

Editor's note: This is a column Kevin Noland wrote for the Gyp Hill Premiere in 2010, when Sam Clester retired and sold his printing business. Clester died Friday, Nov. 9, 2012.

When I was 13 years old, Sam Clester was the most towering human I had ever met. Standing better than 6'5" to my 5' frame and carrying close to 300 lbs, he was a giant.

Even though imposing, he had a fun nature and gentle goofiness about him that made me love to buck paper for him.

Yes, I bucked paper. At the time, most kids my age were bucking bales. Yeah, they were tough throwing those 50lb. bales around, but that was minuscule in task compared to bucking paper.

Our paper truck came every few months. When I say truck, I mean semi truck. When I say paper, I am referring to rolls of newsprint that weighed at minimum 998 lbs.

These rolls had to be maneuvered into our building, lined up and lifted on to other rolls in our warehouse with the aid of a roll lift and chain hoist. It was hard work.

Sam would sometimes buy part of our load. He was the owner of The Belle Plaine News and owned the print shop there.

My first encounter with Sam came when my dad told me to help Sam load some rolls up in his truck. I used a small piece of wood scrapped paneling that we referred to as a "cheat" to spin the rolls. At 100 lbs., dripping wet, it was all I could do to spin one of these rolls 20 degrees at a time with a butt-bump.

"Here now, let me show you how to do this," Sam said.

He grabbed that roll of paper and spun it 90 degrees with one shove and no cheat. I was impressed and always remembered this giant from Belle Plaine who could easily handle a 1000 lb. roll of paper in our warehouse.

Seven years later, I was married with a kid and my wife and I were starting our very own newspaper. I needed a place to print my newspaper and called Sam Clester up. He was eager for my business and we agreed to print at his plant in Belle Plaine the second weekend of July in 1991.

Our friendship has been solidified in ink, so to say. We've done many hours of bs'ing back and forth and I've seen Sam's business grow over the years to the point of him selling off his newspaper businesses and simply becoming a "printer" of newspapers around the area. He's gone through at least a half-dozen pressman over the years. I even worked for him for one day as a pressman while

his pressman was on vacation. Although I had much experience with web press and sheet fed printing over the years, I had never printed on a News King or a Color King. Sam assured me that it was like, "Riding someone else's bicycle." I had enough ego to give it a shot.

The agreement was that I could have my paper for free that week, if I printed for him while his pressman was on vacation. I got a quick tutorial on the press one day the previous week and then I was standing in front of this machine the following Monday.

If running this press was like riding my friend's bicycle, then this was like a unicycle with one pedal and no seat. It kicked my butt.

After wasting more papers than I needed for my customers, and barely printing one legible copy of The Gyp Hill Premiere that week, I was a nervous wreck.

For some reason, many small towns had a bar not far from the newspaper office. Belle Plaine had one just to the south and Sam took me there. I had just barely turned 21. I had a few drinks and put an end to our "free papers for printing" deal. I was out of my league.

Sam understood and let me off the hook. He even discounted my shabby print job that week. I went home with my tail between my legs and we never talked about it again until last Saturday.

Ronda and I were on our way to Wichita when my phone rang. It was Sam.

Sam usually only calls when there's bad news. Things like: the press is broke down or I'm behind on my printing bill. He wanted to eat lunch and talk face to face. When I hung up the phone, I turned to Ronda and asked, "Are we behind on our printing bill?" We weren't.

Sam met us for lunch and explained that he was selling off his printing business and retiring. I'm not surprised by his decision. I'm now close to the same age that Sam was when we first met. I've known him for almost 27 years now.

He was one of the people who helped me start the newspaper more than 1000 press runs and close to 20 years ago. I've trusted him and his staff to provide our town with a finished product for all of these years and in two press runs after this paper, it will come to an end. He's never let me down and he's been there when the times were tough. There were times in the history of this newspaper, that if it weren't for Sam's generosity and patience, we might not have made it.

I thanked Sam in person and on the phone this week, but wanted to print my gratefulness in ink, this one last time - with Sam's ink and paper.

Sam told me that I had courage for going up against the big boys of the newspaper industry and starting The Gyp Hill Premiere years ago. I told him I was just too young and simply too stupid to know better.

He said, "I guess there's a fine line between courage and stupidity." I agree, but Sam has had the courage to stick it out for all these years and we'll never forget his help and will always call him a friend.

Starting Monday, September 6, we will be changing to a new format and printing with The Hutchinson News. On most Mondays, the newspaper will actually be delivered earlier than normal. If all goes as planned, you'll notice some big and exciting changes for our little town's newspaper.

Have a great week!