



# Found in Translation

With a Scottish name and an upbringing in the North Carolina mountains, **Robert McCarson '86** might seem an unlikely prospect to run a Spanish-language newspaper.

But out of the basement of his Asheville home, McCarson publishes *La Voz Independiente*, a weekly Spanish-language paper for western North Carolina's growing immigrant population. The paper — its name translates to *The Independent Voice* in English — has a circulation of 9,300 and reaches predominantly Mexican and Salvadoran immigrants across Buncombe, Henderson, Transylvania and Haywood counties and beyond to other mountain communities.

Starting the paper was both an economic and personal opportunity. In 2003, after reporting jobs at several large newspapers and public relations posts in Washington, D.C., McCarson financed the newspaper from his life's savings to come home to the mountains, where his family has lived for 13 generations.

"In 2000, there was no Spanish paper here but more than 25,000 Hispanics in Asheville and Hendersonville alone," said McCarson, describing the market change that presented the opportunity. "That number is now closer to 75,000. Hispanics are the largest minority in all of western North Carolina except for Jackson, Graham and Swain counties, home of the Qualla Boundary and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation, and Burke and Rutherford counties, where there are slightly more African-Americans. But think about it: Since 1990, Hispanics have eclipsed African-Americans in Buncombe, which traditionally was the most African-American county in the mountains."

McCarson's reporter days started in his freshman year of high school in Brevard when he was inspired, like legions of other budding journalists, by the Watergate saga depicted in *All the President's Men*. As a sophomore, he worked for the local

*Transylvania Times*, "stuffing inserts, then covering city council and local sports." He continued writing there and for the *Watauga Democrat* in Boone while studying at Appalachian State University before a junior-year transfer to Chapel Hill. As a journalism major, he worked as a part-time reporter for *The News & Observer's* bureau in Chapel Hill and later for The Associated Press, *Asheville Citizen*, *Palm Beach Post* in Florida and the *News & Record* in Greensboro.

In a career path familiar to many former journalists, McCarson was drawn to the "other side" and worked in communications and public affairs, including a stint as press secretary for then-congressman and now-U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer of New

York. He worked at a boutique PR firm and was director of corporate communications for Fannie Mae in Washington before starting *La Voz*.

During his Beltway days, McCarson hired tutors and became fluent in Spanish long after studying it in high school and at Carolina.

McCarson, who is divorced and has two children living in Texas, runs *La Voz* with his domestic partner, Jasmin Arzón, who is Puerto Rican. The couple is the staff — he

does advertising sales, reporting and photography while she designs ads and helps with layout. Regular contributors also write for the print edition and its website.

They met when Arzón came to work at *La Voz*; she left for a time, the two dated and then she returned to work with McCarson. "We speak both English and Spanish but never 'Spanglish,'" said McCarson. "I am a stickler that you should never contaminate Spanish with Anglicized false cognates. Spanish is a very broad language with an equal to nearly every word in English. There's an old saying, 'English is the language of business, but Spanish you use to speak to God.'"

The paper has a heavy focus on local news but only news that's directly tied to the target audience. For instance, readers don't see coverage of high school football or city council meetings in *La Voz* unless there is a specific connection to local Hispanics. Even its name sends a message. "*The Voice* and *Independent* because it's not owned by some journalism-killing conglomerate," he said.

Even though he is not Hispanic, McCarson says, he has developed credibility in that community. "Sure, it took time but we show our readers and advertisers we are here for them," he said. "They have always welcomed and appreciated what we do. They face a lot of prejudice because they speak Spanish, and they see the paper as being on their side."

— Andy Trincia '88

## Journalist spots opportunity in his second language



**Robert McCarson '86 and the press in Westminster, S.C., where his newspaper, *La Voz Independiente*, is printed.**