

THE COMMUNITY REPORTER

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

TROY SHANTZ FOUND HIS PHOTOGRAPHIC VOICE WORKING FOR A LOCAL NEWSPAPER

While most newsrooms are laying off staffers, *The Sarnia Journal* is expanding. Troy Shantz, one of the weekly's new hires, is learning what reporting and living in a small town entails.

Sarnia, a town of about 70,000 people that sits on the shore of Lake Huron and the St. Clair River, is better known for its petrochemical complex, which adorned the \$10 billion in the seventies, and the Blue Water Bridge border crossing than for its thriving newspapers. Yet here residents hungry for local news can consult a daily, *The Sarnia Observer*, as well as a weekly, *The Sarnia Journal*. The first was founded in 1853, the latter in March 2014. "When I heard that a small town newspaper was hiring, I was taken aback. How often do you hear about a reporter getting a staff job in this day and age?" asks Troy Shantz, who was offered a position at the independently owned periodical last fall. His mandate is to cover stories from Sarnia and the neighbouring communities—Corunna, Point Edward and Bright's Grove—with a local perspective for the paper's thirty thousand plus readers.

In the past few months, he's reported on a broad range of topics, from the municipality's healthcare system and politics to a local family selling its belongings to hike across the Pacific Crest Trail to raise awareness and funds for a mental-health initiative. "Every week, we learn about something interesting happening

on our streets or about how impressive one of our neighbours is. Those stories deserve the same careful, deliberate, committed and high-calibre coverage than any big flashy national event," believes the 34-year-old photographer. Case in point: last fall, he found out that the local curling club is renowned for having some of the best ice in the country. That's all it took for Shantz to decide to follow the man responsible for the pristine rink, Don Bourque. He also wrote about a family who got rid of its front lawn and replaced it with AstroTurf. "Fun, simple stuff like that is part of the patchwork that makes up the city," he declares.

Bobbi Jo Dalziel is ranked number 1 in the world for Women's MMA. She lives and trains in Sarnia.

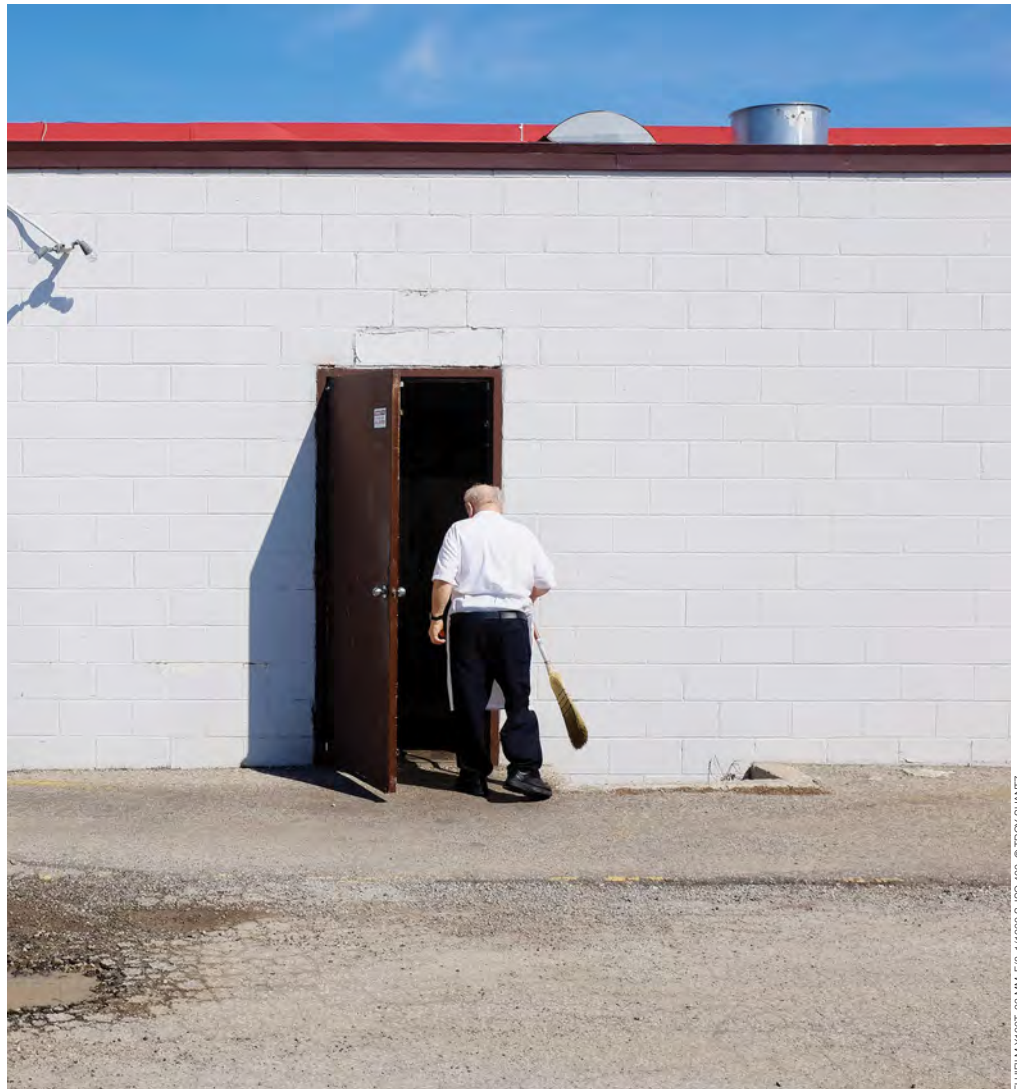
Originally from Kitchener, Shantz studied close to home at Conestoga College. He then worked freelance in television, documentaries and films, primarily in Toronto and Windsor but also with projects in Europe and Africa. Shantz transitioned to photojournalism in the late aughts. He lived in Sarnia for two years between 2008 and 2010 before moving there permanently in 2011. "Not being from the community has given me a fresh perspective on some of the local realities that someone who was born and bred here might not think twice about," he says. "Yet, at the same time, I'm invested in the city. I have a house in town. My kids go to school here. In many ways, it feels like everyone is part of an extended family."

Herein lies one of the main differences between Sarnia and larger cities: Shantz is bound to bump into people he's interviewed or photographed at the farmer's market, coffee shops, parent assemblies, etc. On one hand, such proximity fosters a heightened sense of accountability. "You want to represent people in an accurate and fair way, not



CANON EOS 5D MARK III, 35 MM, F/2.5, 1/125 S, ISO 1600. © TROY SHANTZ/THE SARNIA JOURNAL.

only because that's the role of a reporter, but also because you know you'll run into them again and again," he explains. Being responsible for both the text and photos helps in that it allows him to spend more time with subjects. It's no secret: the more you know about someone, the more you will notice details that those less familiar wouldn't. On the other hand, he acknowledges that it can make it harder to cover more sensitive stories. "I didn't know city councillors could run so fast," he jokes when asked how his role at the newspaper affects his relationships when he's not on the clock. With a more serious tone he continues, "I hope people realize that I'm not a sinister person who records what they're saying or tries to take a snapshot of them without their knowledge. Truth be told, anyone who does that wouldn't stay a community journalist for very long." His success and that of the publication he works for depend on his ability to navigate these tensions. "First impressions are key. That's the time where you want to make it clear to people that if they want to be off-the-record, their wish will be honoured."



FUJIFILM X100T, 23 MM, F/5.6, 1/1000 S, ISO 400. © TROY SHANTZ

Using the lessons he learned doing community reporting, Shantz is also working on personal photo projects—one just an hour away in Flint, Michigan, and one in Sarnia. He's interested in the social dynamics that exist between communities and the industries that sustain them, especially in contexts where the dominance of the latter is waning. He reveals, "I always thought it'd be cool to be the Tragically Hip of photographers, to tell the stories of the lost highways and obscure Canadian towns. They're just as beautiful and just as meaningful as any other place in the country." ■

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From Shantz' personal series, *Oil Heritage*

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A member of the Canadian Armed Forces pins a poppy to Mayor Mike Bradley's lapel at a dedication ceremony for the Sarnia-Lambton Afghanistan memorial on Oct. 30, 2016.



CANON EOS 5D MARK III, 35 MM, F/3.5, 1/200 S, ISO 400. © TROY SHANTZ/THE SARNIA JOURNAL