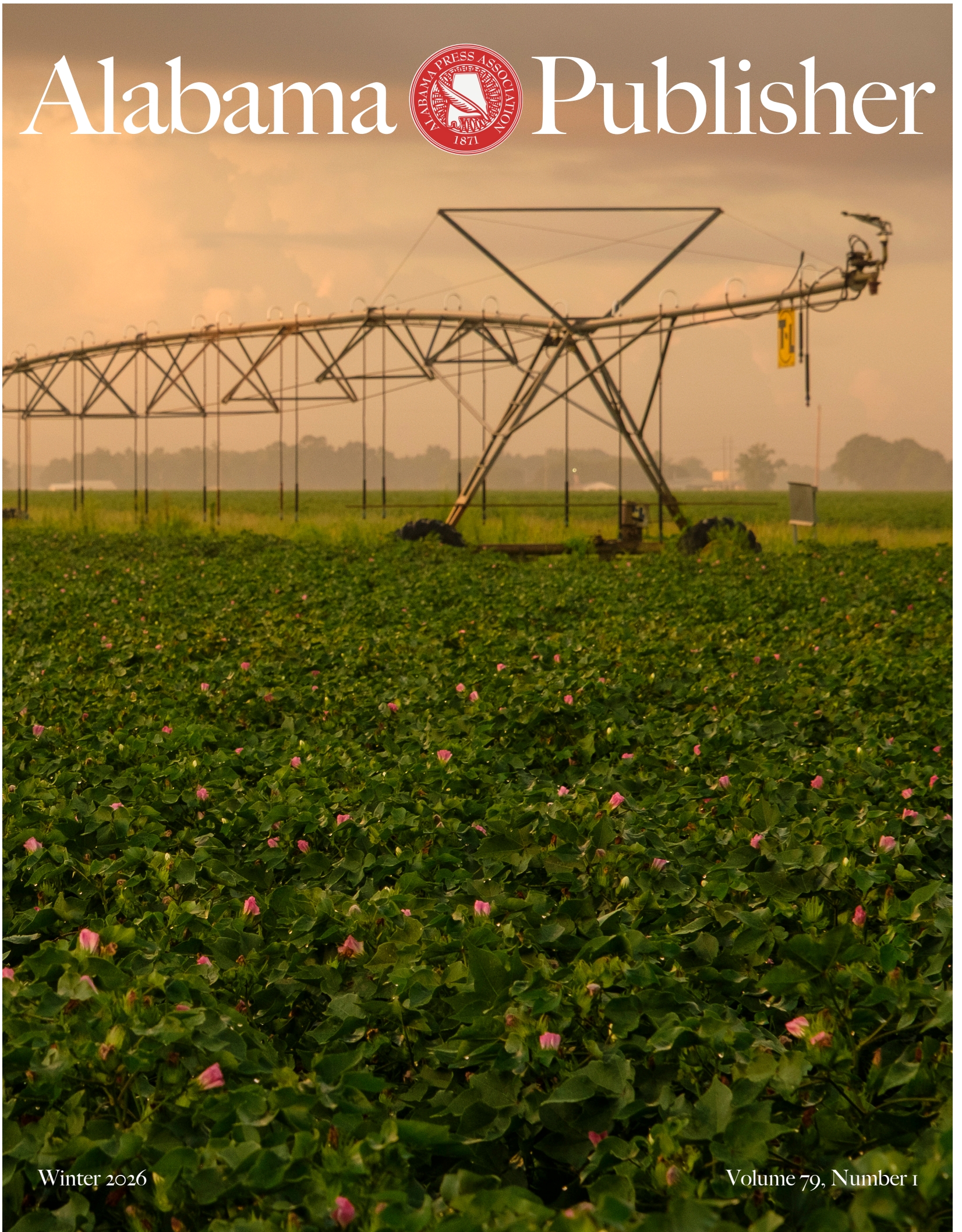




Alabama Publisher

Winter 2026

Volume 79, Number 1



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Welcome!

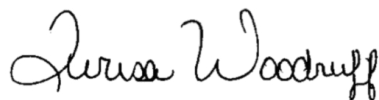
It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 155th APA Media Summit, this year in Montgomery. We are proud to have journalism students and faculty from Alabama colleges and universities with us. We welcome our active and associate members as well.

We are excited to honor the recipients of the 2026 Lifetime Achievement and Emerging Journalist awards. Tommy Hicks, Ed Howell and Hayden Renfroe represent the seasoned and the young professionals in our industry. These awards are the most prestigious personal awards given by APA each year, and we look forward to sharing their stories with you at the luncheon.

The presence of students is a bright spot for this association. We learn so much from hearing about the work they are doing and the ideas that will lead our industry into a new era.

We appreciate the support of all our members, and their steadfast dedication to this industry and to our association.

Everyone, please mark your calendars for the APA Summer Convention at the Perdido Beach Resort, June 26-28, 2026. See you there!



Teresa Woodruff
President, Alabama Press Association

Passing The Gavel:

*Many thanks to our APA presidents for
their passion and dedication
in moving our association and industry forward.*



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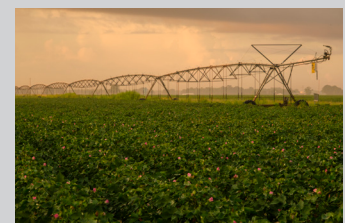
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Special thanks to the undergraduate
and graduate students and their
professors for attending this year's
Media Summit.



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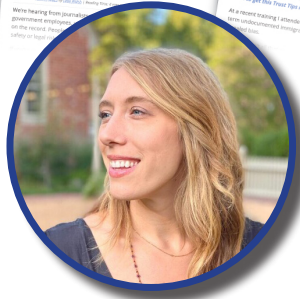
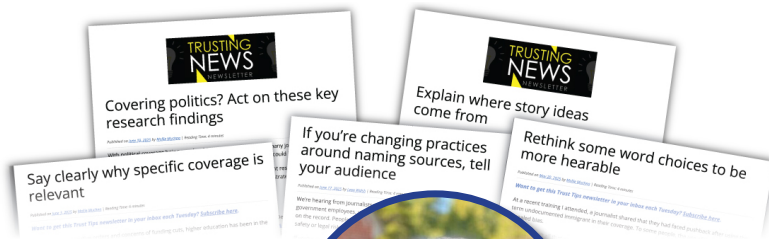
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APA Media Summit Speakers



Mollie Muchna



mollie@trustingnews.org
trustingnews.org



Project manager Mollie Muchna has spent the last 10 years working in audience and engagement journalism in local newsrooms across the Southwest. She lives in Tucson, Arizona, where she is also an adjunct professor at the University of Arizona's School of Journalism.

Trusting News aims to inspire and empowers journalists to take responsibility for demonstrating their credibility and actively earning trust. They equip journalists to listen and engage with humility and to explain their integrity through day-to-day transparency. They use research-backed, newsroom-tested strategies to support journalists in building a better relationship with the people they aim to serve.



Shannon Kinney



shannon@dreamlocal.com
dreamlocal.com



Dream Local Digital Founder and CEO, Shannon Kinney, brings more than 40 years of experience in leadership roles and is a master at developing scalable digital marketing strategies. She played a vital role in the development of such corporate giants as Cars.com, CareerBuilder.com, Knight Ridder Digital, LinkedIn, Google, eBay, and Microsoft until pivoting to found Dream Local Digital.

Since Dream Local Digital's creation in 2009, Shannon has helped media companies transform their business model and supported thousands of SMBs to develop and execute digital marketing strategies designed to grow and scale their businesses.

2026 Contest Open for entries! NEW Categories!

www.newspapercontest.com/Alabama



**2026 Judging
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PNMA Ad Contest Judging will begin in February 2026.
PNMA Editorial Contest Judging will begin in March 2026.



Scan green QR code to sign-up as a PNMA judge! You can choose preferences (ads, sports, editorial, photo, video, etc.)



A-Mark Prize for Investigative Journalism

First place: \$5,000 for the journalist(s)
and \$2,500 to the news organization

Second place: \$3,000 for the journalist(s)
and \$1,500 to the news organization

Third place: \$2,000 for the journalist(s)
and \$1,000 to the news organization

Investigative reporters are trained to follow the money, but it takes resources to follow the money! That's why the APA has partnered with the A-Mark Foundation to present a total of \$15,000 in cash prizes for Alabama reporters AND their newsrooms. The A-Mark Prize for Investigative Journalism is open to all active and associate publication members of the Alabama Press Association (APA). Winners will be announced at the APA Summer Convention AMA Awards Banquet to be held in June 2026 at the Perdido Beach Resort in Orange Beach, AL. For more information on criteria and how to enter, scan the blue QR code.



Center for Integrity in News Reporting Award of Excellence

First place: \$5,000
for the journalist(s)

The Alabama Press Association is partnering with the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association and the Center for Integrity in News Reporting to present the Award of Excellence with \$5,000 in prize money. Judges will consider work produced in 2025, and the prize will be awarded in June 2026, as part of the APA's annual awards. For more information on criteria and how to enter, scan the red QR code.



**"To give news impartially, without fear or favor."
- Adolph Ochs, Publisher, New York Times 1896-1935**

2026 Emerging Journalist Hayden Renfroe

Hayden Renfroe, a 25-year-old native of Northport, worked as lead reporter for The Northport Gazette for four years under General Manager Paula Bryant. Renfroe was in college when he was hired in August of 2022, and covered city council meetings and community events for The Northport Gazette.

Bryant said, "He enjoys writing, and is excited to expand his experience in writing, especially for the city in which he grew up. We constantly get phone calls and visitors to our office telling Hayden what a great writer he is becoming, and how proud they are to have him writing for the paper."

Growing up in Northport, Renfroe attended Huntington Place Elementary School all the way through Tuscaloosa County High School, where he played football and

graduated in 2019. His dream was to be a high school English teacher and head football coach. But after working at The Northport Gazette for almost a year, he enjoyed the work so much that he announced to his general manager that he had decided to change his degree to journalism!



In her nomination letter, Paula Bryant said, "Hayden is a true gem in many ways...not just for his writing, but also in the way he cares for the community."

She recounted how he worked with community members and spoke with city leaders so he could report on exactly what was taking place during the potential sale

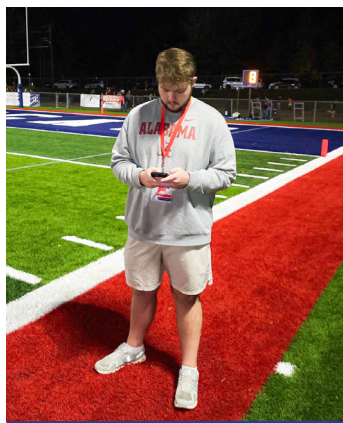
of their Northport Community Center and Park that may have been turned into retail space. Bryant believes that Renfroe's continuous coverage contributed substantially to saving their local community center from being sold and changed into something the community did

not want. He persistently reported the facts, readers reacted, and the community won out. The beloved 70-year old community center has not only been rededicated now, but also received a major refurbishing with support from the city council.

Renfroe has covered a variety of important stories for his hometown, which he takes great pride in. He also reported extensive election coverage, and has kept readers up to date on the development of the University Beach Project, a \$350 million resort planned for Northport which will feature a 10-acre lagoon with a water park and lazy river, a large event venue, a luxury hotel, "beach" houses, and more.

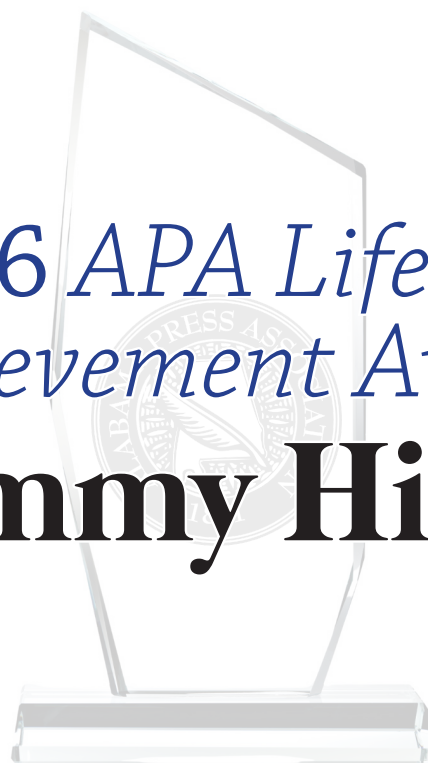
Hayden attended the University of Alabama and Liberty University, and graduated in August of 2025 with a BS in Creative Writing and Journalism. He is currently a Master of Fine Arts Candidate at Liberty for Creative Writing.

Bryant said she wanted to nominate Hayden because he is a true example of an emerging journalist and is definitely deserving of the award.





2026 *APA Lifetime Achievement Award* **Tommy Hicks**



Tommy Hicks has been a mainstay of sports journalism in Alabama for over 48 years. He has worked for papers across the entire state including the Selma Times-Journal, Montgomery Advertiser, Anniston Star, Mobile Press-Register, Citronelle Call News and currently at Lagniappe. Now at 71-years old, he has served as sports editor of the "best damn sport pages in Alabama" since 2020.

As a native of Phenix City, Hicks graduated from Troy University in 1972 with a double major in art and journalism. He began his career at the Phenix Citizen in Phenix City. The majority of Hicks' career was covering sports either as a reporter, columnist or sports editor,

but he also served as an entertainment and features editor at the Montgomery Advertiser, and (overall) editor for the Call News and Washington County News.

Co-publishers of the Lagniappe, Rob Holbert and Ashley Trice, both joked about how Hicks is an entire sports department unto himself, or he "must have been a triplet since it would take three Tommy Hicks lookalikes to handle all the work he does."

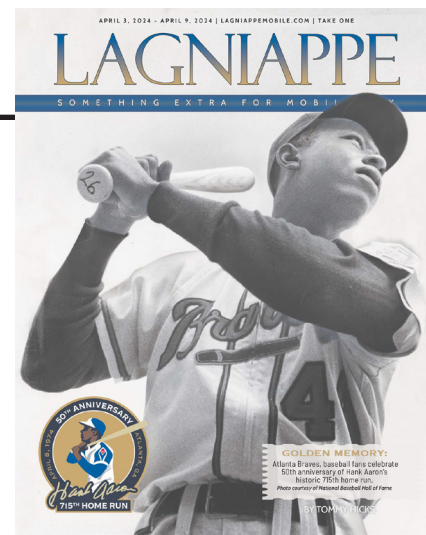
One memorable and favorite story that Trice mentioned was Tommy's incredible piece on the 50th anniversary of Hank Aaron's 715th home run. She described it as a really important piece for their community, as Aaron is from

Mobile. She said Tommy's "deep dive into the events of that night on April 8, 1974, explored just how complicated breaking Babe Ruth's record was for the entire Aaron family."

Trice went on to say, "[Tommy] is an incredible reporter, interviewer, writer, co-worker, friend and all around wonderful human being. We are so thankful to have him on the Lagniappe team, and he could not be more deserving of this honor."

Rob Holbert describes him as a kind and generous person. "As a journalist, the thing I love most about him is the clear enthusiasm he still has for the job. He's still excited to get out there on

L to R:
the Lagniappe (Mobile)
crew; Lagniappe
cover featuring award
winning story on the
50th anniversary of
Hank Aaron's 715th
home run.



the sidelines and to talk to the athletes," said Holbert. "As a person, Tommy has just made our small newsroom an even better place to be. I'm so glad to see him honored for the career he's had and is still having."

Hicks was inducted into the Alabama Sports Writers Association (ASWA) Hall of Fame in 2018, selected as one of 50 Legends of ASWA in 2022, past president of the Football Writers Association of America, and two-time ASWA president. Hicks has also authored three books, and received numerous other awards including:

- Three-time Alabama Sportswriter of the Year (National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Association)
- First place writing awards from ASWA, Alabama Associated Press, Associated Press Sports Editors, Green Eyeshade Awards, APA Media Awards, and Football Writers Association of America
- Recipient of Troy University Hall School of Journalism Print Alumni of the Year in 2005

- Two-time ASWA Herby Kirby Award winner (sports story of the year)

Tommy and his wife Julie have a daughter, Masren Whittaker.



Tommy and family

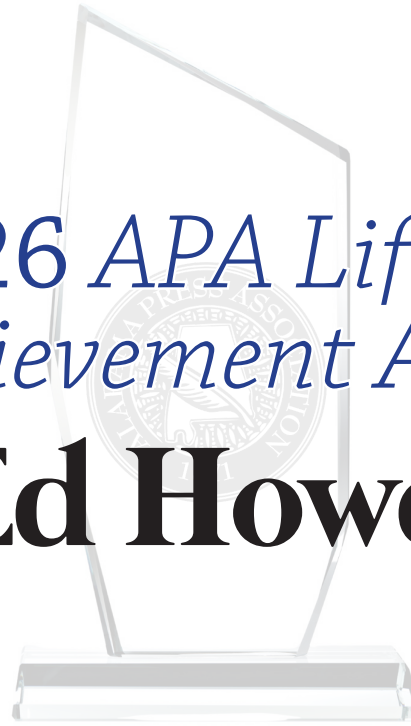
L to R: Tommy and friends at a signing for his book, *The Game of a Lifetime*; Tommy interviewing LPGA golfer Stacy Lewis; Tommy with baseball great Ozzie Smith; Tommy interviewing The University of South Alabama football player Devin Voisin at the 2026 Senior Bowl





2026 APA Lifetime Achievement Award

Ed Howell



For over 40 years, Ed Howell has earned the respect of his readers, his community, and his colleagues as a writer and news editor who exemplifies the very best of community journalism through consistent accuracy, fairness, and a sincere commitment to truth-telling that uplifts rather than divides.

As described in the numerous letters supporting his nomination for this Lifetime Achievement Award, Howell was described as a “journalistic giant” by former Parrish Mayor Wayne Gross. Howell’s faith has also contributed to his profession in the way he conducts his reporting respectfully and fairly. Howell “goes to great lengths to ensure that the news in our community is not only told, and told boldly, but told in such a way that refuses to reflect the

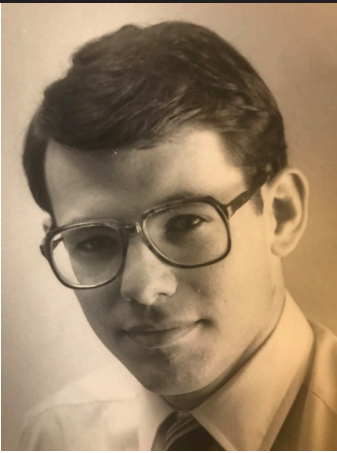
divisive rhetoric we so often see on display in the news cycle,” said local pastor and community worker Rev. Ryan Cagle.

Howell graduated with a BA in Communications from The University of Alabama as a journalism major, and political science minor. He began his career as a staff writer and crime reporter at The Tuscaloosa News in 1985. A couple of years later, he learned how to do it all at a weekly newspaper by directing news coverage, selling ads and subscriptions, taking photos and even helped with bookkeeping at the Sumter County Record-Journal in Livingston, AL. His next stop was four years at The Clanton Advertiser where he wrote a weekly column and took photos.

Interspersed between stints in Livingston and Clanton, Howell did two tours in Hamilton, where he spent almost 20 years total as news editor for the Journal Record. There, he conceptualized, pitched, assigned and monitored stories from origination to publication, and participated in laying out pages under General Manager Les Walters.

“I could always depend on Ed to get it right. He was a workhorse, the type of person who anyone in the news business loved to have by their side,” said Walters. “[Ed] stuck to his guns if he knew he was right. That’s the mark of a good man and even better journalist.”

Howell alternated from the Journal Record to the Daily Mountain Eagle for the next



portion of his career. He has now served as news editor and staff writer in Jasper since 2017, where he has managed a team of reporters, posted and promoted articles on their website, contributed feature stories to their quarterly magazine, and covered in-depth issues and interviews with state and local political leaders as host of "Talking Politics with Ed Howell" on Facebook and YouTube.

Other supporting letters came from state and local officials. As current Secretary for the Alabama Department of Workforce and former State Sen. Ed Reed has worked with and been covered by Ed

Howell on many occasions for the past 15 years. He said, "Ed found his call in being the guy to carefully report the news day-in and day-out. He has spent his lifetime focused on getting the story right for those who depend on him for their news." That is high praise from a state legislator.

Danny Cain, former county extension director, admires Howell's zealous approach to community news and said, "He represents the 'gold standard' for what any member of the media should aspire to achieve...His tireless commitment to excellence has cemented the role of The Daily Mountain Eagle as the

centerpiece of local news communications."

Ed Howell has done it all. In addition to his journalistic awards and accomplishments, he was a member of the Hamilton Kiwanis Club and Kiwanian of the Year in 1995; coordinated publicity and raised funds in several counties to help build the Weldy Home for Children near Winfield; developed and raised funds for Newspapers in Education in Marion County; and his extensive coverage and dynamic explanations led to the creation of E-911 system in Marion County, to name only a few of his extra-curricular achievements.



2026 APA Media Summit | Agenda
Friday, Feb. 13 | Embassy Suites | Montgomery, AL

8:30 a.m. Registration Desk Open

9 to 10:30 a.m. **Program 1: Making Your Integrity Visible** Capital Ballroom
Mollie Muchna, Trusting News

Journalists don't get credit for any decisions, policies or practices that the audience can't see. So, how easy is it for your audience to understand your ethical principles? Your funding? How you work to be fair in your coverage? How seriously you take accuracy? How you cover topics like crime or politics? This session will walk through why and how journalists can shine a light on their credibility and integrity — and value to the community.

10 to 11:30 a.m. **Past President's Brunch** Salon D
Nominating Committee

10:45 to 12 p.m. **Impress The Interviewer/Meet the Publisher** Atrium
Publishers, editors and special guests will be seated at tables in atrium and are available to meet with groups of students or one-one-one for questions and discussion.

12 to 1:30 p.m. **Lifetime Achievement/Emerging Journalist** Embassy Ballroom
Awards Luncheon | Membership Meeting,
Installation of Officers

1:30 to 3:00 p.m. **Program 2: AI Workshop for Sales Pros** Capital Ballroom
Shannon Kinney, Dream Local Digital

In this interactive session, Shannon will review the top ways you can work smarter, not harder, and leverage AI for every step of the sales process. Then, we'll break into small groups and work on sales research together leveraging free tools and the tips you learned. You will come away with pro tips and the understanding and experience to execute them on your own to increase your sales effectiveness.

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