



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**MONTANA NEWSPAPER ASSOCIATION ANNOUNCES
2026 BETTER NEWSPAPER CONTEST WINNERS,
HONORS INDUSTRY LEADERS,
NAMES BALDWIN PRESIDENT FOR COMING YEAR**

June 20, 2026

Miles City, Montana — The Montana Newspaper Association proudly announced the winners of the 2026 Better Newspaper Contest, inducted Milton “Milt” Wester into the Montana Newspaper Hall of Fame, honored Brice and Lois Lambert and Jeff Welsch with Master Editor/Publisher Awards, and elected Matt Baldwin as president during its 141st Annual Convention held June 18-19 in Miles City.

The Better Newspaper Contest recognizes the best journalism, photography, design, advertising and digital work produced by Montana newspapers during 2025. Winners were honored during the annual MNA Better Newspaper Awards Banquet on Friday evening.

This year's contest was judged by the Nevada Press Association.

GENERAL EXCELLENCE AWARD WINNERS

Group 1 (Tie):

- Whitehall Ledger, Whitehall
- Terry Tribune, Terry

Group 2:

- Choteau Acantha, Choteau

Group 3:

- The Monitor, Boulder

Group 4:

- Daily Inter Lake, Kalispell

SPECIAL CONTEST AWARDS

Sam Gilluly Award for Best Montana Daily Newspaper
Daily Inter Lake, Kalispell

Thomas Dimsdale Award for Best Montana Weekly Newspaper
The Monitor, Boulder

Best Montana Online Newspaper
Flathead Beacon, Kalispell

Mel Ruder Photograph of the Year
Gary Marshall, Independent Record

Beyond recognizing excellence, convention attendees participated in professional development sessions focused on readership trends, artificial intelligence in journalism and advertising, audience engagement, and innovative revenue strategies. The training reinforced MNA's commitment to helping Montana newspapers adapt and thrive in a rapidly evolving media landscape.

"What a convention," said Eric Lovec, outgoing MNA President and publisher of The Ekalaka Eagle. "The Better Newspaper Contest is a celebration of our industry and the work we do in our communities. It's a chance to step back and be proud of what we've accomplished, both individually and as an industry. Congratulations to everyone, and to all of the papers that took home awards tonight. These recognitions reflect the important work newspapers do every week, from strong editorial coverage to creative, effective advertising. I'm proud to be part of such a meaningful industry, and happy to celebrate it with great people and great friends."

Earlier in the day, MNA honored several individuals whose careers and contributions have strengthened community journalism across Montana.

MONTANA NEWSPAPER HALL OF FAME

Milton "Milt" Wester was inducted into the Montana Newspaper Hall of Fame. Throughout his career, Wester became widely respected for editorial excellence, innovation, mentorship and an unwavering commitment to community journalism. His leadership at The Laurel Outlook helped establish the publication as one of Montana's premier community newspapers while influencing generations of journalists and newspaper leaders across the state.

MASTER EDITOR/PUBLISHER AWARDS

Brice and Lois Lambert of The Ekalaka Eagle received the Master Editor/Publisher Award for their extraordinary dedication to community journalism and nearly three decades of service to Carter County and southeastern Montana.

Jeff Welsch, former editor-in-chief of the Bozeman Daily Chronicle, also received the Master Editor/Publisher Award in recognition of more than four decades of journalistic excellence, newsroom leadership and mentorship throughout Montana and the western United States.

"These awards recognize the very best of Montana journalism and the people who dedicate their careers to serving their

communities through local news,” said MNA Executive Director Brian Allfrey. “At a time when trusted local journalism is more important than ever, Montana newspapers continue to produce outstanding work that informs, educates and strengthens communities across our state.”

Montana newspapers continue to serve as a critical source of local information, government accountability, community connection and public service in communities large and small across the state.

As the association concluded its annual business meeting, members thanked outgoing president Eric Lovec for his leadership during the past year and elected Matt Baldwin, regional editor for Hagadone Media Montana, as president for the coming year.

“Eric Lovec has been an outstanding leader for the Montana Newspaper Association,” Allfrey said. “His commitment to community journalism, thoughtful leadership and willingness to serve helped guide the association through another successful year. We are grateful for his service and the positive impact he has had on Montana newspapers.”

Allfrey said Baldwin brings extensive newsroom leadership experience and a deep commitment to local journalism to the role.

“Matt Baldwin is one of the most respected newsroom leaders in Montana,” Allfrey said. “His dedication to quality journalism, support for community newspapers and collaborative leadership style make him exceptionally well-suited to lead the association. We look forward to working with Matt as MNA continues to advocate for Montana newspapers and strengthen local journalism across the state.”

Baldwin oversees editorial operations for Hagadone Media Montana's newspapers across northwest Montana and has helped lead award-winning newsrooms recognized for excellence in journalism and community service. He becomes president at a time when local newspapers continue to navigate rapid technological change while remaining essential sources of trusted local information.

Complete Better Newspaper Contest results and convention information are available at www.mtnewspapers.com.

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