

Presses silent at SA's oldest independent newspaper

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South Africa's oldest independent newspaper has closed its print shop after 140 years in Grahamstown. Yesterday, 30 June 2009, was the end of an era at *Grocott's Mail* when former owner Jeff Grocott retired after 49 years, and eight print shop staff were retrenched.



Admitting some tears had flowed when they printed the last issue in the building on Friday 26 June 2009, general manager Louise Vale yesterday said making the call to silence the presses was “a very tough decision”.

“It has been hell ... the retrenched staff are not just colleagues, they are also friends. It is heartbreaking for everybody.”

With more than 150 years combined service between them at *Grocott's*, Vale said the retrenchments were like “losing family” and that every effort was being made to try to find them jobs elsewhere.

Besides the 49 years clocked up by Grocott, Margaret Brand had notched up 35 and several others had more than a dozen years under the belt.

Vale said a combination of tough economic times and the realisation that the Rhodes University-owned paper needed to “focus on its core business of publishing” had prompted the decision.

“The print shop was not profitable ... it had become less cost-effective over the past 18 months.”

Vale said printing had been outsourced to Port Elizabeth and now took 30 minutes to produce instead of the usual nightmare 16-hour print runs per edition on the newspaper's presses.

Founded by Jeff Grocott's great-grandfather in 1870, the newspaper hit hard times and was sold by the family in 2003 to Rhodes University's School of Journalism - instead of a big media group.

The David Rabkin Project for Experiential Journalism was created as the holding company of *Grocott's Mail* and the newspaper was soon transformed into a training ground for media students.

Journalism School head Professor Guy Berger, who chairs the project, said the newspaper now wanted to “strengthen the

company” using new media like cellphone and Internet technology. “We are not printers, we are communicators.”

Admitting to “mixed emotions”, Jeff Grocott said “I am very sad the print shop has closed after 140 years ... we missed only one edition in the 49 years I was here and still managed to come out the next day.”

Source: *Daily Dispatch*

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