Better Newspaper Contest | Montana Newspaper Association (mtnewspapers.com)