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COLUMN: Tragedy thrusts local journalist into the 'other' side of the news

Posted by [Ed Nadolski](#) / In [Columns](#) / September 28, 2011

Mark Dudzik would hate – absolutely detest – the fact his name is appearing on this newspaper website any place other than the byline.

Journalists should report and write the news and then get the hell out of the way, he would say. He is old school – ask the tough questions, get the facts, write the truth as best you can and then let the readers take over.

Perfectly coifed broadcast journalists who inject themselves into the news and vanity-motivated columnists make him sick.



Mark Dudzik (right) with his wife Denise and children Austin, 10, and Kaela, 7, in a recent family photo. Dudzik is in a Neenah hospital after he was struck by a pickup truck Sept. 17 while participating in an organized bicycle ride in Sheboygan County.

In 11 years, he never missed a deadline unless away on a scheduled vacation. He's sat at his computer on deadline and pounded away as stubborn, painful kidney stones tore at his insides. He even trudged a half-mile through waist deep snow on unplowed streets to make sure the newspaper got out during the epic blizzard of Feb. 2, 2011. That's just what a journalist does, he'd say, no big deal.

He takes pride in doing his best to hold public officials accountable in one story and tell tender tales of families facing tragedy in the next – cranking out seven, eight, even a dozen stories a week.

As a reporter for the Burlington Standard Press for nine years and an editor for the Waterford Post and Westine Report the past two, he is the consummate community journalist and an antidote for everything that is wrong with our microwave media driven by personality and opinion.

And now, in a cruel twist of fate, he is the subject of the news.

As of this writing, Mark Dudzik, 42, of Franklin, is stretched out in an intensive care unit of a medical center in Neenah – unconscious, under heavy sedation in an effort to keep him from realizing the unimaginable pain and trauma his body has suffered.

Five days ago, while participating in an organized bike ride in Sheboygan County, Mark pedaled through a rural intersection and into the path of a pickup truck that pummeled his body with the full, unforgiving force of a monumental physics mismatch.

His injuries are too gruesome and extensive to list here. That he is alive is certainly a miracle.

It's the thought of that crash – that horrible mismatch – that keeps Denise Dudzik from sleeping. Try as she might, she can't shake the crystal clear vision of something she didn't actually see. It sears at her heart until chased away once again by the realization she must be strong and steady for her two children, Austin, 10, and Kaela, 7.

A day after the accident, she bravely went to the scene to take photos – driven by the notion that this is exactly what her husband of 14 years would do: collect the facts and protect the family.

It was an act of love committed by an emotional, confused woman determined to support her man and their children. It's an act that can't be explained but is easily understood in the context of devotion.

And, as if her husband's condition is not enough, she has to deal with the added pain of reports out of the Sheboygan County Sheriff's Department that say her husband may be at fault. The accident report indicates Mark, who was apparently alone on a stretch of the 50-mile route of the Maywood Earth Ride, rode through a stop sign on Garton Road just east of Elkhart Lake in front of the pickup driven by a Plymouth man. The truck was headed south on Highway E where there are no stop signs.

None of it makes sense to Denise, and the only person who can explain it to her and the rest of the world remains too broken to speak.

"Don't jump to conclusions," she pleads, reminding everyone that her husband is the one who has suffered.

"I just can't believe it," Denise said of the sheriff's report, relating a story of how Mark drills into Austin's head each time they ride up to an intersection: "You always have to look three times before you cross."

"It just doesn't make sense," Denise said through her sobs.

None of it does. Especially not the fact that in an instant the family was also thrust into financial crisis. The rapidly mounting medical bills will surely far exceed the coverage offered by Mark's health insurance. And, by virtue of the fact Mark is the family's primary breadwinner, the family's main source of income will run out soon after his remaining vacation time expires.

His fellow employees at Southern Lakes Newspapers in Burlington have contributed their vacation hours in an effort to extend his pay a little longer, but it's a small company and the full benefit of the donated time will be measured in weeks rather than months.

Denise, who is a nurse, doesn't regret their decision for her to work little or not at all while the kids are young. But now she wonders how they'll survive if Mark can't work for the foreseeable future and she can't find a job.

She cries at the thought that Mark's weekend bike rides – long, therapeutic journeys he uses to shed the stresses of a high-demand job – brought him to such a fateful intersection.

The bike had been so good to Mark, she said, helping him cope with life's challenges, including his father's recent cancer diagnosis.

And now this?

Denise gathers herself once again to relate yet another bit of irony.

As a weekly journalist, Mark often carries a camera in addition to his notebook. Three years ago he grabbed the tools of his trade in a rush to cover a crash on a rural highway just west of Burlington. One of the photos he captured of the scene was so impressive that the rescue service shown in the photo requested a copy to use on a calendar it distributes throughout the state.

Mark proudly displays the calendar bearing his photo in his office at home. It shows the Flight for Life dramatically swooping in for a rescue.

It's the same helicopter service that airlifted Mark to Theda Clark Medical Center last Saturday.









–Ed Nadolski

Editor in Chief

How you can help

An account has been set up to accept donations to help defray medical costs and support Mark Dudzik's family. Donations payable to "Friends of Mark Dudzik Benefit" may be sent to North Shore Bank, 116 S. Pine St., Burlington, WI 53105. People may also make donations to that account in person at any North Shore Bank location in Southeast Wisconsin.

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