

By ROBERT PIERCE

• Leader & Times

He only spent about two years in Liberal, but Mitch Bettis said that short span made a big impact on him.

After working many years in the publishing industry, Bettis last week was named the President of the Little Rock-based Arkansas Business Publishing Group, a company that produces about 20 publications that include anything from weeklys and monthlies to ones that are only put out once or twice a year.



“We have about 75 employees here and serve both central Arkansas and statewide with our particular publications,” he said.

Bettis himself is originally from Arkansas, and after what he called his “westward migration,” he found himself back in his home state.

“I did my master’s and doctorate at Oklahoma State,” he said. “I left Oklahoma State and went to Houston to work with a publishing company.”

Bettis said his advisor at Oklahoma State put him in touch with someone who worked for a company that owned what was then called the Southwest Daily Times in Liberal, who then put Bettis in touch with former Times publisher Jim Elsberry.

“Through my connection at Oklahoma State, I got a chance to interview with Mr. Elsberry,” Bettis said. “That was ultimately how I got to Liberal.”

Bettis began his time in Liberal in a formal management training program and was hired as a promotions manager.

“We had an ad director and a promotions manager to really be in charge of the special sections and really kind of learning the ropes,” he said. “Not long after I arrived, the ad director left, and I was promoted to ad director for the Times. Over time, responsibilities grew to include oversight of the ad design department and the Shopper.”

That was from 1995 to 1997, and Bettis said that short time in the Liberal community was extraordinary from both a professional and personal standpoint.

“They are some of my most formative professional moments, and I continue to draw on them today,” he said. “That experience taught me an extraordinary amount about planning a newspaper, helping manage a staff, working with a community. It was an extraordinary experience.”

Bettis worked as many as 80 to 100 hours a week, but he said that time was incredibly rewarding.

“It is an extraordinary amount of talent that has come through the paper in Liberal,” he said. “There are multiple people, some in that management program and some from outside of it, who’ve gone on to have kind of consequential careers as publishers, public relations professionals, editors – all over the country. It’s really amazing. I’m just a small piece of the talent that has called Liberal part of his history there.”

After leaving Liberal, Bettis next published a newspaper in Colorado, where he served for a few more years. He then moved to Aspen, Colo., where he managed a group of dailies and weeklys.

Bettis and his wife, Meg, next left Aspen to buy their first newspaper in Colorado, which they still own, and in the mid part of the 21st Century’s first decade, he made his way back to Arkansas.

Bettis said working in the publishing industry has helped him fulfill one of his two childhood dreams.

“I wanted to own my own newspaper, and I wanted to teach at a particular university in Arkansas where I was an undergraduate,” he said. “When I moved back to Arkansas that first time, I was able to teach there. We eventually rejoined the newspaper life and have worked for another publishing company and then joined this publishing company.”

In 2013, Bettis began working as general manager of ABPG, a job he had worked in prior to being named president of the company last week.

Though short, Bettis said his time in Liberal was so impactful that he likely will never forget it.

“There is not a day that goes by that I don’t draw on something from my experience in Liberal,” he said. “It was an incredibly important point in my life. I still to this day have on my office wall a limited edition painting of the train depot from Liberal. My wife, I met in Liberal. When I was the newspaper guy, I was called into judge the spelling bee at Garfield Elementary, and it happened to be the class she taught.”

Bettis said Liberal will always hold a special place for him, and he said for those who have talent and are willing to work, the town holds many opportunities.

“There’s just a lot of very talented people coming through there for years, and that paper was regarded as one of the best papers in the state for Kansas for a very long time,” he said of the Times.

Bettis said what made his stay in Liberal extra special were the people, who he said were very supportive and impactful in his life.

“There’s just a very warm spot for Liberal and all the many things it gave to me personally and professionally,” he said.

And as Bettis looks to the latest chapter in his life, he sees many positive things in the future for the company he now heads up.

“We’re in a significant kind of growth mode here from our print products, our significant digital portfolio of products, as well as our events division,” he said. “We produce 12 events here in the state of Arkansas. All of those are in a growth mode. We’re really optimistic about business in general.”

Bettis said, though, he is truly grateful for his experiences during his time in Liberal.

“I’ve been back a few times over the years, and it’s a warm spot for me,” he said. “The community and paper are both very special.”