

Roll Call editor says 'spirit of community' missing in D.C.



From left, Christina Bellantoni, editor-in-chief of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill; Sen. Harriette L. Chandler, D-Worcester; Brian Thompson, CEO and president of Commerce Bank and Trust; and Susan Engelkemeyer, president of Nichols College, talk before the Worcester Economic Club dinner Tuesday. (T&G Staff/BETTY JENEWIN)

By Mark Sullivan CORRESPONDENT

WORCESTER — In the age when political bombast rather than compromise is rewarded with TV time and fundraising dollars, Washington, D.C., has become a polarized place, says the editor of Capitol Hill's "neighborhood" newspaper, Roll Call.

Americans deserve better, said Christina Bellantoni, editor-in-chief of Roll Call, here Tuesday to address the Worcester Economic Club.

"In general, people in government have good intentions," Ms. Bellantoni, a veteran journalist in the nation's capital, said. "There's a way we can all make (Washington) a better place if we all step up. The media's included in that. Politicians, citizens, the media: we can demand better."

Ms. Bellantoni, former political editor for "PBS NewsHour" and former White House

correspondent for the Washington Times, spoke with the Telegram & Gazette prior to the Economic Club's dinner at the College of the Holy Cross.

In discussing her work, Ms. Bellantoni spoke of the community she covers — one of the world's great power centers that, at the same time, is in many ways a small town.

"In theory, the way it should work is that people representing America come to what they used to call the Capital City and live there, as a full-time legislative body, get to know each other, and forge partnerships and great legislation in this small little community," she said.

"But what you've seen happen over the years is an increase in polarized politics (corresponding with) an increase in fundraising," she said. "Lawmakers don't spend any time together anymore. They don't show up for hearings, they don't vote on the floor together — they're out raising money, all day long.

"And that, I think, is one of the reasons why you don't see a spirit of community as much anymore. It's something you hear the older, retiring lawmakers say: Those were the good, old days. Now, there were some ugly politics back then. We really romanticize — oh, it was so much better then. I mean, people had duels in the street and called each other really nasty names. But you (did) see people urging one another to set aside their differences and try to come together for a common good.

"But in this permanent campaign, it's very difficult to do that. Unfortunately, hot rhetoric pays off. The more bombastic you can be, either on the left or the right, you are rewarded with television time, you are rewarded with fundraising dollars — and that really breeds more and more bombast.

"People want to be more extreme because it gets them attention. That forces people in the middle to really become more and more obscure — and they just want to legislate. There really are a lot of people like that, who just want to get something done, but they're not as loud."

She said this polarized atmosphere has intensified since she first arrived in Washington a decade ago. "Absolutely, it has. (Senate Minority Leader) Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) and (Senate Majority Leader) Harry Reid (D-Nevada) used to be very close friends. Now they're pretty angry at each other. They feel like there's been a real breakdown in their own decorum, they've seen their members get out of control on either side. They don't sit down and forge great deals anymore.

"That's an unfortunate thing."

Ms. Bellantoni said there are sides to the political players in Washington that don't always come across in this day of 24-7 cable news and social media clamor.

"Young people hear the name Michele Bachmann and they say, 'Oh, my God, she's so terrible' — she does not have a great reputation nationally, with either party, but

especially with Democrats. She is the nicest person. I have had a lot of very positive, warm personal experiences with her. You would never ever know that, based on the types of things she says, or the way she's portrayed in the media.

"Joe Biden is really fun to cover: I don't think it makes me biased to say I genuinely like him as a human being. I got to know him, covering him in Iowa, because no other reporters were following him around, and that does allow you to see the human side of people.

"That's something I always tell my reporters to remember, 'You have access to people and places and things that most of America will never see. Most of America will not tour that Capitol. Most of America will not have a conversation with John Boehner. That's an important responsibility: We can't forget it or take it for granted.'

"For me, when I go to the White House still, you walk onto the grounds and you're like, 'There's the White House!' It's exciting: it doesn't matter who's in it. It is an honor to work in Washington. I've always felt that way since I arrived, and it's one of the reasons it's now become my home."

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