Tough as nails, sharp as a tack
Bulletin says farewell to veteran newswoman

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From the Publisher

Tough as nails. That’s not the most common description of a woman who is 5-foot-2, weighs maybe 100 pounds soaking wet, and was born about 76 years ago.

That is, however, one of many ways I would describe Alta LeCompte.

For the past five years, Alta wrote for the Las Cruces Bulletin, primarily covering business. Unfortunately, Alta is leaving us, as she and her husband, Ross, move to North Carolina.

I can’t remember exactly how Alta’s resume came across my desk, but I remember being immediately intrigued. The resume revealed experience broad and deep, and the writing samples were informative and engaging.

We were looking for a versatile writer, so I called the editor for whom Alta had most recently worked in Virginia. Many times, calling for references is an exercise in futility, or at least in boredom. Often, former employers don’t give you much more than start and end dates of the person’s employment. Occasionally they will honestly answer the question “Would you hire this person again?”

Boring cannot describe the call I made to this editor. He could barely contain his excitement.

“Alta is the best reporter I’ve ever had,” he said. “If you can hire her, do not hesitate.”

I hesitated long enough to call Alta and bring her in for an interview, at the end of which, I brought her on board.

One of her early interviews for the Bulletin was with Garrey Carruthers, now New Mexico State University’s chancellor, but then dean of the College of Business.

The next time I saw Carruthers, he went out of his way to come tell me about this feisty little reporter.

“Alta is tough!” he said. “She keeps drilling down until she gets to the heart of the matter. She is good.”

I took this as high praise from a former governor, someone who for four years dealt with journalists of all stripes on a daily basis.

A few years later I would learn another aspect of Alta’s toughness.

I sat in a small room in the MountainView Regional Medical Center emergency room, where Alta sat on a doctor’s table, with dried blood on her clothes and skin.
She had been in a car wreck.

The wreck, though, was not the topic of conversation she wanted to cover. She wanted to let me know what appointments and assignments she was missing due to her accident. She wanted to apologize for missing them and was already planning ways to re-schedule.

“Um, Alta,” I said. “You do know you have blood on you, right? You do realize there’s a good chance you may have some broken bones, right?”

She shrugged all that off, and muttered something about her car.

Sharp as a tack

Few people are as active as Alta, in as many different ways. Her life is full of physical, spiritual, social and intellectual activities. She can speak as readily on the Pittsburgh Steelers as she can on the business opportunities in Santa Teresa, as she can about the teachings of her church. She has bright insight, a great B.S. detector and a wry sense of humor. In short, I want to be like Alta LeCompte when I grow up.

Journalism is a high-stress job, but Alta is unflappable. The closest I ever saw her to being flapped was the time she mistakenly called Valley Cold Storage “Viking Cold Storage,” and it unfortunately made it to print. Even though it was ultimately my responsibility, particularly because I had caught the error in an early proof, Alta claimed the mistake as her own. She was upset because she has such pride in her craft.

It is a craft she has honed since she was in the fifth grade in Palisades, New Jersey. She talked her teacher into letting the class do a newspaper, which was mimeographed at the photo engraving business where Alta’s father worked.

While I love Alta’s sense of humor, her husband Ross’s is an acquired taste. If you’ve known Ross for any time at all, he’ll tell you how he once played for the New York Jets. When he’s got your curiosity, he’ll let you know that he played in the band that happened to play at New York Jets games years ago.

New chapter

Perhaps what makes Alta such a lively, positive person is she remains a seeker.

She and Ross arrived in Las Cruces five years ago with no connection to the community, but quickly immersed themselves in the Land of Enchantment.

“When we first moved here I was really impressed with the Organ Mountains,” she said. “But I began to realize all these other mountains around us, with all sorts of geological features that turn all different colors. Physically it’s a beautiful place.

“We’ve just met such wonderful people in Las Cruces,” she said. “We moved here attempting to learn something about a new culture, and work at speaking Spanish, not too successfully. But it’s been a great learning experience.
“And I'll always remember the Las Cruces Bulletin as being family, no matter who’s working there over the years,” she said. “You guys attract the kind of commitment to community and one another that's very rare.”

Now, they head to North Carolina. Again, they have no real connection, but will be somewhat closer to some parts of their family.

“It’s time for another chapter,” Alta said about her move, seeking new adventure and new lessons in life, at an age when most people are spending more time looking at the old chapters.

That should be inspiring to all of us at any age.