

AFTER 38 YEARS AT HERALD-CITIZEN, MARY JO DENTON RETIRES

by Amy Davis

MARY JO DENTON RETIRES

Long-time crime reporter Mary Jo Denton, who retires this month, types away on one of her final days at work. Her byline first appeared in the Herald-Citizen in March 1975. Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen



COOKEVILLE — Her byline is linked with some of the Upper Cumberland's most controversial and shocking stories.

Murders, thefts, drug busts and crooked politicians — all brought to light by long-time Herald-Citizen crime reporter Mary Jo Denton.

But after this month, it's a byline readers will see no longer.

After 38 years — and approximately 20,000 stories published — Mary Jo is retiring.

No more will she settle into her cubicle at 6 a.m., ear to the police scanner while going through emails, faxes and online news sources, followed by calls to the fire department, ambulance service and Tennessee Highway Patrol.

Gone are the days of her morning rounds to the sheriff's department, county court clerk's office and police department for the latest crime reports.

And that morning deadline?

Beaten.

For good.

"I used to love the deadline," she said. "It was like a race, and I could win it. And I loved doing it — competing every day to see how much we could get done."

Which usually turned out to be two to three stories a day.

She said the number one goal for a story has always been to "get it right." Number two was to get it done fast — before the deadline.

Which isn't always an easy thing to do.

"You don't have a lot of luxury time to think," she said, pointing out that rarely has she spent more than 30 minutes on a particular story after getting all the facts gathered.

But sometimes information is hard to come by — like when a source needs to be tracked down.

But those sources — the people in the community she has grown to depend on each day — have grown to expect a call from Mary Jo, particularly if anything "big or bloody" has happened overnight.

She seems to have a radar for that kind of thing.

And when the day does present a big story — something she knows everyone in Putnam County will be talking about that afternoon — it's a rush like no other.

A challenge she's always thrived upon.

"I start calling people," she said. "I think, 'We have to have it,' so I will wake people up if I have to — and I've done it many times."

Then it's her against the clock — that maddeningly short window of time before her story goes across the editor's desk and then to the page designers before finally ending up in the pressroom downstairs.

And then when she sees it in print that very afternoon...

"I pray that I got it right!" she said. "Because you have to do it in such a hurry-up fashion."

It's a pressure few understand, she noted.

"Hardly anybody in the world works under such a deadline as we do," she said. "I can't imagine the luxury of having a whole day to produce something. And some people have a whole week or a month in their work — but we don't."

Which is why the relationships she's built over the years have been so valuable.

"The number one thing in this business is to build relationships," she said. "Many of the people we work with learn about the pressure of the deadline here, and they will help you."

Even if it's a story some would rather not see in the paper.

But — like she once told a city official — "I'm a tape recorder, not a cheerleader."

And not only has it been her job to keep the public informed, it's been her passion.

"We have a big responsibility here," she said. "A lot rides on people knowing what's going on. That's just how government works (in a democracy)... And if you have somebody in an official position who's doing something wrong, the people who put him there need to know it."

But a good story is not just what readers "need to know about" — it's what they "want to know about."

Like murders, no less.

"Everybody wants to know who was murdered and who murdered them," she said. "And they want to know all the details about it."

And with Mary Jo on the story, H-C readers know they'll get the answers they've come to expect over the past 38 years.

Ever since that day in March 1975, when her curiosity led the Overton County native away from the classroom at Tennessee Tech University (where she taught English) to the newspaper where her husband, Hal, worked as the sports editor.

"It sounded so interesting to me — so exciting and controversial," she said. "And I wanted to get into it."

She had earned a bachelor of arts degree in English from Berea College in Kentucky in 1967 and a master's degree from TTU in 1971 — but never had a journalism class.

Even so, she asked then-Herald-Citizen executive editor Charles Denning for a job.

“He and I have argued about this over the years because I heard him say ‘you can’t do this job,’ and he says he meant he didn’t think I’d like the job,” she said. “But to me it sounded like ‘you can’t do it — you’re incapable.’ So that made me want to do it even more! And he hired me, so the rest is history.”

Over the years she’s carried her notebook and pen to cover everything from crime to city and county government to education and has written plenty of feature stories in between.

“I’ve done everything except sports,” she said.

And, of course, she’s seen a lot of changes through the years. Not only in the community but in the newspaper business as well. For instance, when she first started, stories were written on a typewriter.

“And we could go fast on them,” she said. “You’d yank your story out when you got it done, go over it and mark things that needed to be corrected, and then it went to the typesetters (to be typed in newspaper format). Now, modern technology has removed several steps.”

She’s had her share of memorable stories, too, quickly pointing out the most memorable — that of the Oct. 19, 1998, assassination of Sen. Tommy Burks.

“Charles and I were talking about it just this week how unreal it still seems that a state senator was assassinated — and by his opponent,” she said.

It later came to be known as the H-C’s “story of the century” — and Mary Jo was the first to have it before any other news source.

“We found out about it about 10 o’clock that morning,” she said. “I just happened to be calling up at the sheriff’s department for nothing, and when I asked for the sheriff, they said he had gone up to Monterey to the Burks farm, and I thought, ‘Why would he do that?’ So I started digging around... and was able to call him. They had cell phones by then, and I asked, ‘Is it Tommy and is he dead?’”

The worst confirmed, she had minutes to write the story.

“I still can’t believe it,” she said.

Another memorable story was that of a young boy needing a liver transplant.

“He was 2 years old, I believe, and he was going to die without a liver transplant,” Mary Jo said. “So, we started doing stories, and the people in this county raised \$250,000 to send him to a hospital in Pennsylvania, where he got his transplant and lived four years.”

It’s been a long 38 years with plenty of energy and intensity, but Mary Jo has always loved her work.

Still does — and says it’s hard to comprehend retiring.

“It’s kind of sad to me because I enjoy working, but I realize I have to because of my health.”

Plus, it is “time to retire,” she said.

“I want some time to do other things — leisurely things.”

She said the main thing she will miss about reporting is the people she has worked with every day.

And, of course, seeing her byline in the paper.

But she was quick to point out that those who continue to cover the crime beat “will do a good job” and keep the public informed.

Just as she would.

Because the news never stops.

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Mary Jo Denton, right, talks police business with Bailey Darrow, who will be taking over the crime beat along with Herald-Citizen newcomer Brittany Stovall. Denton retires this month after an award-winning, 38-year career in journalism. Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen

*Read more about the History of Putnam Co., TN at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>