

Kibler's Hall Of Fame Status Deserved

Local journalism is important.

When it comes to what you need to be informed on what's going on in your community, your local newspaper — whether it be the traditional print product or online — should play a major role in your life (if we don't say so ourselves).

That's why Harrisonburg High School is so lucky to have Valerie Kibler, the journalism adviser for the school's nationally recognized Newsstreak student newspaper. And, on April 26, the rest of the state will learn the value of what Kibler brings to this crazy career when she's inducted into the Virginia High School Hall of Fame as part of its 14-member 2020 class.

Kibler is no rookie. She's been advising school newspapers for more than 30 years, starting in Southwest Virginia before making her way to the Friendly City. Much like the seasoned (and salty) ink-stained veterans of this trade, she's seen the changes during that time.

"There are so many more ways ... to report," she said.

The newspaper she advises has followed suit, with a top-notch website and social media accounts spread over cyberspace.

She's learned a lot as well, maybe just as much as her students. She's seen the profession change along with the perception of student journalism on the high school level. One of the many things Kibler has learned over the years is you cannot discount teenagers' opinions or label them as immature.

"I've seen kids in situations make more mature decisions than adults, whether it's to run a story or not, or how to report it," Kibler said.

Much like their professional counterparts, those staffers at the Newsstreak are learning to make tough decisions that aren't going to make everybody happy, they're learning to ask the tough questions and, probably most importantly, they're learning how to make a viable and important product that students at Harrisonburg High School should be reading to stay informed.

You've heard all the talk about this business. It's hard to ignore the buyouts and the veterans leaving either of their own volition or at the behest of others. But, at the same time, there is a future when it comes to journalism. It's important and will remain important for decades to come.

That's thanks to people like Kibler, who are making sure the next generation of journalists is ready to heed the call.

We've Reached The (Larger) Tipping Point

Never worked in the service industry, eh?

Never spent a shift slinging drinks from behind a bar, refilling sodas or balancing two trays of food on your shoulders while walking out of a busy kitchen, slicing and dicing your way through an obstacle course of tables, chairs and unruly kids (and adults)?

Oh, boy. You don't know what you're missing.

Yes, it's a thankless job, but some of the best years of our lives were spent doing exactly those things. Struggling through college or the early portions of our post-college life and looking for a little extra folding money to help offset rent, college loans and/or car payments, we made lifelong friends in the go-out-back-and-complain-about-everything world of working in a bar or restaurant. (And, boy, could we complain.)

And we did it for next to nothing.

We did it with a smile and great attitude because we knew we were depending on those tips. Ever try explaining to a customer unhappy with their food that they should still drop 20% your way if the service — you know, your job — was good? Yeah, us neither. That was frowned upon back in the day, even if enough customers didn't know how the whole tipping process worked.

Yes, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam's decree Monday includes new policies that mean restaurants will be limited to only carryout, curbside pickup or delivery. Missing in there is the front-of-house help — the waitstaff, the bartenders, the door hosts. You know who these people are, they're the ones who depend on your tips to pay the rent and put food on their plates.

Surely, we hope, local restaurants will put the waitstaff to good use during this time, treating curbside cars like tables full of people and making the process as assembly-line as possible with multiple people filling multiple orders to keep the cars moving.

That's our hope, at least.

But reality may not match up. We expect some of our service industry friends to lose their jobs — hopefully temporarily. We expect the ones who will be lucky enough to stay employed might expect the tips they depend on to drop.

So now is the time to be a little more generous when it comes to tipping. Twenty percent? If you can, up that a bit. That person delivering pizza to your driveway? Now is when you should toss a bigger bone their way.

Don't worry, restaurant service industry. There are plenty of us out there who graduated from that much-missed school of hard knocks and, trust us, you know darn well we'll make sure we'll give all we can.

Now comes the tough part — convincing the rest.

COVID-19 Transparency Needed From Our Health District

You don't have to dig deep into the big box of clichés to uncover "like pulling teeth." It's used to describe something that's hard to do, something that takes a lot of work, something that proves to be more difficult than it should be.

To describe getting any sort of information out of the Virginia Department of Health's Central Shenandoah District — which spans from Rockingham to Bath and Rockbridge counties — with that adage would not be apt.

Teeth eventually can be pulled.

But in the lock-jawed local world of COVID-19 cases, the Central Shenandoah Health District is only releasing piecemeal information, giving the general public little notice of anything. Last week, it sent out a release confirming one patient in the five-county, five-city district had died from the virus.

Then nothing. No county of residence, no city of residence, no information at all to keep the public aware.

Then, on Saturday, it sent out a release saying that a long-term care facility in Harrisonburg was being investigated for a possible outbreak. That was it. If you had a family member in any of the facilities located in the city, no doubt your mind was sent racing.

Thankfully, employees of Accordius Health nursing home in Harrisonburg — putting their jobs on the line in very uncertain financial times — were willing to speak with News-Record veteran reporter Pete DeLea. They knew something was wrong, claiming a shortage of personal protective equipment. We later discovered from family members that one resident at the facility had died from the disease. On Thursday, the health district confirmed via a press release that Accordius is indeed the facility with the outbreak.

Five days after the initial announcement.

No employee should have to put their jobs on the line to do what is right, and when the Central Shenandoah Health District offers up no information, leading to rumors, innuendo and — even worse — possible panic, it is not doing its job to help fight this fast-spreading coronavirus.

The lack of transparency is especially tough to swallow when, last week, the Thomas Jefferson Health District, just across the mountain in Charlottesville, held an online roundtable where it

was revealed that African Americans in the district were disproportionately contracting the virus. The VDH website breaks down the demographics, but at the state level, not locally. We applaud the Jefferson District for keeping the public informed.

In the Central Shenandoah District — with now 226 total cases, according to the VDH website, with 119 in Harrisonburg and 69 in Rockingham County — we just get crickets broken by the occasional "no further information will be provided."

In a Zoom meeting with U.S. Sen. Mark Warner, the News-Record brought up these concerns. Thankfully, Warner saw where we were coming from, as did his colleague and fellow Democratic U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine during a phone call.

"I think the greater transparency, the more we'll be able to then devise the strategies we need to get through the public health emergency," Kaine said. "Not knowing information raises anxieties."

It also helps spread the virus.

It also raises ire and puts us, the public, in a guessing-game scenario that is dangerous.

"I think we should be giving more guidance on how HIPAA applies in this kind of pandemic," Warner said. "And it doesn't make sense if one health district is providing a different set of information than another health district."

No, it doesn't. Keeping the public in the dark will never make any sense, and certainly not now with lives at stake.