From Ground Zero to War Zone
Black journalists’ battle to cover the big story
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On Sept. 11, 2001, I woke up early and drove to the airport. I held a ticket on Delta Flight 1428 from Atlanta to Nashville. I arrived in Nashville at 7:43 CDT—that made it 8:43 a.m. in New York. There was not a cloud in the sky, so you’ll understand my confusion at the hard landing.

Upon deplaning, I saw a crowd gathered around two television sets. On one set was the burning twin towers of the World Trade Center. On the other set was a live shot of a fire at the Pentagon. The sound on both television sets was muted. The horror of what happened had not hit me.

I grabbed my cell phone and called my newsroom. Chris, my news director, told me that two commercial jetliners had flown into the towers of the World Trade Center. A third plane had crashed into the Pentagon. Quickly I ended our call. He had more important things to do than talk to me.

Immediately, I wanted to go home, but was not sure how to make that happen. I’d gone to Nashville for a board meeting of the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) that was to begin on Sept. 12.

Not knowing what to do next, I recovered my luggage and hailed a taxi to the hotel. The driver had his radio tuned to an all-news station, and it was by listening to the top-of-the-hour newscast that I not only learned that the Federal Aviation Administration had ordered all U.S. airports closed and planes diverted to Canada or back to Europe.

At that moment, I realized that no one close to me knew that I’d landed safely. Quickly I called home and let my family know that I was safe and figuring out how to get home and back to work. At my hotel, like millions of Americans, I sat glued to a television set, my mouth agape, unable to comprehend tragedy unfolding before my eyes. I watched as the first tower collapsed, then the second.

As I sat there in front of the TV, the phone rang. It was NABJ calling to make sure I had landed safely. While talking to the office, it became clear that I needed to close the Washington, D.C. office and send our employees home to be with their families. As Tangie Newborn (NABJ executive director) and I talked, she looked out her window to see snipers atop the National Archives building adjacent to the NABJ national headquarters.

By midday, the RTNDA Board of Directors voted to cancel the 2001 convention and I hitched a ride home with former RTNDA Chairman Robert Garcia of CNN who’d driven to Nashville. Another news director from Central Florida with relatives in Atlanta hitched a ride also, and that afternoon the three of us, each with a week’s worth of luggage, piled into Robert’s Prelude and headed home.

I work in radio and am very proud of the medium, so it seemed appropriate that in the initial hours of the biggest story of our generation, I was listening to coverage on AM radio on the drive back. Robert drove me to the Hartsfield Airport parking deck where my car was parked and armed security guards were allowing cars out, but not in. So, Robert left me at the entrance to the deck to search for my car. I felt confused and discombobulated, said a prayer for myself and for the thousands of others touched by tragedy that day and God led me to my car.

There was no traffic on Atlanta’s interstate. Imagine that: No traffic in Atlanta. The lighted signs overhead read, “All Airports Closed. National Emergency.”

As much as I hated being away on a major news day, on Wednesday, I came in with the second shift to relieve our first team. Covering this story 24/7 for the first week left me numb. I cannot fathom what it must have been like for reporters at Ground Zero.

In this issue, we salute NABJ Journalist of the Year Byron Pitts of CBS News and his amazing coverage from Ground Zero and in Afghanistan. There are other stories as well, and I assure you that they are far more interesting than my Sept. 11 experience.

Nonetheless, I held onto my boarding pass from that day, and I pray that our nation never experiences loss like that again.

Condace Pressley

You can e-mail Condace Pressley at nabjpresident@mindspring.com.
"Black" Like Me

Using self-respect as a guide to style

Unlike most editors, I very seldom use my allocated space to tell you what's inside this issue. That's what the table of contents is for. Instead, I'll usually have something to say that may, or may not, have to do with the subjects covered within these pages. Today, it's about being Black. That's "Black," not "black."

Whenever in a position to do so, as part of my own style book, I insist that "Black," when referring to my people, my issues and my communities, be respected enough to be capitalized. But, because I know it's not AP Style and I know it's not correct in the eyes of many "by-the-book journalists" and because this magazine represents an organization of professional journalists, I struggled with the issue as I edited the stories on these pages.

Quite frankly, I had decided to wimp out and stick with the politically correct non-capitalization of "black," possibly dealing with it later. Then, I received a sign.

In the middle of my decision to be indecisive, the subject became the topic of some lively conversation on the NABJ listserve. The discussion was initiated by Chido Nwangwu, founder and publisher of USAfrica The Newspaper and USAfrica-online.com—and I quote:

"I find it extremely insulting to use lower case 'b' when the reference is to Blacks/African-Americans. Style-wise, it is wrong for the dominant media to continue the imposition of such substantial error of form and content since, the basic color, black, should be in lower case. Some dude will attempt, for the 1000th time to 'explain' away why its correct to identify Blacks as "blacks" while they hold as accurate the capitalization of Hispanic, Jewish, or Irish. It does not make sense!... Black is Black; that is, denoting a person, encapsulating ethno-racial origins while 'black' is a color for an inanimate [object] like paint."

Mr. Nwangwu requires his editors, contributors and reporters to capitalize the "White" and "Black" ethno-racial identities and all other ethnic origins.

In the introduction to his book "PowerNomics: The National Plan to Empower Black America," Dr. Claud Anderson states, "It is illogical to capitalize American Indian, Hispanic, Arab or Asian yet not capitalize the terms used to describe the two largest racial populations in the United States."

There's no reason to give up the AP Style book, but Mr. Nwangwu and Dr. Anderson are two examples of how we can control our own images through what we write. The NABJ Journal is in a powerful position to act as a catalyst for change and we must take advantage of that position even in the smallest ways.

For those who need verification of the acceptability of this change, in a January 1998 letter to the NABJ, the publisher of the Arizona Republic announced their decision to capitalize Black. The move put that mainstream publication in a unique, elite and forward-thinking class—a class in which The NABJ Journal should have been the first member and is long overdue in joining.

The New York Times style guide says that when trying to determine whether to use “African-American” or “black” you should try to determine and use the term preferred by the group or person being described. I prefer that they add “Black” to the list of options—because there's a big difference between me and a can of paint. I am more than a color and prefer to name myself “Black” instead of having someone else name me “black.” It is a matter of style…and substance.

I guess this column was about what's inside after all.

PEACE.

P.S. Thanks to Chido Nwangwu and the many other listservers who engaged in the "lively" conversation that so inspired me to do what I knew was right. Many of you, I know, will have comments on the subject and I welcome your letters to the editor.

Rick Sherrell
Byron Pitts got to work early as usual that day. He was working on a piece about entertainer and social activist Harry Belafonte for the CBS show “Sunday Morning.” It was a labor of love and he looked forward to getting immersed in the story. Then the call came. A jet had plowed into one of the World Trade Center towers.

“My first reaction was, do I have to (go)?” Pitts said. “I thought an amateur pilot made a mistake and it was a big accident.” He headed to the site. “I was one block away from the scene when the first building collapsed. I called in by phone for the first couple of hours,” then stayed at Ground Zero reporting round-the-clock on the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. “They sent me by default,” said Pitts, who is this year’s NABJ Journalist of the Year. “I was there all day the first day.”

Pitts said while getting that assignment may have been purely coincidental, other big stories have come his way because he gets to work early and takes any assignment tossed his way. “I have a reputation for not complaining, arriving early, being willing to stay,” he said, and cover all the fires, earthquakes, hurricanes sent his way.

Pitts and dozens of other African-American reporters and photographers were active players in the coverage of the terrorist attacks in New York and at the Pentagon, just outside of Washington, D.C., but many more had to battle to get a piece of the action. While there is no conclusive study of how many Black journalists had a piece of what was undeniably the biggest story of the year, there were many more clamoring for a slice of the action than were assigned.

Clem Richardson, a New York Daily News columnist, said he had to find creative ways to get into the mix. Both his columns, “Great People” and “City Beat,” were not considered news columns by his newspaper, so he was not one of the first people to spring to editors’ minds when the crisis hit.

“I was able to nose my way into some of the coverage by checking the schedule each day and proposing stories that were not on it. So, I got in pieces about funeral homes offering special deals to civil service victims and, later, how Chinatown was still hurting from being in the no-go zone for weeks afterward.”

Kenneth F. Irby, Visual Journalism Group Leader at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Fla., said that initially the enormity of the attack required every staffer available to document it. The more subtle decisions about whom to send on what kinds of stories changed over time as the focus of the coverage began to shift.

“The 9/11 story was a huge tragedy in American life, and it was a visual story from the moment that the first commercial jet-bomb collided into the first tower. From that first fatal moment, people around the world were saying and e-mailing each other the question ‘did you see?’” Irby said. “Local papers did not have time to be selective and sent every available photographer to the scene. The others,
Rewarding hard work

Michael Days, deputy managing editor of the Philadelphia Daily News, said several factors were involved in deciding who would get certain assignments. “In a small newsroom like this, on the day of the attack, we just put folks on trains and in cars.” Afterwards, he said, “we tried to give (stories) to the people who made the most sense, but everybody jumped in.”

A reporter was sent to Israel to write about how the U.S.-Israel relationship factored into the attack. Other reporters simultaneously were sent around the country to gauge the impact the attack had on the rest of the country—beyond the northeast corridor. It was a diverse team of reporters, Days recalled.

Days said it helped that he was an African-American in a management position when assignment decisions were made to ensure that African-Americans and other staffers of color got a piece of the big stories. “We’ve all got people we’re more comfortable with and that’s who editors turn to in a situation like this,” Days said, but he successfully pointed out that there were many hard-working reporters at the paper who needed to be rewarded with a shot at a big story.

For example, an African-American reporter at the Daily News was the only reporter in the area to find out where Philadelphia 76ers star Allen Iverson’s wedding was going to be held. “Even the guests didn’t know. They were told to mass at a certain point and got on buses to go,” Days said. “But she got it alone. Here’s someone who worked her butt off. Was it the biggest story of the year? No. But it was a story that people in this town were buzzing about and she got it. She should be rewarded.” That reporter was on the team traveling the country to document response to the 9/11 attacks.

“I think one of the reasons it became easier for me” to cover the disaster, said Pitts, was “the Pentagon correspondent got his slice (of the story). The Justice Department guy got his slice. The part of what was occurring on the ground I got.”

Pitts, 41, also spent five weeks covering the fighting in Afghanistan as part of the network’s rotation of reporters to the front. He saw no African-American reporters during his stint there, but did see a couple of photographers. The low numbers didn’t surprise him. “Only the major news organizations were sending people. There aren’t many people of color to begin with” in those newsrooms, Pitts said. “The bulk of U.S. journalists sent were journalists working in foreign bureaus, an even smaller pool.”

But there was another major factor, Pitts said. The assignment to Afghanistan was a purely voluntary process at CBS, Pitts said. “I didn’t have to stand in a very long line to get to go.”

Pitts said concerns about safety and family probably kept a lot of reporters, Black and White, from signing up. “It is a tremendous personal sacrifice,” he said. After he returned, “I talked to a young Black reporter (at CBS) who asked how it was and at the end, he said ‘boy, I would never want to go.’”

Pitts said his wife, Lyne, was not pleased with such clarity. The conditions, he said, forced him to focus “clearly and quickly” in planning a piece to go on the air. Basic tasks often taken for granted, such as eating, drinking clean water, bathing, even just washing one’s hands all were calculated and well-thought out moves. And sometimes, he said, there wasn’t a lot of time to think about how those things would be accomplished.

While in Afghanistan, Pitts said, he and his crew were fired upon three times, were briefly pinned down during a skirmish between Taliban and Northern Alliance troops and a bomb blew up on the road in front of the SUV his team was riding in. The windshield was destroyed. Once their vehicle strayed into a minefield. Our guide got out and walked ahead and

“I didn’t want to leave. My last day there I cried. I loved the people.
Everything is just bigger.
You have a heightened sense of being alive.”
—Teresa Wiltz,
The Washington Post
could get through the area without encampment and they hoped they saw what appeared to be an under Taliban control. In the distance, old Afghani driver believed was still strayed into territory that their 17-year-old Afghani driver believed was still under Taliban control. In the distance, old Afghani driver believed was still strayed into territory.

Afghan women, he said, “weren’t even second-class citizens. In northern Afghanistan women still were not welcome to work” after the Taliban were chased out of the area. “There was no one more desperate in Afghanistan than a woman who lost her husband,” Pitts said. Because women could not work, “they could not take care of their families and there was no one to step in and take a widow and her children under wing. They became beggars,” he said.

The video on the nightly newscasts showing women pulling off their burqas and men shaving their beards was mostly show for the cameras, Pitts said. As he traveled throughout the country, most women still wore the conservative dress and the men weren’t shaving.

Rules of the road

Pitts said his faith sustained him in the scarier moments of the trip.

At one point, his team’s vehicle strayed into territory that their 17-year-old Afghani driver believed was still under Taliban control. In the distance, they saw what appeared to be an encampment and they hoped they could get through the area without being noticed. Driving at night, in the desert, lost, with the lights turned off and still uncertain that they had cleared all the landmines, Pitts said the driver turned to him and said: “You have gun?”

No, Pitts said. Western journalists didn’t usually carry guns. They mostly consider it inappropriate for doing their jobs. The driver replied: “You in Afghanistan, no gun. Then we must drive faster.”

Pitts said he was scared, then angry. Angry at himself for breaking most of the rules of the road for foreign journalists in battle conditions: Never travel at night; never travel alone; never show money and never pick up anyone on the road. “I had promised my daughters that I would come back home safely and be able to one day walk them down the aisle and I thought, I’m not going to be able to keep that promise.”

He said suddenly he looked up and saw they were in a valley. “Then I saw a skyline of stars. It was breathtaking, just beautiful.” It made him think of the line from the 23rd Psalm: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...” He recited the psalm to himself, he recalled, adding “and my fear and my anger went away.” He said he realized his life was in God’s hands and he needed to rely on Him because “none of what sustained me much of my life growing up in the inner city would do me any good at that point.”

That and the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and how they refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar, telling the king that their God would deliver them from his wrath—or not, but that they would remain faithful to God, Pitts said, brought him a sense of calm that got him over the rough patches during his stint. “That gave me great peace, a peace I never felt in my life,” Pitts said. “There were several other occasions when I was frightened, but never afraid.”

Pitts said the experience made him “more mature spiritually and professionally.” He said he would likely take other dangerous assignments in the future, not because he seeks them out but because that’s the nature of the news business. He said CBS anchor Dan Rather summed it up pretty nicely, telling Pitts once: “Fish gotta fly, birds got swim, reporters gotta go.”

Taking the tough assignments is critical to success, Pitts said. “The institution isn’t built for us (people of color and women) to be successful, initially,” he said. That’s why it’s critical to finely hone one’s writing skills and be willing to take on all kinds of challenges.

Pitts, a CBS correspondent since 1998, was born and raised in Baltimore. He graduated from Ohio Wesleyan in 1982 with a degree in journalism and speech communication. He worked at television stations in Greenville, N.C., Norfolk, Va., Orlando, Tampa, Atlanta and Boston, and CBS Newspath, the 24-hour affiliate news service of CBS News, in Washington, D.C. He has won a national Emmy for his coverage of the Chicago train wreck in 1999 and an NABJ award. In addition, he has

“I never felt more alive or worked on something more significant...I have never written with such clarity.” — Byron Pitts, CBS News Correspondent

How to get a shot at the big story

- Get to work early and take any assignment sent your way.
- Gain a reputation for not complaining, arriving early and being willing to stay.
- Find creative ways to get into the mix. Check the schedule each day and propose stories and unique angles that are not on it. Hint: Editorial pages sometimes have unique angles on old stories.
- Become someone your management is comfortable with and knows they can turn to.
- Gain a reputation as someone who can get the facts no one else can get.
- Be willing to volunteer for the assignments no one else wants.
- Finely hone your writing skills and be willing to take on all kinds of challenges.
- Be willing to put in the time and effort it takes to succeed in the business.
won four Associated Press Awards and six regional Emmys.

One of his biggest challenges came early in his career when he had his work critiqued by experienced members in broadcast during his first NABJ convention in 1985 held in Baltimore. “There was no love for a 23-year-old brother with a sports coat and two pairs of slacks.” Pitts said. “I went to the critique” and a guy leading the session just savagely ripped into Pitts’ audition tapes. NABJ member Ray Metoyer came to Pitts’ rescue.

“Ray stood up and said, “Leave the brother alone. There are folks in this business who will tear him down. It’s our job to build him up.””

Metoyer’s response kept Pitts from giving up on a career he had wanted since he was 18 years old. He said he was stunned to have an older Black man give him the harshest critique he had ever received, “but to have Ray to stand up and defend me when I couldn’t defend myself” was an act of kindness Pitts said he will never forget.

Pitts said he wants to see more young African-American journalists willing to put in the time and effort to succeed in the business. And he’s keeping it in the family. His wife, Lyne, until recently was the executive producer of CBS News’ “The Early Show.” His stepson, Daniel Bowens, 21, who will graduate in the fall from Ohio Wesleyan University is planning a career in journalism, and his 19-year-old niece Stephanie Pitts, a student at the University of Missouri, has also expressed an interest in the field.

Pitts has always believed in hard work, and he said it has paid off for him and it will for others. “My mama raised me to believe you gotta work hard. It guarantees you nothing but an opportunity.”

Jackie Jones, a former national NABJ board member, is an assignment editor on the business desk of The Washington Post.

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The Virginian-Pilot

Debby Adams Simmons
Deputy Managing Editor
Carl Juste has been a photographer with the *Miami Herald* for the past 12 years. Last year, *The Herald* offered him the opportunity of a lifetime to document the events and consequences of the United States’ war against terrorism. He agreed to travel to Pakistan to take part in the historic moment in spite of the dangers. For 16 of those months, Carl traveled the war-torn terrain as one of the few Black photojournalists to get the opportunity. Among the photos Carl brought back were many scenes of fighting, protests, flag burnings and rallies. But the pictures of children spoke a thousand words about how war affects people. They are pictures that depict the sorrow of war and the unspeakable possibility that these could be our children. Carl’s pictures, his captions and excerpts from his personal log speak volumes.

**The Faces of War**

*by Carl Juste*

**10/05/01 — Rawalpindi, Pakistan** — A young boy brandishes gun as he is hoisted over the crowd in front of the Jamia Dar-Ul-Ulum Taltem Ul Quran Mosque (cq) in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. About three thousand worshipers gathered on the street outside the mosque for an anti-American and pro-Taliban rally.

**10/12/01 — Khyber Bazaar, Peshawar, Pakistan** — Two Pakistani men crawl and roll on the market’s floor begging for a sign of kindness from market shoppers. The one man shields his eyes from the sun as her rolls by the crowd of shoppers. Pakistanis and Afghan refugees of Peshawar continue their lives even though the hardship, turmoil, and threat of violence are constant.

**11/21/01 — Islamabad, Pakistan** — Distraught family members cry in anguish as the body of Afghan photojournalist Azizullah Haidari arrives at his Pakistani home in Islamabad after he and three other international journalists were killed in an ambush as they drove from the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad towards the capital of Kabul.

**10/31/01 — Killi Fazo Refugee Camp, Chaman, Pakistan** — An Afghan boy stands alone while a group of men surround members of the press during their visit of the Killi Fazo refugee camp.
11/27/01 — near Jalalabad, Afghanistan — Young boy tends to a herd of sheep. Afghan nomads herd their sheep, which have been reduced by three years of drought. The nomads, known as “kuchis,” have suffered more than most Afghans, having to contend with 23 years of war that have blocked their traditional migration routes with fighting and landmines. But like most, they pray for peace, stability and rain.

10/08/01 — Islamabad, Pakistan — Little girls stare at the strong police presence in the streets of Islamabad as their public buses passes the protest site.

11/01/01 — QUETTA, PAKISTAN — The doctor shows the scars on Khanomu’s face, a ten year-old Afghan girl, who along with her little brother and mother, were injured during recent bombing raids in Uruzgan province in Afghanistan. They are seeking medical attention at Al-Hajeri Al-Khidmat Hospital in Quetta, Pakistan.

11/02/01 — Quetta, Pakistan — Pre-K students leave classes after the end of the school day at the Seven Day Adventist Church and School in Quetta, Pakistan. Guns belonging to the local police sit on a cot. Local police officer are stationed at churches and school in fear of possible violence against Christians. The school has grades from pre-school to eighth grades. Christians being of small numbers in Quetta, live a isolated existance due to recent violence against Christians.

“Peshawar has not been victimized by terrorists, nor is it under a biological scare. Peshawar is just poor, over populated with the influx of refugees, and struggles to meet the needs of its own citizens. It is a victim of tribal feuds, violence and fighting among smugglers while being a short ride to open gun markets. Children and adults struggle to survive by hand peddling in the streets. Some literally crawl and roll on the market floors for extra change. Peshawar with all of its problems remains alive. Life is too precious to be wasted on fear. Most of the citizens of Pakistan want access to political and economic advancement. They are willing to keep the doors of hope open, we should take note of their resilience and do the same.”

— Friday, October 13, 2001, Peshawar, Pakistan
12/07/01 — Malawa, Afghanistan — Mujahideen soldiers hit the ground for shelter behind a rock as mortar fire lands near their position. A US B-52 bomber participated in the third day of joint assault on Al-Qada stronghold at Tora Bora, rumored to be Osama bin Laden hideout.

10/31/01 — Killi Fazo Refugee Camp, Chaman, Pakistan — An Afghan boy pulls his younger sister using a piece of cardboard and rope. The camp now has about 1800 newly arrived refugees. An additional fifty-five refugees arrived today, but were later returned back to the border.

11/03/01 — Quetta, Pakistan — Barbwire is placed on top of the outer wall of the Seven Day Adventist Church and School. The church has offered a place of worship and schooling to Quetta’s Christian minority. Many in the Quetta’s small Christian community have complained of threats of violence by non-Christian majority.

10/25/01 — Peshawar, Pakistan — After collecting dry grass for a fire, Sabara, 60, left, recalls how her daughter was killed during US bombing raids on Kabul, Afghanistan. Sabara left Afghanistan two weeks ago after her daughter died due to American bombing raids in Khaira Khana, near Kabul. She barely can hold back her emotions as explains that her grand daughter, Bulale, 4, goes hungry because of lack of food.

“How can anyone live out here? Dry, dusty, and isolated. It is amazing where one will take refuge to escape death and war. Several brick factories line the road, dark smoke spewing from their smokestacks. The land is flat and situated between mountains. The life out here is hard and deliberate. It offers no shade or sanctuary for the Pashtun way of life.”
— Wednesday, October 21, 2001, Quetta, Pakistan

10/31/01 — Killi Fazo Refugee Camp, Chaman, Pakistan — An Afghan boy pulls his younger sister using a piece of cardboard and rope. The camp now has about 1800 newly arrived refugees. An additional fifty-five refugees arrived today, but were later returned back to the border.
In June, seven former *Washington Post* reporters met at a colleague’s home for dinner—not to mark the 30th anniversary of the break-in at the Watergate Hotel, but of the landmark Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint charging the newspaper with discrimination against its Black employees.

The case, believed to be the first of its kind against a major American newspaper, unarguably accelerated the hiring and promotion of scores of journalists of color. More importantly, it helped solidify the role of Black journalists in the interpretation of contemporary American history. Yet, it seems the complaint and its significance has been largely ignored. There was no formal recognition of it scheduled at this year’s NABJ Convention in Milwaukee, where we relished in the ascension of more Blacks to top newspaper posts. African-Americans head bureaus in Mexico City, Paris, and Johannesburg, while Black columnists write on topics ranging from the African AIDS crisis to personal finance. Sure, at first glance, there is much to celebrate.

To the Metro Seven—as the group of Black Post reporters came to be known—the struggle for equality in the nation’s newsrooms is hardly over, as some wish to believe. Within the complaint’s allegations lie stark parallels to scores of issues that still linger. Yet, some of the Metro Seven survived at the *Post*, in journalism, partly on their own resilience, in the days before there was a deputy managing editor, or even an executive editor, to turn to for counsel. They had nothing but themselves.

**Constant challenges for Dash**

In 1966, a Howard University student named Leon Dash was working as a copy aide at *The Washington Post* when then-city editor Steven Isaacs
offered him a spot in that summer’s intern class. Dash quickly accepted, and was eventually hired as a full-time reporter assigned to cover the District’s Metropolitan Police Department. From the beginning, he faced constant challenges from Southern-bred police officers fresh from the Vietnam War, as well as from his own Post colleagues, whom he learned could be “some of your stiffest competition.”

Two years later, he left to serve in the Peace Corps, in Kenya—soon after, riots erupted in Washington and dozens of other American cities in the wake of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Editors looked around their newsrooms and realized, perhaps for the first time, the consequences of the absence of people who could penetrate communities of color and authoritatively explain just what was ticking inside Black America’s head. And so they plucked reporters from the ranks of Black-owned newspapers, then they even recruited police officers, teachers and government officials. Then in March 1968, the Kerner Commission concluded that “along with the country as a whole, the press has long basked in a world, looking out of it, if at all, with the white man’s eyes and perspective.”

Indeed, The Post realized this, too, and by Dash’s return in 1971 had hired several more Black reporters. Among them was Penny Mickelburry, a child of the Civil Rights Movement who just a few years earlier had become the first Black reporter at The Athens (Ga.) Banner-Herald. To Mickelburry, then in her early 20s, the jump to The Post’s “large, noisy” downtown Washington newsroom was at first glance daunting, but surmountable. “There were these people who were ephemeral, who floated around in sort of a rarified world,” recalls Mickelburry, who was quickly promoted from night police reporter to the District government beat, largely because, she is convinced, editors realized that many emerging Black bureaucrats were reluctant to talk to white reporters.

Still, Dash did not see strengthened coverage of Black culture in The Post’s pages, or significant improvement in the status of the newsroom’s Blacks, for that matter. White editors, he believed, “didn’t see anything extraordinary in that. They thought our development was consistent with our entry into the industry.” Dash flatly rejected that notion, and believed Black reporters were stifled primarily because of their race. In his own intern class, for instance, he watched silently as a White male Harvard University intern was quickly assigned a story that was destined for page one.

“I didn’t see any kind of consideration of that sort given to Black reporters. There was a lopsidedness of the trajectory toward becoming a journeyman reporter…. Blacks were kept at a low level of personal and professional development, and not given any chance to rise above it,” says Dash, who received the 1995 Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Journalism and left The Post three years later to become a professor of journalism at the University of Illinois at Champaign.

Talk of the disparate assignments dominated casual conversations between Black reporters. Recalls Richard Prince, then a young Metro reporter, “Black reporters kept asking, ‘why did this or that happen? How come Shirley Chisholm’s campaign wasn’t covered? Why did they close the Africa bureau? Why, on major breaking news stories, were Black reporters only assigned to do legwork?”

Soon, the keen observations turned to formal meetings, and strategizing.

Received unsatisfactory response

In the first week of February 1972, the nine Black Metro reporters sent a three-page memo to then-executive editor Benjamin C. Bradlee asking, essentially, why there had never been more than a single Black reporter assigned to the national desk? Why there were no originating Black editors on the foreign, national, sports, financial and style desks? And, among other issues, why there were no Black reporters in sports, and only two in Style? Why, after Leon Dash obtained information in an unreleased report on halfway houses in the city, was the assignment given to a white reporter?

Within a week, Bradlee issued a memo acknowledging difficulty striking a balance between the newspaper’s “commitment to hire, assign and promote the very best journalists we can find” with its “commitment to hire, assign and promote Blacks.” In addition, he noted The Post “now employs more Black editors, reporters and photographers than any newspaper in America.” Indeed, of 396 Washington Post newsroom employees, 37, or 9.3
percent, were Black; Black reporters comprised 17.5 percent of the 51-member Metro staff. Blacks accounted for 2 percent of the staffs of newspapers with circulation of more than 10,000, and 149 newspapers had none.

What is more, Bradlee promised the newspaper would amplify its recruitment efforts, and hire two more Black reporter-interns into its fiercely competitive program within a month. And he said the paper had twice offered the District editor job to Blacks—who declined. The Africa bureau was closed because of financial constraints incurred by the Indo-Pakistani War, he said.

However, Bradlee’s five-page response failed to appease the Metro reporters, who’d begun generating support from White colleagues. Later that month, the Black Metro reporters demanded The Post implement a stronger affirmative action program to bolster the number of Blacks in virtually every job category to at least 35 percent. Within six months, the reporters requested that Blacks account for between 15 and 25 percent of national and foreign, financial, sports and editorial desk staffers. Black copy editors also should be hired in virtually every other section, as should assignment editors, the Metro reporters argued.

“The city of Washington was overwhelmingly Black, and I’d guess 35 to 45 percent of the stories in the paper had Blacks in them or were about civil rights,” says Mickelburry, who left the paper one year later and is now a Los Angeles-based novelist. “So, I don’t think it was an unreasonable request. It was an effort to get The Post where it needed to be.”

In turn, Bradlee offered to hire even more Black reporter-interns, and in the following month appointed Robert E.L. Baker as the newsroom’s equal opportunity officer, charged with overseeing the affirmative action plan. In addition, he promised to hire an additional African-American reporter to the national staff, a Black editor to the Metro desk, and initiate a formal coaching system that would pair senior staffers with cub reporters.

To the Metro 8 (one person dropped), Bradlee’s response was “an insult to our commitment, vague and totally unacceptable.” A round of contentious meetings between the Metro reporters and editors followed, ending in an impasse.

“No alternative” to EEOC complaint

Penny Mickelburry had had enough. “I wasn’t in the mood for racism. I was disappointed and tired, and I really hadn’t come to Washington to put up with the same kind of crap I put up with in Athens,” she says. “My tolerance level had peaked.”

As it had for Black Metro reporters, whose coalition had dwindled to seven.

On March 23, 1972, the Metro Seven—as they came to be known—gathered before a throng of reporters and photographers at Metropolitan AME Church, literally behind The Post’s building, and announced they had filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint charging the newspaper with “denying Black employees an equal opportunity with respect to job assignments, promotional opportunities, including promotions to management positions and other terms and conditions of employment.”

The group’s spokeswoman, Metro reporter LaBarbara Bowman, said during the news conference that “the complaint [to the EEOC] represents our belief that this discrimination cannot continue to exist at a publication in a city that is 71.1 percent Black.” She added that the discrimination complaint—the first filed against any American newspaper—“came after very much thought, very much consideration. We’re very sorry we had to take this step. There is no alternative.”

Post attorney Joseph A. Califano told The New York Times that “The Post feels it is as good or better than any other publication in this country” in the employment of Blacks, and that the newspaper had already established an affirmative action program. For the young reporters, all that mattered was ensuring that African-Americans had a significant role in interpreting contemporary events in American history, and so any feelings of nervousness were minute—although the risk was great.

Ron Taylor, for instance, had been at the newspaper only four months, and was still on probation when he signed onto the complaint. “I thought it was important. I wasn’t going to worry
about my career. I could compete with anyone, so I didn’t have any real concern about whether I’d be blackballed.”

News of the filing triggered a series of columns, including one by The Post’s ombudsman Ben H. Bagdikian, who wrote that “if The Post is the best, it is still inadequate.”

Eventually, the EEOC complaint was dismissed.

However, it inspired a group of female Post staffers to file a discrimination suit, which the newspaper settled in 1980 with five-year hiring goals. The New York Times settled a discrimination suit by women in 1978, and Black staffers in 1980. Newspapers and, indeed, other corporations, implemented affirmative action programs in part to thwart the risk of lawsuits.

In 1978, the American Society of Newspaper Editors adopted an ambitious goal of achieving racial parity in the nation’s newsrooms by 2000, pledging that at least 17 percent of newspaper journalists would be of color. Twenty years later, only 11.5 percent of newspaper journalists were of racial or ethnic groups, which comprised more than one-quarter of the U.S. population.

The Washington Post changed, too. In a region that is more than 42 percent of color—and is projected to be majority-minority by decade’s end—20.6 percent of the newspaper’s 640 reporters, editors, photographers, copy editors and information technology professionals are racial or ethnic minorities. In the last five years, there has been increased diversity on the newspaper’s foreign, financial and news desks. However, some departments, such as investigative and outlook, remain all White, and there are sharp declines on its sports and metro desk—the traditional entry point for the vast majority of reporters. This decline has enormous short- and long-term implications, acknowledged Milton Coleman, who as deputy managing editor, is the newspaper’s highest-ranking African American.

“Given the role that Metro plays in the ultimate staffing of the newspaper, if editors of sections can’t turn to Metro to find journalists who’ve been developed in The Washington Post tradition, it makes it harder for other staffs to diversify,” he said.

There’s still work to do

The Metro Seven remained in contact sporadically over the years, more frequently, lately, through e-mail. Now, they say, it is a joy watching a new generation of Black journalists climb to new heights. Ron Taylor, now a copy editor at the Bureau of National Affairs in Washington, pointed to DeNeen L. Brown, who as The Post’s Toronto bureau chief has reported from the North Pole. “I think she does what I’d like to do,” he said, “stuff that, frankly, goes where Black people have never been.”

Yet, there is still much work to do. Earlier this year, Richard Prince, who returned to The Post as a foreign desk copy editor, noticed the newspaper briefed a story about President Bush’s appointment of Gerald A. Reynolds, a Black lawyer who is a critic of preferences for racial and ethnic minorities, to head the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education. The New York Times ran a full story. “It’s those kinds of things that just goes past the radar, and shows there’s still work to be done.”

Steven Gray, a reporter on The Washington Post’s Metro staff, can be reached at smgray@aol.com.

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**The Metro 7: Where are they now?**

**Richard Prince** is an assistant foreign editor at The Washington Post.

**LaBarbara “Bobbi” Bowman** is diversity director at the American Society of Newspaper Editors, based in Arlington, Va.

**Leon Dash** is a professor of journalism at the University of Illinois at Champaign.

**Penny Mickleburry** is a novelist in Los Angeles.

**Ron Taylor** is a copy editor for the Daily Report for Executives, one of the flagship publications for the Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., a Washington publisher of print and electronic news.

**Ivan Brandon** is a Washington-based consultant on energy issues concerning low-income people and utility deregulation.

**Michael Hodge** is an actor in New York.
When Rick Hancock followed Joe Lieberman to a New Haven polling place on Nov. 7, 2000, to watch the Connecticut Congressman cast a vote for himself for senator and vice president of the United States, it was only the beginning of a long, strange day.

“It was a historical, hysterical day,” said Hancock, anchor and political reporter for WTIC-TV in Hartford. “One of the best days of my life as a political reporter.”

The day would take him from New Haven to the Gore-Lieberman jet, where he would get the only interview with the candidate en route to Nashville. There, he would wait all night to learn that America was still days away from picking a president.

As WTIC’s political reporter, Hancock was one of only a handful of Black reporters to cover the national election, primarily because his state’s junior senator, Lieberman, was in the race. And while he says he more than thoroughly covered the vice-presidential race, Hancock, the only Black reporter in the Connecticut covering the State House, represents a notable shortage of Blacks covering elections and politics.

“The politicians aren’t the ones with the issues; the newsrooms are the issues,” said Alison Bethel, Washington bureau chief for the Detroit News. “They don’t have minorities covering the big races. The struggle is to get beyond the mayor to cover the senator or Congressman.”

She said editors and news directors have to start rethinking how they use Black reporters.

Concurring, Hancock, who has worked in Hartford for five years, said: “We just have to try to figure out ways to tell stories. That is what we should be doing in journalism anyway.”

But while newsrooms haven’t jumped at placing Blacks at the forefront of big races, Bethel said that in a lot of instances, Black reporters gravitate to areas like features, sports and urban affairs and seem disinterested in politics.

“Part of it is incumbent on us to be more interested in politics,” said Bethel, the former senior assistant city editor in charge of politics for the Boston Globe. “We have to direct more people into political coverage. NABJ needs to train people in political coverage.”

Stephen Miller, who has worked for the New York Times for 12 years, said with any job, position or beat, people have to express an interest. Miller likes to tell the story about when a Times editor posted a job listing looking for foreign correspondents, positions that were traditionally appointed. He said several Black reporters and editors—who were good, but not on the radar screen—applied, accepted and are now doing foreign duty.

“If that is what you want to do, figure out how to do it and do it,” said Miller, now the Times’ assistant to the technology editor and point man in setting up mobile newsrooms at the national conventions and other huge news events. “Come up with ideas and every time they say ‘no,’ come up with something else. Soon, they are going to have to let you do it. Sometimes, you really have to ask. Then you have to deliver.”

Miller, who has covered campaigns in the past, said that at a paper with the size and resources of the New York Times, they are able to send several reporters to cover events. Take the New Hampshire primaries. One of the early presidential battlegrounds, there could be a dozen candidates, each with a couple of Times reporters covering them. As the candidates advance, so do the reporters covering them.

“You have to hope you are covering the guy who is winning,” said Miller, adding that the Times has a number of Blacks covering politics, including the current White House correspondent. “We have these super correspondents who roam at will and cover what they want. From that perspective, I don’t remember any Black people doing that.”

Bethel, who is preparing for Michigan’s congressional races and helping out with the gubernatorial race, notes the difficulty in summing up how race plays into election coverage.

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“We just have to try to figure out ways to tell stories. That is what we should be doing in journalism anyway.”

Rick Hancock, anchor and political reporter, WTIC-TV (Hartford)
“It is hard to talk about race in the context of elections because that is the time when (candidates) are most open because they want the vote. They would be stupid not to talk to a Black reporter,” Bethel said. “They will even talk to the Black press. The Amsterdam News probably has as much access as the New York Times, especially when you are talking about local races.”

One advantage that Black reporters do have, said Bethel, is dealing with Black candidates.

“I do think that sometimes minorities have a little better access to minority candidates, but I think that is also the same for women with women candidates,” Bethel said.

Some might say Hancock is one of those rare breeds. Hancock majored in political science and communications at Howard University, graduating in 1985. He then became a salesman—of dog food—until he found himself in, of all places, Salisbury, N.C., where he had a cousin who was a lawyer. There isn’t much to do in Salisbury, a sleepy Piedmont town 40 miles east of Charlotte, so when the owner of the local Black newspaper asked him if he would be interested in being a reporter, he jumped at the chance.

But after a couple of years, Hancock was back in Washington contemplating Howard’s law school, when he got a call from the district’s mayor in 1988.

“Marion Barry was looking for a publications manager, and I had print experience,” Hancock said. “The funny thing is, when I was at Howard, I thought Marian was the biggest joke in the world. But the job was paying $48,000 in the mid-1980s, and I was 25. So I took it.”

Hancock said at his first press conference with Barry, his image of the mayor changed.

“It was on the budget, and he knew every detail. He knew what page everything was on and knew everything about that budget,” Hancock remembered. “I misjudged him, and I began to see politics from a different perspective.”

Then came Jan. 18, 1990.

Barry, on the eve of announcing his bid for re-election, was busted in a D.C. hotel room smoking crack cocaine with a woman named Rasheeda Moore. He was convicted of cocaine possession and spent six months in jail.

“Within a few days everything changed,” said Hancock, who had become deputy director of communications. “I changed my course of direction after Barry got busted. I was depending on him, and I placed my future in him. I was very disappointed.”

Hancock went to work at a public affairs television station and was on the verge of returning to print, when the news director of WRC-TV, an NBC affiliate in Washington, called him to be a freelance weekend reporter. He moved on to work in Baltimore, then Harrisburg, Pa., before moving on to Hartford. During his five-year tenure there, Hancock, the station’s chief political reporter, has covered two gubernatorial races, several state and U.S. Congressional races and Lieberman’s national run for vice president.

“I jumped at the opportunity to do it,” Hancock said.

When Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton became front-page news on every newspaper and tabloid in the country, Lieberman was the first major Democrat to denounce the president. Hancock sensed that Lieberman’s moral stand would one day benefit the junior senator.

“We started hearing that he was on Gore’s short list for vice president,” Hancock said. On the day before Lieberman was to be announced as the vice-presidential candidate, Hancock sent a photographer to his home to ask him what he had heard.

“He just knocked on the door and asked him,” Hancock said. “The next day, the secret service swarmed in. It was a different game.”

Hancock naturally became his station’s key guy in covering Lieberman and the campaign. Budget constraints prevented him from going everywhere, but Hancock was at all of the key spots, including stops on the East Coast, the Democratic National Convention, and that night in Nashville.

“I remember it was warm, then cold, then it started raining,” Hancock said. “Gore had lost Tennessee, so some Bush people came over to taunt the Gore people. Then when the results were announced for Gore, the Bush people were out-numbered and it was a mini-riot. It was a very long and crazy night.”

While America waited and watched as national anchors flip-flopped and vacillated, Hancock flip-flopped and vacillated.

“It was very hard because we didn’t know,” Hancock said. “When we signed off at 1:30 a.m., I felt bad because we had to tell the audience that we just didn’t know anything.”

It would later be revealed, of course, that Gore and Lieberman had lost, although Lieberman won his Senate race. Hancock still covers him in Connecticut.

“We have a good relationship,” Hancock said. “He is very media savvy. But if I gotta slam Joe Lieberman, I slam him.”

Hancock said he has been able to cover politics effectively because he not only likes it and understands it, but has been on both sides of it.

“I watched how people covered Marion, and I understand the two sides,” Hancock said. “I bring a uniqueness to the job, and I understand these guys a little bit. If Marion had not gotten in trouble, my life would be different. I thought about running for city council, but I always wanted to get back in journalism. At this point, I appreciate what I am doing. I find it very fascinating and exciting and I hope to take it on a larger scale one day if I am blessed.”

Ernie Suggs is a political reporter for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. He is also NABJ’s Region IV director.
Key to job seeking: Be prepared
Jump-start your own career by being ready

By M.L. Lake

Twice in the last month or so, I’ve had to get someone to jump-start my sport-utility vehicle because I left my lights on and my battery ran down. Each time, my rescuer used a self-charged battery starter, and each time I vowed to buy one so that I was prepared next time. But I haven’t gotten one. Which means, sooner or later, I’m likely to find myself dependent on someone for help again. Which got me to thinking about how unprepared we often are when career opportunities present themselves simply because we haven’t done what we know we should have.

Take the case of a young female journalist who contacted me recently. Recruiters at two larger newspapers whom she had sought out as mentors told her about openings they had and asked her to send a package ASAP. Had she been prepared, she could have overnighted her cover letter, résumé and clips that afternoon or early the next morning. Instead, she had to start from scratch, including the time-consuming process of locating and selecting clips to submit—because she wasn’t prepared.

Here’s some advice on the subject:

Have your portfolio ready at all times. Have several. Several versions, in fact. Too often, job seekers—media and otherwise—have the portfolio. Everyone gets the same résumé, the same cover letter and the same clips. Big mistake.

Let’s start with the clips. I’ve advised deciding upfront if a story has the potential for a submittable clip. If so, report and write the heck out of it.

Compile lists—note, I said lists—of your 10 best clips in various categories: news, news-feature, feature, etc. Work to replace clips on the list—starting with No. 10—with superior ones.

Clip your stories, make several copies and file them in designated folders. Now assemble portfolios. One could be for a general-assignment job covering a municipality, another feature-writing job, etc. See where I’m coming from? Tailor your portfolio to the job sought. Or the one available, if your major objective is to get hired at a particular paper.

Never submit more than 10 clips (Treat a series as one). Attach notes to some stories explaining special reporting circumstances or noting follow-up stories, public response or resulting actions.

The résumé: Generally make it one page, no matter how long you’ve been in the business. Aim for concision and consistency. And make it visually appealing. Don’t use fifty-leven different fonts or type that’s too small. Use a reverse-chronology approach, listing most recent jobs first. Never fib or oversell yourself. If you did a summer internship at a major paper, list it as such.

The cover letter: Keep it to a page and avoid rehashing your résumé. It’s meant to be a teaser, to introduce you and whet the reader’s appetite. That means telling things about yourself and your career that create the image you desire. Write with as much care as you would in crafting a good story. As circumstances dictate, modify your cover letter.

One last thing: Don’t forget to review the letter carefully each time you send it to make sure you don’t include information meant for the last recipient. Such as, “I have long wanted to live and work on the West Coast” when, in fact, the letter is going to an East Coast paper.

Now, let me make a note to buy a battery starter.

M.L. Lake is public editor and former recruitment director for The Virginian-Pilot, 150 W. Brambleton Ave., Norfolk, VA. 23510. He is president of the Hampton Roads Black Media Professionals. Contact him at lake@pilotonline.com.
Escape to reality
Some issues to consider and a little fun
by Richard Prince

This issue’s list of books by or about Black journalists includes an examination of Black homosexuality, the latest take on the idea of an American melting pot and a whodunit that offers readers a $10,000 prize.

ELIZABETH ATKINS BOWMAN, a onetime Detroit News reporter and former president of the Detroit chapter of NABJ, has teamed with actor BILLY DEE WILLIAMS to write Twilight (Forge, $25.95). Bowman says Williams liked her 1998 novel White Chocolate and was looking to write a love story himself. Their joint effort has a female judge in an affair with a movie star whose case is before her, and characters struggling with their racial identities, as in the biracial Bowman’s two previous novels. An early review, from Publishers Weekly, said the book “verges on so-bad-it’s-good camp, but misses,” but Bowman has already written a screen treatment. More at www.lavender-dream.com.

DELROY CONSTANTINE-SIMMS, a British academic and freelance journalist who is news editor of Europe’s largest Black Web site, www.Blacknet.co.uk, has edited The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities (Alyson, $16.95). In the U.S., the book won the Lambda Literary Award for excellence in gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender literature in the nonfiction anthology category. Constantine-Simms, who is “100 percent heterosexual,” says Black journalists need to “recognize that there is Black homosexuality,” that “it’s not about the female stereotypes that people put across,” and to “separate HIV/AIDS from homosexuality.” His book features a forward from Harvard’s Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and essays from such writers as Earl Ofari Hutchinson and bell hooks. The work seems more academic than journalistic, but where else can you read an essay about the homosexual subtext in the songs of Luther Vandross?

TRENÆ FLOYD, an NABJ member who works in public relations with the Port of Miami, has Cinnamon Browne: Waiting on Love, (SpiceRackBooks, $17.84, paper), written under the pen name Lauren Spicer. The cover line gives a clue to the writing style: “When the heart gives a command, the mind, body, and soul must obey.” More at www.spicerackbooks.com.

JOHN JOHNSON, a former ABC-TV correspondent and anchor at all Big Three network-owned stations in New York, has Only Son: A Memoir (Warner, $23.95), about life with the man Johnson resigned from television to care for: his father, John Johnson, Sr., who died in 1998. “The book is a message of redemption and force of will,” Johnson said. “I was born in the ghetto and despite an alcoholic mother and a sexual-predator father, we prevailed. I say ‘we,’ because despite all of the racial subjugation and its psychological consequences it wrought on my parents, they fought for a better life for me. I rewarded their effort by achieving in the racist media world of television news. While my book does not emphasize race as a headline issue, it’s the understood subtext in

“The models that have been constructed to think about Black media are essentially being imploded by the economic facts on the ground today. What’s good for them can also be good for us. HBO is good for us. Ask Chris Rock.”

— Leon E. Wynter
the telling of this small story about a little Black family. For any journalist, especially a minority journalist, the will and the drive needed for success is part of this story.” Johnson now writes and paints.

MEL WATKINS AND BILL ADLER offer Who Killed Tiffany Jones? (Amistad, $22.95), a novel written under the pen name Mavis Kaye. The whodunit Who Killed the Robins Family? sold more than a million copies after it was published in 1983 and spawned a sequel. The first book offered readers a $10,000 reward for solving the murder of eight members of a wealthy white family; the second paid $10,001. This one repeats the gimmick. But in this effort, Adler, a book packager, teams with Watkins, a former editor at the New York Times Book Review and author of two books on African American humor, On the Real Side (1994) and the new African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to the Present, written with Dick Gregory. (Adler’s original collaborator, Thomas Chastain, died in 1994.) The 2002 characters include a member of the Congressional Black Caucus and an expatriate jazz musician, and Tiffany Jones is a former disco diva. More at www.harpercollins.com/tiffanyjones.

KEN WELLS, a senior editor and writer at the Wall Street Journal, offers Floating Off the Page: The Best Stories from The Wall Street Journal’s ‘Middle Column’ (Wall Street Journal Books, $24). This 67-story collection includes a piece each from two African Americans. Angelo Henderson, now at the Detroit News, writes about a hair competition, and fashion writer Teri Agins, has a piece about stylin’ at the Oscars called “And the Winner for Placing the Most Bras Is…” Says Henderson, former NABJ board member and Pulitzer winner: “There are so many good writing examples and strategies taught on the front pages of the Wall Street Journal—detail, voice, movement, color and creative approaches to subjects. You’ll see decades of great writing—the best the Journal has ever had to offer.”

LEON E. WYNTER, who wrote the “Business and Race” column for 10 years in the Wall Street Journal, has American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America (Crown, $25). Wynter, who stopped doing his column in 1999 to work on this book, uses his reporting experience to argue that “whiteness itself is finally being dissolved into a larger American identity.” And he says that Black journalists must re-examine the validity of Black media, “this idea that ‘Black-owned’ automatically is in the best interests of the Black community and ‘White-owned’ is only for the interest of the White community. The models that have been constructed to think about Black media are essentially being imploded by the economic facts on the ground today. What’s good for them can also be good for us. HBO is good for us,” Wynter says. “Ask Chris Rock.” The 1996 NABJ convention in Nashville has a cameo role.

Richard Prince is a writer and editor based in Washington, D.C., who works part-time at the Washington Post and is chairman of NABJ’s Media Monitoring Committee. He can be reached at rprince@erols.com

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Joining forces
Fledgling chapter discovers their strength, even in small numbers

By Melissa Monroe

San Antonio is known for the River Walk and the Spurs, but few people know the city has a wealth of African-American history. Here's a little Texas trivia for you: San Antonio has the largest Martin Luther King, Jr. Day march, its first mayor was black, it is home to many black cowboys and it now has a local NABJ chapter.

A little more than four years ago, six black media professionals pooled their money to start and incorporate the chapter, write a constitution and eventually receive nonprofit status.

In a town where the Black population is about seven percent—including the large African-American military personnel stationed in the region—the chapter knew it would have to rally hard to recruit new members. Recruiting and retaining members is a challenge for any chapter, but it’s even harder in cities with small Black populations. Many of its members see the group as their only source for communicating with each other and meeting conversations often center around being the first African American in a newsroom, overcoming stereotypes and educating people about diversity.

“Having the organization is like a magnet where it attracts people who are in journalism and in public relations or have an interest in it,” said Express-News columnist Cary Clack. “If we didn’t have it, there would be no way for us to come together and meet and feed off each other’s energy and ambition.”

Today, with more than 30 members and a regular following at the monthly meetings, the San Antonio chapter is making inroads. At an annual publicity workshop to introduce San Antonians to the chapter, SAABJ members teach how to write press releases and whom to call in the media to get publicity. The chapter has always given money to struggling college students, and last year it started an official scholarship program. This year’s goal is to increase awards from $250 to $500 each.

Helen Montoya, who earned a degree in communication arts at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, knows first hand how money can be an obstacle to a career.

“Without the scholarship I may not have had the opportunity to take photography classes,” Montoya said. “Without the opportunity SAABJ gave me, the road to continued education would have been much longer and bumpier.”

SAABJ also participates in the local Urban Journalism Workshop, a two-week journalism boot camp for high school students. Although the workshop typically attracts one to two Black high school students a year, SAABJ hopes it can encourage them to go into journalism.

In addition to giving to charities and helping in other causes, SAABJ president Melissa Monroe said the chapter also contributes to the national association. Last year, the fledgling Texas chapter hosted its first regional conference, one of the few conferences to make a profit. San Antonio members raised nearly $30,000 for the event that attracted about 200 conference-goers.

“It never came across our minds to propose having a regional in San Antonio because we were so new,” Monroe said. “But after one of our members suggested it and we received encouragement from Cheryl (Smith) we knew it would be successful, and it was.”

Last year, SAABJ was nominated for chapter of the year by Region VII Director Cheryl Smith for their efforts in pulling off a successful regional conference—a huge milestone for an organization struggling for survival and attention among other more-established NABJ chapters.

SAABJ continues to endure because of the dedication of its members who may not always attend the meetings—another ongoing challenge for local chapters—but know the chapter’s mission is too important to overlook.

“SAABJ has shown that it doesn’t matter if you are Atlanta or Dallas,” Monroe said. “As long as you have members willing to participate and needing to communicate with each other, you can have a successful chapter.”

Melissa Monroe is a business writer at the San Antonio Express-News and president of the San Antonio chapter. She also serves as chair of NABJ’s Council of Presidents.
Pride of Few May Lead to NABJ’s Fall
Vital PR members, fed up with insults, abuse, soon may leave a void in the organization

Many people have asked me in bewilderment about the controversy between the journalists and the public relations professionals in NABJ. They want to know what the scuttlebutt is. My answer? I don’t know. What I do know is there needs to be a better understanding of and appreciation for the hard-working public relations professionals and those in similar marketing, non-journalism positions who not only actively and financially support NABJ, but the industry as a whole. There needs to be the same sensitivity to issues of discrimination within the organization that we rally to address in society. The level of insensitivity and paranoia that prevails when the “PR issue” comes up has reached levels so high that many who have opinions feel threatened to share them for fear of unbridled verbal abuse.

What was that about “free speech” that we claim to protect?

The career choices that people make are not always easy, nor obvious. When one chooses to voluntarily support an organization, that relationship takes on a completely different nature. It begins with the word “volunteer,” which means in many cases that it was an independent choice based upon an affinity for the mission of the organization and the people in it. Many PR professionals have had their professionalism challenged and their level of competence insulted. However, when it comes to “getting things done” or “raising necessary funds” then PR people are OK; they are expected to just stay in the shadows and not speak. That sounds like shades of slavery and the “White, you’re all right, brown stick around, black get back” mentality.

I heard a journalist proclaim, “PR people are ok to hang around the bar with, but I would not want them to run my organization.” News flash: Many of the local chapters would not be as successful as they are without the interdependency of a diverse member base. Funny, the organization preaches diversity and inclusion to combat the bad “isms”—racism, sexism, ageism—while it practices elitism and classism.

We can look at the business model to see how important it is to have diversity within the structure to survive and grow. The writers for the prestigious newspapers and magazines that we herald, while shunning the dedicated and less funded Black newspapers, are not paid per word for their prolific articles. It is the advertising dollar and those funds generated through the promotion of the publication as the “leading authority” that drives the revenue. Who is out there promoting the publications and the stations? Who is out there keeping the public image high and those revenue streams upward?

NABJ is a business as well as an organization, but there are some vocal purists who feel that too many PR professionals, and those of their kind (doesn’t that sound like “look who is moving in the neighborhood?”), will “take over” NABJ and change it. Another news flash: We are well aware of NABJ’s mission—yessuh, boss, we can read—and are here to help the organization, not hurt or change it. However, the consistent and vociferous verbal assaults and the recent threats via the streamlining process have done more harm than good.

By eliminating the associate member position on its board, NABJ is once again throwing salt on an open, festering wound. If NABJ thinks that this move has encouraged many of the previously reticent full members to “step to the plate,” look at the numbers. If leaders think that their actions have helped local chapters to maintain their identity as a powerhouse with just “journalists” in charge, then look at the numbers

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and the decline in programs and membership. And if leaders think that by eliminating not only the associate member position but also the student representative the board will reflect the views of the membership, look at the facts and contributions of the individuals in those positions.

We won’t even talk about the other issues of fiscal mismanagement and member apathy. They have generated more divisiveness and bad feelings among members. They have caused more hard-working members of the organization to bail out and take their money and support elsewhere. Coming from a business background, that does not seem to fit the “keys to successful organization management” scenario. You do not trash your cash cows, those in a productive, profitable member segment, but you do not milk them dry either. It is about balance and respect.

I am in the closeout year of my second, and final, term on NABJ’s board, and it has been a joy and a challenge. The success stories and contributions outweigh any sleights or outright insults. I know that I have made a significant difference and brought a wealth of knowledge and expertise to NABJ locally, regionally and nationally. I have initiated innovative programs and national conference workshops; generated substantial funding for local scholarships, regional events and national projects; established state tax exemption and corporate outreach format for a local chapter; upgraded student chapters to award-winning status; developed the “Chapter of the Year” package for a local chapter; recommended policy and operational changes, including changing the Journal to a magazine format; and developed proposals for NABJ promotional vehicles and major initiatives. That’s just a few highlights.

Further, currently, I work on membership recruitment and retention, mentor students and members in transition, interact with members and organization representatives, meet with industry leaders to advocate for fair hiring practices and inclusion, and provide historical background to current and past board members. I am more than confident that there are others in NABJ who have the same desire and are working as hard to support the mission that we all agreed to do when we joined.

The rallying cry seems to have gained new support in the form of members who are now classified as “associates” because they no longer have the “full time” employment stamp. Now they feel the unnecessary sting that the title entails because associates cannot vote in NABJ elections. Their valid argument is that their extensive years in journalism and knowledge do not disappear when their status changes. It is different when you are no longer the boot, but the boot print.

So let’s see, if someone has been a member of the organization, supported the local and national programs, served on committees and raised money, wouldn’t they also have an awareness and understanding of how it is run and what it needs?

All I know is NABJ is losing key people and vital resources during a period when all other forward-thinking organizations are focusing on their strengths and emphasizing their diversity. The damaging statements from the vocal minority and the assumed support from the silent majority are driving out a crucial member block—and job network.

In keeping with the saying “be careful what you wish for,” if purists have their way and public relations professionals reach their limit and move to the “other organizations they are encouraged to join,” there indeed will be less time for people to denigrate one another and more opportunity to roll up those expensive sleeves and risk the manicures to get the work that the tried-and-true used to do done.

But what will be lost? Man, and woman, power.

Then again, this issue is much like the time when sports writers had to vie for respect and photojournalists were dismissed as mere photographers. And let’s not forget the ongoing snubbing of those who work for Black publications, are in 20 or higher broadcast markets or don’t work in a major city.

Sadly, as the replacement list continues to grow, it appears that the “crab in the bucket” mentality, which requires that one not stand on the shoulders of others in appreciation but stepping on the heads below, will continue.

Don’t say I did not tell you so, but soon you may have to look for me somewhere I will be appreciated.

Meta J. Mereday is marketing and media consultant and NABJ’s associate board member.

Do you have something to say about issues of importance to NABJ members or the media industry? Send your commentary to rick@sherrellpublishinggroup.com.
Minority Report

Diversity training can change the lives of student journalists and improve a culture of coverage

When I saw the cartoon, I had to remind myself that I was not reading a newspaper produced by the Aryan Nation. Since the cartoon was in the University of Minnesota Daily's end of semester humor issue, it was supposed to be funny, but unlike the rest of the issue, which really was funny, this particular cartoon was no joke. Its presence made a telling statement about the ignorance of many student journalists when it comes to issues of diversity.

It began with two Black males sitting on a couch next to an oversized bottle labeled “malt liquor.” One says to the other, “So Playboy! You take care of business last night with Trina or what?” The other replies “Oh you know how we do son (cq in regard to lack of a period) She was walking funny this morning! I hit a chick once and she be running back like Tellis Redmon!” It ends with a Black woman saying to one of the Black men, “I know you ain’t tryin get outta baby daddy duties”. (all cq) And the man says, “Bitch YOU KNOW I AM!”

While the cartoon is unspeakably offensive, I do not view it as reflecting a problem that is unique to the Daily. Indeed, during the nine months that I have been reading that national award-winning student-run paper at the university that my older son attends, I have found it covers minority issues well. Instead, I view the cartoon as being representative of a major omission of the newspaper industry's diversity efforts: a failure to subject college newspapers to the same standards in regard to content, training and staffing that the industry has been using to measure professional newspapers' progress in diversifying.

As a former recruiter for Knight Ridder and as the former executive director of the Black College Communication Association's Student Newspaper Institute, which worked to strengthen student papers at historically Black colleges, I have visited many collegiate newspapers. Few—whether at mainstream colleges or at historically Black colleges and universities—take diversity seriously. This is because many journalism professionals, including NABJ members, have equated diversity efforts at the college level with simply offering internships and other training to student journalists of color.

Meanwhile, the main training ground for future professional journalists and top managers in this field are college newspapers, particularly college dailies. Moreover, most college newspapers are not diverse, nor do staff members have much knowledge about diversity issues or of people from cultures that are not their own.

For instance, the summer 1998 issue of The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education surveyed the racial composition of editors at 25 student newspapers including the Ivy League dailies as well as dailies at universities such as Duke, Stanford, Northwestern, Michigan and Rice. In 1998, there were 520 editors at those newspapers, of whom 20 were Black. (They did not report other racial breakdowns. This also was the only such research that I have found on the racial composition of student newspaper staffs.)

Just as the industry wants professional newspaper staffs to reflect the composition of the country and their local communities, so should college newspapers—including their top management—reflect the composition of their campus communities. And this will not happen until the industry begins to emphasize its importance.

One way to achieve this would be to have industry professionals offer college newspapers training on covering diverse communities as well as how to attract, retain and promote a diverse staff. I have found that it is assumed that it is the newspaper staff of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) who are in need of training from journalism professionals. This assumption includes NABJ members.

Since no HBCU has a daily student newspaper and only one, Florida A&M's The Famuan, is published more than once a week, clearly HBCUs can benefit from the free training in various technical areas, such as copy editing, that many newspapers and industry organizations provide to help student papers expand their frequency and improve their content. However, it is just as important that the mainstream student newspapers learn from the professionals about how to diversify their papers' coverage and staffing.

If such training were offered, including by NABJ, I believe that the mainstream student papers eagerly would accept. This would include students who had not previously been interested in diversity issues. Why would they want the training? Self-interest. The market is tight, and students are desperate to find ways of
meeting and impressing prospective employers. If supporting diversity opens employment doors, then students would be eager to demonstrate that interest.

NABJ’s offering diversity training to mainstream student newspapers would have some additional benefits. Many non-Black young journalists have their first encounters with African Americans when they cover the police beat as interns or entry level reporters. This can lead them to assume that degenerates and criminals are the mainstays of the African-American community.

Their perspectives, though, would be different if they first encountered African Americans as journalism professionals; particularly at large mainstream institutions—where a “swim with the sharks” mentality is prevalent—students are hungry to meet journalism professionals and to have the opportunity to talk on a personal basis with mentors. Obtaining even very limited mentoring from an African-American professional can open young journalists minds so that they are better able to cover the African-American community in an insightful way and are more supportive of African-American co-workers.

Another way that newspaper companies could encourage diversity efforts would be to require scholarship, internship and entry-level job applicants to submit portfolios that include some examples of work that the applicant has done covering communities that are different from the applicant’s. Just as, for instance, applicants for reporting internships are expected to submit examples of breaking news, features and beat reporting, applicants could be expected to submit at least one example that demonstrates how they covered a story that expanded their paper’s diversity coverage. This, incidentally, would be expected of African-American students from HBCUs as well as White students from mainstream universities.

Too often, have I seen HBCU newspaper staffs that not only do not cover the non-Black students on their campuses, but also do a poor job of covering Black students who are gay, Caribbean, non-Christian or African, or who come from rural or impoverished backgrounds. Just because student journalists are African-American or because a student paper is at an HBCU does not mean that their work reflects their community’s diversity.

Students do not have to publish the type of cartoon that the University of Minnesota Daily produced for their papers to reflect a lack of awareness of diversity issues. Ignorance comes in all colors, and we need to address it at a variety of levels. And this is no joke.

Louise Reid Ritchie, Ph.D. is a diversity consultant who lives in Tallahassee, Fla. She can be contacted at LouiseRitchie@aol.com.

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