

Journalist Dan Shaw completes the latest chapter in a career of telling stories

Editor's note: Dan Shaw is retiring in May from Monroe County Community College, where he has been a journalism professor and adviser of the student newspaper for 11 years. Before that, he was managing editor of the Monroe News from 2005-2008.

My life has been a series of chapters, each involving a new beginning in a new setting.

Each chapter started with hope and anticipation, along with a healthy dose of anxiety and apprehension. I was moving my family to another city, joining another newsroom, learning another community.

One thread connecting the chapters was story-telling.

From my first job as a reporter for the student newspaper at Oregon State University to my last job teaching journalism at MCCC, I've been telling stories and helping others tell stories.

That's pretty close to 50 years of gathering facts, feelings, thoughts, and ideas and weaving them into narratives that inform, amuse, entertain — and hopefully not bore.

My personal narrative includes stops at a dozen newspapers in seven states, spread over 32 years. I never tired of telling stories, seeing each new community as empty pages in a book. Oregon, Washington, Illinois, Indiana, West Virginia, Ohio and finally Michigan — thousands of stories covering communities spread across the nation.

I've enjoyed just as much helping students at MCCC learn what it takes to be journalists.

I came into the newspaper world in the early 1970s near the pinnacle of the "objective era," when telling stories required leaving myself out of the narrative, emphasizing accuracy, balance and fairness.

I watched as first "literary journalism," then "advocacy journalism," then "citizen journalism" and "personal brand journalism" laid siege to the concept of objective journalism.

I came to agree that objectivity is impossible. We're human, and we're all captives of our subconscious minds, the sum total of our past experiences. We can't turn that off, no matter how hard we try.

But I still think objectivity is a worthy goal. I think the best journalists still search for it, knowing that in the end they'll fail, but that readers will be better served by the journey. It's what makes their work valuable, setting them apart from the noise of the Internet.

At the same time, many of the changes in journalism have been positive, helping writers tell more compelling stories.

A more personal approach helps readers connect with the writer and allows the writer more license to explore paths to truth.

I'm retiring at a time when journalism is more important than ever, and when it's under attack by people who don't seem to understand that.

While I'm worried about the future, I'm also hopeful. It's true, we're going through a tumultuous restructuring of the business models that support journalism. And at the same time, the polarization of our country threatens to split the world of journalism down the middle.

But I think more and more people are seeing the need for responsible journalism, and are beginning to understand that it's worth paying for.

I spend a lot of time with young people, and I'm confident that journalism is in good hands. There are plenty of smart, curious, thoughtful people willing to tackle the challenge of story-telling in the digital world.

Many of the chapters in my life ended with a column like this. A farewell to a community I had served for two or three or four years, and a thank you for accepting me into their midst.

This one is a little different, though.

I'm not leaving MCCC to go on to another community, to start another chapter in my career.

I'm not transferring — I'm retiring.

That's a new job altogether, and it's a little scary.

This also is the longest I've been in a single position — by far. I've had more time to develop deeper friendships.

It's also different because MCCC is a special place, full of talented faculty, staff and administrators. Just as important as their skill and dedication is their commitment to each other also is vital. This is not only a place you can be proud to work, it's a place you can genuinely enjoy working.

Most of all, what sets this chapter apart is the students. I've been privileged to get to know hundreds of young people. They've enriched my life in countless ways.

I've watched them explore their potential, struggle with obstacles, reach down for the determination to keep going, and light up with joy when they succeed.

Witnessing them beginning to write their own stories has been amazing.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to my colleagues at MCCC, but also to the students who have made my time here so special.

