

# 'Friends' seek to relaunch, revive The Citizen

By Sarah Hoehn

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On Oct. 4, 2012, The Carrboro Citizen bid adieu to the community it had covered relentlessly for the past five years.

Relying solely on advertising and personal resources for its funding, the newspaper was more of a financial burden than could be accounted for.

Now, five months later, a plan is in motion for The Citizen's revival as a non-profit paper that will be "owned by the community."

"Carrboro and Chapel Hill need a locally owned and operated community newspaper even more now that when we started The Citizen back in 2007," founder, owner and publisher Robert Dickson said. "I believe the nonprofit model offers a great opportunity to bring local journalism back to our community."

Many Carrboro residents were saddened when The Citizen was forced out of print. In the weeks after the paper's folding, Board of Alderman Town Council member Randee Haven-O'Donnell began spearheading the efforts to revive The Citizen.

From those efforts came the Friends of The Citizen, a group of individuals who want to see The Citizen brought back to Carrboro community. The original group of planners included Bob Saunders, Allen Spalt, Jock Lauterer, Connie Cohn, Sally Robertson, Julian Sereno, David Jessee and Peter Lee. The Friends of The Citizen has now grown to include many others and is leading the effort to relaunch The Citizen as a non-profit paper.

In Oct. 2012, the Friends incorporated as a non-profit and began to pursue 501(c)3 status. If this pursuit is successful, The Citizen will be a pioneer in the industry of non-profit journalism.

In December 2012, the Friends signed an agreement with The People's Channel, who will act as a fiscal sponsor during the interim period of application for the 501(c)3. Having The People's Channel serve as their umbrella organization allows the Friends of The Citizen to begin to receive and disperse funds, make donations tax-deductible, and allows the group to apply for grants.

Additionally, the Friends are working



**Members of The Friends of The Citizen speak in Jock Lauterer's community journalism class on Feb. 13, 2013 in Carroll Hall. From Left to Right: Ed Timberlake, Connie Cohn, Alicia Stemper, Goodmond Danielsen, Taylor Sisk and Randee Haven-O'Donnell. (Photo courtesy of Jock Lauterer)**

to reach an agreement with Dickson on obtaining the use and assets of The Citizen. "Asset acquisition is part of our first fundraising goal," Cohn said.

## A newspaper worth saving

The Citizen first came to publication in 2007 thanks to the efforts of Dickson, a small core staff and a number of local contributors. According to Haven-O'Donnell, the original paper was very much a community effort. The leadership was engaged, educated and socially conscience.

"If we got something wrong, we got told," Haven-O'Donnell said. When The Citizen went out of publication, the fear was that "[Carrboro] was going to lose the voice of the community."

After The Citizen went out of publication, there was much unrest among members of the community. As a small town on the verge of a big university, Carrboro residents recognized what lay ahead in the future of their news coverage.

"Chapel Hill is like this giant comma surrounding Carrboro that threatens to eat it," said Alicia Stemper, a former Citizen photographer and member of the board of directors for the Friends. "I can't stand that we just get subsumed if we're not careful, because we are not the same. If you have to ask why Carrboro is different, then you just don't get it."

After her recent move to Carrboro, Connie Cohn joined the Friends as

communications coordinator. "I already had a sense that Carrboro was a welcoming place that anyone could walk down the street and feel accepted," Cohn said. "I'm here because when I read that the newspaper was gone, I thought, maybe it's time for publically owned non-profit journalism."

## The future Citizen

According to Cohn, one of the goals of the relaunch of The Citizen is to create a sustainable paper. "Our goal is to pay workers a living wage," Cohn said. "We've gone from thinking poor to thinking progressively and optimistically."

Another instrumental individual in the efforts to relaunch The Citizen has been Jock Lauterer, spokesperson for Friends of The Citizen and senior lecturer in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication UNC-Chapel Hill. Lauterer is an expert in the field of community journalism and is a champion of the concept of being "relentlessly local."

According to Cohn, The Citizen wants to partner with Lauterer's community journalism classes in the future. "The other side of what The Citizen will be doing is providing an outlet for student reporters," Cohn said.

"The Friends have a tough task in front of them," Dickson said. "But it seems like the support exists in our community to make this effort successful."