

NIEMAN REPORTS

**Nieman**



**THE STORY  
I COULDN'T  
LET GO**

**85<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY ISSUE**

PUBLISHER  
Ann Marie Lipinski

SENIOR EDITOR  
Laura Colarusso

ASSISTANT EDITOR  
Natalie De Rosa

DESIGN  
Dan Zedek

EDITORIAL OFFICES  
One Francis Avenue, Cambridge,  
MA 02138-2111, 617-496-6308,  
[nreditor@harvard.edu](mailto:nreditor@harvard.edu)

Copyright 2022 by the President and  
Fellows of Harvard College.  
Periodicals postage paid at  
Boston, Massachusetts and additional  
entries

SUBSCRIPTIONS/BUSINESS  
617-496-6299, [nreports@harvard.edu](mailto:nreports@harvard.edu)

Subscription \$25 a year,  
\$40 for two years;  
add \$10 per year for foreign airmail.  
Single copies \$7.50.

Please address all subscription  
correspondence and change of address  
information to:

One Francis Avenue,  
Cambridge, MA 02138-2111  
ISSN Number 0028-9817

Postmaster: Send address changes to  
One Francis Avenue,  
Cambridge, MA 02138-2111

Nieman Reports (USPS #430-650)  
is published quarterly by  
the Nieman Foundation  
at Harvard University,  
One Francis Avenue,  
Cambridge, MA 02138-2111

## Contributors



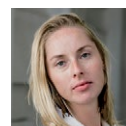
**Jon Marcus** is higher-education editor at The Hechinger Report, a foundation-supported nonprofit news organization based at Columbia University.



**Celeste Katz Marston** has spent 25 years reporting for newspapers, magazines, and radio with a specialty in politics, elections, and voting rights. She has been on staff at outlets including the New York Daily News, Newsweek, and WBAI New York. She is the co-author of “Is This Any Way To Vote? Vulnerable Voting Machines and the Mysterious Industry Behind Them” (WhoWhatWhy, 2020.) She is also news editor of The Concord Bridge, a hyperlocal, nonprofit weekly serving Concord, Massachusetts since October 2022.



**Wendi C. Thomas** is the founding editor and publisher of MLK50: Justice Through Journalism, an award-winning nonprofit newsroom focused on poverty, power, and policy. Previously, Thomas was metro columnist and assistant managing editor at The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal. She has also worked for The Charlotte Observer, The (Nashville) Tennessean, and The Indianapolis Star. Thomas was a 2016 fellow at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. She was a 2019-2020 member of ProPublica’s Local Reporting Network.



**Alisa Sopova** is a journalist and an anthropologist whose work focuses on civilian experiences of the war in Ukraine and specifics of day-to-day life in the context of military violence. Born and raised in the city of Donetsk, she has devoted her career to exploring the means of storytelling that allow conveying the true-to-life experiences of war survivors. She was the first Ukrainian Nieman Fellow and went on

to pursue an M.A. in regional studies at Harvard and a Ph.D. in anthropology at Princeton University.



**Hopewell Chin’ono** is a two-time African journalist of the year and documentary filmmaker. He has been jailed three times by the Zimbabwean government for exposing massive state corruption and looting of public funds. Hopewell, who has worked for ITV News as its Africa producer and written for The New York Times, won the International Anti-Corruption Excellence Award in 2022 for his investigative journalism work. He lives and works in Zimbabwe where his journalism has shone a light on the dark, corrupt corners of that country.



**John Archibald**, a 2021 Nieman Fellow, is a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize and a longtime (i.e. aging) fixture in the South, where he is a columnist for the Alabama Media Group. He was the lead reporter on a series of articles that examined out-of-control policing in the tiny Alabama town of Brookside, which won the 2023 Pulitzer for local reporting. His book “Shaking the Gates of Hell: A Search for Family and Truth in the Wake of the Civil Rights Revolution” was named one of NPR’s 2021 “books we love.”



**Susan Orlean** is the author of nine books. In 1999, she published “The Orchid Thief,” a narrative about orchid poachers in Florida, which was made into the Academy Award-winning film “Adaptation” starring Nicolas Cage and Meryl Streep. Her book, “Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend” won the Ohioana Book Award and the Richard Wall Memorial Award. In 2018, she published “The Library Book,” about the fire at the Los Angeles Public Library. Orlean has been a staff writer for the New Yorker since 1992. She was a 2003 Nieman Fellow at Harvard University and a 2014 Guggenheim Fellow. ■



Programs like the Times Corps are helping young journalists like Gabriela de Camargo Gonçalves forge a path in the industry

## Contents Fall 2023 / Vol. 77 / No. 4

### Features

#### COVER

**The Stories We Can’t Let Go** 22  
Celebrating 85 years of the Nieman Foundation  
By Ann Marie Lipinski

**Honoring MLK’s Legacy By Uncovering a Hospital’s Predatory Debt-Collection Process** 24  
If poverty isn’t an accident, but a robbery, then there are thieves with names that journalists can uncover  
By Wendi Thomas

**A World Where Those With Weapons Have Absolute Authority** 28  
When you’re covering war in your own country, the gap between you and the rest of humanity feels overwhelming  
By Alisa Sopova

**Newsrooms Want to Diversify. These Programs Can Help** 6  
At a time when diversity is under attack, new apprenticeships are providing pathways for young journalists of color  
By Jon Marcus

**My Life of Chasing Big Scoops, 32 Catching Shit, and Shoveling It for Applause**  
Between working at the circus and covering Alabama politics, I’ve met a lot of clowns  
By John Archibald

**Three Months in a Zimbabwean Prison Couldn’t Stop Me from Reporting on Corruption** 36  
Political elites were looting Covid relief funds, but that was just the beginning  
By Hopewell Chin’ono

**‘Here I Am. Please Tell Me Your Story’** 40  
How a chance encounter led to a book about the fire at the Los Angeles Public Library  
By Susan Orlean

**‘We Go Where We Have The Most Impact’** 14  
Five lessons from successful local news startups  
By Celeste Katz Marston

### Departments

**Live@Lippmann** 2  
Marshall Ganz on leadership and the power of narrative for social change

**Niemans@Work** 4  
Challenging the toxic myth of being self-made in America and looking back on the bigger picture to report on the future

**Nieman Notes** 44

**Sounding** 47  
By Yana Lyushnevskaya

**Afterimage** 48  
The Daily Tar Heel shares the story behind its viral front page  
By Natalie De Rosa



Nearly 300 new digital local news organizations have launched since 2016

## ‘To Allow Yourself to be Seen So That You Can See Others is Very Powerful’

Harvard Kennedy School Professor **Marshall Ganz** on leadership and the power of narrative for social change

**M**arshall Ganz has a storied history in community organizing. After matriculating to Harvard College in 1960, he left after his junior year to volunteer with the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project and then later joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as an organizer. In 1965, he began working with Cesar Chavez, and over the course of 16 years with the United Farm Workers, he served as its director of organizing and on its national executive board. In the 1980s, Ganz worked with grassroots organizations to advance voter mobilization initiatives. And during the 2008 presidential election, he played a critical role in designing Barack Obama’s grassroots campaign. Undergirding his multi-decades-work in community organizing is the power of narrative. “By the time I came out of the farmworkers, I knew that you had to have a story,” he told Nieman Fellows in September.

The Rita E. Hauser Senior Lecturer in Leadership, Organizing, and Civil Society at the Harvard Kennedy School, Ganz finished his undergraduate studies in 1992 after a 28-year leave of absence and went on to receive a master’s in public administration and doctorate in sociology from Harvard. Ganz has published work in the *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Political Science Review*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and more. His books include “Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement,” “*iSí se puede!: Estrategias para organizarse y cambiar el mundo*,” and the forthcoming “*People, Power, Change: Organizing for Democratic Renewal*.”

Ganz spoke to Nieman Fellows about how to practice leadership, why telling your own story matters, and the power of storytelling for social change. Edited excerpts:

### On narrative’s role in social movements

In the Civil Rights Movement, storytelling was so in the fabric of the movement. In other words, you can’t understand a movement like that purely in terms of strategic analysis because heart matters a whole lot in social movements. In that movement, the whole narrative [was] rooted in the Black church, rooted in the story of would-be American democracy. The narrative was incredibly powerful.

It was also linking personal transformation with community transformation with political transformation. In other words, as people were discovering within themselves their voices and in each other ways to have a collective voice at the same time, they were building the power they needed to change the laws — the institutions that were responsible for the problem in the first place. That’s what really hooked me on organizing because of the way to link those three together rather than the kind of separation that they often have.

With the farm workers movement, that was also rooted really in the Mexican Catholic tradition. That dynamic — Mexican cultural history, the myth of the revolution, and the Catholic context — was also very powerful. That’s all storytelling. I mean, that’s what happens in church, synagogue, mosque: storytelling. It was that same linkage of individual, collective, and institution that we were doing.

By the time I came out of the farmworkers [movement], I knew that you had to have a story. The way we put it [was] a

“**By the time I came out of the farmworkers [movement], I knew that you had to have a story**

story, a strategy, and structure: You had to have a story to explain why. You had to have a strategy to address how. And you had to have a structure to make clear how we were organizing ourselves to actually implement strategy and enact the story.

### On leadership as a practice

We’re used to thinking of leadership in terms of positions [of] authority. Authority and leadership are not the same thing. We think, “I am leading based on my authority, which means I essentially give orders.” It can be, but it’s about the exercise of authority. Now, how we construct authority in any organization or movement is a really important question, but we tend to think of leadership in positions.

What I’m suggesting is leadership is better thought of as a practice, as a way of doing things, not something you are. If you think of it that way, it opens things up a lot.

We all know about people who occupy positions of formal leadership who turn out to be awful leaders. We don’t have to look too far for those examples. On the other hand, it’s been my experience that in communities, and neighborhoods, and workplaces, you meet people who are exercising, practicing leadership in the way I’m describing it, but without the titles and all the rest of it.

By thinking of it in terms of a practice, the question is, “Do you choose to accept responsibility for the practice of leadership?” Which, if you’re operating in this understanding of leadership, then it means enabling others, working with others.

Jo Freeman, [the] feminist sociologist, wrote in 1972 this classic piece called “The Tyranny of Structurelessness.” What she argues is that when you don’t have a formal structure for decision-making and all the rest, people are still going to form a structure. It just won’t be visible. It won’t be transparent. It won’t be accessible. Pretty soon, it’ll be like, “Well, who decided that?” Then all the factions grow.

It’s a way to actually accept responsibility for creating and working with others to create the mechanisms, including structure, that can create the space in which to actually do this kind of work. In other words, I’ve come to think the opposite of structure is not space. The opposite of structure is chaos. It takes structure to create space.

### On using your own personal story

When your profession is telling other people’s stories, what about your own



Harvard Kennedy School’s Marshall Ganz (left) and Nieman Foundation Curator Ann Marie Lipinski in conversation with Nieman Fellows

story? I think it’s critically important because you’re telling other people’s stories, but not from nowhere. We all have perspectives. We have life experiences. We have values that attract us to the stories we want to tell. There’s a way in which things can be influences on us, that can become resources for us, including the sources of our own motivation and the sources of our own caring.

The more we teach this stuff, we discover how fundamental it is to struggle with articulation of, “Why [do] you care what you care for? Why are you doing what you’re doing?” Because the reality is that most of us have had hurt experiences in which we learned to care. If we hadn’t had those experiences, we wouldn’t think the world needed fixing. Also, we have experiences of our worth and our value, or else we wouldn’t be here trying to change it.

Right now, in our online class on public narrative, we have about 130 students from about 30 countries, and [we’re] working together to find the courage to actually share. To allow yourself to be seen so that you can see others is very powerful.

### On the downfalls of political messaging

We have this political marketing industry

in the United States unlike any place else because we have no constraints on campaign spending.

We’ve created this multibillion-dollar industry that’s essentially an advertising industry that takes the place of political discourse with marketing. Messaging is so different from political communication, discourse, conversation, narrative, and all the rest. It’s just this unilateral thing that you send out there.

I think a lot of progressive movements have been trapped into that messaging deal and [forget] the fact that the ground is people, and it’s how people engage with other people. [Social media] is so disabling. It creates the illusion that, “Oh, you’re talking to the whole world because you can count the number of likes or whatever,” but it’s an illusion.

### On leaders

Charismatic leadership has been around for a long time. Every faith tradition starts with charismatic leadership of some form. What they’re doing is challenging the existing framework of value and power. You see Jesus doing that. You see the Prophet doing that. There’s this existing wealth and power and you’re trying to say, “Hey, here’s this other deal over here. Leave that and join this.”

Now, what is it that enables people to find the courage to do that, or the meaning to do it? Some people are very good at it, but it’s a problem that the charisma gets projected on them in a way.

One of the values of the *Selma* movie was that it showed that Dr. King was not a solo performer. It was much more of a collective, but then, who gets baptized to be the spokesperson?

That also often creates a lot of problems within the movement because they’ll say, “Well, hey, the press decided so and so, but we didn’t choose that person.” You can become a celebrity because some philanthropist thinks you should be and not because you built a constituency that has chosen you to be their spokesperson.

I think sitting around and waiting for the savior is not a good proposition. Movements that are much more conscious about that and that are trying to enable more voices to be heard than just one, that’s a strength of the movement.

People are trying to say, “No, it’s a leaderless movement.” It’s not helpful because then nobody’s voices get heard, or the voice that gets heard is the one who sees it as an opportunity to make their voice heard, and that may not be the person that you want the voice heard by. ■

## A Retort to the Toxic Myth of the Self-Made in America

Alissa Quart, NF '10, on the reporting behind her book "Bootstrapped"

The dark inspiration for "Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves From the American Dream" came from the news but also from my lived experience. I direct the Economic Hardship Reporting Project, a media nonprofit that I created with the author Barbara Ehrenreich, which supports reporting on inequality. Throughout the Trump years, I had seen the number of callous letters and comments about our writers — a third of whom have experienced financial hardship or describe themselves as working poor — increase dramatically.

As one such commenter scoffed, "You are responsible for everything you do

in life. ... You are talking about giving people an income, talking about free health care. ... I drive a 2011 pickup truck because I do not need to buy a new one." This mindset minimized other people's obstacles, viewing it as a sign of their moral decrepitude. And it was very much of a piece with a cruel era: a tiki lamp march with people shouting "Jews will not replace us," intensifying attacks on the media, and an immigration system separating thousands of children from their parents.

I started reporting "Bootstrapped" in 2019 as a retort to the toxic naysayers, but by the time I had done my first interviews, it was 2020 and the pandemic was killing

thousands every week. At the same time, however, Covid-19 brought about a greater level of compassion for the struggles of others — low-wage workers newly deemed essential; immunocompromised people who were at grave risk; the need to protect those who were sure to be evicted from their homes.

That pandemic summer, I continued to work on the book's section where I decoded the centuries-long American myth of the self-made and how it had failed us. I examined how the elite, from Elon Musk to Kim Kardashian, abuse the story of being self-made and boast of their own independence and hard work. Yet rarely do they admit to having benefited from every advantage, including tax write offs, R&D grants, and trust funds. I looked at how social mobility works, and who gets crushed in the axle of our individualistic society. In contrast to the rich, the subjects of my book were forced to rely on medical care or school lunches paid for by GoFundMe campaigns — or what I call "the dystopian social safety net."

Finally, I laid out how, exactly, we can create a new American Dream

and free ourselves of the contaminated old one. Our history is full of hideous injustices but also examples of policies or social imagination that are more equitable or capacious than those in the present. I am thinking of the labor movement of the 1930s and 40s, the GI Bill, and the many Black mutual aid groups in the 19th century. Progress is not always a straight line.

My sources included the late Cissy White, a trauma counselor. Cissy had grown up extremely poor — as a child she would hide the tape and paper clips that held her broken glasses together behind her bangs — and was the victim of abuse. Yet Cissy did well enough in school to get a scholarship to Hampshire College, the first in her family to attend university. She viewed her own story as not an example of the "grit" she was often praised for but rather as having had access to therapy and having on occasion managed to achieve economic stability. I was also influenced by Crystal Hudson, who started a Brooklyn mutual aid organization during the pandemic, where she instructed volunteers to bring their shut-in neighbors exactly what they asked for, for free, whether it was beer or chicken feet. These often elderly inhabitants told her, "No one has ever asked me what I want to eat before."

I finished my book in 2022, and I felt like we had lived through a historical two-steps-forward-one-step-back, but at rapid speed, as if in an accelerated video. The eviction moratorium, relaxed Medicaid and SNAP protocols, and the child tax credit support for families had helped many of the people I reported on in "Bootstrapped," as well as many of the EHRP's writers and photographers. And then just like that, it all unwound. We were sinking into post-pandemic amnesia, as if how we cut child poverty in half during the period of pandemic relief was all some sugarplum-fairy-dream, as if the pandemic was only suffering and didn't also lead to truly imaginative social solutions for that pain.

I still believe the real American Dream is one of interdependence, not independence, with our fates haphazard and interconnected. As Annie Ernaux, the foremost chronicler of working people in her native France, has written, "Sitting opposite someone in a subway car, I often ask myself, 'Why am I not that woman?'" These are watchwords for "Bootstrapped," but also for myself. ■



Chong-ae Lee helped the Seoul Broadcasting System launch the SBS D Forum to address the entwining of technological and social issues

## What Questions Should We Be Raising in These Uncertain Times?

Chong-ae Lee, NF '13, on the value of taking a step back and looking at the big picture

Nearly two decades ago, I received a phone call from the news innovation editor in my newsroom, asking if I was interested in joining the "Future and Vision Division" that had been established the year before. This unique department was dedicated to examining the mid- and long-term issues affecting our society. SBS (Seoul Broadcasting System), one of the three major territorial broadcasting networks in South Korea, had conceived of this idea to differentiate itself from its competitors.

I was a decade into my journalism career at the time, and the initiative captured my attention. My role was to interview experts and identify the mid- and long-term issues we were not covering in the news because they were too deep in scope. The division analyzed population and environmental data and examined education and labor issues and then used forums and documentaries to engage audiences. We investigated technology trends and commissioned research from universities. We then used our findings to propose policy ideas to the government through two forums that SBS organized, the Seoul Digital Forum and the Future Korea Report.

Around 2018, we started seeing an undeniable shift in technological issues entwining with social ones. In response, we merged the two forums into the SBS D Forum (SDF). Through this new platform,

we conducted interviews with domestic and international figures, sent newsletters, and brought people together to discuss pivotal issues from diverse perspectives.

With the pandemic, the climate crisis, the impact of AI on white-collar jobs, and global crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we are experiencing intersecting crises that are changing the rules of society. In this era, when nobody has clear answers, we've realized the key lies in raising the right questions to be considered through collective dialogue.

During the presidential election in 2022, as team leader of the Future and Vision division, I decided to organize a joint study with Seoul National University's Institute of Future Strategy to look into issues of political reform like institutional transformation and democratic innovations. The idea was to find ways to hear more diverse voices through the political system. The study was presented in SBS D Forum 2022. The November SBS D Forum examined the economic system using the theme of "Rewriting the Economic Paradigm in the Age of AI." We asked participants, "What are the questions you think we should be raising and talking about as we navigate this era of transformation together?" I believe raising the right questions as a journalist is still the most important role we can play during this difficult time of transition. ■



Volunteers prepare boxes of food from the Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida during a July 2020 event. Aid efforts during the pandemic served as inspiration for Alissa Quart while she wrote her book "Bootstrapped"

PAUL HENNESSY/SOPA IMAGES/SIPA USA VIA AP PHOTOS

# NEWSROOMS WANT TO DIVERSIFY. THESE PROGRAMS CAN HELP

At a time when diversity in education is under attack, a slew of new apprenticeships are providing pathways for young journalists of color to step into the profession

BY JON MARCUS





**PREVIOUS SPREAD AND LEFT: Zurie Pope, 20, poses in The Cincinnati Enquirer newsroom, where he's an intern covering politics. Pope, a student at the University of Cincinnati, is also a participant in The New York Times Corps**

**M**

**INING PUBLIC RECORDS CAN BE TEDIOUS WORK** — especially more than 40 million of them. But as the findings finally came into focus, not even the just-the-facts questions of their veteran investigative editors could dampen the excitement of the young Chicago journalists who'd been doing it.

Two decades after a then state-senator named Barack Obama had sponsored a bill requiring police in Illinois to report the race of any motorist they pull over, the records showed not only that Black drivers were far more likely than white drivers to be stopped — even more than when the bill was passed — but that about one in five police departments was ignoring the racial profiling reporting law entirely.

There was still much more to do before the story aired on public radio station WBEZ. It would need to hold up to scrutiny. The journalists would check if it was possible that more Black than white residents hold drivers' licenses,

skewing the numbers, or if this ratio had changed over time. They divided up the tasks of asking for reaction from politicians, activists, and Obama.

Then Jim Ylisela, a longtime Chicago journalist helping guide the effort, piped in.

"This is a great place to have an anecdote from someone who's been through this," he said.

On that point, the youngest reporters of the eight people in the meeting were way ahead of him. They knew plenty of people who'd been stopped by police without apparent cause. They lived in communities where it happened often. They understood the perpetual anxiety of it. They feared it themselves.

MEG VOGEL

One of these young journalists was Black, one Asian, and one Hispanic. And all were fellows of the new nonprofit Investigative Project on Race and Equity, launched in 2023 by alumni of the Chicago Reporter, which was helping to produce this story about police stops.

It's a single small example of a little-noticed wave of everything from one-day bootcamps to two-year fellowships being started or expanded by modest nonprofits, huge legacy media companies, and professional associations to train aspiring journalists from underrepresented groups — Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indigenous, LGBTQ+ — at the very time when diversity as a goal in education and employment is otherwise a target of the culture wars.

Dow Jones, in collaboration with Columbia University's journalism school, started a program in the spring it calls the HBCU Media Collective to train journalism students from historically Black colleges and universities in covering financial news. The Wall Street Journal last year launched a one-year finance reporting fellowship in collaboration with the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, or NAHJ, and City University of New York's Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism.

NBC News and others are cultivating talent from historically Black, Hispanic-serving, and tribal colleges and universities. Politico founding publisher Robert Allbritton has committed \$20 million to fund the Allbritton Journalism Institute, which, while not aimed solely at aspiring journalists from underrepresented groups, promises to train young people "from a wide variety of backgrounds and perspectives" who will get a \$60,000-a-year stipend to cover government and politics for two years.

Also just last year The New York Times Company revamped and renamed its training program for aspiring journalists of color or who are from low-income families. Now called The New York Times Corps, it teams up college first years, sophomores, and juniors with newsroom mentors and flies them to New York to tour The Times building.

The emergence of these and many other targeted fellowships, apprenticeships, and internships has been driven by stubbornly low levels of diversity in newsrooms. "The country is having an awakening," says Jourdan Bennett-Begaye, chair of the education committee and director of a newly expanded journalism fellowship at the Indigenous Journalists Association. "The whole culture of American society is shifting and doing some really hard reflecting on itself. Newsrooms need to reflect what that society looks like."

**SOME OF THE RISING GENERATION** of journalists grew up watching events — like the murder of George Floyd and the massacre at Pulse, a gay night club in Orlando that left 49 people dead — and wanting to report on issues that affect them and people like them. But that alone can't explain this growing focus on preparing them to work in newsrooms, says Zach Wichter, who serves as a mentor for

**“IT’S OUR MISSION TO REFLECT THE COMMUNITIES WE SERVE. ALL THE COMMUNITIES. THAT’S RACE. IT’S GENDER. IT’S SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS. IT’S DIVERSITY OF PERSPECTIVES. IT’S ALL OF THESE THINGS”**

**YVETTE MILEY**

the training program run by NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists.

“Journalists are people who really want to sink their teeth into the world around them, to learn and pass that learning on,” says Wichter, a reporter at USA Today. “That hasn’t really changed. What has changed is the way a lot of institutions in our industry operate.” Though it’s “slow progress,” he says, “there is an increased emphasis on diversifying newsrooms.”

Wichter works with young journalists who come to the annual NLGJA conventions to help them find and report on local stories under the supervision of the more experienced reporters and editors who are also in attendance. But he says the broader value is in encouraging these journalists, staying in touch with them, and providing them with mentors who can help them get jobs.

Even in his own career, he says, “pretty much every job I’ve had in journalism has come through a first- or second-degree connection” made through the association.

Chicago’s Investigative Project on Race and Equity trains young journalists, too, with a focus on using data to report about systemic racism in ways that many newsrooms don’t have the capacity to do themselves. In the process, it trains underrepresented journalists who can deepen the coverage and who diversify the pool of talent available for media organizations to hire full time.

“It changed my view when it comes to data,” says Ola Giwa, 34, one of the fellows on the project about traffic stops, who is Black. “You have the data, and you put it into some kind of model and it spits it back out. But it’s not just about the data. It’s about people, and telling their stories. Even if you have all the stats, all the numbers, it doesn’t really mean anything if you don’t know how to tell the story behind what’s going on.”

This movement also comes as the traditional pipeline into journalism jobs from small to successively larger newsrooms staffed by experienced potential mentors has been choked off, yet another victim of the closing and downsizing of media outlets. There’s also the reality that not all young people can afford to work in internships for free.

“I could go to a small newsroom and embarrass myself and make a bunch of mistakes” on his rise through the journalism ecosystem, says Leroy Chapman, the first Black editor of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “And that career ladder doesn’t exist anymore,” adds Chapman, who worked his way up from the Greenville News and The State in South Carolina.

There’s a practical reason, too, for this new focus on trying to produce more journalists from underrepresented groups: low levels of trust from Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ audiences at a time when readership and viewership are already falling off.

Nearly 60 percent of Black and more than half of Hispanic Americans say the media doesn’t understand or reflect them, a Pew survey shows. The proportion of all Americans who say they closely follow the news has declined from more than half to fewer than 40 percent since 2016.

“It’s our mission to reflect the communities we serve. All the communities. That’s race. It’s gender. It’s

socioeconomic status. It’s diversity of perspectives. It’s all of these things,” says Yvette Miley, executive vice president for diversity, equity, and inclusion at NBC Universal News Group and head of its NBCU Academy, which trains aspiring journalists from backgrounds underrepresented in the media. “That’s the business case. It’s smart business.”

In fact, says Jacqueline Jones, dean of the School of Global Journalism and Communication at Morgan State University, a historically Black school, “a lot of people tend to focus on the social unrest and things that have happened in the wake of George Floyd” as reasons so many programs have been started up, and why many of them have reached out to schools like hers. “I have a broader view. News organizations are struggling with credibility issues and making their audiences feel that they get them.”

**F NOT CRITICISMS**, there are questions about these programs. Some observers, and young journalists themselves, wonder whether they’re sufficiently committed to lifting the people they train into jobs, for instance.

“There’s a sense of, you get a lot of Black and brown people in a room, you train them, and then once it’s over you applaud them and they go back to their colleges and nothing really happens. They don’t have any real means of breaking through these barriers,” says Zurie Pope, 20, a University of Cincinnati undergraduate and a Times Corps participant.

That can leave some people “stuck in this internship-fellowship loop,” says Jeremiah Rhodes, 26, a graduate student at the University of California Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism and an alumnus of the NLGJA training program. “I do wish there was an easier pipeline from these programs, internships, fellowships to jobs,” though he says that’s made more complicated by the general contraction of the media industry.

Program leaders also concede that improving coverage of marginalized communities depends on not only increasing diversity among front-line reporting staffs, but also among editors and managers. After all, said Wichter, quoting an old journalism adage, “News is what your editor finds interesting.”

Meanwhile, even as these programs gain momentum, they’re just as suddenly threatened by attacks from the same forces that successfully pushed back against affirmative action in higher education. The American Alliance for Equal Rights, run by Edward Blum — the conservative activist behind the lawsuit against Harvard that resulted in the Supreme Court’s ending of affirmative action in university admissions — sued two law firms, alleging that their diversity fellowships discriminate against white and straight applicants and should be shut down. In response, both of the firms opened their diversity fellowships to all students; Blum in October dropped his suits against them.

These budding journalism training programs could also face attacks like these, forcing them to shift from considering applicants’ race, sexual orientation, or gen-

der to using other kinds of criteria, says Jamila Jefferson-Jones, a professor of law at the University of Kansas and its associate dean for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging.

“It’s not that you can’t mention your race,” Jefferson-Jones says. But “you can ask the candidate to frame it with their interest in diversity — ‘I want to tell the stories of the black community,’ or, ‘I want to tell the stories of the Latinx community.’ Now, does that mean that a student from a majority background could write a similar essay? Sure.” The difference, she says, is that instead of a racial preference, the selection standard “needs to align with values.”

Similar pushback has already seeped into journalism schools. The board of trustees at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill derailed the hiring of Black Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, best known for her work on The Times’ “1619 Project,” by her alma mater, UNC’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media, after opposition from conservatives. Kathleen McElroy, a Black former Times editor, turned down the job of reviving the journalism major at Texas A&M University when it withdrew its offer of tenure — partly, she says she was told by a dean, because “you’re a Black woman who worked at The New York Times.”

Journalism graduate programs that have historically been conduits to top jobs are also so pricey that students from low-income backgrounds count them out. Tuition, fees, and living expenses for a nine-and-a-half-month master’s degree at Columbia come to \$126,691; for the 12-month master’s at Northwestern University’s Medill School, \$114,842. Comparatively low salaries make it difficult to repay student loans required to afford those kinds of costs, and students from underrepresented backgrounds are disproportionately harmed by student loan policies.

“The former gatekeepers are realizing we are missing a lot, and how do we get it,” says Waliya Lari, director of programs and partnerships at the Asian American Journalists Association. That demands not only looking in new places for aspiring journalists but creating new paths for them into the profession.

**WHEN JIM YLISELA LANDED HIS** first newspaper job in 1979, it was with a community newspaper on the northwest side of Chicago.

“I saw that as a way to get to the big boys downtown, which I eventually did,” Ylisola says. He worked his way up through larger and larger newsrooms, where “from the copy desk up, there used to be people who could guide young reporters.” That process is no longer available to the people who he mentors, he says. “There’s not enough people, and there’s not enough time. There’s not the teaching element.”

Investigative journalism in particular, into which many aspiring journalists of color hope to move, “is a field that has a lot of gates. You do need someone to show you the ropes. You need someone to show you



**As a fellow at the Investigative Project on Race and Equity, Taylor Moore (right), worked on WBEZ’s investigation into racial profiling in Illinois**

how to pull records,” says María Inés Zamudio, co-coordinator of a boot camp that coincides with the annual FOIA Fest in Chicago, at which volunteers mentor young journalists in those kinds of skills. Thirty-three percent of the journalists in last year’s cohort were Hispanic, 27 percent Black, and 7 percent Asian.

Even young, underrepresented journalists already working in the field “have gotten stuck,” says Angela Caputo, another Chicago Reporter veteran who co-edited that story about traffic stops. “They’re not interns. They’re kind of stuck at the grunt level. They’re churning out stories, but nothing that’s going to set them apart or get them an award to help their resumés.” Or they’re not exposed to specialty beats. “If you’re not getting the exposure to financial journalism, how are you going to choose it?” asks Robin Turner, vice president of training, culture, and community at Dow Jones.

What these programs have going for them is a generation of young people who want passionately to be journalists, despite the industry’s many challenges — often for the purpose of exposing wrongs they’ve witnessed, or stories they don’t see covered. In some cases, the fellowships and internships have already given them a platform to do that.

COURTESY OF TAYLOR MOORE

**“PUTTING YOUR PERSONAL FEELINGS ASIDE AND EXPLAINING TO PEOPLE IN THE NEWSROOM WHY THINGS ARE A CERTAIN WAY — THAT’S NOT A BIAS. THAT’S EDUCATING PEOPLE ABOUT THE FACTS”**

**GABRIELA DE CAMARGO GONÇALVES**

Being pulled over by the police in disproportionate numbers, for example, “is an experience white drivers don’t have,” says Taylor Moore, 27, one of the fellows who worked on the Investigative Project on Race and Equity racial profiling story. “They get pulled over and they see it as an inconvenience. Their first concern they probably have is, ‘How do I get out of this ticket?’ rather than, ‘Will reaching for my phone be seen as reaching for a gun?’”

Much of the existing coverage in Chicago “is insensitive to the racial dynamics,” says Moore, who is Asian. “The point of view is of a moneyed white person living in a white community, maybe a suburb, and you can see it manifested in how crime is covered, for example.”

The fellowship was particularly helpful in giving her experience on an investigative team, she said. Moore had otherwise worked mostly as a freelancer, and freelancers can’t afford to pay for resources such as Pacer — a database of court records — or LexisNexis, which gives access to government and business information. “You don’t have access to those tools.”

The connection she could make with fellow Korean Americans helped Juliana Kim cover the fatal shootings of eight people at three Atlanta-area spas in 2021, when she was a fellow at The New York Times. “I got a call from an editor who said, ‘Can you speak Korean?’ and I said, ‘Kind of,’ and he said, ‘Book a ticket to Atlanta right now.’” remembers Kim. When she went to interview the family of one of the victims, she says, she realized they might be hungry, so she brought them some Korean soup.

“They were similar to my age and we had similar up-bringsings,” says Kim, now 25 and a digital reporter who covers breaking news at NPR. “It helped me to get into deeper conversations with people who might have had reservations about the media.”

At first, she says, she had been worried about being pigeonholed into a certain beat or type of story because of her race and background. “I didn’t know going into the internship what it meant to be a reporter of color. I didn’t know the weight of that, and how it’s also a strength,” Kim says. But now, she says, she thinks “that was very naïve of me. Now it would be an honor to be pigeonholed to cover Asian stories.”

Gabriela de Camargo Gonçalves sees the empathy divide not only in her journalism but in her daily life. “Sometimes I’ll talk to my friends about my experience of living in the United States as an immigrant, and they’ll say, ‘I had no idea,’” says Gonçalves, the daughter of Brazilian immigrants and a senior at Virginia Commonwealth University who is part of the Times Corps.

“It’s never going to translate. You can do your best to talk to people who have lived it, but I don’t think you’re ever going to know what it’s like,” she says.

Young Indigenous journalists with whom she works see the job as a way of telling positive stories for a change, says Bennett-Begaye of the Indigenous Journalists Association, rather than the “three Ds” of coverage they’re used to — that Indigenous Americans are drumming, drunk, or dead. (A 2021 IJA report found that the word “violence” appeared in more than 40 per-

cent of stories in The New York Times about Indigenous people.) “That’s the only time that Native people are reported in the news, and frankly, they’re tired of it,” she says.

They’ve been influenced instead by successes, such as those of Deb Haaland, the first Indigenous cabinet member, and Nicole Aunapu Mann, the first Indigenous woman in space, and by what Bennett-Begaye called authentic portrayals in popular culture, such as the show “Reservation Dogs.” “Those are the kinds of stories young people want to be a part of.”

“Even for us, it’s hard to gain trust,” says Bennett-Begaye, who is Navajo. “Native people have a mistrust of the federal government, but they also have a mistrust of media. I may not look like them. I may not talk like them. I went to a university.”

Some editors have historically considered it a con-



DANIEL MIN

flict of interest for journalists from certain backgrounds to cover other people from similar backgrounds. Ken Miguel, executive producer for special projects at KGO TV in San Francisco, remembers when a female reporter and photographer for the San Francisco Chronicle were pulled off the same-sex marriage beat after they themselves got married.

“It sounds like an implied bias, which is one of the tenets of journalism: You don’t want anything that can be considered a bias by a reader or viewer,” says Miguel, president of the NLGJA. “But people who are intimately experiencing the negatives about a story know more about what’s happening than people who don’t. Putting your personal feelings aside and explaining to people in your newsroom why things are a certain way — that’s not a bias. That’s educating people about the facts. And that’s what we’re seeing in this new generation of journalists.”

For Toni Odejimi, The New York Times credential on her resume is already a huge help.

“This program has probably opened so many doors for me that I didn’t even know were closed before,” says Odejimi, a Georgia State University junior who was accepted to the Times Corps and hopes eventually to cover politics. “The most heartwarming thing about it was I saw people that looked like me and looked like my friends, and I saw hard-working, brilliant Black journalists everywhere I went.”

The program “took a gamble on a black girl that goes to a state school with a 100 percent acceptance rate,” she says. “I hope and I wish that more of those national programs can say to themselves, ‘You know what? This person might have less experiences and they go to a less selective school, but they still have so much passion.’” ■

**“Sometimes I’ll talk to my friends about my experience of living in the United States as an immigrant, and they’ll say, ‘I had no idea,’” says Gabriela de Camargo Gonçalves, the daughter of Brazilian immigrants and Times Corps participant**





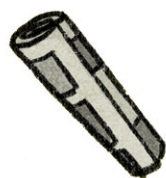
# 'WE GO WHERE WE THINK WE CAN HAVE THE MOST IMPACT'

Five lessons from successful  
local news startups



BY CELESTE KATZ MARSTON  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY KLAUS KREMMERZ





**L**

**et's start with an encouraging statistic:**

Despite years of demoralizing reports on sweeping media layoffs, nearly 300 new digital local news organizations have launched since 2016.

That number, which comes from a 2021 study by Project Oasis, a consortium that studies digital media startups, is one data point that has given hope to many in the industry. "The

field is experiencing tremendous growth," the study notes, adding that more than 50 new startups have launched each year on average. "Publishers operate in a challenging financial environment, but the field is making progress. One in five publishers believe their organization has reached sustainability and another two in five say they are heading in that direction."



And there are other glimmers of hope: In September, the national Press Forward coalition pledged more than \$500 million to re-energize local news.

These might sound like positives for a news industry that sings a lot of dirges: As media scholar Penny Abernathy, a professor at the Medill School of Journalism, wrote in the State of Local News 2022 report, since 2005, "the country has lost more than a fourth of its newspapers (2,500) and is on track to lose a third by 2025."

More than 70 local newsrooms launched during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, according to Abernathy, but challenges remain. Startups have been concentrated around metro areas. Lower-income regions are less likely to see a replacement when their local outlets fold, Abernathy says. And "what really worries me about the digital startups is how we've been stalled right around 550," she adds, noting that for prac-

tically each fledgling enterprise, another flames out.

There are three things that Abernathy's research pinpoints as contributing to news startup success: Launching in a market that is either growing demographically or has average or above-average economic growth prospects; local ownership attuned to community needs; and "capital to get through the next five years, because you're going to experiment a lot, and not all experiments are going to work." If an outlet can make it to that fifth birthday, she says, it's far likelier to make it to the tenth.

Even if a new outlet starts small, experts say that it still needs to direct resources to the business side of the operation.

"If you only have two people, it shouldn't be an editor and a reporter. It should be an editor and a business person," says Steven Waldman, founder and president of Rebuild Local News. "If you get some grants, view it as a

temporary bridge and use it to build out a more enduring small-donation or other kind of revenue strategy."

But success in local news looks different across outlets and communities. "Whenever anybody says, 'What's a good example of a local startup?' or 'What's a good example of a non-profit that's really made it?' [the] answer is always really gray, right?" says Tim Griggs, founder of Blue Engine Collaborative, an organization that offers coaching and advice to media companies. "[If] you draw inspiration from lots of folks, you'll be good." For inspiration in a tough business, Nieman Reports spoke to recently launched news outlets about the diverse pillars that are helping them make it work.

**1**

**EXPERIENCED, RESPECTED LOCAL LEADERSHIP: CARDINAL NEWS**

**D**wayne Yancey worked at Virginia's Roanoke Times for 39 years, ultimately rising to editorial page editor.

Over time, the paper cut back. In 2021, "We were told flat out: There would no longer be capacity for any in-depth reporting. Okay, you know, appreciate the honesty," he deadpans. He wondered if he could start something of his own — maybe a Substack.

Around the same time, Luanne Rife, who specialized in health coverage, took an early retirement after 16 years at the Times.

"Very quickly, [we] joined forces," he says, to create Cardinal News, a nonpartisan nonprofit covering the western third of Virginia. Yancey is the executive editor; Rife, executive director and chief development officer.

The Institute for Nonprofit News said they'd need "at least \$350,000" to make a go of it. The duo raised the seed cash in about three months, most in chunks of \$100,000 from outfits like Virginia-based utility Dominion Energy and hospital operator Carilion Clinic.

"It wasn't like we were out holding bake sales. ... [It was] based on people we knew," Yancey says. "Not to brag, but [we] have some seniority. ... Important people would take our calls." Looking back, "if we were 25 years old and didn't know the big players in the community, we couldn't have done it — or we'd have had to do it completely differently."

The power of Yancey and Rife's tenure in Virginia media carried over to the editorial side in both reporting and hiring: "Everybody in politics in Virginia knows who we are," he says. "We do not have to promote ourselves to that community, other than doing good work."

Focused mainly on politics and business, by fall 2023, Cardinal had grown from two reporters to seven, with money for an eighth. They don't hire unless the job is funded for three years. "We have no physical office. We try to pay people well, but try to be cheapskates on everything else," Yancey says. The site won first-place financial

health honors from LION in 2023 for having quadrupled its starting budget and reached its five-year goals in just 18 months.

Cardinal was the only news organization to investigate a threatened mass eviction of tenants on fixed incomes, says Yancey. The outlet has also documented flash floods that devastated the southwest of the state and has probed the legality of "adult share" marijuana businesses.

People are paying attention: After launching in September 2021 with 600 subscribers to one newsletter, three years later Cardinal had 18,000 unique subscribers to five. By July 2023, the website had 1.9 million page views and 1.2 million visitors per month.

"In the beginning, the people putting up money [were] reacting to our reputations that, 'Oh, okay, these are serious people. We think they can do this,'" Yancey says. "Now, we build that reputation every day with our work."

**2**

**AN UNAPOLOGETIC VOICE FOR MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES: THE KANSAS CITY DEFENDER**

**W**ith an empty pocket, no journalistic background, and no Plan B, The Kansas City Defender was born in July 2021," Ryan Sorrell writes in a two-year retrospective on the news outlet he founded as a "abolitionist, radical, unapologetic and community-led" local



“WE DON’T  
PRETEND TO  
BE OBJECTIVE.  
AS WE LIKE  
TO SAY, WE  
ARE BIASED  
TOWARD  
JUSTICE. THE  
BLACK PRESS  
HAS ALWAYS  
BEEN A PRESS  
OF ADVOCACY”  
RYAN SORRELL

counterpoint to white-dominated corporate media.

The Kansas City Defender deliberately draws no bright line between reporting and activism. “We don’t pretend to be objective. As we like to say, we’re biased towards justice,” says Sorrell, who’s got a background in community organizing. “The Black press has always been a press of advocacy.”

As its reporting capacity grew, the outlet focused on racial discrimination and inequity within Kansas City schools — including an episode in which students signed a petition to bring back slavery. “We’ve had a lot of students say that they’ve been dealing with racism for months, [and] the administration has done nothing, and [they] feel like they have no other choice but to come to us,” Sorrell said.

More recently, The Defender has also reported on an investigation of bigotry and misogyny at the Kansas City Fire Department, the segregationist history of the landmark Country Club Plaza, race-based harassment of Black student-athletes, and conditions at a rental building “swarming with roaches, bedbugs, and mice.” It’s also focused closely on the shooting of Kansas Citians like Ralph Yarl, a Black teen shot by a white man after he rang the wrong doorbell in the spring of 2023.

In the early days, Sorrell — who had quit his PR job and was living with his parents — started with an Instagram account and a small email newsletter: “I was being honest and vulnerable and being like, ‘I don’t have no money. Can y’all please help me if you believe in the work that we’re doing?’” A supporter came to his aid with funds for gas, food, and the six-month rental of a Canon Mark IV camera.

The Defender kept reporting as mainstream outlets “would just steal our work,” according to Sorrell, reporting information had “emerged on social media” rather than attributing it to his outlet. But as of this fall, he says, The Defender had hit more than 50 million social impressions, and had been cited by The Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN, and AP. It has also garnered recognition from the Local Media Association, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and INN.

The Defender’s coverage has had an effect on the way other media cover local issues, Sorrell says. “We certainly saw a dramatic increase in the amount of coverage of racism in schools,” he said. “We’ve seen a lot more of the news outlets here take bolder stances against the racist policing that exists here in our city.”

With the non-profit Defender, Sorrell has always been mindful of ways to connect with its audience. From the start, “Anywhere that there were Black people in the city, we were there and talking and building relationships and trust with people in the community [and] not asking them for anything.” The Defender, which also features arts, music, and restaurant coverage, has a strong community service component that’s included a “grocery buyout,” paying for Black customers’ purchases at a local market. “These types of events are vitally important to us because we aren’t only a news outlet, we are a community organization that is

actively committed to building directly alongside and showing love to Black people and our community,” The Defender wrote at the time of the first buyout in October 2022.

The Defender’s social-first approach has netted nearly 33,000 Instagram followers, more than 28,000 followers on TikTok, and about 10,000 on X.

“Decades ago, it would’ve been impossible to compete with the multimillion-dollar budgets of the legacy TV and news outlets,” Sorrell says. “But [in] our first three months, we were outcompeting [them] — and all we had was an Instagram page and \$0 in actual funding.”

### 3

#### UNSWERVING FOCUS ON A SINGLE MISSION: SPOTLIGHT PA

**B**ack when Chris Baxter worked for the Newark Star-Ledger, his boss used to say daily and viral stories were “how we paid our taxes. That’s how we bought our ticket to entry to be able to do what you wanna do. And I get the concept,” he says. “The problem is that if that center of gravity and identity is not strong, then all that other noise takes over — and it suffocates the real impactful work and [what] you bring to the table for the community.”

From Spotlight PA’s 2019 inception as a source of investigative, public service journalism, “I was very clear: This is not your typical State House bureau. [We] are not doing all the turn of the screw coverage,” says Baxter, the president and CEO. “We’re going to focus on what you might think more traditionally of as that second-day story — more of the why and why it matters.”

Spotlight PA offers a range of deep dive and quicker-turnaround pieces, relentlessly focused on government accountability. It adheres to the guiding principle that its reporting should not only inform people but engage them in public policy.

“The more people that get involved in our government, in our democracy, the more people who vote, the better,” Baxter says. “We don’t care who you vote for, we don’t care what the issue is. But we want more people to get engaged. And we’re not afraid of any of those things.”

Spotlight PA’s mission is so keenly focused that it has chosen not to cover Pennsylvania’s federal delegation — at least for now. “We know that there are vastly fewer resources put into statewide races, appellate court races, [than] there are nationally,” Baxter says. “We go where we think we can have the most impact.”

To illustrate impact, Baxter often refers to a 2021 investigation that revealed the state Department of Labor had overcharged unemployed Pennsylvanians millions in interest for a decade — and covered it up.



The first story hit in July. By September, the state had started paying back what it owed to more than 22,000 people. “That one story returned \$19 million to the public,” he says.

Other Spotlight PA investigations have delved into compassionate release for elderly inmates, the opacity of the legislature’s spending records, and a flawed state mortgage assistance program.

The intense focus extends to the operating model of Spotlight PA, a nonprofit powered in part by multi-million-dollar investments from the Lenfest Institute and American Journalism Project. It has a website, but Spotlight PA’s work also appears in a plethora of Pennsylvania outlets — free of charge to them — from the Altoona Mirror to Gettysburg Times to the York Daily Record. That lets Spotlight PA spend more time

chasing the news and less chasing an audience.

Spotlight PA has experimented with other ways to reach readers. One newsletter called PA Local covers the “incredible people, beautiful places, and delicious food” of Pennsylvania. Baxter says it fits into the mission of Spotlight PA “because we know that to have a healthy relationship with people, we can’t just shove oatmeal down their throats every single day.”

“To me, that is fundamentally different than doing all of that from the start, because we’re only doing that as a strategy to support [the] core identity of the work. We’re not changing the mission,” he stresses. “If you start with the core identity, as we did, it doesn’t preclude you from expanding out strategically later, but then all of it is centered around [your] center of gravity.”



## 4

### OPENNESS TO NON-TRADITIONAL — AND DIVERSE — STARTUP REPORTING: THE CHARLOTTE LEDGER

**T**ony Mecia is the kind of local newsman who'll describe a rezoning meeting as "really hot." "They were basically accusing a city council member of taking bribes and getting paid off by developers [and saying] it's gonna [worsen] traffic and kill the bald eagles," he says. "People are super passionate, [and] so it's like, 'Okay, can [we] bring some clarity to that?'"

It's the kind of local story The Charlotte Ledger, which Mecia founded in 2019, can really get into.

Mecia had watched his former paper, The Charlotte Observer, try to transition from print to digital. He

looked at the newsletter successes at national outlets and wanted to try it in a local market. "On a lark," he fired up a Substack.

With a newsletter format, "You're not relying on people having a habit of going to a website. ... You're living in their inbox. Maybe [it's] a little bit hard to get people to give you their email addresses. But once you're there, they're sort of opted in," Mecia says. "The key is [to] make sure [you're] respectful of their time and that you are providing information that they can't get anywhere else."

Work Mecia is proud of as executive editor includes a five-part series on teen mental health; coverage of the state's takeover of a financially troubled retirement community; and an attention-grabbing scoop on a potential passenger rail line.

Going with the "write what you know" approach, Mecia started out with business coverage, a focus of his dozen years at The Observer. The Ledger, with a staff of three plus freelancers, now has four newsletters.

Besides the flagship, there's Transit Time, aimed at "Charlotte people who leave the house" and produced jointly with local NPR station WFAE. Fútbol Friday covers Charlotte FC, the new pro soccer team. And Ways of Life is an obituary newsletter featuring "inspiring, thought-provoking and often-heartwarming stories of people in our community."

All — plus a podcast — focus on Charlotte and its surrounds in different ways. "If we can expand the different categories of coverage in newsletters, we can reach some people that we might not have been able to reach," Mecia says. "If we had just stuck doing, say, a business newsletter, which has relatively more narrow appeal, that's a little bit tougher to grow. Maybe someone's interested in the local soccer team, [and] that's a way to draw them into the other newsletters that we offer."

The Charlotte Ledger has some free and some paid products. As of fall 2023, Mecia said he had around 19,500 users on his list. About 2,600 pay. "I wouldn't characterize it as rapid, off-the-charts growth — but it's steady and it's moving in the right direction."

The Ledger isn't the only newsletter in town: Axios Local bought the former Charlotte Agenda in 2020. Mecia says his audience skews older than that of Axios, which reports more than 70 percent of its readers are between 18 and 44. (In a nod to its demographic, the Ledger presents "40 over 40" awards.)

When it comes to media struggles, "What I'm seeing is that it's not that people aren't interested in the news — [it's that] it hasn't, in the last few years at least, been delivered to them in a way that is relevant to them," Mecia says. "When you see people leaving, when you see circulation of newspapers declining, does that mean people don't want to pay for local news — or that they don't really like the [product]?"

## 5

### ENGAGING THE PUBLIC TO COVER — AND SOLVE — PROBLEMS: MISSISSIPPI FREE PRESS

**F**or too long, says Donna Ladd of the Mississippi Free Press, the media has had it backwards. "So many journalists and editors have thought that they have all the answers if people would just listen," she says. "We're the ones who [should] shut up and listen."

Ladd and MFP co-founder Kimberly Griffin have baked a direct connection with Magnolia Staters into the work of the outlet they launched in March 2020 — just as Covid-19 was creating a shockwave of fear and isolation.

A big part of forging that connection was MFP's solutions circles, group discussions on topics ranging

from health care and education to violence, housing, corruption, and elections. It's a deliberate rejection of the "expert panel" format that presumes to tell people about their own communities.

"At MFP, started by a Black woman and white woman from Mississippi, our goal is to really get people to talk to each other and to listen to each other," Ladd says. "Potential story ideas emerge from these conversations. [What] I really like is that potential solutions emerge, because we really want our reporting to be solutions-driven."

MFP doesn't report verbatim on the circles, which began virtually and segued to an in-person format. Instead, they follow up with sources and build networks — not only with readers, but between them.

For example, "we were doing this project called Black Women and Covid that was actually looking at what Covid spotlighted in the lives of Black women and their families" and the systemic inequities that already existed, Ladd says.

The circles surfaced not only "a lot of the reasons that people were afraid of vaccination," but also countered prevailing pandemic narratives, according to Ladd. "A number of Black women were saying, 'The pandemic has actually helped me with my business,' or 'It's helped me to decide to do something else.' So there were all these angles of stories that we might not have thought about the same way."

MFP, a nonprofit funded by donors and grants from groups like the American Press Institute, covers a wide array of big-ticket stories. Among them: threats to voting rights, a state welfare-fraud scandal, and House Bill 1020, which lets state officials appoint unelected judges in the majority-Black county that includes the capital, Jackson.

MFP had grown to 14 full-time staff by fall 2023 — all but one raised in Mississippi — with three more jobs advertised. "We're growing very fast," Ladd says — so fast she's thinking of bringing print editions of MFP to select zip codes to combat the double-headed problem of news deserts and the digital divide.

And if someone asked why MFP puts this much energy into its circles instead of focusing solely on traditional reporting?

"I think what I would say back to them [is], 'I bet you money I have more sources than you do [and] a more inclusive funder base than you do,'" she says. "And I bet you that I can show up in just about anywhere in this state and find people who trust me enough to talk to me, regardless of their political background, without me ever having to run three sentences of fake, both-sides, horserace reporting to try to prove that I am quote-unquote objective."

That trust is at the heart of everything the Mississippi Free Press tries to achieve.

"If people [support] us and our approach to journalism that doesn't literally talk down to them from a stage, then we can do more of what they want us to do," Ladd says. ■

**"OUR GOAL IS TO REALLY GET PEOPLE TO TALK TO EACH OTHER AND LISTEN TO EACH OTHER. POTENTIAL STORY IDEAS EMERGE FROM THESE CONVERSATIONS"**

**DONNA LADD**

# 'STORIES STALK YOU. STORIES BEGUILE YOU'

Celebrating 85 years of the  
Nieman Foundation

BY  
ANN MARIE  
LIPINSKI

**A** reunion is a corrective, a response to a period of separation. Families, colleges, even countries reunite, often in celebration, sometimes in longing.

In the five years since the last Nieman Fellows reunion, the world has been torn by pandemic and war. Journalism had suffered too, weakened by record job cuts while called upon to cover events of epic dimension. Appetites for large gatherings had diminished. If we held another reunion, who would come?

But the question underestimated the rare nature of the Nieman community: the bonds that inspire and sustain, the knowledge that both your fears and faith in journalism's future are understood in this global fraternity. In the end, more than 400 of us from across 40 countries and seven decades of Nieman fellowship traveled to Cambridge to reunite — in celebration, yes, but also for reaffirmation that the work matters.

A fellow whose newsroom, like so many, is shrinking, emailed me after returning home. "This reunion came at just the right time," he wrote. "This has not been the easiest year ... but this past weekend reminded me why I do what I do and why it is so important to me that I continue to do it. I feel reinvigorated."

The email affirmed the foresight of Agnes Wahl Nieman, heir to a Milwaukee newspaper fortune, who 85 years ago assigned the largest portion of her estate to Harvard University to "promote and elevate the standards of journalism ... and educate persons deemed specially qualified for journalism."

The challenges these journalists now confront were eloquently articulated throughout the weekend and ranged from the existential to the dangerous. "Some important leaders are not advocates for the democratic project," Harvard Professor Archon Fung reminded us in a talk about polarization and assaults on democracy. In a somber reflection, New York Times Executive Editor Joseph Kahn said that worry over covering the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East "keeps me up at night." Of the reporting dangers in Gaza — where the war has become the deadliest for reporters since the Committee to Protect Journalists began documenting such fatalities three decades ago — "the level of risk is like nothing I've seen," Kahn said.

But an inescapable theme of the weekend was the persistence of journalists to find a way through. As during a fellowship year, inspiration came from other fellows, in



conversations both private and public. At the end of the weekend, my Nieman colleague Ellen Tuttle observed that it was "the fellowship of the fellowship" that animated the reunion.

The five essays that follow in this issue of Nieman Reports were delivered live at the reunion, each a response to a simple prompt: Tell us the story you couldn't let go. One of those stories landed its writer in prison; another freed its subjects from crippling debt. All of them met Agnes Nieman's ambitious mandate to elevate the standards of journalism.

"The problem with being a writer is you're a writer," Nieman Fellow Susan Orlean, one of the storytellers, told us. "Stories stalk you. Stories beguile you. They bewitch you. It's not easy to fend them off, even when you've vowed you will."

Later, during a talk about the artificial intelligence revolution, Harvard Business School Professor Karim R. Lakhani polled the fellows. Stand if you think ChatGPT will change journalism, he said, and most of us did. But when he asked who used the AI system every day, most took their seats.

"There is a gap," he observed, "between the knowing and the doing."

Mindful of Lakhani's lesson, I asked ChatGPT to tell me a story about a journalism fellows' reunion at Harvard. Here is an excerpt:

"As the night unfolded, the journalists found themselves drawn to the steps of Widener Library, where they had once sat as eager students. Beneath the soft glow of the lampposts, they shared stories of triumph and defeat, of the moments that had tested their resolve and the stories that had changed the course of history.

"The reunion concluded with a sense of renewed purpose and a commitment to the principles of journalistic excellence. The journalists departed Harvard with a shared understanding that, despite the challenges of the digital

**"THE BATTLE IS  
HERE, IN YOUR  
CELL PHONES.  
IT IS A BATTLE  
FOR INTEGRITY.  
IT IS A BATTLE  
FOR VALUES"**

MARIA RESSA

age, the essence of journalism lies in its ability to uncover truth, to give voice to the voiceless, and to hold power accountable.

"As the alumni dispersed once again to the far reaches of the world, the spirit of the Harvard journalism reunion lingered, a testament to the enduring bonds forged in the pursuit of a free and informed press."

The depictions were cloying and clichéd — though correct me if I missed the reminiscing under the soft glow of Widener Library lampposts. But they mimicked the romanticized tone that characterizes so many defenses of journalism. Attacks on the industry, cultural and legal, have required our response, but it can lean toward the vague and vainglorious.

A better reunion story was the one found in the Harvard Science Center with Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa, CEO of Rappler in the Philippines and author of "How to Stand Up to a Dictator," her account of exposing an extrajudicial killing campaign by President Rodrigo Duterte's government. Her journalism attracted the enmity of Duterte and the full force of his retaliatory powers. She has been arrested, jailed, and targeted by government-coordinated social media attacks, including doxing and rape and death threats. Her pleas for intervention by tech firms were ignored.

"The battle is here, in your cell phones," she said. "It is a battle for integrity. It is a battle for values."

As she awaits the resolution of her legal cases and decisions about imprisonment, what gives her hope?

"Journalists," she said, and gestured toward the hundreds of Nieman Fellows. "How much will we suffer, but we continue to do our jobs. You have staked your life, your careers, your mission, your families — we all know the toll journalism takes. So guys, more power to you. We have to continue doing our jobs in far more dangerous times. I hope you're here. ... We're still here, and we'll keep going."

That's the story of the reunion I can't let go. ■

ELOISA LOPEZ/REUTERS

# HONORING MLK'S LEGACY BY UNCOVERING A HOSPITAL'S PREDATORY DEBT-COLLECTION PROCESS

If poverty isn't an accident,  
but a robbery, then there  
are thieves with names that  
journalists can uncover

BY  
WENDI  
THOMAS

**A**pril 4, 1983 was the 15th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. The day before was a Sunday, and I was with my family in the virtually all-white church we attended in Memphis. I was 11 and naive and a bit self-righteous. I thought that in the very city King was killed, the pastor would surely work King's death into his sermon, maybe something about the Beatitudes — you know, blessed are the peacemakers. He did not, and I was disappointed.

After church, I wrote the pastor a letter. Why would he be silent on a movement and a man who mattered so much? And how did he think that made me feel, as one of few Black congregants at his church? I have no idea where I found a stamp or an envelope, but come Monday, my letter was in the mail.

On Wednesday night, my family was back at church for Bible study. After Bible study was over, the pastor approached me and my mother. He asked us to sit with him in the back of the sanctuary. He said he'd gotten my letter as my mother looked at me as if to say: What letter? He said he'd never meant to offend me, and tears formed in his eyes. He said some other conciliatory things, but I didn't say anything at all — my letter had said all I wanted to say.

I can see now that this pastor's failure to mention Dr. King, what could be described as an innocent oversight, was in fact an omission. And omission is erasure.

That's a large part of why I became a journalist, to make sure that nothing that mattered to people who look like me would be omitted.

By 2008, the 40th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, I'd become the first Black woman to be a columnist for Memphis' daily paper. Often, I wrote about topics



ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

**I'D NEVER BEEN  
SO SURE I HAD  
AN IMPORTANT  
STORY TO TELL  
ABOUT WOMEN  
WHO HAD BEEN  
OVERLOOKED,  
OMITTED, AND  
ERASED**



Like all nonprofit hospitals, Methodist is required by the IRS to provide free or discounted care to the poor. But Methodist's policies were exceptionally stingy.

The hospital sued so many people that they owned a collection agency, which added mountains of interest to the patients' debt. The lawyers got their share, too, and every time another patient was sued, the court collected a filing fee.

If poverty isn't an accident, but a robbery, Methodist was a cruel thief, stealing from people whose only mistake was to be sick and poor at the same time.

All of this was hiding in plain sight — in the basement of a Shelby County courthouse. If you weren't being sued for debt or facing eviction, there would be no reason to go there.

But every Wednesday morning, a judge would hear nothing but Methodist cases. The hospital came with an entire team — lawyers with rolling filing cabinets, billing clerks on standby. The defendants? They came alone, some clutching sheafs of bills, hoping to persuade the judge that they truly couldn't afford to pay.

The judges saw the hospital's attorneys week after

week, and were collegial, if not cozy, with them. But defendants were treated as liars.

I remember a mother of three who came to court with a copy of her household budget, which she presented to the judge. The judge zeroed in on the \$300 monthly clothes allowance. The children, the judge said, were old enough to make some sacrifices. The mother tried to explain that the clothing wasn't new Nikes, but adult diapers for her disabled son.

The judge didn't care and ordered the mother to pay more than the hospital had asked for. Often, the defendants would be wearing Methodist hospital uniforms. Yes, Methodist regularly sued its own employees. Including low-wage workers who couldn't afford to pay their bills to the very same hospital they worked for. That includes Miss Marilyn, a hospital housekeeper who made \$12.25 an hour and owed \$23,000.

Another woman I met in court was Miss Carrie. Miss Carrie reminded me of my mother — they are both short and very religious. Neither wear makeup, and both dress very, very modestly.

At the time, Miss Carrie was working at a grocery

**Carrie Barrett rejoices at her church in September 2019 as she shared that Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare had erased her nearly \$33,000 hospital debt following MLK50's "Profiting from the Poor" investigation**

store, making \$9.05 an hour. A surgery left her with a \$12,000 bill. Over the years, thanks to interest and attorney's fees, the debt ballooned to \$33,000. \$33,000. That's twice what she earned that year.

And still, a judge ordered her to pay \$100 a month. If Miss Carrie paid on time, every month, she'd be 90 years old by the time she paid off her debt.

Most defendants weren't like Miss Carrie: They didn't want to talk to me on the record. Debt and shame often travel together.

Armed with court records and defendants' addresses, I spent my Saturday mornings driving around some of Memphis' poorest neighborhoods.

I knocked on door after door, tucking my business card and a discreet note into storm doors, under windshield wipers, or handing them to a skeptical resident. No one called me back, and I'm sure most of my business cards landed in the trash.

There were many Saturday mornings that ended in tears. I'd never been so sure I had an important story to tell about women who had been overlooked, omitted, and erased, and I never had a story that was so difficult to report.

But after months of door knocking, I found enough defendants willing to go on the record. In June 2019, with much help from ProPublica, we published the series "Profiting from the Poor."

The impact was swifter than I could have ever dreamed. It turns out shame

can also be a motivator. Methodist pronounced itself "humbled." Within days, the hospital stopped filing new lawsuits. Then it raised the pay of their lowest-paid workers from \$10 to \$15 an hour. It made its charity care policy twice as generous.

And then, the hospital erased the debt owed by more than 5,300 defendants. The total debt erased was just under \$12 million.

That means that thousands of patients will never be sued for hospital bills they can't afford to pay. And there are hundreds of Methodist employees who have more money in their paychecks, thanks to our investigation.

Miss Marilyn, the hospital housekeeper who owed \$23,000? She didn't have a car, so sometimes I'd pick her up and take her home from work. When I saw that the court had erased her debt, I printed the paperwork and called her to see if she needed a ride.

She did. In the car, I handed her the case satisfied notice. Confused, she asked me what it was. I explained that her debt had been erased and she screamed.

"Did we do this, Miss Wendi?"

I told her, "You did this, Miss Marilyn." ■

ANDREA MORALES/MLK50

# A WORLD WHERE THOSE WITH WEAPONS HAVE ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY

When you're covering war in your own country, the gap between you and the rest of humanity feels overwhelming

BY  
ALISA  
SOPOVA

**T**here are things that you think would never happen to you, like an airplane crash — or a war. As a child, every time the TV was on, I heard the words Bosnia and Herzegovina. These two words stuck with me because they sounded strange and unlike anything I knew. But mostly in these moments I was upset, because when the news was on, this meant I could not use TV to play video games. When I was in middle school, our history teacher started crying because of the war in Iraq. “Nobody will do anything, the UN is useless,” she said. We, the students, were rolling our eyes and giggling. We thought it was nuts. Why would anyone cry because of something that existed merely on TV?

Not that my childhood was fancy and privileged, quite the contrary. I am from Donetsk, Ukraine. When I was three years old, the Soviet Union collapsed. It was a hard time. There were food shortages, the playgrounds were rusty and falling apart, and the trolleybus to Grandma’s might or might not show up. The highlight of my preschool years was accompanying my mom as she sold Tampax tampons brought from Poland at the market. If we had good sales, she would buy me a banana — a luxury, like Tampax itself. Our women were just discovering that stuffing rags in their panties was not the only option out there.

But it was getting better. By the time I graduated from college and started my career as a reporter at a local newspaper, my life was not so different from a typical Western middle-class life. In the spring of 2014, I was really into my new yoga studio. I was even considering going on a retreat and was trying to choose between that and a vacation in Barcelona. I got a slight raise in salary and decided now I could afford to get waxed every couple of weeks.



ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ



**I COULDN'T  
LET GO** **THE STORY**

Well, that's what I thought was going on. In Russian propaganda, this spring was called the Russian Spring. This was when the invasion of Ukraine first started — when the Kremlin incited and backed a separatist insurgency in Donetsk. It got pretty bad pretty soon. And something that most profoundly shocked me about the experience of war, more than having my house bombed, more than seeing people die, was how the world suddenly distanced itself from me.

There was a series of events that made it clear.

The first was the airplane load of blankets.

The real-real war hadn't even started yet. There were just some street riots and rumors of Russian involvement, some strange activity that most people didn't even pay attention to, believing it would go away. And then one day my paper is sending a reporter to the airport to cover the arrival of a cargo airplane filled with blankets sent by the U.N. I remember asking, "An airplane of ... what?" I could not comprehend the idea that someone out there, in some office in Brussels or New York, had already categorized me, with my life and my plans and my everything, as a charity case soon to be reduced to such misery that I would need a humanitarian blanket. I wanted to scream, "I don't need your blanket! I am not THAT!"

But, those people knew better than I did. The situation was only getting worse. After a couple of weeks, my city was pretty much controlled by the Russia-backed separatists. Do you know how a city is taken over? Every day a bus or two parked near one center of power — a police department, court, municipal offices, or a treasury building. A group of armed people unload and enter the building. Confronted by nobody but a bunch of scared-to-death office workers, they change the flag at the entrance, find the chief of the office, put a gun to his head, and demand cooperation. Some cooperated, some fled, few openly resisted, and nobody saw them again — except the one who was later found in the river with his stomach cut open.

One day, the bus parked by our newsroom, right next to my little red car. It was a yellow school bus stolen from the Department of Education. The armed men came in. You cannot take over a city without shutting down independent media. Our editor-in-chief refused to cooperate and fled the city. Overnight, our newspaper ceased to exist, and I became unemployed. The next day I was hired as a fixer by the Western media.

I kind of liked being a fixer. It was a lot of adventures and good money. But there was something weird about my position vis-à-vis my employers. On the one hand, I was included in the global media scene. On the other, I was constantly reminded of the gap between myself and them that seemed unbridgeable.

**MY WHOLE  
WORLD WAS  
FALLING  
APART ON  
ME. AND HERE  
WERE PEOPLE  
TALKING ABOUT  
MASSAGES,  
RESTAURANTS,  
AND WEDDINGS**



I remember one day driving home after a day of working on the frontline with two American photojournalists. They were chatting leisurely in the back seat. One said that he was going to get a massage once he was back in the hotel. "They have a really good massage, you should try it while we are on assignment and it's covered." The other said he was already tired of this assignment and looking forward to going back. "I'm gonna stop in Kyiv for a few days, meet some friends. There are some really good restaurants to check out." The first one said he would love to stop in Kyiv, too, but needed to return for a wedding back home.

If dead people could listen to those who were alive, this is how I was listening to that conversation. Those days, I was constantly in a state of shock and bewilderment. My whole world was falling apart in front of me. And here were people talking about massages, restaurants, and weddings. Because, you know, there is always

ANASTASIA TAYLOR-LIND

some suffering out there in the world. You cannot help it all. Except, this time, the one suffering out there in the world was me.

Even inside my own country, I was constantly experiencing this otherness. After a few months of covering my city falling into the abyss of the war, I felt I needed a break and went to visit friends in Kyiv. The next day after arriving, I went to a nearby supermarket. At the entrance, I was stopped by a volunteer collecting humanitarian aid. She said, "You can buy some groceries and leave them in this box for the refugees from the East." "I am a refugee from the East," I replied. The volunteer looked at me with this "system error" face. Obviously, I could not be a refugee because I looked just normal and was freely inhabiting public space. I was not covered in mud, wrapped in the U.N. blanket, or, even better, secluded in some camp away from everyone's eyes, the ways refugees exist in the public imagination.



**"5km from the Frontline," a 2020 project by Alisa Sopova and photojournalist Anastasia Taylor-Lind, captures the everyday lives of Ukrainians against the backdrop of war**

"5km from the Frontline." Its goal was to overcome this otherness and show what everyday life in the war really looks like. Anastasia takes photographs, and I write short stories about them. These are images of people, places, things, and life situations in the immediate vicinity of the frontline taken over the past five years.

Prior to the full-scale Russia invasion, the war in Ukraine was largely absent from the global media scene. In order to make the suffering of people in eastern Ukraine more visible, we self-funded our many reporting trips to Donbas. Eventually our work was picked up by outlets like TIME magazine, The New York Times, and NPR.

Following the full-scale invasion, we have continued this work. As before, we seek to represent daily civilian life in Donbas — an aspect of the war that, despite the heightened attention on Ukraine, remains overshadowed by events deemed more newsworthy. ■

Then I met Anastasia. She stood out because she didn't just want to go to the frontline and then back to her hotel. She was curious about the logistics of everyday life in war. She asked questions about my own life. "I can take you to my neighborhood," I offered. The suburban neighborhood where I lived before the war was next to the Donetsk airport, and the airport was one of the main battlefields. Whatever life was left there was tense.

We took a walk towards my old house. I showed Anastasia my newspaper building, now shelled and abandoned. I showed her my favorite manicure salon, now empty and with a broken window. A 10-minute walk away from my house, we were stopped by soldiers. "You are not allowed to go any further." "But I have a house there. I live there," I tried to argue, just to make a point. "You are not allowed to go any further," the soldier repeated, looking through me as if I was a non-entity, a bothersome fly on his way.

I was not surprised or upset. I had adapted to living in a world where whoever had a weapon had absolute authority. But Anastasia was stunned. She was shaken by the idea of being prohibited from accessing your own home by a random guy who was not from there. I'd finally met a Western journalist who was eager to relate to me as an equal and to treat my experiences as if they could be her own. That day laid the ground for our friendship and our creative collaboration.

Over the next several years we created together a project that we titled

# MY LIFE OF CHASING BIG SCOOPS, CATCHING SHIT, AND SHOVELING IT FOR APPLAUSE

Between working at  
the circus and covering  
Alabama politics,  
I've met a lot of clowns

BY  
JOHN  
ARCHIBALD

**T**hey asked us to talk about stories we can't let go of.

The first thing that popped into my head was ... Shiiiiit.

No really. That's my answer.

I can't let go of shit.

I guess I gotta go all the way back to 1984 to explain. I was coming off the worst few years of my life.

I'd been arrested, taken to the Birmingham jail — a place they write the saddest songs about — for stealing a box of condoms from Big B drugs.

The cop told me I was lucky. If I'd taken a jumbo pack, I'd be staring at a felony.

I didn't feel lucky. For not needing the jumbo pack.

I tried to keep it all hush hush. But when I went to throw myself on the mercy of the court, I realized I'd seen the bailiff before. He was an usher at the church where my dad was the preacher.

So pretty soon, I was known in all the Sunday School circles as the rubber robber. The condom con. I was a prophylactic prodigal.

My whole life was going to shit. I hurt my leg playing pickup basketball, ending my unrealistic sports dreams. I lost my job as "Incinerator Operator" at a hospital.

I'd pretty much flunked out of one school and moved back in with my parents until I could get into another one, and I had no idea what to do with my life.

So I did what any of you would do in that position. I ran off to join the circus.

You might say "No, you didn't run away and join the circus! You just took a summer job at a theme park outside Orlando called Circus World."

Tomato, potato.

It was a circus, with elephants and tigers and horses and clowns and trapeze artists under a big top, with a



ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

**I COULDN'T  
LET GO** **THE STORY**

Wild West show called “The Great Western Stampede” that had an emcee on horseback who trotted around singing “Don’t Fence Me In.”

I had a bit part in that Wild West show. I was a bad guy with a black hat and a black mustache I had to paint on with mascara.

Twice a day I’d pop out in the middle of the show, say nasty things to the emcee, and get shot dead by his posse. I died twice a day and never shot anyone. I was a gunfighter who was bad at his job.

That was how I got to perform for Michael Jackson. The park had a great roller coaster, and the owners wanted to name it The Thriller. One day, they shut the whole park down and let Michael and his entourage have the run of the place.

We watched as he walked in under this little yellow parasol, and this gaggle of kids followed him in. They were the only people in the stands.

The emcee sang his song and I said mean things. I pulled my gun, but not fast enough, and they shot me dead.

I hit the ground. And as I lay dying, I watched Michael for his reaction.

And he got up and left. The little yellow parasol moved toward the exits. I don’t know if it was the gunfire or the acting, but everybody in the stands followed him out.

He beat it right out of there. It was bad.

It was a good thing my main job, the job I was hired to do, was as a stagehand in the circus show under the big top.

As stagehands, we lurked around in the dark and changed props and stuff. But the most important part was scooping the poop. Circuses are full of shit. Elephants, tigers, dogs, ponies, me.

I became something of an expert in excrement, a scat scholar.

Tiger poop is the worst. Elephant poop is almost pleasant, really. Earthy. Steamy. Like home.

When elephants are about to do the doo, they lift their tails high in the air. The head stagehand would yell, “Tail!” And off we’d go.

We’d run, shovels out, to scoop it away.

Sometimes, if everything went just right, we’d slide on our knees and catch it before it hit the ground.

And the crowd would go crazy. It made us feel like we were doing more than, you know, shoveling shit.

Sometimes it feels like I’ve been doing that stuff my whole life.

Chasing big scoops, catching shit, and shoveling it for applause.

Hell y’all. I write about Alabama politics. I’m still surrounded by clowns.

**IT IS  
OUR JOB, OUR  
RESPONSIBILITY,  
OUR PURPOSE,  
OUR ESSENCE, TO  
LOOK AT THOSE  
BAD THINGS AND  
DO WHATEVER IS  
IN OUR POWER  
TO TURN THEM  
INTO SOMETHING  
GOOD**



I guess can’t let go of that story because it’s fun. And literally full of shit.

The truth is there’s other stuff that won’t let go of me.

Like the first time I went on a ride-along with cops, and they busted down doors and laughed at the lies they told to catch the “bad guys.”

Or the time I watched my state put a man with the mind of a sixth grader in an electric chair named Yella Mama. They hit him with 2,000 volts. Twice, because the first time didn’t kill him.

His dad stood next to me. I still hear his voice saying “They’re torturing him. They’re torturing him.” And from where I stood, they were.

I can’t let go of that.

Or the time the feds were convinced a guy named Robert Wayne O’Ferrell bombed a federal judge in Birmingham. We’d say now they Richard Jewelled him, tearing up his property for evidence that wasn’t there.

What I remember most is standing on the street out-

side his house as his daughter got home from school.

She was just a little kid, and as she got off that yellow school bus and started across the yard, I yelled something like “You think he did it?” Which, as it happened, he did not. She looked at me with a horror I still see and ran crying into the house.

I can’t let go of that. I can’t disown it. It won’t let go of me.

I remember standing in the wreckage of a Methodist Church in Goshen, Alabama, on a Palm Sunday after a tornado swept through during an Easter cantata. It killed 20 people, including the pastor’s daughter.

My dad was a Methodist preacher so everything in the rubble seemed familiar. Hymn books open to the songs he loved to sing. Notes written in a child’s hand on the back of church bulletins, like I used to do. A little shoe from a girl who was ... just gone.

I can’t let go of what that preacher said a few days later when she came outside to talk to reporters.

**Rescue workers search through the rubble of the Goshen United Methodist Church after a tornado destroyed the building and killed 20 people in March 1994**

Her name was Kelly Clem. She’d lost her daughter Hannah in a place they called a sanctuary. Her face was bruised and swollen, and people asked her if she blamed God, or thought this nightmare was God’s will.

Now I’m not a religious person. Then or now. I’ve seen things done in the name of the church that caused my soul to search in other directions.

But I’ll never forget what Kelly said and did. She paused for a second. She noticed the little Easter egg tree — just a branch hung with colorful eggs and stuck in the dirt — had been knocked over by the storm. She went over and replanted it, firmly.

Then she came to us and said something like this: We live in a natural world, and bad things happen. It is our job, our responsibility, our purpose, our essence, to look at those bad things and do whatever is in our power to turn them into something good.

I’ve seen a lot of shit. A lot of you have seen worse. But that’s the shit I can’t let go of. ■

GADSDEN TIMES

# THREE MONTHS IN A ZIMBABWEAN PRISON COULDN'T STOP ME FROM REPORTING ON CORRUPTION

Political elites were looting  
Covid relief funds, but that  
was just the beginning

BY  
HOPEWELL  
CHIN'ONO

I was born in a country that was first to have television in Sub-Saharan Africa, but today it is the only African country with just one television station, which is owned by the state and run by an Orwellian-type Ministry of Truth, dubbed the Ministry of Information and Publicity.

The Zimbabwean liberation struggle against colonial rule was meant to put an end to the suppression of freedom of speech and access to a variety of sources of information amongst many other freedoms, but we are still where we were during colonial rule if not worse.

Our freedoms have been constrained and repressed by the only post-colonial ruling political party, ZANUPF, which uses the state security machinery and violence to exert its power.

This has made it particularly difficult for journalists as the country's Ministry of Information has to accredit journalists — by operation of a draconian law — before they can do any work in Zimbabwe.

In reality, it is the dreaded secret service of Zimbabwe that gives the nod or rejects your accreditation application behind the scenes.

Exactly 20 years ago, I went back to Zimbabwe after being away for nine years living in Britain where I was studying and working.

I came back to Zimbabwe hoping that I would be able to practice as a journalist. However, the head of the accreditation media board who had been my history lecturer at journalism school, Dr. Tafataona Mahoso, told me that he was instructed not to accredit me.

It was extremely surreal that the man who had taught me at journalism college was now the same man standing in my way to stop me from practicing the craft that he had taught me a decade before.

He couldn't look me in the eye; he was extremely embarrassed. It was a short meeting, and I left feeling



ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

**I COULDN'T  
LET GO** **THE STORY**

disappointed with how someone like him could easily be bought by the regime to become its media hangman.

The regime asked me to do my journalistic work with the BBC under a pro-government broadcasting television production company in exchange for accreditation. I refused to do so because it would have been self-censorship.

Stuck in Harare, jobless and targeted by my own government simply because I was going to be working with the BBC, which the government considered banned, I applied for a scholarship to study film in London and left the country.

On my return to Zimbabwe in 2007, the political environment had gotten worse. The highly popular opposition party was being hunted down by the regime using state institutions. Zimbabwe now had the highest inflation rate in the world. Shops were empty as the country prepared for another election pencilled for March 2008.

I joined a South African television news channel, eNCA, as its Zimbabwe reporter based in Harare in February 2008.

The election was on March 29, 2008. Robert Mugabe and his party lost the election but refused to go.

They turned to their default political setting of using brutal violence while refusing to release the presidential results for over one month.

The violence witnessed that month was followed by another two months of nonstop indiscriminate brutality. Houses were burned down, and opposition supporters were maimed or killed daily.

I became the first locally based journalist to break the violence story internationally, and for that I was targeted by Mugabe's regime, which had also refused to accredit me to cover the original election and called me a national security risk.

That is a euphemism for being declared an enemy of the regime.

I always watched my back as I went into communities filming. It was tough because television news requires cameras, tripods, and at times, big microphones to record events.

There was no stable or fast internet at that time, so we used satellite phones to file stories to London or Johannesburg. If caught with one, you risked going to jail.

The election period had been so traumatic for most journalists who covered the violence in-depth. It was painful watching people having their homes burnt to the ground, their limbs and hands cut off, or villagers killed in the senseless violence.

It was scary to film in rural Zimbabwe because that was the hotbed of Mugabe's shock troopers who could maim or kill with no consequence to them.

Nine years later, in 2017, Robert Mugabe fired his

vice president and long-time enforcer, Emmerson Mnangagwa, who immediately ran away to South Africa fearing arrest, only to come back three weeks later after a military coup as the new president.

Mnangagwa started off by making all manner of fairy-tale political promises, but it became clearer that it was only changes in name and not deeds as his administration became the source of massive looting of public funds and rampant corruption. Public funds were being routinely looted without consequence, and audit reports were ignored without exception.

I started speaking out about it through social media. I also started investigating and exposing the rampant corruption that was taking place, and the more I did that, the more state actors and ruling party senior officials attacked me publicly both on social media and through the state-controlled media.

The pandemic began in 2020, and a Covid-19 fund of \$60 million was set up to help fight the pandemic in Zimbabwe. I uncovered that it was being ruthlessly looted by powerful political elites. They were raising prices for a \$.65 mask, selling them to the state for \$30 a piece. They formed shell companies both home at home and abroad using their children, relatives, and friends to bid for state tenders, which were awarded without transparency.

I spent one month reporting about it every day because each day my investigations discovered new things.

I used social media platforms to report, mainly X, Facebook, and Instagram, which reached younger audiences using videos that I recorded speaking into a camera phone.

My investigations led me to the highest levels of government.

The excitement and disbelief that my social media reports caused were palpable and national. My reporting raised unmatched levels of public anger, but that anger made the regime angrier at me.

Then on July 20, 2020, the dreaded knock was heard on my gate.

The police were let into my compound by my staff. I locked myself inside my home waiting for my lawyers to arrive. Instead of waiting for my lawyers to arrive, the police, who had secret service details with AK47s, hit my dining room door glass and walked into my home, all seven of them.

As they came toward my bedroom, I picked up my cell phone and started a live broadcast on Facebook. I filmed them coming into my bedroom, but they ordered me to put the phone down and I complied because they had guns. But the film had already gone out to the world and global news networks were broadcasting it within an hour of being filmed.

I was dragged out of my home, walking on top of broken glass barefoot. I spent two days and nights at the police station. The regime didn't know what to charge me with or which law to use because the arrest was bogus and political.

They took me back home twice to search my property. They took all my computers, cell phones, and camera equipment.



PHILIMON BULAWAYO/REUTERS

I was eventually charged with tweeting against corruption, and the charge ridiculously said that the tweets would lead to the removal of the government.

I was denied bail three times and taken to Africa's worst prison, Chikurubi.

As the truck drove to me to the prison from the magistrate's court, I felt the pain of being persecuted for simply doing my work.

I spent 45 days in Chikurubi, staying amongst murderers and rapists without clean running water and sleeping with 45 convicts in a cell meant for 14 people, only because I was practicing journalism and had exposed corruption.

I fell sick while in prison with Covid-19 and was denied access to proper medical care. The prison hospital was just as bad as all Zimbabwean public hospitals, with no medication or basic equipment.

I spent my time speaking to prisoners who saw me as a hero of some sort and protected me from unsavory criminal characters. Most of the prison officers were kind to me and took turns to tell me how they were suffering living on paltry salaries.

I realized that I was building a story from these anecdotes, one which I told when I left the prison. Instead of being depressed, the journalist in me started taking notes which turned into stories about the prison conditions.

I was released from prison in September after my fourth attempt to get bail.

Three weeks after my release from prison, the president's niece was caught trying to smuggle six kilograms of gold to Dubai on a flight. A plan was hatched to give

**Hopewell Chin'ono arrives at court in Harare, Zimbabwe, August 2020, after his arrest the previous month**

her bail unopposed, an insider informed me, and I exposed it using my X handle.

I was arrested again six days later and charged with another bogus charge of interfering with a pending case before the courts. But there was no pending case before the courts — it was just another excuse to punish me for exposing the corrupt arrangement to give bail to the president's niece.

I was jailed for 23 days and only released by the High Court of Zimbabwe — the magistrate courts are completely captured by the regime, so you stand no chance of getting bail there for political persecution charges.

I was arrested again on January 8, 2021, for something that I didn't do using a law that doesn't exist. I was jailed for 24 days and again only released by the High Court on appeal. Every time I was imprisoned, I was sent to Chikurubi maximum security prison where only convicted prisoners are sent. This was meant to punish me.

However, my work and the political persecution have not been in vain. The exposures of corruption were acknowledged internationally and managed to put a spotlight on Zimbabwe's failed governance.

When things get tougher with arrests and imprisonment, one has to be creative to reach young people about corruption.

I recently did a music skit which I called "Dem Loot," which means "They Loot."

The anti-corruption message was delivered with fun, but effectively. It went viral and the government was even more upset, but they couldn't arrest me for singing. ■

**INSTEAD  
OF BEING  
DEPRESSED, THE  
JOURNALIST IN  
ME STARTED  
TAKING NOTES  
WHICH TURNED  
INTO STORIES  
ABOUT THE  
PRISON  
CONDITIONS**

# 'HERE I AM, PLEASE TELL ME YOUR STORY'

How a chance encounter led to a book about the fire at the Los Angeles Public Library

BY  
SUSAN  
ORLEAN

It was *done*. Absolutely done with writing, and especially done with writing books. This was in 2008, and I had just finished my book "Rin Tin Tin." It was a story of the most famous dog in Hollywood, and it had grown into a convoluted, complicated tale that spanned a century and put me in contact with some of the most ornery subjects I'd ever encountered. And that was just the humans! The whole thing had taken me seven years and, quite honestly, it wore me out. In my postpartum exhaustion, I made the decision that I just couldn't, wouldn't, do it again.

Of course, I'm a sucker for books. I grew up in libraries, or at least it feels that way. I grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland, just a few blocks from a branch library, and from the time I was a toddler, my mom and I would go there at least once or twice a week. The library might have been the first place I was ever allowed to wander on my own, but the magic of the experience was inextricably linked to spending this almost sacred time with my mother.

She loved libraries. On the ride home, each time, we would have a solemn conversation about the order in which we would read our books and how we would pace ourselves during the charmed, evanescent period until the books were due. We both thought the branch librarians were beautiful. For a few minutes, we would discuss their beauty. My mother would also mention that if she could have chosen any profession at all, she would have chosen to be a librarian, and we would grow silent as we both considered what an amazing thing that would have been.

I loved books so much that I started writing them as soon as I could lift a pencil. My first book was called "Herbert the Near-Sighted Pigeon," a stirring narrative about a tiny pigeon who was bullied by his brother and sister because of his small stature and his large glasses. Spoiler alert: He meets a bespectacled owl, who coaches



ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

**I COULDN'T  
LET GO** **THE STORY**

him on witty retorts to bullies.

Being a writer was all I ever wanted to be.

My parents, though, were wary. They were products of the Depression, and they viewed the notion of writing as a profession with the kind of dread they might have felt if I had planned to be a professional tightrope walker. My father, who was a lawyer, urged me to go to law school, the inevitable route back then for English majors. He said if I wanted to *try* writing, that was an option, but a law degree would give me something to “fall back on.” With unearned bravado, I told him I didn’t plan on falling back.

I charged ahead, convinced that I could be, *would be*, a writer. And after some years writing for alternative newsmagazines and Sunday magazines, I was seized with the idea that I could write a book, and, lo and behold, I did it. Then I wrote another, and another. After each one, my parents congratulated me, and then my father would pull me aside to suggest that it wasn’t too late for me to go to law school.

After my third book was published, I told him, “Dad, I actually think it IS too late to go to law school.” One day, when I was particularly frustrated while working on “Rin Tin Tin,” and wondering if maybe I should have gone to law school, my dad, who was then almost ninety years old and still working as a lawyer, confessed to me that he had always wanted to be a writer.

Writing books is not easy, but I loved it. Each one is like a marriage. When I finished “Rin Tin Tin,” after what felt like a bit of agony, I was proud, but I also felt — perhaps like anyone who has been married six times — that maybe I just couldn’t get married again.

But the problem with being a writer is ... you’re a writer. Stories stalk you. Stories beguile you. They bewitch you. It’s not easy to fend them off, even when you’ve vowed you will.

One day, a year after “Rin Tin Tin” was published, I stopped in at the library. This was an experience I had had hundreds of times before, but that time, something in my brain activated. Wow, I thought, libraries are so interesting! I wonder how they work, and I wonder what it’s like day-to-day in a library. I love to examine the inner workings of familiar things, and what could be more familiar than a library? But — wait. No. I took a deep breath. I thought, OK, it’s a great story, but not for me. But damn, what a good idea for a book.

Fast forward a few years: My husband and I have moved to Los Angeles. Our son started kindergarten, and right away, he had homework, to interview someone who worked for the city. I suggested he interview a garbage collector. He, being smarter than I am, suggested he interview a librarian. So off we went to our local branch library, in Studio City, California. The minute we

walked in, I was flooded with those memories of going to the library with my mother.

Even though the building in Studio City was very different from my local library in Shaker Heights, Ohio, everything about it felt familiar — the hush in the room; the flyers on the bulletin board fluttering in the breeze; the wide worn desks; the sense that things were happening, words were being consumed, thoughts were percolating. The sense of familiarity hit me so hard that I almost gasped.

And then I thought, what a great idea for a book. But no. No!

Sometime after that trip to the library with my son, I met Ken Brecher, the head of the Los Angeles library foundation. He asked me to speak at one of the foundation’s luncheons. As a thank you, he wanted to give me a tour of the downtown library. (I was excited because I didn’t know L.A. had a downtown.)

The day of the tour, I drove to the library. Even from a distance, I was smitten. It’s a marvelous building — it looked like the architect had fallen asleep with a book about King Tut under his pillow and then woke up and designed it. Carved into the exterior surfaces was an assortment of history’s greatest observations about reading, books, knowledge, ideas — as I circled the building, I read it, almost as if it itself were a book. Ken and I walked through the building, and at every turn he told me about various patrons and librarians and the upheavals and challenges the library had weathered over the decades. It was like being on the best first date *ever*; every detail fascinated me, every row of books looked inviting.

When we reached the fiction department, Ken stopped in front of a shelf, rummaged around a bit, and then pulled out a book. He held it up and took a deep, deep whiff of it, and held it out towards me. I was stupefied. Was I supposed to sniff it, too? Was this an L.A. thing, to smell books? After a moment, he said, “You know, you can still smell the smoke in some of them.”

“Did they ... did they used to let people smoke in the library?”

Ken scoffed at me and said, “No! Smoke from the fire!”

I stammered. “What ... what fire?”

He seemed exasperated. “The big fire! The fire in 1986! It shut the library down for seven years!” As I later learned, the fire — an arson — consumed 400,000 books and damaged 700,000 more. It was the largest library fire in American history.

Now someone ought to do a book about that, I thought to myself, and I knew it was going to be me.

And so it was. I plunged into the story, learning everything I could about the fire and about these beloved institutions. Over and over, I was reminded that we feel something really deep about libraries — they aren’t just warehouses of books, but instead represent a repository of everything we know and dream of and have explored. They seem to have souls.

While working, I came across an expression that intrigued me. In Senegal, when someone dies, it is expressed by saying his or her library has burned. I wasn’t quite sure what it meant, but I wrote it on a notecard



**Fire captain Don Stukey examines the damage after the devastating fire at the Los Angeles Central Library in 1986**

and hung it over my desk, and I would read it every day that I was working.

When I was about halfway done with the book, my mom was diagnosed with dementia. Little by little, I understood that Senegalese expression, because her loss of memory and, eventually, of language, was like watching her interior life smolder and then disappear, as if consumed by fire.

When I finished the book, I realized that this entire time, I have been drawn to writing it, to writing in general, in hopes of creating something that endured, that would be alive somehow as long as someone read what I had written. This was my lifeline, my passion, my way to understand who I am and what I do. When I finally saw the book out in the world, I thought about my dad, and I knew, had he still been alive, that he might again

BORIS YARO/LOS ANGELES TIMES

**THIS WAS  
MY LIFELINE,  
MY PASSION,  
MY WAY TO  
UNDERSTAND  
WHO I AM AND  
WHAT I DO**

be urging me to go to law school.

And I thought especially about my mother, who died before I finished it, and I knew how pleased she would have been to see me in the library, and that thought transported me to a split second to a time when I was young and she was still in the moment, alert and tender, with years ahead of her. I knew that if we had come to the library together, even now, she would have reminded me that if she could have chosen any profession in the world, she would have been a librarian.

That’s why I knew I had to write this book, to tell about a place I love that doesn’t belong to me, but feels like it is mine, like it belongs to all of us. All the things that are wrong in the world seem conquered by a library’s simple promise: Here I am, please tell me your story; here is my story, please listen. ■

## 1963

**Victor K. McElheny** attended the 40th anniversary celebrations of Knight Science Journalism at MIT in April. From 1982-1998, he served as founding director of the nine-month mid-career program, which has hosted some 400 science journalists from around the world. McElheny continues to lecture in MIT's Program in Science, Technology, and Society.

**François Sully**, who died in 1971, is the focus of the article "To Each His Turn ... Today Yours, Tomorrow Mine: François Sully's Turn in History," written by Nathaniel L. Moir for the Journal of American-East Asian Relations. The piece examines Sully's reporting on U.S.-South Vietnamese relations and notes: "As one of the earliest journalists the First Republic of Vietnam expelled in 1962, his reporting introduced Vietnam to American readers, and his journalism influenced a generation of Western reporters covering the intervention of U.S. forces in Vietnam."

## 1995

**Paul Carvalho**, an internationally recognized documentary filmmaker, died on August 17, 2023, at his home in Montreal, Canada, after a long illness. He was 72. Carvalho started making films in 1996 after working as a radio and television news reporter for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Montreal and Toronto. He was best known for "Montréal, mon amour, mon histoire," a series of five films produced in honor of the city's 375th anniversary in 2017. The documentaries were created in collaboration with Ici Radio-Canada and were broadcast by select PBS stations as well as in 30 languages around the world by TV5-World.

**Anne Hull** is author of "Through the Groves: A Memoir." In it, she recalls growing up during the 1960s in the orange groves of Central Florida, a region that changed dramatically when it was cleared to make way for Walt Disney World. A fifth-generation Floridian, Hull spent nearly two decades as a reporter at The Washington Post.

## 1998

**Phillip W.d. Martin**, NF '98, and **Jenifer McKim**, NF '08, from the GBH News

Center for Investigative Reporting, were part of the team that won the ONA award in the social justice category for their series "Trafficking Inc." about the victims of forced labor.

## 2006

**Mary C. Curtis**, a Roll Call columnist and host of the "Equal Time" podcast, recently won several awards: first place for online columns and honorable mention for crisis commentary from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists; first place in the writing/personal category from the National Federation of Press Women for "What it means to be 'surprised' by the massacre at Highland Park;" and the 2023 DC Dateline Award for her columns from the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

## 2007

**Ian Johnson**, a senior fellow for China studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, is author of the new book "Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future" (Oxford University Press). Johnson spent 20 years in China writing for The New York Review of Books, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal, as well as serving for five years on the editorial board of The Journal of Asian Studies.

**Andrea McCarren** has been named president of the nonprofit PenFed Foundation, which supports U.S. service members and veterans through financial assistance, advocacy, and outreach. She will also serve as senior vice president of PenFed Digital, the division she created in 2019.

**Cameron McWhirter**, is co-author with his Wall Street Journal colleague Zusha Elinson of the forthcoming book "American Gun: The True Story of the AR-15." (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, September 2023). The authors trace the history of the AR-15 rifle, the gun used in some of the worst mass shootings in U.S. history. McWhirter covers politics and U.S. news for The Wall Street Journal from Atlanta.

## 2008

**Andrew Meldrum** is now the global weekend editor for The Associated Press based in New York City. He previously served as AP's Africa news editor, based in Johannesburg, South Africa.

**Gaiutra Bahadur** was appointed as a

fellow at the University of Cambridge this past spring and spent the summer there as the inaugural Ramesh and Leela Narain Visiting Fellow, the first fellowship devoted to the study of indenture in the world.

## 2009

**Alfredo Corchado**, Mexico/border correspondent for The Dallas Morning News, has been inducted into the National Association of Hispanic Journalists Hall of Fame. Corchado additionally received the Ruben Salazar Award for Communications from UnidosUS for his reporting.

**Kevin Sites** is author of his first novel, "The Oceans Above Me," a thriller in which a former war correspondent confronts a secret from his past as he struggles to survive in a capsized shrimping trawler. Sites has worked as a reporter for more than 30 years, half of that covering war and disasters for ABC, NBC, CNN, Yahoo News, and Vice News, and has written three books on war.

## 2012

**John Nery**, a columnist for Rappler in the Philippines, is author of "Radical: Readings in Rizal and History" (San Anselmo Publications), a collection of columns, speeches, lectures, and papers related to Philippine national hero Jose Rizal. "Radical" is Nery's second book about the man. The first was "Revolutionary Spirit: Jose Rizal in Southeast Asia," which published in 2011.

**Carlos Eduardo Huertas**, director of the nonprofit journalism project Connectas in Colombia, has won a 2023 Maria Moors Cabot Prize, presented by Colombia Journalism School to honor outstanding reporting on the Americas. The award citation mentioned his important contributions to investigative journalism adding: "For over a decade, Huertas has cultivated a journalistic method that has strengthened the skills of hundreds of colleagues in the region."

## 2013

**Jen Balderama**, was the editor of work for Washington Post Opinions that was awarded a 2023 Gerald Loeb Award for Commentary. The coverage, by columnist Alyssa Rosenberg, reported on the infant formula shortage in the United States and, as the Loeb judges wrote, "spotlighted the structural causes of this national

# Bob Giles, former Nieman Foundation curator, dies at 90

## The veteran journalist oversaw the launch of Nieman Journalism Lab, Nieman Storyboard, and several national journalism awards

**R**obert H. Giles, curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University from 2000-2011, died in Traverse City, Michigan, on August 7, 2023, after battling cancer. Known as Bob to friends and colleagues alike, he was 90 years old.

Under Giles' leadership, the influential media news site Nieman Journalism Lab and the narrative journalism site Nieman Storyboard were launched; the annual Christopher J. Georges Conference on College Journalism began; and several national journalism awards were created, including the Taylor Family Award for Fairness in Journalism and the I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence. He additionally brought the Worth Bingham Prize for Investigative Journalism to Nieman and oversaw the expansion of Walter Lippmann House, Nieman's office space on campus.

During his tenure, Giles selected several hundred journalists from around the world to study as Nieman Fellows at Harvard. He and his late wife, psychologist Nancy Giles, worked tirelessly to create a home away from home for all of them.

Current Nieman curator Ann Marie Lipinski said: "Bob leaves behind a community of devoted Nieman Fellows who treasured him for his grace and generosity. He cared deeply about the fellows and their families and together with Nancy placed a high value on building support for each year's fellowship cohort. He well understood the pressures the journalists had been laboring under and worked hard to create a program that offered inspiration and a path forward."

She added: "He grew Nieman in important and lasting ways, both through the physical expansion of Lippmann House and programmatic additions. Nieman Lab and Nieman Storyboard are the direct result of his leadership, helping to expand Nieman's impact well beyond the campus experience."

Giles was a Nieman Fellow himself in the class of 1966. As Nieman curator, he served as publisher of Nieman Reports and was a frequent contributor to the magazine.

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, Giles was a



Under Giles' leadership, Nieman Lab and Storyboard were launched, along with several national journalism awards and the expansion of Lippmann House

graduate of DePauw University and earned a master's degree from Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. In 1996, he received an honorary doctorate in journalism from DePauw.

Giles served in the Army before beginning his journalism career in 1958 at The Akron Beacon Journal. As managing editor there, he directed coverage of the campus shootings at Kent State University on May 4, 1970, a time when people in the United States were sharply divided over the Vietnam War. Four students were killed during an anti-war protest, and National Guard soldiers also wounded nine other people. The paper's coverage won a Pulitzer Prize for spot news reporting.

Giles left the Beacon Journal in 1975 and taught as a professional-in-residence at the School of Journalism at the University of Kansas. From 1977 to 1986, he served as the executive editor and then editor of the Democrat & Chronicle and the Times-Union in Rochester, New York.

He joined The Detroit News as executive editor in 1986. As noted in The Harvard Gazette: "This was a tumultuous period in Detroit journalism. The paper was honored for its journalism, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1994 [for its coverage

of a scandal in the Michigan House Fiscal Agency], but was faced with the challenges of a joint operating agreement with its rival, the Detroit Free Press, and a long, bitter strike that lasted for 19 months."

Giles won the Scripps-Howard Foundation's Distinguished Journalism Citation in 1978 for "outstanding public service in the cause of the First Amendment." He also was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2012, the same year he was selected for a Yankee Quill Award from the Academy of New England Journalists. An eight-time Pulitzer Prize juror, he was the author of "Newsroom Management: A Guide to Theory and Practice."

After retiring from the Nieman Foundation, Giles and his wife Nancy moved to Traverse City, Michigan, where he was actively involved in civic and cultural groups, including the National Writers Series and the International Affairs Forum.

He is survived by his children, David (Ellen Katz), Megan (Jay Cooney), and Rob (Kelly Giles); four grandchildren, Walker and Caroline Cooney, Sadie, and Ruby Giles, and two step-grandsons, Miles and Nick Johnson. ■



## NIEMAN NOTES

emergency and offered compelling solutions and advice for parents, corporations and politicians.”

**Finbarr O'Reilly** received the James Foley Award for Conflict Reporting at the ONA23 conference. The selection committee wrote: “He continues Jim Foley’s legacy of excellence in storytelling, moral courage and concern for fellow freelance photographers. The sharing of personal issues with injury resulting from his brilliant work, and his serving on the ACOS (A Culture of Safety Alliance) board, promotes journalist safety, self-awareness and generosity to the community of journalists.”

**Alexandra Garcia** has been named deputy editor for Op-Docs, The New York Times editorial department’s forum for short, opinionated documentaries. In this new leadership role, she will oversee editorial vision and strategy. Garcia joined the Times in 2013.

## 2014

**Issac Bailey** has joined the McClatchy opinion team full time as a columnist and opinion editor in the Carolinas. A former member of The Charlotte Observer editorial board, he has been writing a weekly column for North and South Carolina markets. Bailey is a professor of practice at Davidson College and taught journalism and applied ethics at Coastal Carolina University.

**Cristian Lupsa**, founder of the Romanian long-form narrative journalism quarterly DoR (2009-2022) and the “The Power of Storytelling,” conference in Bucharest, has been chosen for the Executive Program in News Innovation and Leadership at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York (CUNY).

**David Smydra**, a 2014 Visiting Nieman Fellow, is the new vice president of product at Politico. He joins Politico from Twitter and is currently president of the Online News Association.

## 2017

**Marcela Turati** is author of the

forthcoming book “San Fernando: Última parada: Viaje al crimen autorizado en Tamaulipas” (“San Fernando: Last Stop,” Aguilar, October 31, 2023), which investigates what happened to a group of migrants who were massacred after disappearing from a bus station in San Fernando in Mexico’s Tamaulipas state. In 2011, the government identified the remains of 193 people found in mass graves in the area. The book is winner of the Javier Valdéz Cárdenas Award.

**Jeneé Osterheldt**, deputy managing editor for culture, talent, and development at The Boston Globe, won the online commentary award at ONA23 for a series of columns examining race, ethnicity, gender, and identity.

**Chisomo Ngulube**, a senior editor at Kulinji.com in Malawi, has been elected vice chair of MISA Malawi’s National Governing Council. MISA Malawi is one of 11 chapters of the Media Institute of Southern Africa, which promotes and defends media freedom and freedom of expression across southern Africa.

**Jason Rezaian**, global opinions writer at The Washington Post, has joined a bipartisan commission on hostage taking and wrongful detention launched by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The panel, created partly in response to Russia’s detention of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, will examine ways to strengthen current U.S. hostage policy and propose new government strategies to deter future hostage taking.

## 2019

**Peter Nickeas** has begun teaching at the University of Arkansas, where he is a visiting distinguished professor of ethics in journalism at the School of Journalism and Strategic Media. A specialist in data journalism and investigative reporting, Nickeas previously worked as a reporter for the Chicago Tribune and a senior writer for CNN.

## 2021

**Amber Payne**, editor-in-chief of The Emancipator, and her colleagues were selected as a finalist in the excellence in social media engagement/small newsroom category for the collection of articles “We need to talk about racism” at ONA23.

**S. Mitra Kalita**, co-founder and CEO of URL Media, has been named to the American Press Institute’s Board of Trustees.

## 2023

**Fahim Abed**, a co-editor with Lighthouse Reports, and Colombian-American photographer **Juan Arredondo**, NF ’19, have been elected to the Overseas Press Club of America’s board of governors. **Deborah Amos**, NF ’92, who now teaches journalism at Princeton, Columbia, and SUNY New Paltz, continues to serve on the board.

**Darryl Fears** has been named as senior environmental correspondent at The Washington Post, with a focus on environmental justice. He has covered the environment for The Post since 2010.

**Ashish Dikshit** has been promoted to senior news editor at the BBC World Service, responsible for the output of five language services including BBC Persian, BBC Chinese, BBC Turkish, BBC Serbian, and BBC Azeri. He previously served as the editor of BBC News Marathi.

**Angie Drobnic Holan**, editor-in-chief of the fact-checking site PolitiFact, is the new director of the International Fact-Checking Network based at the Poynter Institute in Florida. IFCN supports fact-checkers who battle misinformation worldwide. Holan has been a member of the IFCN advisory board since its inception in 2015 and helped create its Code of Principles.

**Renée Kaplan** has started a new role as the director of news for the European public broadcaster ARTE, based in France. She previously worked as head of digital editorial development at the Financial Times in London, where she directed newsroom innovation, new editorial products, and digital journalism.

## 2024

**Andrew Ryan**, an investigative reporter for The Boston Globe, received the 2023 Arc of Justice Award from the New England Innocence Project for his stories on the wrongfully convicted. In recognizing his reporting, the group said: “We are grateful for the honesty and integrity with which Andrew Ryan approaches his reporting and for shedding light on the injustices faced by wrongfully convicted people.” ■

## SOUNDING

# ‘What comes first, being a journalist or being a citizen?’

**Yana Lyushnevskaya**, NF ’24, on the difficult dilemma Ukrainian journalists face when covering war in their own country



**Yana Lyushnevskaya (right) works with her colleague out of a bomb shelter in Lviv, Ukraine**

In November 2022, I saw my former home in Kyiv in flames on live TV following a Russian missile attack. Moscow was targeting energy infrastructure across Ukraine to cause blackouts, often by firing up to 100 missiles at once to overwhelm Ukrainian defenses. This often resulted in major damage to civilian infrastructure — schools, museums, universities — and residential areas, like the ordinary five-story building in the leafy Pechersk neighborhood where I lived for much of my life in the Ukrainian capital.

I had been safely out of Kyiv by that time, but the attack served as a painful reminder of the personal toll the war has taken on myself and other Ukrainian journalists. We were not like the prominent war correspondents who travel to a faraway warzone for a three-week deployment and then go back to the comfort and safety of their peaceful countries. The war had come to us and there was no way to escape the emotional impact it left, even if we were physically far from the front lines.

Inevitably, this emotional attachment to the story raised difficult questions about how we should cover it.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian society responded with unprecedented unity, and the media community was no exception. As I observed in my role as a media analyst at BBC Monitoring’s Kyiv bureau, the coverage was defiant and patriotic, amplifying Ukraine’s heroic struggle for freedom and rallying behind President Volodymyr Zelensky. There was an unspoken consensus that this is the only way to respond when your country is under attack and that any political disagreements or criticism of the authorities should be put aside, since any bickering would only play into Russia’s hands.

But as the initial shock of the invasion wore off, the question “what’s next” began to be openly asked in the Ukrainian media community. What is our role as Ukrainian journalists in wartime? What comes first, being a journalist or being a citizen? Should we raise inconvenient topics, such as

corruption in the military? And if so, how do we go about the fact that exposing it could, for example, undermine vital aid from Western allies?

Both in journalism school and at the BBC, where impartiality is one of the key editorial values, I have been taught to strive for balanced, objective reporting. But nothing prepared me for having to effectively make a choice between my identity as a journalist and my identity as a Ukrainian.

While this choice was painful, it was not new to me. I faced it when Russia annexed my home region of Crimea in 2014. I had my own strong opinions on what happened — and grappled with the profound impact the annexation had on my family — but I managed to leave them out of my reporting, because I felt that it was important to show the full picture and give sufficient attention to the stories of people I may disagree with.

But this time, the scale was different. We were talking about the survival of the entire country, the one I love deeply.

Gradually, Ukrainian journalists started discovering solutions. While national TV is still speaking in a united, highly patriotic voice and often attracts criticism for its excessively pro-government coverage, critical reporting is thriving online, where you can find numerous investigations and other stories on sensitive issues.

It appears that the Ukrainian media community has been gradually shifting to a new consensus that it is important not just to win the war, but also not to turn into Russia in the process.

Ukrainian soldiers are fighting not just to preserve the country’s territorial integrity. They are also fighting for a Ukraine that is free, democratic, and pluralistic — everything Russia is not. If we do not talk about problems, we will never solve them and our country would only become weaker because of that.

But the way Ukrainian journalists have stood up for their right to do critical reporting even during the war makes me optimistic that it is not going to happen.

While doing quality journalism is important for society, it is also important for us, journalists, as human beings. Even though hearing missiles striking my city was the scariest thing that ever happened to me, I found solace in the fact that I was doing something useful and meaningful — telling the story of the war in Ukraine to the audiences around the world.

It has been 20 months, but this mission still fills my heart with meaning and hope. ■

# ‘It Was Hard to Put Words to Something So Raw and So Recent’

Daily Tar Heel editor-in-chief **Emmy Martin** shares the story behind the paper’s viral front page

**A**fter a gunman fatally shot a professor on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus on Aug. 28, the editors of The Daily Tar Heel, UNC’s student newspaper, were unsure of what their front cover should be. At first, they thought to print a blank page, symbolizing the loss for words the community had following the tragedy. But what the editors had a hard time verbalizing was found in the various text messages students sent and received during lockdown. These texts recounting the fear people felt that day made up the front page of the Aug. 30 print issue of the paper.

Nieman Reports spoke with Emmy Martin, editor-in-chief of The Daily Tar Heel, about how the viral front page came to be, covering the news while also being the news, and why student journalism is uniquely equipped to report on issues like gun violence. This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

## Where did the idea for the front cover come from?

As soon as I got out of lockdown, I met with my staff in the newsroom. We were talking about what our front page would look like after such a tragic event, and no one really knew exactly what we wanted. I think it was hard to put words to something so raw and so recent at that time, and so after kind of talking it through with everyone in the newsroom, we left that conversation thinking that we had to do something different from our normal front page coverage.

Monday evening, after everyone had gone home from the newsroom, I was ... looking through text messages that I personally have received. I was also looking on social media — specifically, I was looking at Instagram. I was seeing so many text messages, asking, “Are you safe? Are

you okay?” that people had posted from the lockdown.

That’s when it clicked for me that if I was receiving these messages, and all of these people were also receiving these messages, it’s something shared by every student on campus. I knew that that had to be our front page.

The next morning, we asked all of the editors of The Daily Tar Heel to reach out to their friends and acquaintances asking if they felt comfortable to message me their text messages that they sent or received. And almost as soon as I sent my message to the editors, I started getting so many screenshots from people, all of those really intimate and scary texts, [and] you can really feel the emotion. I worked with Caitlin Yaede, our print managing editor, and then she put them on the page. As soon as we saw them all together in one place, it was incredibly moving.

## What was the reaction to the cover on campus?

As soon as papers hit our blue boxes around campus, they were almost all empty by midday, which is unusual for our print papers. We printed a couple thousand more [papers] and handed them out in the pit, which is a large meeting place on UNC’s campus, the next day. Looking through social media, even Tuesday evening before our print paper had even come out, it was all over people’s social media. We saw a large outpouring of support from students and community members, but also people who could relate to the cover — people across the country who have either had people they love experience an active shooter situation, or they themselves had experienced that situation.



**The only reason The Daily Tar Heel could create that cover is because we’re students, too**

## How can people support student journalism?

We received more page views than we’ve probably seen in one day ever. Of course, that’s not why we’re doing our work, but to see the community look to us for clarity and information during the lockdown — and then to also see so many people across the nation look at our cover and support us and send love — was really rewarding. Many people donated to our paper, which has been really helpful to support our student journalists. We’re a fully independent nonprofit organization, so of course finances are of our concern. I think any school newspaper faces similar struggles.

## How do you balance covering the news while also being part of it?

Going through lockdown was tough. I probably used reporting as a way to cope with what was happening across campus. I was sitting in the library of the journalism building at UNC, so I was surrounded by a lot of other student journalists, which, in a way, was helpful. Everyone was very calm, and we all were kind of just trying to figure out what was happening, and of course, turning off the lights, locking doors, staying away from windows.

## How are student journalists positioned to report on gun violence?

After living through the events of Aug. 28, I know people in my newsroom who also were in lockdown or were scared for their life. They can relate to the students they’re talking to for their stories on a different level from perhaps a professional journalist. I think that makes students more comfortable when talking. It’s important to note that the only reason The Daily Tar Heel could create that cover was because we’re students, too, and we’re close to other people on campus in ways that perhaps The News and Observer in Raleigh can’t quite be. It’s a weird place to be. It’s important in training to share [that] we’re prioritizing an unbiased perspective, but it’s also really helpful because you can connect with your sources in a different way. ■

# The Daily Tar Heel

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 30, 2023

VOLUME 131, ISSUE 16

**ARE YOU SAFE? WHERE ARE YOU? ARE YOU ALONE? GUYS I’M SO FUCKING SCARED. HEY- COME ON SWEETHEART- I NEED TO HEAR FROM YOU. CAN YOU HEAR ANY GUNSHOTS? PLEASE STAY SAFE. BARRICADE THE DOOR OR IF YOU THINK YOU CAN RUN AND GET TO A PLACE THAT CAN LOCK DO SO. MY TEACHER IS ACTING LIKE NOTHING IS HAPPENING AND I’M LOWKEY FREAKING OUT. I WISH THESE NEVER HAPPENED. STAY CALM AND SAFE - WE LOVE YOU. I AM SO SORRY THIS IS HAPPENING. I LOVE YOU. WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING? MULTIPLE VOICES AND LOUD BANGING. I’M IN CLASS EVERYONE IS LOSING IT PEOPLE ARE LITERALLY SHAKING. STILL GOING ON AND COMING CLOSER, HOPING IT’S COPS. I’M GONNA FUCKING THROW UP. KINDA WISH I HAD SOMEONE ELSE HERE THOUGH. PLEASE PRAY FOR US. PLEASE STAY WHERE YOU ARE AND KEEP YOUR DOORS LOCKED OR FORTIFIED. LOVE YOU SO SO MUCH. ARE YOU HOME? SOMEONE IS ALREADY SHOT. IT’S ALSO SCARY HOW UNPREPARED OUR TEACHERS AND STAFF WERE FOR THAT. I’M LISTENING ON THE SCANNER. I HAVEN’T HEARD ANYTHING YET. IT WILL BE OK MY LOVE JUST STAY PUT. THERE’S SOMEONE ARMED ON CAMPUS. YOU HAVE A WHOLE COMMUNITY IN THE SAME BOAT WITH YOU. ARE U HIDDEN? LONGEST HALF HOUR OF MY LIFE. I’M SO SCARED TO LEAVE. STAY DOWN. DO YOU HEAR SHOOTING? PLEASE LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU ARE SAFE. HEY ARE YOU DOING ALRIGHT. LIKE MENTALLY, THIS SHITS SCARY. I LOVE YOU. IM SAFE STILL. MY TEXTS WON’T GO THRU. I AM SAFE. ACTIVE SHOOTER ON CAMPUS. I’M IN DEY RN BUT I CAN SEE PEOPLE RUNNING AND HEAR SCREAMING. GET UNDER THE DESK!!!! OR RUN IF YOU CAN! PUT STUFF IN FRONT OF THE DOOR! PLEASE BE CAREFUL. I’M SCARED. I’M SO SCARED RN. OMG. I’M SO SCARED. HOLY FUCK SOMEONE’S IN MY BUILDING. SAFE? YES YOU? YES. CHECKING IN JUST HOPE Y’ALL ARE SAFE WHEREVER Y’ALL AT. APPARENTLY SOMEONE WAS SHOT IN CAUDILL. POLICE SCANNER SAYS 1 PERSON DOWN NO PULSE. PLEASE STAY THERE WHERE YOU’RE SAFE. ARE YOU SAFE RIGHT NOW? ARE YOU SAFE? PLEASE SEND LITERALLY ANYTHING. I HEARD SOMEONE GOT SHOT. CAN YOU CALL ME? ARE YOU OKAY?? IDK WHAT TO DO. I WISH I COULD JUST COME GET YOU. DON’T STOP TEXTING ME.**

# NiemanReports

The Nieman Foundation for Journalism  
Harvard University  
One Francis Avenue  
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

FALL 2023

VOL. 77 NO. 4

**TO PROMOTE AND  
ELEVATE THE STANDARDS  
OF JOURNALISM**

