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Sun Staff Writer Receives National Journalism Award

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Posted: Monday, February 22, 2016 10:46 am

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Greeneville Sun Staff Writer Ken Little has won the 2016 Public Notice Journalism Prize for coverage of the John M. Reed Nursing Home in Limestone.



Ken Little

The nursing home's Medicare/Medicaid coverage was revoked by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Little's story, published Dec. 4, 2015, followed the Nov. 23 publication of an official newspaper notice by HHS in the Sun noting "deficiencies" by the hospital.

The award will be presented March 17 by the Public Notice Resource Center at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. in conjunction with National Newspaper Association's Community Newspaper Leadership Summit.

Little and Sun Co-Publisher Gregg Jones will be present to receive the prize.

Little's story was submitted by the Tennessee Press Association, which also recognized the coverage in its annual newspaper contest.

Sun Advertising Account Manager Brenda Weems first noticed the public notice shortly after its publication. She alerted Sun General Manager Steve Harbison, who then alerted the Sun's news staff.

Bradley L. Thompson II, president of the Public Notice Resource Center, said judges found Little's coverage compelling and important to readers, according to a news release from the Public Notice Resource Center. The story noted shortcomings of the John M. Reed Health and Rehabilitation Nursing Home cited by HHS.

Among them were a report from a housekeeper who said she had checked a patient's vital signs one night because of a shortage of nursing staff, a failure to maintain antibiotics ordered by physicians and failure to prevent pressure sores.

The public notice advised readers that Medicare/Medicaid coverage would cease as of Nov. 28, 2015.

Thompson said he was particularly pleased that the Sun picked up the story because HHS had proposed at one time eliminating the newspaper notices, an action PNRC had criticized as harmful to the public's awareness of the agency's activities.

"Reporters hold a compelling trust to help readers find and understand these important public notices," Thompson said. "The wording of a notice is usually prescribed by regulation to convey precise information. But to put the information in context, the journalist has to develop the background and guide readers to appreciate the meaning of the notice. Little did exactly what newsrooms across America are doing, and must increasingly do, every day."

Jones applauded Little's work and said this illustrates why public notices are so valuable to citizens.

"Public notices in newspapers provide an indispensable way to educate the public on many things that citizens need and want to know, but probably wouldn't learn otherwise," Jones said. "However, often a public notice is so brief or is worded in such technical language that the 'real,' or full, story is unclear even though the matter is something which could affect people in the community in a significant way.

"That's when it becomes important for us at The Greeneville Sun to dig a little deeper into the situation to provide the context and substance essential to ensuring that citizens who are potentially affected by the public notice can make well-informed decisions.

"Follow-up of this kind is exactly what Ken did in the case of a public notice published in the Sun several months ago about a local nursing home's having had its Medicare/Medicaid payments canceled by the federal government.

"If the public notice had not been published in the newspaper's Classifieds advertising section, as the law requires in such situations, the Sun might not have discovered that there was a local matter needing further explanation.

"And without Ken's careful follow-up to find and report the full story behind the public notice about the nursing home, most readers of the Sun probably wouldn't have known about a serious problem that might have affected the well-being of one of their loved ones or friends.

"I am very proud of Ken Little for being nationally recognized for doing something the members of our news staff at the Sun strive to do any time it seems needed -- shine a spotlight on possible problems in the community so that they can be suitably addressed.

"That kind of reporting is an important part of our overall effort to make sure our readers are clearly informed about things that are relevant to them, and that help them live better lives."

Greg Sherrill, executive director of Tennessee Press Association, echoed Jones' and Thompson's praise of the work.

"We were thrilled to learn that the public notice story by Ken Little has been chosen as the national winner for the PNRC Public Notice Contest," Sherrill said. "Little's use of a public notice as a genesis for his story and the excellent coverage that has followed led us to choose it as the Tennessee Public Notice Contest winner this winter.

"As this was the first year Tennessee has sponsored such a contest, we were excited to learn that Little's work has now been recognized in the national contest. We congratulate Little and The Greeneville Sun for outstanding public service work, which highlights the importance of public notices in the community."

Little is a native of western New York and received a communications degree from Buffalo State College. He served as editor of a weekly newspaper in the Buffalo area and has also worked as a staff writer at daily newspapers in Oswego, N.Y., Niagara Falls, N.Y., Lansdale, Pa., Utica, N.Y. and Wilmington, N.C.

He has served as a staff writer at The Greeneville Sun since 2011.

He also has experience as a television news producer at the CBS affiliate in Buffalo and provided on-air reports for the National Public Radio affiliate in Wilmington, N.C.

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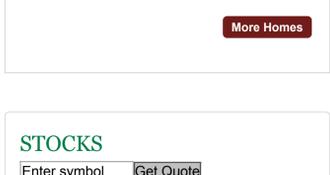
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