

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.

MFCP lost a good friend this month. JOEL KLAASSEN, a true pioneer in the print industry died on June 29th in Decatur, GA. His story is one of inspiration and you will want to read it.

We would like to feature many more pioneers. Do you have someone in mind? If so, please reach out via email to director@mfc.org with the appropriate contact information. We'll take it from there!



Joel Klaassen A True Believer in MFCP

By Joey Young

HILLSBORO- Joel Klaassen has been in the print industry pretty much his entire life. He swept floors and helped with the press at the old Hillsboro Star-Journal as a child, helped start a free competitor to the Wichita Eagle called the Wichita Sun that lasted for about two years, and eventually started his own free newspaper in Marion County called the Hillsboro Free Press.

Klaassen, frustrated with the Kansas Press Association and several of their members who didn't like his inclusion as a free publication into their society started looking for alternative groups he could join to be among like-minded individuals which is how he found the Midwest Free Community Newspapers group.

He quickly started attending, vocally appreciating the free conferences and training the group was providing. Despite the over six-hour drive from Hillsboro to Des Moines, IA many times the whole Free Press staff would accompany Klaassen to conferences.

Never a serious man, Klaassen was constantly telling jokes to staff members and folks he met through MFCP. A saying that is uttered in the Hillsboro office to this day is:

“Two heads are better than one, unless one is cabbage,” which was a favorite saying of Klaassen's when talking about collaboration on projects.

After several years of attending the conferences and interacting with the many members in MFCP, Klaassen joined the MFCP Board of Directors where he served for over a decade, often driving the furthest each time to participate in board meetings and conferences.

He often touted that the Hillsboro Free Press was the southernmost newspaper in the association and even managed to get a MFCP Board Meeting located in Kansas City so he wouldn't have to drive so far for once.

Klaassen always believed scale and availability made his product the best in his county and through MFCP he found a group of people who believed the same. Many of his favorite memories were from interactions he made at MFCP over the years.

Eventually, Klaassen sold his interest in his company to Joey Young and moved into semi-retirement, often coming to the office four-five times a week anyway. He and Young would travel together to MFCP conferences while they could.

In 2017, Klaassen was diagnosed with a rare brain disease that has robbed him of his mobility and forced him to eventually move to Atlanta, GA where he and his wife, Nancy, can live with their daughter and near better health facilities than he could get in rural Kansas.

Klaassen is a member of the Kansas Newspaper Hall of Fame and a 2021 recipient of the President's Memorial Award for Distinguished Service from MFCP.

By Joey Young who would have interviewed Joel for this project but due to his health he would be unable to respond to the questions. There is much I have missed with this report as it is based on some loose notes I have taken for Hall of Fame inductee presentations and memory. Joel loved MFCP and made it clear to me when I purchased his stake in the company that it was an organization to remain active in.

