Contributors

Jon Marcus is higher-education editor at The Hechinger Report, a foundation-supported nonprofit news organization based at Columbia University. He has devoted his career to exploring poverty, power, and policy. Previously, he was metro columnist and assistant managing editor at The (Memphis) Commercial Appeal. He has also worked for The Charlotte Observer, The (Nashville) Tennessean, and The Indianapolis Star. Thomas 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.” He lives and works in Zimbabwe where his journalism has shone a light on the dark, corrupt corners of that country.

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.

Celeste Katz Marston has spent 15 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 WNBC 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.


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‘We Go Where We Have The Most Impact’

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

Nearly 300 new digital local news organizations have launched since 2016.
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‘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

Marshall 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 as 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 and the field of organizing and communication and democratization 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 Farm Worker Movement,” “Sí se puede!: Estrategias para organizarse [movement], I knew that you had to have a story.”

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, which 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 link, age of individual, collective, and institution that we were doing.

By the time I came out of the farmworkers [movement], I knew that I had to have a story. The way we put it [was] a strategy, a story, 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 really an 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 far for those examples. On the other hand, it’s been my experience that in communities, and neighborhoods, and workplaces, you’re seeing people who are en- cizing, 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 means, in this understanding of leadership, then it means enabling others, working with others.

In forefront 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 of the opposite of structure is not space. The opposite of structure is chaos. It’s takes structure to create space.

On using your own personal story
When your profession is telling other people’s stories, but not from nowhere. We all 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 own 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 this marketing deal and forgot the fact that the ground is people, and 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 Ganz 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.

The narrative was incredibly powerful because you’re telling other people’s stories, but not from nowhere. We all 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.

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A Retort to the Toxic Myth of the Self-Made in America
Alissa Quart, NF ’10, on the reporting book “Bootstrapped”

I am thinking of the labor movement of the last century, of the struggles of workers to rely on medical care or school lunches 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, 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 EBBP’s writers and photographers. And then just like that, it all unwound. We were sinking into post-pandemic amnesia, as if 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 imaginary social solutions for that pain.

I still believe the real American Dream is one of interdependence, not independence, with our fates hash-tagged and interconnected. As Annie Ernaux, the foremost chronicler of working people in her native France, once said: “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. 

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

early 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.

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 in this era of transformation?” I believe raising the right questions as a journalist is still the most important role we can play during this difficult time of transition.
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
MINING 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.

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...
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“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 upbringings,” 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 naive 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 their communities. “I think Bennett-Begaye has the Indigenous Journalists Association, rather than the ‘three Ds’ of coverage they’re used to— that Indigenous Americans are drumming, drunk, or dead,” she says. Some editors have historically considered it a conflict of interest for journalists from certain backgrounds to cover other people from similar backgrounds. Ken Miguel, executive producer for special projects at EEO 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.’”

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‘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
and are there others 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 the tenth. 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 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.”

“Now, we build that reputation every day with our work.”

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

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.”

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.

“Now, we build that reputation every day with our work.”

The Institute for Nonprofit News said they’d need at least $350,000 to make up $0 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.”

Focused mainly on politics and business, by fall 2023, Cardinal had grown from two reporters to seven, with 18,000 unique subscribers by July 2023. 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.

“It’s start with an encouraging statistic:

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EXPERIENCED, RESPECTED LOCAL LEADERSHIP: CARDINAL NEWS

With an empty pocket, no journalistic background, and no Plan B, The Kansas City Defender gained traction 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
as activism 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 toward 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 Kansas City Star and other legacy publications, and the Kansas City Police Department, which also features arts, music, and restaurant coverage. The Defender's coverage has had an effect on the way news outlets here take bolder stances against the racist policing that exists here in our city.

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 bold 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, 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 used its social-first approach to bring a “grocery buyout,” paying for Black customer-purchased goods 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 3,500 Instagram followers, more than 28,000 followers on TikTok, and about 12,000 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 $60 in actual funding.”

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 multimillion-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 impact that's there now. I think we can have a larger impact that's there now. I think we 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.”

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.”

Spotlight PA offers a range of deep dive and quick-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.

“We don't pretend to be objective. As we like to say, we're biased toward justice, The Black press has always been a press of advocacy,” Ryan Sorrell
OPENNESS TO NON-TRADITIONAL — AND DIVERSE — STARTUP REPORTING: THE CHARLOTTE LEDGER

Tony 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 energy into its circles instead of focusing solely on traditional 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’s not that people aren’t interested in the news — it’s that they haven’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 that we offer.”

“Potential story ideas emerge from these conversations. ‘What’ 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.
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 danes that had changed the course of history.

“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 Orlan, 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 fellow’s 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, but they mimicked the remnant 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.

“If 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.
April 4, 1968 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...
that made some readers squirm, or worse. That included a call to remove the city’s Confederate monuments. Those columns made a few white readers angry enough to threaten to kill me.

But after a reader threatened to rape me—a threat that the newspaper’s editor and publisher didn’t seem to take seriously—I knew that I’d have to find another place to do the storytelling that King’s legacy deserved.

And that’s where an idea formed: To create MLK50: Justice Through Journalism, a nonprofit news project to examine what went wrong with King’s sacrifice.

I took the idea here, to my Nieman fellowship, and held it in my mind during my favorite class: “Poverty in America,” taught by sociologist Matt Desmond. He asked a question that I’ve sat with ever since: What if poverty isn’t an accident, but a robbery?

What if poverty isn’t an accident, but a robbery? If poverty isn’t an accident, but a robbery, then there are thieves and the thieves have names. And the thieves’ names should be known. I returned to Memphis ready to look for people and institutions that steal from the poor. Here’s what I knew for sure: Legacy media was going to frame the 50th anniversary of King’s death as an unqualified celebration of Memphis’ progress since 1968.

But when I compared the state of Black Memphis in 1968 to the state of Black Memphis in 2018, too little had changed.

The Black-white wealth gap had actually grown when accounting for inflation. In 2018, one in four Black workers lived below the poverty line and 40 percent of Black workers in the city earned less than $13 an hour.

King’s last trip was to support the city’s striking Black sanitation workers, who were overworked and underpaid. Fifty years after his death, one of those striking workers was still on the job because he couldn’t afford to retire.

On April 4, 2017, I launched MLK50 with $3,000 I’d raised from friends and family. I ran up $38,000 in credit card debt as I slowly raised enough money to pay a small but mighty team of freelancers to write about poverty, power, and policy.

And in 2019, I started an investigation that would take me there. decesso de medicos de Black and Methodist.

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 base- ment 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 collateral, if not copy, with them. But defend- ants were treated as liars.

I remember a mother of three who came to court with a copy of her household budget, which she pre- sented 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 hos- pital uniforms. Yes, Methodist regularly sued its own em- ployees. Including low-wage workers who couldn’t afford to pay their bills to the very same hospital they worked for. That means that thousands of patients will never be un- 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.

I knocked on door after door, tuck- ing my business card and a discreet shield 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 morn- ings that ended in tears. I’d never been so sure I had an important story to tell about women who had been over- looked, omitted, and erased, and I never had a story that was so difficult to re- port.

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 turned 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.

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 jumped in the car and 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.”

Carrie Barrett rejoices at her church in September 2019 as she shared with MLK50’s “Profiting From the Poor” investigation. 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.”

Carrie Barrett rejoices at her church in September 2019 as she shared with MLK50’s “Profiting From the Poor” investigation.
When you’re covering war in your own country, the gap between you and the rest of humanity feels overwhelming.

There 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 trolleybuses 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.
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.

I was constantly in a state of shock and bewilderment. Some strange activity that most people didn’t even pay attention to, believing it would go away. And one day my paper was 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 story, as a charity case soon to be delivered 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 newspaper, 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 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 do not allow 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 groundwork for our friendship and our creative collaboration.

Over the next several years we created together a project that we titled “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 about the logistics of everyday life in war.

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,” he said, “you should try it while we are on assignment and it’s covered.” The other said he was already tried 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 bewildlement. My whole world was falling apart in front of me.

And here were people talking about massages, restaurants, and weddings.

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 groundwork for our friendship and our creative collaboration.

Over the next several years we created together a project that we titled “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 about the logistics of everyday life in war.

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,” he said, “you should try it while we are on assignment and it’s covered.” The other said he was already tried 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 bewildlement. 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 something suffering out there in the world. You cannot help it. 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 by the logistics of everyday life in war. You cannot take over a city without shutting down independent media. Our editor-in-chief refused to leave me in this box for the refugees from the East.”

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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

They asked us to talk about stories we can’t let go of.
The first thing that popped into my head was … Shiiiiiit.
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 starring 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 trapese artists under a big top, with a
I guess I 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 burst 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.

Or the time I 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. But that’s the shit I can’t let go of.

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 got up and replanted it, firmly.

She went over and replanted it, firmly. 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 got up and replanted it, firmly.

But that’s the shit I can’t let go of.
I grew up 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...
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 me to the prison from the magistrate’s court, I felt the pain of being persecuted for simply doing my job.

I spent 45 days in Chikurubi, staying amongst mur- derers and rapists without clean running water and sleeping with 45 convicts in a cell meant for 14 people, simply doing my work.

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

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I 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 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 intrinsically 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...
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 newswEEKLYs and Sunday magazines, I was settled 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 beseech 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 as a professional. When I finished my first book, I went 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 hash 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!

Sometimes 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, it 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 assemblage of history’s greatest observations about reading, books, knowledge, ideas — as if 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 sniff 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. Even as I was writing my book, I thought of all the libraries I had been to over the years. I had been to thousands of libraries before I finished it, and I knew how pleased she would have been.

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 had been drawn to writing it, to writing in general, in hopes of creating something that endured, that would be alive somehow as long as I was reading it, this book I had written. This was my philosophy, 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 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.
NIEMAN NOTES

1963

Victor K. McElheny attended the 40th anniversary celebrations of King 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 a new book, "The journalists the First Republic in France," written by Nathalie L. Moir for the Journal of American-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. His documentaries "Turn … Today Yours, Tomorrow Mine: François Sully's Turn in History," written by Nathaniel L. Moir for the Journal of American-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.

1998

Phillip W. Martin, NF '98, and Jennifer McKinnon, NF '08, from the GBH News Center for Investigative Reporting, were part of the team that won the GNA 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 "Roll Call" podcast, recently received several awards: first place for online columns and honorable mention for 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 UnidosUS for his reporting.

2007


Andrea McCarren has been named president of the nonprofit Penny Press 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.


2008

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

Gaiutra Bahadur reported on the India-Pakistan conflict for The New York Times and has written three books on war.

Bob Giles, former Nieman Foundation curator, dies at 90

Robert H. Giles, curator of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University from 2000-2005, 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 Lab and Storyboard, along with several national journalism awards and the expansion of Lippmann House...
emergency and offered compelling solutions and advice for parents, corporations and politicians.”

Finbar O’Reilly received the James Foley Award for Conflict Reporting at the ONA23 conference. The selection committee wrote: “He continued the legacy of brilliance and dedication to covering conflict and reporting truth.”

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.

Issac Bailey has joined The McClatchy Company’s 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 Duke University and taught journalism and applied ethics at Coastal Carolina University.

Cristian Lupasa, founder of the Romanian long-form narrative journalism quarterly DoR (2009-2022) and the “Power of Storytelling” conference in Bucharest, has been elected to the Overseas Press Club of America’s board of governors. Deborah Amos, NF ‘93, who now teaches journalism at Princeton, Columbia, and SUNY New Paltz, continues to serve on the board.

Daryll Pears has been named 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 languages services including BBC Persian, BBC Chinese, BBC Turkish, BBC Arabic 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 with the global editorial development at the Financial Times in London, where she directed: newsroom innovation, new editorial products, and digital journalism.

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

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

2023 Pabon Abd, 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.

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Daryll Pears has been named 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 languages services including BBC Persian, BBC Chinese, BBC Turkish, BBC Arabic 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 with the global editorial development at the Financial Times in London, where she directed: newsroom innovation, new editorial products, and digital journalism.

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

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.

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 five-story former building in the Lebych-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 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, our 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 critical reporting is thriving online, where you can find numerous investigations and other stories on sensitive issues.

High-quality media community has been gradually shifting to a new consensus that it is important 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 these issues, we will never solve them and our country would only become weaker because of that.

But not all 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 high-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 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.

Yana Lyushnevskaya (right) works with her colleague out of a bomb shelter in Lviv, Ukraine.
Daily Tar Heel editor-in-chief

Emmy Martin shares the story behind the paper’s viral front page

After 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 cover 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 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 what we 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 was 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 them the 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.

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 I do 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 were all kind of just trying to figure out what was happening, so 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 in my newsroom who also were in lockdown or were scared for their life. They can relate to the stories they’re telling to 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, but 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 only reason The Daily Tar Heel could create that cover is because we’re students, too.