

# Celebrated cartoonist Peter Lewis reflects on record 30 years - Newcastle Herald.

By Peter Lewis Feb. 12, 2016, 11:30 p.m.



**SELF PORTRAIT:** After 30 years as a newspaper cartoonist, Peter Lewis, ponders the essence of humour as he parts ways with the Newcastle Herald. Picture: Simone De Peak.

THIRTY years ago today I walked into the *Newcastle Herald* to begin my career as an editorial cartoonist.

The editor had been handling complaints all morning. The Lindy Chamberlain court case was in full swing, *Crocodile Dundee* was in cinemas, and the *Herald* had run a cartoon of a woman screaming: "Help, a crocodile's got my baby!" The telephones had blown off the hook. While I hadn't created the cartoon, it was a lesson in how reactive readers could be, and I trod very carefully for the first few months.

John Allan was an old-school editor with a short fuse and high blood pressure. Like a thermometer, a reddish colour would rise up his neck and across his face as his intensity grew. Thankfully he was also wise.

"Be good humoured, particularly on local issues," he said. "If you're just being malicious, people will retaliate."

The complaints began immediately. Letter writers were furious my cartoon was taking up their space, so I had tough crowd from the outset. I can't say I got off to a strong start.

Truth be told I thought the job would be easy. I mean, cartooning for a living, how hard could that be? I'd been drawing my whole life and had a fine arts background.

What could go wrong?

Humour, that's what. Making a satirical comment each day is like trying to catch smoke. Even after three decades it's still a mystery. A daily magic act, pulling the rabbit out of my head.

Sometimes an idea comes straight away. Other times it's a slog with lots of coffee and pacing the newsroom under a looming deadline. If you're not mad when you start as a cartoonist, you soon will be. Everyone thinks it must be easy. When I tell people I do cartoons for the paper they say: "What else do you do?"

I'm grateful for many things the *Herald* has made possible. A steady income is rare in the art world and it helped me raise a family. I've made lots of friends and shared the office with great colleagues who have provided unstinting support.

There's never been a dull moment. Our office has survived a killer earthquake, a biblical flood and a beached ship while breaking national stories and inspiring a royal commission.

I've worked with 12 editors, seen young journalists become major news figures, and watched computers take over every aspect of news production.

I've now matched the 30-year record set by the legendary *Newcastle Herald* cartoonist Les Lumsden. His was a golden era for newspapers, making him a household name in the region.

The media industry is now facing its most challenging time. The *Newcastle Herald*, considering the talent and determination of its staff and its importance to its Hunter community, is well placed for a bright future.