

Bengal's Purr still hot off the presses

Lewiston High's paper, published since 1927, continues to draw students to journalism

By Kerri Sandaine of the Tribune

The staff at the Bengal's Purr has been putting Lewiston High School's student newspaper to bed this week.

They refer to it as "rest" week, but senior journalism students said it's far from a relaxing experience.

"Sometimes it's really hectic and people are really stressed out," said Britnee Packwood, 18, co-managing editor. "Every now and again, it's nice and calm and there's no talking, and we're all heads down in our work, but that rarely happens."

While many high schools no longer offer journalism or publish student newspapers, Lewiston is still pumping out the Purr every four to six weeks. The award-winning paper has been in existence since 1927, when it was established by the student council.

"We're pretty lucky because we have administrative support," said adviser Patrick Shannon. "One of the reasons this program has had so much success is my predecessor, Marian Adams, fought for it at the state level, and the state recognizes it as a core class."

The other high school paper rolling off the press in this region is Moscow's Bear Press, which was started this year. To date, eight issues have been printed, said Harry Evans, the 17-year-old editor. The previous student publication there was discontinued a year or so ago, he said.

The Purr's circulation is 1,500 for seven regular issues, and 3,500 for special Golden Throne and homecoming editions, Shannon said.

About 15 students write stories, take photographs, edit copy, sell advertising, design graphics and put together pages. The seniors on the staff handle most of the writing.

"I like the end result," said the 17-year-old editor-in-chief, Beth Mann. "We've become like a close family. It's really cool to put it together and look around and see the staff and know we did it together."

Getting the paper ready for publication takes 20 to 30 hours during the week it goes to press, said staff members. The latest issue will be in the hands of students and teachers today.

"Seeing people read it is just awesome," Packwood said.

The Bengal's Purr has a long, rich history of offering students the option of becoming skilled in technical writing and writing to an audience using subject matter that appeals to LHS students, said Superintendent Joy Rapp.

"It also gives students hands-on experience in understanding what it takes to produce a newspaper. Students learn to accept responsibility for what they write and for assuring that the facts are accurate."

Stuart Stromberg, 18, co-managing editor, said he enjoys writing, copy editing and problem solving. Writing to the "lowest common denominator" doesn't appeal to him.

"I can't do that. I just love words too much."

Last year the seniors wouldn't let him use the word "conundrum," he said. This year it's the name of his column.

Stromberg is interested in politics, law and medical research, and he wants to attend Tulane University in New Orleans. Mann wants to go into journalism and graphic design, and she would like to attend Columbia University in New York City.

Reading about the challenges in the newspaper industry has made choosing a career path more difficult, Packwood said. She has her sights set on the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, and plans to major in music education and minor in journalism.

"I really struggled with it. I decided I had to be realistic and choose a career where there will always be a job."

Stromberg said the current economic woes have affected ad sales at the Purr, which is a concern to the staff. "What if we go the way of the big publications? We get no funding from the school. This issue went from 10 to 12 pages because of ad sales."

The Purr is a tradition that needs to continue, the editors agreed. Working on a school newspaper has been a good learning experience that has taught them to handle deadline pressure and strive for perfection, they said.

"This prepares you for almost anything, and it forces you to be responsible," Mann said. "Our adviser pushes us. He expects the best from us."

Trying isn't good enough anymore, Shannon recently told the kids. It's time to do it right and quit making mistakes, he said during a lecture on fundamentals.

"I hammer ethics and law," Shannon said. "I try to make a lot of situations into teaching moments so we avoid illegal or unethical situations, but that doesn't mean we don't push the envelope. It's a fine line. You have to be consistent, fair and balanced."