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Sullivan is leaving News for post at N.Y. Times By Gene Warner The Buffalo News Tue, Jul 17, 2012

Margaret M. Sullivan, the first female editor of The Buffalo News, leaves behind a solid legacy from her 13 years at the helm, as she moves to her new job as public editor of the New York Times.

Sullivan announced the move late Monday morning in The News newsroom, signaling an end to her 32-year career at the newspaper. She rose through the ranks before being named editor in 1999; two years later, she also was named the newspaper's vice president, another first for a woman at The News.

She will assume her duties at the Times on Sept. 1, becoming the fifth person and first woman to hold that position, which is similar to an ombudsman's post. The public editor, who represents readers and responds to their concerns, remains an independent voice, working outside the newspaper's normal reporting and editing structure, according to the Times.

Sullivan told about 50 News reporters and editors Monday morning that she has some "sad and regretful feelings" about leaving such a great place. But she quickly added, "I feel this is a unique opportunity I wanted to take advantage of."

News Publisher Stanford Lipsey told the newsroom staff that he has worked with some fine editors in his years as a newspaper publisher.

"I've never had one with Margaret's overall talent and a makeup for getting things done extraordinarily well," Lipsey said.

During her 13 years as editor of The News, Sullivan established the newspaper's first investigative reporting team, helped develop Western New York's leading website and emphasized local enterprise reporting, according to a profile on the Pulitzer Prize organization's website.

She has served as a Pulitzer Prize juror four times and was named to the Pulitzer board last year.

Sullivan also has presided over The News' editorial product at a challenging time for daily newspapers in America, as many papers have lost large amounts of money, laid off much of their editorial staff and sacrificed their editorial content.

Under her stewardship, The News has avoided newsroom layoffs, mostly through natural attrition and voluntary buyouts, and the paper remains profitable.

The News also has won a host of state awards, including the Distinguished Community Service award from the New York State Newspaper Publishers Association - for eight straight years.

"Who's Flying Your Airplane?," a four-part series on airline safety, earned the newspaper one of those awards.

That series continued The News' in-depth look at airline safety following the February 2009 crash of Flight 3407 that took 50 lives in Clarence Center.

It's that legacy that has impressed local officials and newspaper experts.

During perhaps the most trying time in the history of newspapers, Sullivan has done a strong job of maintaining the editorial standards set by The News decades ago, said Lee Coppola, a former News reporter and retired dean of St. Bonaventure University's Jandoli School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

"I think she has brought to the job intelligence, energy and youth, all important in today's newspaper world," Coppola said. "I think her vision and leadership will be missed. Overall, she's done an admirable job."

Sullivan, a Lackawanna native who holds degrees from Georgetown University and Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, joined The News as a summer intern in 1980, before becoming a full-time staff member.

She has worked as a business and cityside reporter, covering the Buffalo schools before becoming a metro columnist, assistant city editor, features editor and managing editor.

"She's a consummate professional," Rep. Brian Higgins said. "It's a testament to the whole notion that we search nationally and globally for talent that's right here in Western New York. Margaret was born in Lackawanna and spent her whole career in Western New York."

Higgins, D-Buffalo, noted that Sullivan now has been selected by both the Pulitzer board and the Times, arguably the best newspaper in America. She has had to steer The News into the digital age, manage the newsroom and avoid newsroom layoffs at a tough time for the industry.

"She's obviously been a very effective manager in a very challenging, perhaps unprecedented, time for newspapers," the congressman said. "What's unique is her effectiveness in handling it."

Newspapers always attract plenty of slings and arrows from the public, and the greatest controversy during Sullivan's tenure may have come in The News' coverage of the City Grill shootings that left eight people shot, four of them fatally, in August 2010.

Much of the local African-American community was outraged, especially after The News detailed the criminal pasts of seven of the victims.

Before and just after those shootings, many African-Americans had a low opinion of The News and its coverage of the black community, suggested the Rev. Darius G. Pridgen, the Ellicott District Common Council member.

That's when many African-Americans expressed their outrage to The News and to Sullivan in some community forums.

"I was surprised and humbled to have the editor of The News not only respond to our concerns, but also show up and take the heat and make changes," Pridgen said.

"That is monumental responsibility and shows great leadership."

Sullivan then set up a committee to deal with minority issues and made the changes she promised, he added.

"We're not all the way there yet, but I think we're much further in fairness of reporting than we have been for a long time," Pridgen said.

Jill Abramson, executive editor of the New York Times, said in a news release that Sullivan has exactly the right experience to assume her critical new role.

"She has an impressive 32-year background in print journalism where she has distinguished herself as a reporter, columnist, editor and manager," Abramson said.

"And critically for us at this time, she has shown adeptness at embracing new platforms and engaging and interacting with readers in real time online, in print and in person."

Buffalo Mayor Byron W. Brown, when asked for an interview on Sullivan's stewardship, issued a brief statement:

"I want to congratulate Margaret Sullivan on this great opportunity to work for one of the most well-respected news organizations in the country. I wish her the best."

Even House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California got into the act, tweeting, "Congrats to Margaret Sullivan, who has just been named the first woman public editor ever @ NYTimes."

The News plans to conduct a national search for Sullivan's successor, Lipsey said. Managing Editor Brian J. Connolly will serve as interim editor after Sullivan leaves.