

Out of habit, I began typing in my password to check my work email from home when, just before it was rejected, I realized there was no work email any more. And, sadly, I think that is how many people are going to, perhaps slowly, understand what the loss of a newspaper like The Packet & Times feels like – what it means to me, to you and to our community.

For me, like many, today is a day to grieve. I don't mean to be melodramatic. However, the reality is, The Packet was like family; I know it sounds trite, but for those of us who invested our time and tears and talents into the newspaper and the community it served, we share a bond that is deep.

My affiliation with The Packet began when I was in public school and continued through high school – not as a carrier, like so many, but as someone who, literally, cleaned the toilets. Working for the family janitorial business meant I was often at the old Colborne Street building at night, where the air was rank with smoke and ringing with curse words I had yet to be introduced to. I remember meeting Steve Milton, who I idolized for his local sports coverage, and being in awe of the man and the job. It sparked in me an interest in journalism that continues to burn bright.

When I went off to university to obtain my degree and learn everything I could possibly learn about journalism, I never thought I would return to Orillia. I had big dreams of working at big newspapers covering big-league teams. But after working at a weekly paper in Amherstburg for 18 months, the sports editor job opened up in my hometown. When my dad called me to tell me about the opening, I was lukewarm to the idea. However, I had just married and had plans for kids and the opportunity was a good one. “Let's go to Orillia for a year and then we will move on,” I told my wife at the time.

So, we moved back to Orillia in 1991 – for a year that has lasted three decades. It is a decision I have never regretted. I fell back in love with Orillia, that same town I couldn't wait to escape. I grew into my role as sports editor, that role Steve Milton once had. I had the good fortune to be promoted several times and enjoyed each new role and the opportunity to help inform and shape the community that I called home.

In 2005, as the industry changed and contracted, I made a difficult decision to leave The Packet – sort of. I left the security of a full-time job to become a freelancer or, if you will, a private contractor. It gave me the opportunity to pick and choose my work, to have a measure of control over my schedule and life and, most importantly, to work at home where I could be invested and involved in the life of my kids. I never stopped working for The Packet. My 'final' day as a full-time employee was a Friday; on the Sunday evening, I began my freelance career and found myself back in the editor's chair, working with reporters and designing and editing the Monday edition – a gig I loved until the decision was made to eliminate the Monday edition.

In more recent years, I have gradually, not purposefully, worked more and more writing news, editorials and sports for The Packet. As layoffs dealt the paper crippling blow after crippling blow, it did provide an opportunity of sorts for me to do more. And I enjoyed it.

Here's the thing: Most of us think we're going to change the world at big papers in big markets. But it didn't take me long to realize that at the local level, at a paper like The Packet, you have a chance to make an even bigger impact. I am beyond grateful for the good fortune I have had since 1991 to tell a little part of the story of Orillia ... stories about young athletes, about inspiring people, about hard-

working and industrious citizens, about injustice and unfairness, about epic victories and life-altering defeats. It was my great honour to be a little part of it.

Only in the days and weeks to come will we begin to realize the depth of the loss of the paper that has told Orillia's story for more than 140 years. When someone posted a comment about the citizen of the year Monday, it brought tears to my eyes. I hadn't thought about how the loss of The Packet meant the end of that tradition started by legendary publisher C.H. Hale. The award, like the paper, is dead. There will also be no more stories about your children's sports feats, no more stories about the machinations of city council, no more stories about important events and meetings, no more wedding announcements, no more obituaries, no further editorials or columns meant to educate and entertain, no more letters to the editor that provided a barometer on community issues ... this list could go on and on.

It is a sad day. But I choose today to be thankful and grateful. My kids have known stability because of The Packet. They have a roof over their head and food on their table because of it. The opportunities opened to me personally and to others who have worked at The Packet are innumerable; there are people working today at the profession's highest levels who got their start at 31 Colborne Street. Many of them, I was fortunate enough to have worked with. I have met some of my very best friends while working at The Packet. It has become a second family to me and so many others. And the loss hurts.

Monday's sudden closing of The Packet and so many other venerable, old papers was shocking. No opportunity was afforded us to thank the community that supported it so faithfully over the years. That is what this is meant to do, because without you, there would not have been a Packet & Times. I feel bad that, ultimately, we were unable to keep it going. But please know it was not from lack of effort or lack of desire, lack of passion or lack of love for our community. The Packet was profitable. I am proud of that. But it was much more than that: it was as much a part of this community's fabric as you and me and our forefathers. It was an institution whose loss is profound and deep. I mourn it as I would the loss of a cherished friend.