

From Brillion to the Beltway

Jim VandeHei, the *Axios* co-founder and Wisconsin native, went from small-town summer editor to redefining political journalism in Washington, D.C.—and never lost his love for the work or his roots. **BY MARILYN KRAUSE**

FOR JIM VANDEHEI, our 2025 Sacred Cat honoree, it all began in Brillion, Wisconsin. That includes his stellar career as a journalist at legacy publications including *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*, to his stunning departure from reporting on national politics to found *Politico*, a start-up his Post editors and just about everyone else predicted would fail.

This self-deprecating Oshkosh, Wisconsin native traces his eventual success to a life-altering moment at age 20 when Zane Zander, publisher of *The Brillion News*, hired him for a summer job as editor at the weekly newspaper, despite VandeHei having completed only one writing course. But he learned newspapering quickly, and among the early lessons was that anything could be interesting.

“There’s no way I’d be where I am without Zane,” VandeHei said. “He talked to me for 10 minutes and changed my life. I

technology, media, and business, VandeHei’s resume is rooted in journalism and laced with serendipity.

After an internship in the Washington, D.C. office of the late U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl, VandeHei set a goal to cover Congress. Fresh out of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, he worked at a small publication covering Congress in D.C. until landing a job at *Roll Call* doing the same. So began about a decade covering Congress, the president and politics.

Sensing a major shift in the media landscape when Google bought YouTube, he and colleague John Harris left the Post to launch *Politico*, the digital media firm that revolutionized coverage of policy, politics and power in Washington, and ultimately expanded abroad. He had oversight for both editorial and business operations. Ten years later, VandeHei left to co-found *Axios* with *Politico* alums Mike Allen and Roy Schwartz.

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learned everything in Brillion. Farms, ethanol, politics, Trump – I find it all fascinating. I never lost that perspective.”

That job reinforced two of his foundational beliefs: You control much more in your life than you think, and most of what you control positions you to take advantage when good luck strikes.

VandeHei has worked his way, emphasis on *worked*, to the very peak of the often conflicting worlds of journalism and business, with an impact both immense and significant. And at age 54, he no doubt has many more chapters in his life story yet to write.

The co-founder and CEO of *Axios*, a media company designed to help people become smarter, faster on politics,

In 2022, *Axios* was acquired by Cox Enterprises, with the three founders maintaining editorial control.

During the past few years, VandeHei also authored two books, “Smart Brevity: The Power of Saying More with Less,” with Allen and Schwartz; and “Just the Good Stuff,” his perspective on succeeding despite life’s inevitable obstacles or a low self-image.

He wrote “Just the Good Stuff” in part, because he realized that growing up in Oshkosh and lacking the elite backgrounds of many of his Washington competitors or colleagues ultimately didn’t matter.

“There was nothing remarkable about me but I was able to do really remarkable things as a journalist, meet people, go places,



see things,” he said. “I wanted to reach out to kids like me – no Ivy League, not a high achiever. I realized I can do whatever I want with my life.”

Asked what he would like people to know about him, VandeHei goes back to his roots.

“My title is CEO of a company but I really do consider myself a journalist... having the soul of a journalist really drives me.”

Asked for his view of ongoing discourse over perceived media bias, VandeHei acknowledged observing bias in newsrooms during his newspaper days, but he believes it’s not as prevalent as some contend today. Even so, journalists need to earn back their credibility.

“Get back to basics, be curious...do your job,” he said. “Check your opinions at the door. I think most people can do that... If you make a mistake, admit it.”

Honors for VandeHei include the National Press Club’s Fourth Estate Award in 2024 (with Allen), and The National Press Foundation’s Editor of the year in 2015 (with Harris).

“I hate this damn debate about ‘Oh, we don’t need the media.’ It’s not true,” VandeHei said in accepting the Fourth

Estate Award. “I’m a beneficiary of this country. Some dipsh-- from Wisconsin can come and start two companies, be up here, win an award.

“But at the core of that is maybe transparency, maybe a free press, maybe the ability to do your job without worrying about going to jail, maybe the ability to sit in a war zone and tell people what’s actually happening ... The work that we do matters.”

And, being a great reporter “is really, really hard.”

“You have to get up every single day and say: I want to get to the closest approximation of the truth — without any fear, without any favoritism,” he said. “You don’t do that by popping off on Twitter. You don’t do that by having an opinion. You do it by doing the hard work.”

Looking back, VandeHei said professionally, he’s most proud he’s been able to keep evolving and learning as a journalist, still as enthusiastic as in his early days.

“I have been so fortunate in my career and life,” VandeHei said. “I still get to write and work with good people.

“It’s easy to get cynical. But I feel more passionate than I ever have about what I do.”