The newsroom reeks with the sweat of 20 or so college students in the heat of deadline. An hour ago the printer stopped working. The Internet signal flickers. It’s almost impossible to send the paper digitally to the printer in Carson City in these conditions.

My eyes hurt from straining under fluorescent lights most of the day. But the allure of idealistic college journalism pushes my staff and myself. Edging on the deadline, we give up sending the pages from the office. Instead someone shuttles my laptop and me the quarter mile to the parking lot of the old Jot Travis Student Union where Internet is reliable. Four more times and the paper is out. Finally the office is quiet, deserted by students with sleep to catch and papers to write. I take a deep breath of gratitude. One week down, 17 more to go.

The Nevada Sagebrush runs solely on the judgment of 20 or so college students fumbling with words, photos and fonts, figuring out effective and meaningful journalism. They have more freedom and power than they will in the next 20 years of their careers. They also have just as much chance of putting out an interesting, entertaining and relevant newspaper as messing it up.

Their decisions are sometimes as isolated as their Sierra Street office, relegated to a corner of campus even the most acquainted couldn’t find on first try.

Over the winter break the Sagebrush’s offices moved from the shanty, tan, brick buildings to the new Joe Crowley Student Union. Soon after, my challenges as editor in chief from 2005 to 2007 will be clichéd war stories of two cluttered rooms with weathered technology. One large newsroom with new computers will house the 114-year-old newspaper.

Over the past decades different editors remolded the Sierra Street office to meet the newspapers needs. During 2002 to 2003, Editor-in-Chief Jeremy Dutton and Managing Editor Dylan Shaver pressed the student government to repaint and recarpet the run-down building.

Then in 2004, editor Alex Newman ’05 (journalism) spent hours reorganizing the office, adding more desks to fit a bigger staff and hanging long-hidden awards.

It may seem like trimmings, but a few new chairs make a difference when you spend 80 to 100 hours a week in those two rooms.

What stayed with the paper through those changes and what will move with it to The Joe is the Sagebrush’s lore and ethos of uppity, sometimes misguided, but always student-created independence.

That story began in October 1893 when the Board of Regents denied permission to a group of students who wanted to publish a campus newspaper.

In response, the students put together the first issue in secret and called it The Student Record. The fledgling newspaper promised it would be “independent in politics” and reserve “the right to criticize all parties and measures.”

It’s a promise The Nevada Sagebrush has lived up to with its legacy of ousted editors and controversial content.

“I didn’t make a lot of friends; I didn’t see that as being my job,” 2001 to 2002 Sagebrush editor Ben Larson ’00 (general studies) said about his relationship with University officials. “I saw my job as reporting the news and that’s what was important to students.”

During his time as editor, Larson criticized the administration’s handling of the Fire Science Academy in various editorials. An editor clashing with University infrastructure is not new to the Sagebrush. A century before Larson, George Springmeyer 1902, (arts & science) who served as editor from 1901 to 1902, became the first editor removed from his position by the University because of an editorial criticizing the president’s handling of a smallpox scare.

Six decades later the student senate fired editor Don O’Donnell, who served from 1960 to 1961, for “incompetence” and “a lack of cooperation with and respect for the board and inaccuracy of editorial material.” O’Donnell had written a series of critical editorials, one about the decline of campus traditions.

His staff fired back with a blank issue—only the newspaper’s nameplate and advertisements appeared.

Another editor, Buddy Frank ’78 (journalism), who served from 1972 to 1973, was temporarily suspended
from school in 1972 when he printed an advertisement for a pornographic device.

War stories of editors under fire and resilient independence are embedded in the culture of the Sagebrush. Editors since 2000 now tell new stories of building the newspaper’s reputation. Toward that goal Newman changed the paper’s name in 2004 from just The Sagebrush to The Nevada Sagebrush, to give a sense of place and identity. Editors who came before Newman and long-time University administrators talk about seeing a growth in the Sagebrush in the past decade.

“I have just been very pleased with where the Sagebrush has gone because I saw where it came from,” said Rita Laden ’96Ed.D. (educational leadership) former associate vice president for Student Life Services and a University administrator for 27 years.

Building the quality of the newspaper is an endeavor editors and staffs have sometimes taken on without consistent professional editorial guidance.

An adviser overseeing production is not a part of Sagebrush tradition, even though it is a trend at many college newspapers around the country.

While The Nevada Sagebrush does have an adviser within ASUN’s structure, even she does not see her role as an editorial one.

“I am a strong believer in student-run things and self governance,” said Amy Koeckes, ASUN’s Coordinator for Clubs and Organizations and Publications since 2001. “I really think that it is a classroom and that it is one of the best learning tools students going into the industry can have.”

The journalism school has also traditionally abstained from an official advisory role with the Sagebrush.

“We have taken the view that the students should be able to run...
their own paper and make their own mistakes and take responsibility,” said Pulitzer Prize winner, journalism school professor and former Sagebrush editor Warren Lerude ’61 (journalism). “We are their friends, not their advisors.”

With friends, or sometimes alone, each editor and his or her staff fought for legitimacy by addressing different challenges.

Larson modernized the paper’s production by taking it digital in 2001. Before the change, he described a chaotic environment where the paper, then published twice a week, was often not produced until 7 a.m.

“It was horribly inefficient, it took them forever to do this monumental job,” Larson said.

Larson also took the paper from a twice weekly publication to a once a week.

“We came to the conclusion that in lieu of putting out two marginal papers we wanted to put out a quality paper once a week,” Larson said. It was a huge change for the Sagebrush, which had been published twice a week for almost 40 years.

It was also during 2001 to 2002 that the newspaper experienced a major shift in funding. The amount of student fees it received dropped by more than 60 percent, and the newspaper’s overall budget decreased by nearly 30 percent.

It was time to do more with less.

The following year, Shaver remembers trying to bring the paper back to fiscal solvency as managing editor.

“We sat down and said, ‘If we brought in $2,700 in ads, let’s not print a paper that costs more than $2,700,’” Shaver said. “It was shocking that the paper was on budget.”

During his 2003 to 2004 editorship, Shaver said he focused on keeping the paper on budget and creating a more professional environment.

Newman built on that ambition, and solidified a culture of professionalism within the newspaper offices.

“Every time you tell a story the right way someone remembers it and you build on that,” Newman said. “You win the battle one person and one story at a time.”

She led her campaign with barely more money than her predecessors, most of it from advertising revenue.

It was a moment of affirmation for herself and her staff when the newspaper won a regional best of show award at a San Francisco college journalism conference.

It was the first of many awards to come.

After Newman, the paper went on to win two national best of show awards from the Associated Collegiate Press and was nominated twice for the organization’s Pacemaker award, which measures excellence in college journalism. The Nevada Sagebrush also took first place for overall design and for its Web site in 2007 from the Student Society for News Design.

Current editor Brian Duggan said winning the most recent national best of show award at an Associated Collegiate Press conference in Washington, D.C. was the result of a talented staff.

“We’re working hard and we appreciate any kind of recognition we get,” Duggan said.
Martarano Scholarship boosts Sagebrush editors

By Annie Flanzraich ’07

Ask a former Nevada Sagebrush editor-in-chief for a retrospective on their tenure and you might get a response like “It was probably the best job I would never, ever do again.”

As a two-term editor, I know the stress of making daily decisions for the 114-year-old publication. I can remember my pulse rising every time an angry phone call came in, demanding answers and justification. Absence from classes, sleep and friends was a regular occurrence in my life from 2005 to 2007.

Which is why I was grateful and surprised when former Sagebrush editor Steve Martarano ’79 (journalism) called one day in 2006 to tell me he was creating a scholarship for the Sagebrush editor, and that I would be the first recipient.

“It was always a tough road for the editor; I felt like they could use that push,” said Martarano, who was editor from 1978 to 1979.

Being the editor of The Nevada Sagebrush is a unique privilege in University of Nevada, Reno’s history, according to former Sagebrush editor, Pulitzer Prize winner and journalism professor Warren Lerude ’61 (journalism). He remembers signing the Sagebrush editor’s desk drawer, a tradition since 1937.

“You see some legendary names in there,” Lerude said, referring to names like Frank McCulloch ’41 (journalism), Paul Finch ’56 (journalism) and Sig Rogich ’67 (journalism). “To be able to sign your name where those kind of names are makes you humble. It doesn’t make you arrogant.”

Signing the drawer and being an editor-in-chief left an impression on Martarano that continues to this day. “The Sagebrush is the one thing that stood out in my college career,” Martarano said.

Another former Sagebrush editor-in-chief, Guy Clifton ’85 (journalism) mirrored his remarks. “It means more the farther you get away from it,” Clifton, editor from 1985 to 1986, said. “You make some of the best friends of your life and you have more freedom than you will have ever again in your news career.”

Annie Flanzraich ’07 (journalism) is currently the news editor at the North Lake Tahoe Bonanza.

A final check of The Sagebrush as it comes of the press, which survived the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1905.

For more information about scholarship opportunities at the University contact Bruce Mack, associate vice president for Development and Alumni Relations at (775) 784-1352 or bmack@unr.edu.