



Building workers pay tribute to their dead colleagues.

## Rising Sun nets the Pulitzer

Born of the union movement, the *Las Vegas Sun* has been at the forefront of hard-hitting social justice journalism. In April its multimedia package about construction deaths on the Strip won a Pulitzer prize, writes **Drex Heikes**

The story is the thing, yes. But at the *Las Vegas Sun*, it is hardly the only thing. Alexandra Berzon's dogged reporting last year unearthed a remarkable story about how poor safety practices and lax government oversight contributed to a rash of construction-worker deaths on the Las Vegas Strip. But that story would never have been told if the newspaper had not made a series of bold and wrenching changes over the previous three years.

A brief history:

The *Sun* was a small afternoon daily in 2005, failing commercially and locked in a joint operating agreement with the more profitable morning newspaper, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

The *Sun*'s publisher, Brian Greenspun, and his top editor, Michael Kelley, hit on an idea. Greenspun wanted to make the *Sun* a one-section insert in the *Review-Journal* – an idea many found a little nutty. The two newspapers had been bitter rivals for 55 years. Now they would be delivered in one package?

Kelley's idea was even nuttier. Yes, make that change, he said, and then turn the print version of the *Sun* into a new kind of newspaper.

Kelley wanted to institutionalise the very things that budget cuts were squeezing out of US newsrooms: enterprise stories, investigations and analysis. He believed Las Vegas had a niche market of serious readers who were not being well served by Nevada media.

Breaking news would shift to the web, in Greenspun's view. Hard news junkies could get their fix online, minute by minute.

The plan was risky. Who knew if readers wanted their paper to become six to 12 wide-open pages every day of magazine-style journalism? Newspapers have been going in the opposite direction for decades. Shorter is better. Lighter is better. Chop chop.

But under Kelley, the *Sun* zagged.

The two newspapers agreed to change their operating agreement. The *Sun* scheduled its relaunch for the northern autumn of 2005.

Kelley had a blueprint for the transition. He would first find veteran editors

with records of producing the kind of journalism he wanted. Those editors could then help him find and teach a cadre of bright reporters who aspired to this type of work.

The plan worked, eventually. But it wasn't a straight line. It turned out the country wasn't brimming with editors who had the necessary skill set and a desire to uproot their lives to follow a dream of building a boutique newspaper in the Mojave Desert.

Kelley did succeed in luring Tom Gorman, a 30-year veteran of the *Los Angeles Times*, and Bill Gaspard, one of the nation's pre-eminent newspaper designers. Gaspard brought a bundle of design talent with him, including Chris Morris, then running the graphics department at the *Dallas Morning News*.

The search for other editors moved slowly – the search for reporters even more so.

The 2005 relaunch date came and went without many staff changes. The new *Sun* read a lot like the old *Sun*.

Gradually, however, one hire at a time through 2006 and 2007, the *Sun* was reborn with editors and reporters who shared three traits. They had strong critical thinking skills, they loved to dig, and as writers they heard the music. The *Sun* seated reporters in the newsroom alongside the grey-haired editors, up-ending the traditional newspaper practice of sitting the two species separately.

The better to coach, my dear.

The construction-deaths story arose just as the *Sun* newsroom was beginning to settle into its new groove.

Berzon came aboard in December 2007 for her first regular newspaper job. Told about the curious string of deaths on Strip building sites, she immediately began digging, which meant wrestling with state agencies, labour unions and construction companies, none of which co-operated.

She reported both vertically and horizontally, digging deeply for the facts about each death and working broadly so that she could set scenes and provide the anecdotes essential to narrative journalism. ▶

► By late winter, she was working on the first drafts of a two-part series that would open the newspaper's coverage.

Those first stories reported that the rapid pace of construction created shoddy safety practices that contributed to the deaths. Contractors had overloaded their building sites and demanded speed and long hours from workers because construction deadlines loomed. Missing them meant financial penalties.

Berzon reported that Nevada safety regulators, which have a history of cosy relations with the building industry, ultimately blamed the workers themselves for their own deaths. Labour unions, thankful that their workers had jobs, did not protest against the safety conditions because they did not want to aggravate the builders.

As the stories developed, the *Sun* teamed Berzon with Gaspard and his graphic genius, Morris, to produce elegantly simple drawings showing how each fatal accident occurred.

Tyson Evans, a major player in the *Sun's* makeover of its website under the direction of online guru Rob Curley, worked with Morris to create an interactive graphic for online. Readers could roll over a building site or a photo of a victim to see a pop-up drawing and a text description of the accident and a synopsis of the outcome of the state's investigation.

Berzon also collaborated with Zach Wise, a brilliant videographer who had come to the *Sun* only months earlier. (Wise and Evans have since moved on to *The New York Times*.)

Wise is a storyteller with strong sensibilities that he communicates even while remaining invisible to viewers. He put together a compelling five-minute video to accompany Berzon's stories online. It was concise and disturbing.

*Sun* print editions designer Dave Wilson, using powerful photos by Sam Morris, created an arresting front page to kick off the two-part package in March 2008. Evans amplified that vision online.

Most surprising to us print dinosaurs was that many online viewers looked at Wise's first-day video before reading the stories. We had expected the video to enhance the package. We didn't expect it to be the entry point bringing readers to the text.

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Reader reaction was immediate and overwhelming – and here is a major lesson of the *Sun's* story: The newspaper's website was flooded with responses, as were Berzon's email and voicemail. Online interaction became a tool in her reporting. It fed many of the 51 additional stories Berzon wrote during the year, stories that ultimately forced contractors to make sweeping safety improvements.

After the improvements, the deaths stopped. Twelve workers had died in 18 months. Not one has died since June 2008.

Looking back, the construction-deaths stories said three things about our evolving industry:

- ◆ Journalism of this kind remains possible in this era of shrinking resources if newsroom leaders make a commitment to it, and that might mean completely rethinking their newspapers.
- ◆ A gifted reporter can flourish even as a newcomer if her newspaper gives her time to dig and teams her with veteran editors.
- ◆ Online packaging is the new black.

The construction-deaths story grabbed readers because it was presented in a compelling way, starting with narrative storytelling and following through with strong online video and interactive graphics.

The story found legs because online interaction provided the reporter with new tools for obtaining information.

**Drex Heikes**, second-ranking editor at the *Las Vegas Sun*, assigned and edited the stories on construction deaths. The *Las Vegas Sun* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service this year for its investigation of construction deaths



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