

# Industry Pioneers

*The free-paper industry has a rich history. And, many people from the Midwest played an important role in its development and growth. The caring, sharing and support members offer each other make this an industry like no other. In this section we will share features from people past and present who helped create the unusual dynamic we enjoy today.*

*If you know of a person or company that should be featured, please contact Lee at [director@mfc.org](mailto:director@mfc.org)*

**This month we are featuring Jim and Cathy Crosby whose dream started in the basement of the family home where the Valley Shopper became a reality.**

In 1967 Jim and Cathy Crosby started a shopper in West Des Moines. Shoppers weren't exactly new to the greater Des Moines market. In fact, Jim was familiar with three publications in the area – the South Side, Northwest and Northeast shoppers. Seeing an opportunity, Jim came to Cathy and said he thought they needed to start a shopper. He thought his background in selling quality printing and Cathy's secretarial background would be a good fit. And together with two small children in tow (ages 3 and 2 months), they started a plan to launch a publication.

They were going to need some seed money to get started, so Jim and Cathy conducted a feasibility study. They did this by driving around in Jim's car, making note of the businesses that were there and assigning an expected ad size to each. For example, Jim felt the banker was good for a page and the hardware store a half. He rolled his projections into a proposal and made a presentation to the local banker. It must have been a great proposal because he walked out with a \$2,500 loan which was a huge amount of money back in the day.

The Crosby's named their publication The Valley Shopper. For the first five years the shopper was located in the basement of their home. Cathy and Jim were the only two employees. Zoning laws being what they were they couldn't put the business name on their garage entrance – so they had a sign that just read "The Shopper". People found them and the business grew.

Their first issue they included a welcome message that let the readers know what they could expect from Jim, Cathy, and the Valley Shopper and stated that they hoped all would accept the publication and welcome it into their home.

Jim took to the streets selling and Cathy handled all things clerical. Her slogan was - I'm here night and day.... call anytime! One morning at 5AM the phone rang. She breathlessly answered it: "Valley Shopper" and the voice on the other end asked "am I too late?". She assured the gentleman that he wasn't but went on to say "But, you're a bit too early!" They both had a good laugh over that one. You may wonder what was so urgent that he needed to call at 5AM...he had a sow that he wanted to sell and she was set to farrow.

Remember I said this was a family business....here's proof. One day Cathy was changing her infant and the phone rang. The three year old answered the phone: "Valley Shopper". Apparently the caller indicated they wanted to place an ad. The young child said "just a moment while I get a want ad card". When Cathy finally broke free and took over the call, she let the caller know that the "receptionist" was only 3 years old. The caller was amused to say the least – and complimentary as to what a good job she did handling the call.

The family worked hard and the business prospered. After five years, the Crosby's rented a building and added some staff members. One of the first people they hired was someone to build a carrier system.

Of course family was the cornerstone of the shopper industry and the Crosby's were no different than any others. Everyone had a job to do. Both daughters had routes to deliver. One day the girls had a dance lesson so Cathy decided to start delivering their routes for them. She happened to be driving her Lincoln Continental. While making a delivery a gentleman stopped her and said, "Is that your car?!?".

"Yes, it is" she told him. "And, if you delivered The Shopper you'd have one too!"

Years later a lady called late one day to say she had yet to receive her paper. Jim took the call and said "no problem, we'll drop one off on the way home". When he arrived at her house with the paper she was shocked. She said "you mean to tell me a publisher would make a home delivery?!". Jim responded "this one would!"

Employees were like family. And, they were treated as such. Cathy proudly shared that they never had to fire or lay anyone off. Most interesting to me was a story she shared about the time they achieved their first 100-page paper. This was in the early 1980s. Cathy suggested that they give each employee a crisp \$100 bill to celebrate such an achievement so they did. The staff was stunned at their generosity.

Industry associations and the friendships made through them were an important part of the Crosby's success, too. Both Cathy and Jim enjoyed getting together with other publishers to share ideas and learn new ways to grow their business. The national conventions were especially looked forward to, in large part, because of their locations. Most shopper publishers were from the heart of the Midwest and the east coast. So, meeting locations tended to be in warm locales. The Crosby's made a lot of friends over the years and Cathy still stays in touch with many of them.

Jim served as the president of NAAP (which is now ACP) in 1981-1982. Back in the day, when technology was lacking, if a member had a problem, you flew out to them and helped them solve it. A member in North Dakota was struggling. Even though it was wintertime, and he wasn't feeling the best, Jim boarded a plane and helped them solve their issues. While there and immediately upon getting home he felt even worse. He went straight to the hospital and had major heart surgery.

Cathy shared that Jim was very creative. Good with the written word and very, very particular. He won many honors at state and national for his award-winning ideas. He was one of the first publishers to organize a football contest that encouraged readers to go into every store and complete an entry. Jim did more than just devise the contest. He went to a local bakery and purchased empty bakery boxes, decorated them, and supplied to the stores so they would all have an attractive ballot box. He took the same amount of care with the many ad award entries they submitted over the years.

Another contest that brought up a fond memory for Cathy was when the West Des Moines Chamber had a contest to decorate your door for Christmas. Jim covered the door in red paper and greenery and adorned it with a large Christmas stocking. Cathy took it one step further by adding the words "Sock It to Me Santa!" That saying was a nod to Laugh-In, a very popular TV show at the time. They won the contest.

Cathy shared other interesting memories too. One time a customer told her that he wanted his classified ad in the front of the paper. Cathy handed him a copy of the paper and indicated he should open it up. He turned it so that back was to him and began to thumb through back to front. She pointed that out and said many readers went through the paper the same way. She told him that they didn't classify their ads to ensure people went through the full paper. He ended up agreeing there was no bad position.

Another time a group of school kids came through to tour their facility. One young man (9 to 10 years old) commented that they must have a lot of money. Cathy shared with him that there were a lot of costs associated with putting out a paper. Rent, taxes, wages, supplies, printing, delivery fees, etc. After all of that you are left with “profit”. She asked if he know what “profit” was. And, he said “yes, that’s the man in the Good Book!”

The last cute story I’ll share right now involved a time when Jim had taken the negatives to the Perry Daily Chief to have the paper printed. The job was done, he put the negatives on the front passenger seat and loaded the printed papers into the back of the van he was borrowing from a local businessman. On the way home he threw a cigarette out the window. An ember flew back in and set the paper on fire. Jim was able to extinguish the fire without getting too badly injured but the papers were a loss. So, he headed back to Perry and asked them to reprint. The papers were a little late that week!

In 1981 a businessman from California who previously bought and sold funeral homes to build chains branched into the shopper industry. This person ended up buying all four of the shoppers surrounding Des Moines and Jim and Cathy ran the group. Unfortunately, Jim passed away while on Christmas holiday in Hawaii in 1986. As you can imagine Cathy and the girls miss him very much. Cathy wonders what life would be like had he lived and wonders if they would still be in the publishing business. As she said, you have to change with the times – so she knows the business would look different. I have no doubt the Crosby’s would have changed with the times and continued to be leaders in the industry.