

# **Help us tell the stories of our community — and get a front-row seat**

Minnesota newspapers stand in a unique moment. A shortage of reporters and editors is causing hardships at some papers, important stories are going unreported, and some newspapers have been forced to close.

Other papers have forged solutions. Wanting to strengthen their coverage, they are turning to their readers to report the news. These new partnerships are producing incredible stories.

Do you consider yourself a potential storyteller about our community? If so, we want to visit with you. We want to learn about your interest in storytelling. We'd also like to see some samples of your writing.

Then we will tell you about an enterprising online training program that can help you refine your writing skills so you can share stories about our community with other readers.

The program is called Citizen Journalism University, or CJU for short. Now in its fourth year, CJU has already trained almost 60 new journalists across Minnesota. And it has solid credentials. Its sponsors include this newspaper, the Minnesota News Media Institute, the Minnesota Newspaper Association and the journalism program at Bethel University.

Interested? Read on.

The (name of your newspaper) is recruiting readers like yourself to join the second cohort of CJU students. The first cohort of 24 students, who were trained in 2022, had varied backgrounds: high school students, retirees and people in between from all walks of life. Their common interests: a deep curiosity of the world, a love for their communities, and a love for telling stories.

Mary-Anne Olmsted-Kohls was one of them. ~~Two~~ years ago, she was eager to try something new after devoting 35 years to teaching string instrument students. Having many of her letters published in her local papers, the Hutchinson Leader and Litchfield Independent Review, she knew she could write. She also knew that news reporting required a different set of skills. So she applied for CJU training and now reports on news and trends, from changes in church music to the evolution of a local school lunch program. She's also written absorbing accounts of ordinary citizens doing fascinating things.

Among her more challenging stories was an in-depth look at rural homelessness. "That was kind of a monumental one to undertake right away," she said.

Olmsted-Kohls credits CJU for helping her build the skills she needs to tell her stories.

"It was a very positive experience for me," she said, adding that she continued to receive support from a mentor long after completing the course. "I felt raw after the course and my mentor continued to offer suggestions to me. We worked so well together."

Mentorship is just one facet of CJU instruction. Weekly two-hour online training sessions are moderated by journalism professor Scott Winter. He is accompanied by four experienced Minnesota newspaper professionals who take students on a deep dive into reporting. Over five weeks, students learn the difference between news and opinion, how to develop a "nose for news," how to conduct an interview, how to organize and add color to a story, the ethics of photos and interviewing, and dozens of other worthwhile things that go into writing a solid news story.

The course is free to students because costs are shared by host newspapers and the Minnesota News Media Institute. After successful completion, students are awarded a certificate from Bethel University, the Minnesota Newspaper Association and the Minnesota News Media Institute.

Might you or someone you know be interested in CJU – and writing for this newspaper? We're specifically looking for readers who want to report on:

- people with intriguing hobbies or interests, life-changing volunteer roles, stories of epic world adventures, and other experiences.
- public affairs issues such as matters being considered by our city council, school board and county board;
- local athletes and sports events, particularly high school sports.
- school trends and activities, both in the classroom and out;
- store openings and other major business changes on Main Street, in the industrial park, at local farms, and elsewhere nearby;
- trends and major changes in our houses of worship; and
- the local arts and entertainment scene.

Interested? If so, contact me at (email and or phone number) so we can set up a time to visit. I'll ask you to bring a sample or two of your writing. It doesn't have to be anything official – it might be a report you wrote for school or for your job, or something similar.

If selected for CJU, you'll become part of this newspaper's extended team of reporters, perhaps as a freelancer or maybe part time. Your efforts will strengthen this newspaper, inform the community, and help it retain and nourish its identity.

That identity is crucial because it is reflected in this newspaper's content. When a town loses its newspaper, it risks losing its identity. It becomes fertile ground for misinformation. Studies show the loss of a local newspaper can lead to declining confidence in institutions, decreased volunteer involvement, fewer candidates for public office, lower voting rates, and a higher risk of partisanship and political corruption.

A newspaper is part and parcel of citizens' daily lives. It nurtures a community's vibrancy and culture. Let's not risk losing that in (name of your community).