

The Big Sandy Mountaineer

Big Sandy, MT



“I had no idea how to start a business. Without the SBDC, the process of purchasing an existing business would have been much more stressful. Joe provided the needed training and guidance.”

Lorrie Merrill, Owner

Lorrie Merrill had been working full-time as the Director of Big Sandy Activities when she began writing part-time for the 110-year-old Big Sandy Mountaineer newspaper over two years ago. When Lorrie decided to retire as director at the end of 2018, she turned to writing full-time for the small-town paper, a step toward developing her dream of becoming a writer. Lorrie, a lifelong resident of Big Sandy, began covering all the local meetings and events, and even reported on human interest stories in the small farming community and surrounding areas. In 2019, the owners of the Big Sandy Mountaineer decided to sell the paper and Lorrie leaped at the chance to start a new chapter in her life.

Lorrie began working with Joe LaPlante, Havre SBDC Regional Director, after the offer to buy the paper was presented to her. With limited small businesses experience, Lorrie worked with Joe through the process of writing a business plan, unwinding the complexities of subscribers online vs. print, covering financial documents from the previous owners, and getting ready for the bank. Joe was able to assist in obtaining an Employer Identification Number for tax purposes and registering the paper as an Limited Liability Corporation. Lorrie also utilized Joe’s extensive knowledge of QuickBooks to help her integrate the software into the business and received marketing advice that was relevant to the Mountaineer. Lorrie frequently turns to Joe as questions arise in the process of learning her new business.

Lorrie was able to obtain a \$100,000 loan that allowed her to purchase the existing Big Sandy Mountaineer. The paper itself has grown, and the community has come together to support the business. It was a consistent six-page paper prior to the purchase. Each edition is now an eight-page paper, but several publications have reached ten-pages and once reached 12-pages. With a simple approach that the newspaper is a tool to celebrate the rural community to keep everyone connected, the Big Sandy Mountaineer now boasts two writers in addition to Lorrie and one full-time employee. The Big Sandy Mountaineer printed its first paper in 1911, and now Lorrie is dedicated to continue the Mountaineer’s long history of keeping her community informed.