

IDENTIFY THE ISSUES

A measure of racial disparities

HOMES, NEIGHBORHOODS, CHURCHES, schools, workplaces, the justice system — these threads form the fabric of people’s lives. Nearly every project broke race down into some or all of these areas.

The projects divided the topic into separate issues for a practical reason. As people

move outward from one area of their lives to another, the nature of how race affects them changes. Race relations can’t be covered as a monolith. It must be examined in context with all aspects of community life.

From project to project, the similarity in categorizing race relations is striking. Some

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White kitchen

- Refrigerator**
 93% buy instant soups
 63% buy frozen whipped toppings
 77% buy diet sodas
 Top brand: Diet Coke
 36% buy instant noodle soups
 Top brand: Noodle Soup
 37% buy prepackaged fruit drinks
 86% buy salad dressings
 Top brand: Italian Dressing
 73% buy condiments
 Top brand: Heinz
 87% buy hand soaps
 Top brand: Huggs Baby Wipes
 80% buy household bleach
 Top brand: Clorox
 60% buy detergent
 Top brand: Pampers
 41% buy bottled apple juice
 49% buy bottled fruit drinks

- Counter**
 41% have a garbage disposal
 84% have an electric range
 60% have an dishwasher
 70% buy paper towels
 Top brand: Bounty
 64% have an air purifier
 Top brand: Honeywell
 79% have an clothes-drying machine
 52% buy fabric softener sheets
 42% buy shower caps
 81% buy air fresheners
 Top brand: Glade
 64% buy air purifiers
 Top brand: Levoit
 41% buy bottled apple juice
 49% buy bottled fruit drinks

- Upper cabinet**
 77% buy cleaning or stain-removing products
 Top brand: Clorox
 91% buy canned soups
 Top brand: Campbell's
 84% buy ground coffee
 47% buy multi-grain cereals
 21% buy gifts
 19% buy hot sauce



Black kitchen

- Refrigerator**
 94% buy instant soups
 Top brand: Diet Coke
 61% buy frozen whipped toppings
 74% buy diet sodas
 Top brand: Diet Pepsi
 14% buy instant noodle soups
 Top brand: Noodle Soup
 41% buy prepackaged fruit drinks
 86% buy salad dressings
 Top brand: Italian Dressing
 72% buy condiments
 Top brand: Heinz
 87% buy hand soaps
 Top brand: Huggs Baby Wipes
 80% buy household bleach
 Top brand: Clorox
 60% buy detergent
 Top brand: Pampers
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The New York Times explored differences in consumer purchases between black and white Americans in the Sunday magazine wrap-up to its series “How Race is Lived in America.”

editors said they spent hours brainstorming with staff members, talking frankly about experiences that crystallized the race issue for each of them, to come up with the list of stories. Others came up with nearly identical lists, saying simply that dividing race into those segments was “obvious.”

A few news organizations came up with novel topics, some unique to the communities they serve. *The Charlotte Observer*, for instance, published an installment on NASCAR as part of its 1997 series “Side by Side.” A couple of other papers also picked up the leisure-time theme with segments about race and sports.

Some media organizations located near military bases investigated race in the military. The *Times Record News* in Wichita Falls, Texas, explored race relations on the nearby Sheppard Air Force Base in its 1997 series “About Face.” *The Day* in New London, Connecticut, devoted a segment of its 1999 “Two Races, Two Worlds” project to race relations in the Navy.

Shopping went nearly unnoticed until 2000 in *The New York Times* series “How Race is Lived in America.” What products people buy proved fascinating, illuminating that even buying habits reflect a cultural divide.

The Columbus Dispatch included a startling installment about the neglected issue of health in 1999 in “The Color Chasm.” The paper reported moving on the higher infant-mortality rate among non-whites in the Columbus area, as well as the disproportionate number of blacks with AIDS and diabetes. The paper also found a far higher percentage of blacks with no health insurance compared to whites and explored the historical inequity in health care for blacks.

The Times-Picayune in New Orleans documented the link between communities of color and the location of environmental hazards with its May 2000 series “Unwelcome Neighbors.” The paper found that in Louisiana, African-Americans are 50 percent more likely than whites to live within one mile of a contaminated site.

COVERING ESSENTIAL AREAS

By and large, however, news organizations stuck to the basics in writing about race and included most or all of six essential areas: Church, Education, Justice, Housing, Relationships and Economics.

- **Church:** The religion divide was a popular starting point since many of the print projects began in the high-circulation Sunday paper. Most projects devoted at least one major story to the difficulty of integrating worship. Martin Luther King’s description of 11 a.m. Sunday as “the most segregated hour in America” was a popular reference in these pieces from the earliest projects through the most recent. It’s as if religion is the most obdurate part of the American cultural divide.

- **Education:** This is such a crucial issue, it often merits its own separate project or series.



In part two of its “Dividing Lines” series, the Winston-Salem Journal found continuing inequities between black and white students.

Those projects are not included here — even though they often contained compelling information about racial disparities in resources and achievement — because they focused primarily on education. *The Wisconsin State Journal's* “Schools of Hope” project is a classic example. Education, though, was explored in nearly all of the race projects we studied. As the *Winston-Salem Journal* pointed out in its 1998 “Dividing Lines” series:

“The schools have been a laboratory in America’s experiment with race relations. We haven’t forced people to live in integrated neighborhoods. We haven’t forced people of different races to socialize together or worship together. But our children have studied and played together at school for more than 25 years.”

The results of this mandated integration, as the paper noted, is that people judge schools not only by academic achievement, but also by whether they have improved race relations. The news, on both counts, is generally bad. In community after community, news



The Post-Gazette found that, despite school desegregation, little integration had occurred.



The Journal Times included a sidebar called “Best Friends” with each installment of its “A Matter of Race” series.

organizations that studied race in schools found black students trailing white students on every indicator of school success.

Where schools were segregated, reporters found black schools had the most inexperienced teachers and received the fewest overall resources. In another discouraging trend, where schools were officially integrated, students had “re-segregated” themselves by racial groups. Many projects, however, found hopeful signs amid the discouraging trends and highlighted some exceptional success stories.

- **The Justice System:** Many journalistic efforts were undertaken in response to the 1992 acquittal of the Los Angeles police officers who beat motorist Rodney King or to the aftermath.

The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* project was inspired — at least in part — by the 1995 death of a young black man while in the custody of suburban police. In 1994, the *Lexington Herald-Leader* launched two series, “Voices” and “Distant Neighbors,” after a white Lexington police officer shot an unarmed black teen-ager. Even those projects that were not inspired by specific news stories spent time scrutinizing criminal justice because it is the social system where racial disparities are most evident and carry such severe consequences.

News organizations chose a number of ways to explore this issue. Some began with police and the phenomenon of racial profiling. Noteworthy in this category is the *Newark Star-Ledger’s* reporting on racial profiling by the New Jersey State Police, including a deadline story based on some 70,000 pages of documents that established a pattern of vehicle stops based on race and ethnicity. The *Star-Ledger* won acclaim for its dogged reporting on the matter. The stories are still available at www.nj.com/specialprojects/index.ssf?/specialprojects/racialprofiling/main.html.

Other news organizations took a broader look at the disproportionate number of minority men in prison. Many news organizations looked at the greater toll crime takes on minority communities and the repercussions it has on the quality of life. *“If the average white mother worries at night about losing her son in a car accident, then the black mother has twice the worry,”* one mother told *The Columbus Dispatch*. *“We worry they’ll be shot.”*

• **Housing:** Reporters found that a pattern of segregated housing caused many race problems. It led to segregated schools and segregated lives and is inevitably a part of any large-scale exploration of race relations. Some projects even took their names from this phenomenon. “Dividing Lines” in Winston-Salem referred to the geographic boundaries that physically divide blacks and whites by neighborhood. “Distant Neighbors” in Lexington referred to the distance between black and white neighborhoods.

The *Lexington Herald-Leader* dissected the public policy that had led to sharply segregat-



Discrimination in the criminal justice system was often the impetus for race projects, including The Post-Gazette’s 1996 “The Race Question.”

ed neighborhoods in its 1995 series. *The Daily Journal* of Kankakee, Illinois, in its 2000 project “Skin Deep,” looked at social factors. One black resident told the paper he chose to stay in the city, as opposed to moving to the suburbs as white residents did, because he feared the suburban volunteer fire department would not respond if a fire started in his home.

• **Relationships:** These stories often brought a hopeful note to reporting on race. Stories generated by other racial issues dealt with large trends where movement toward reconciliation is slow. But stories of individuals reaching out to each other across racial lines, forging understanding, developing friendships, forming families, pinpoint progress.

Perhaps the most progress could be seen in stories about interracial romance. For centuries, mixed-race unions were condemned

and even outlawed. Through the '90s, journalists reporting on race documented increasing numbers of interracial couples and a growing acceptance of them.

Many news organizations asked poll questions about attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage. They uniformly found high rates of approval, especially among younger respondents, though accompanying stories often showed moments of difficulty in such unions. *The Times* in Trenton wrote of an interesting backlash from African-American women, who, according to a Bucknell professor, "view African-American men as a scarce resource" and resent having to compete for them with white women.

Family relationships — husbands and wives of different races with multiracial children and parents with children adopted across racial lines — were also highlighted in many race projects. Most of these stories found children greatly conflicted about their multiracial heritage. The tone of these stories differed slightly, according to the attitude of the subjects interviewed.

Some papers found children in multiracial families who felt their heritage was a burden. Even those stories revolving around well-adjusted interracial families seemed to dwell on the difficulties they faced in the outside world.

Interracial friendships are becoming more common as a focus. Many projects, from the earliest through the latest, included a sidebar about interracial friendships. But more recent projects have given the phenomenon more attention.

Stephen Magagnini, ethnic-affairs and race-relations reporter for *The Sacramento Bee*, wrote a five-part series called "Getting Along" in 1999. It explored how people of different races and ethnic backgrounds have been able to form lasting friendships.

Magagnini interviewed several hundred people in the Sacramento area to glean what it was that allowed some people to develop these ties. The series attracted more than 200 responses and was used as a teaching tool in university courses.

• **Economics:** Race in the workplace was a common theme. The workplace, many projects concluded, was where most people have their most meaningful interactions with people of other races.



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When it explored housing in its series "Skin Deep," *The Kankakee Journal* found many residents believe Realtors are largely responsible for segregated neighborhoods.



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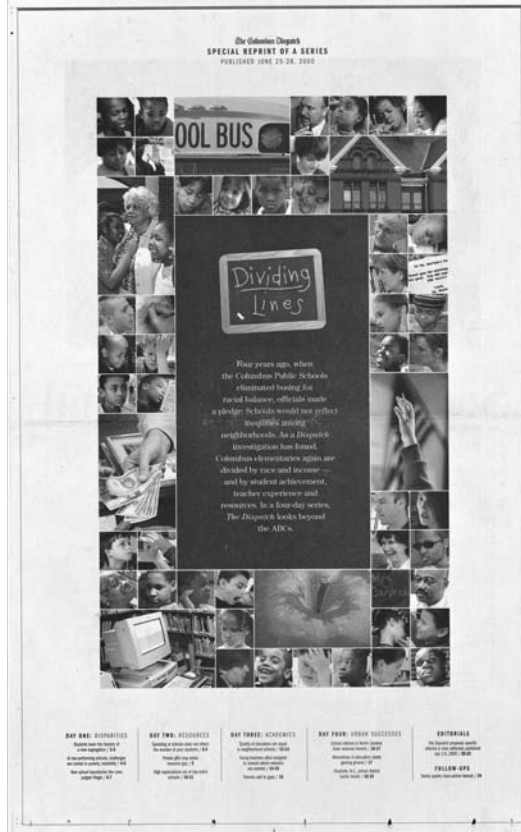
The Times in Trenton explored various kinds of relationships in "The Comfort Zone," which reported on self-segregation.

As *The Times* in Trenton put it, “If America is a racial melting pot, the workplace is where we feel the heat.” Within this topic, affirmative action was a popular focal point.

Moving deeper, *The Columbus Dispatch* looked at overall income disparities and numbers of black-owned businesses. *The New York Times*’ series included an account of racial stratification in a meat-packing plant and also at the subtler way race impacted a black entrepreneur with a white business partner.

FINDING THE RIGHT APPROACH

While these broad themes were common to many race projects in the last decade, the way each news organization covered them depended on how each issue played out in a



The Columbus Dispatch followed up its first effort with “Dividing Lines,” which focused on inequities in Columbus public schools.



Segregated worship was a popular starting point for projects on race, including this one from the Racine Journal Times.

particular community.

News organizations examining race relations should not avoid any area because of the belief that “it’s all been done.” The critical element is to determine what is most important in the community being served and what approach will provide the greatest benefit.

Some news organizations produced a whole series based on just one of these issues. For instance, *The Columbus Dispatch* followed up its 1999 series “The Color Chasm” with a separate series, a year later, that was just about race in education, and another series, in 2001, about racial disparities in mortgage lending for houses — both issues that were explored in “The Color Chasm.”

“We’re trying to continue our coverage (of race) and go more in-depth,” said projects editor Doug Haddix. “We have to. The demographics of this area show we can’t ignore it. The latest census figures show our population is 20 percent minority and that the city is still fairly divided along racial lines.”

THE PROJECTS

The Columbus Dispatch: Exposing Health-Care Barriers

“Death came softly, quietly, with no visible pain. ‘She just went to sleep,’” her mother said.

The death of 4-month-old Kaila Franks of an undetected heart condition was unremarkable in the Columbus area but it made the front page of *The Columbus Dispatch*. The very ordinariness of Kaila’s death illustrated a tragic finding of the newspaper’s project on race: Black children in Franklin County, Ohio, are almost twice as likely as white children to die as infants.

Infant mortality was just the beginning of the bad news *The Dispatch* found when it began exploring the racial divide in health for its 1999 series “The Color Chasm.” The diabetes death rate among blacks in Franklin County, it found, was two-and-a-half times the rate among whites. The rate of new AIDS diagnoses in the county from 1995 to 1997 was 67 percent higher for blacks than whites. Fourteen percent of blacks in central Ohio said they had no health insurance, compared to 8 percent of whites. Franklin County had only 42 black doctors or 1.4 percent of its nearly 3,000 physicians.

Given *The Dispatch*’s findings, it’s surprising this issue hasn’t been explored more often in race projects. The concern is not confined to central Ohio. The paper’s reporting showed that similar gaps showed up statewide and in other counties with large cities.



Columbus Dispatch reporter Felix Hoover found higher rates of infant mortality, diabetes, heart disease and AIDS in the black community.

“This issue is important to the community, any community,” said Felix Hoover, the reporter who wrote about Kaila’s death. “Everywhere, there’s someone who’s been touched by one of the diseases we (wrote about).”

Hoover wrote movingly of the human consequences of the racial divide in health while also exploring, in a very practical way, causes and solutions for the inequity.

“We were looking for that kind of mix, hoping it would be readable, informative and useful as being a springboard for additional action,” he said.

Indeed, the series generated one of the largest responses the paper has ever received, according to projects editor Doug Haddix. The United Way, which had just organized a race-relations task force, took advantage of the information in the series and the general awareness that it raised to sponsor several “community dialogues” on narrowing the racial divide. *Dispatch* reporters, including Hoover, participated in those forums.



The death of 4-month-old Kaila Franks from an undetected heart condition put a human face on an infant-mortality rate for blacks that is twice as high as that of whites in the Columbus area.

United Way officials said they are using ideas from the dialogues in developing a plan to improve access to health care for African-Americans and other minorities in the Columbus area. A major part of the effort, they said, will be to overcome the cultural barriers to treatment that Hoover covered.

ACCESSING HEALTH CARE

Hoover found those barriers were poorly understood by the overwhelmingly white health-care community.

“Community leaders doubt that overt racism among doctors, health administrators or policy-makers accounts for the disparity (in health care),” Hoover wrote in 1999. “Yet concerns persist because few blacks hold hospital administration or medical leadership positions to monitor policies or procedures that might adversely affect black patients.”

For instance, Hoover noted, poor prenatal care is a major contributor to high infant mortality. However, there are barriers for low-income women seeking prenatal care, such as the requirement that they register for public assistance before getting care at a clinic, and the declining number of physicians willing to see Medicaid patients because of dwindling federal reimbursements.

“That puts a disproportionate burden on blacks, who are three times as likely as whites in Franklin County to be poor,” wrote Hoover.

Hoover also detailed the historical mistrust of the health-care system in the black community and the resulting consequence that blacks may avoid checkups and preventive care, putting more faith in home remedies with marginal or no benefit.

Hoover said he ran into many obstacles in reporting the story. He knew the story was there, he said, because he had covered human services for *The Dispatch* and had reported separate stories about infant mortality and the higher prevalence of certain diseases in minority populations. But he said it was not easy to assemble the statistical data. Each small nugget of information might require several phone calls. “I made kind of a chain of contacts,” he said. “I called health-care providers, city officials, county officials, agencies. One person supplied one element and, in turn, would refer me to someone else.”

HUMANIZING THE DATA

A critical element to the series was putting a human face on the data. Hoover had to find the central Ohioans whose lives would illustrate the findings.

His toughest challenge, he said, was trying to find a black victim to talk about AIDS. He found the stigma about the disease even stronger in the black community than among whites. One HIV specialist told him black churches, in particular, find it difficult to separate sin from the disease — a blow to prevention programs that would work with the churches on education efforts.

Hoover did find one 39-year-old AIDS sufferer who was willing to talk about his disease and even its impact on his sons:

“With rapid-fire tactics reminiscent of the drill sergeants of his Air Force days, Royal Schultz quizzes his two young sons about a killer that hits blacks harder than whites.

‘What do you do to prevent getting the AIDS virus?’

‘Abstinence.’

‘What else?’

‘Use protection.’

Trever, 11, knows that the virus can lead to full-blown AIDS and death.

He looks at his father. ‘He was supposed to be dead a couple of years ago ...’”

Hoover said the story is difficult to report but it’s a rich topic that he would recommend pursuing. His advice, though: “Plan on taking longer than you think it’s going to take.”



CLIFF JETTE, THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Royal Schultz, 39, was one of the few African-American AIDS sufferers who was willing to talk to The Dispatch. Here, he plays chess with his son Trever, 11.

The Charlotte Observer: Riling NASCAR Fans

Buddy Cook was worked up when he called *The Charlotte Observer* response line in October 1997. “This is just *The Observer* as usual,” the Charlotte native ranted. “I swear to God I believe y’all are a bunch of homosexuals working down there. Many of you have to be because you sit behind a typewriter all day and drink tea or coffee or whatever and you write these stupid-ass stories ...”

What had the paper done to upset Cook? In a series exploring race relations, it had noted how overwhelmingly white stock-car racing is — drivers, crew and fans — and asked readers whether they thought NASCAR should recruit black drivers.

More than 200 people responded and Cook’s answer was fairly typical. Though some supported diversifying stock-car racing, far more opposed it and did so with a vehemence that sometimes included profanity and racial slurs.

The NASCAR story was part of the series “Side by Side,” which editors hoped would contribute to a community conversation about race. Far from being discouraged by the kind of vitriol the story unleashed, *Observer* editors felt they had hit the mark; they had found an issue that engaged a broad cross section of people.

“We wanted people to talk honestly. That hardly ever happens,” said Fannie Flono, who was public editor at the time. “People tiptoe around an issue and avoid how they really feel. But here, people said what they were thinking and we came to a better understanding of the issue and it led to better debate and better discussion.”

DIVERSIFYING STOCK CAR RACING

NASCAR might seem an unconventional topic for a series on race. Indeed, Flono noted, “I don’t know many black people who would put diversifying stock-car racing at the top of their civil-rights agenda.” However, she pointed out, the series examined how leisure-time activities separate people along racial lines.

“(We) develop harmful attitudes and perceptions about each other based on our separateness,” she said.

In the Charlotte area, the stark division in how blacks and whites spend their leisure time is captured in stock-car racing, which Flono called “one of the defining sports of this region.”

Cliff Harrington, an editor who once covered stock-car racing, said that Charlotte, as the birthplace of stock-car racing, has an almost emotional attachment to the sport.



*Fannie Flono, as public editor, had to respond to angry readers after *The Observer's* story about the whiteness of NASCAR.*

That's something reporter Paige Williams captured with a flourish of near poetry in her story:

"The obsession started in the folds of Appalachia. Country boys drove their juiced-up cars out of the mountains of North Carolina and America followed ... until the sport born with moonshine in the trunk and the law in the rearview mirror was able to shake off the dust of a backwoods past and shiny itself up for the future."

Williams also captured something else about the sport's appeal to whites in the region — its, well, whiteness. She quoted 32-year-old fan Steve Irvin as saying, *"They've took everything else over and this is one thing we think they ought not to take over. Not being prejudiced or anything, but that's pretty much the way people feel about it, it's the only thing a colored person hasn't really took over."*

"Irvin's feelings may not represent those of most NASCAR followers," she wrote, "but they raise the question of how beliefs, however individual, contribute to the atmosphere of a place and whether controversial symbols such as the Confederate battle flag, abundant at stock-car events, discourage black people from attending."

It was an intriguing question and, as Flono put it, "It did generate a lot of buzz."

Some of those who wrote and called supported the idea of black recruitment for the sport. *"I see all the other major sports with black involvement and I see NASCAR with no black involvement whatsoever and I just cannot believe they can continue to grow as a national sport without it,"* wrote David Sebastian of Charlotte.

But the vast majority not only opposed diversity in the sport, most reflected the sentiments

expressed in the original story — that NASCAR is "our" thing.

"We already give blacks everything they want," said caller Jack Hinson of Lancaster, South Carolina. *"I just don't think we should have black people in racing. If you bump 'em on the track, they're gonna holler racist. If they don't win a race, they're gonna holler racist."*

The story was, of course, a purely academic exercise. NASCAR has no plans to recruit black drivers. Four years after the story ran, Harrington

said the issue still comes up from time to time on talk radio and other forums in the Charlotte area and the sport is no more integrated than it was in 1997.

As a means of showing how far apart blacks and whites remain in certain spheres of life, however, the debate over NASCAR was an effective tool.

"We wanted to learn where it is we can find agreement and where we may never agree," said Flono. "This made you understand how much investment people had in something they felt superior at and wanted to keep as their exclusive domain."



© THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER.

Scores of comments, some unprintable, defended NASCAR's lack of diversity described in this Observer story.

The Sacramento Bee: Moving beyond Conflict

Misunderstanding. Lawsuits. Beatings. Riots. Stephen Magagnini, the race-relations and ethnic-affairs reporter for *The Sacramento Bee*, noticed a disturbing trend in most media coverage of his beat.

“Nearly all the stories dealing with interracial relationships dealt with conflict,” he said. “A lot of them were important stories but if those were going to be the only stories about interracial relationships, they were ultimately going to be counterproductive because people weren’t going to get the full picture of the relationships that are out there.”

Writing about the full picture — about interracial relationships that had been successful and rewarding — was an idea Magagnini thought about for years. He began gathering string for such a project shortly after taking over the beat in late 1993. Nearly five years later, he was able to spend five months almost exclusively on the topic and produced the five-part series “Getting Along.”

In “Getting Along,” which ran in February and March 1999, Magagnini looked at the value of cross-racial friendships and at the societal changes, such as school desegregation and affirmative action, that made them possible. He also emphasized individual actions that helped them along.

Many race projects in the last several years have included stories about friends of different races. In the 1997 project “Side by Side,” *Charlotte Observer* reporter Joe DePriest wrote movingly of two 46-year-old men, friends since high school, who were still close, gaining strength from each other as both fought terminal illnesses. *The Journal Times* of Racine, Wisconsin, included a sidebar about friends of different races with each of the five parts of its 2000 series “A Matter of Race.”

Magagnini’s approach, though, was notable for several reasons. He interviewed hundreds of people for his stories, which allowed him to pinpoint the



Steve Magagnini reported on specific ways that people had forged interracial relationships.

© THE SACRAMENTO BEE.

factors that aid or impede interracial friendships and to offer tips to those who would like to initiate such friendships.

“The heart of race reporting should be how to bridge the gap between people, not how big the gap is or where it’s forming or changing fronts,” said Magagnini.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

After his exhaustive reporting on interracial relationships, Magagnini determined there were basically three categories of people:

- Those who are open to a wide range of friendships, regardless of race or ethnicity.
- Those who are closed to people who look different than they do.
- Those in the middle, who would like to feel comfortable with people from different backgrounds but don’t know how to relate to them.

“I don’t know how many people fall into each category but I was looking to target people in the middle and I would like to think it’s at least half the general population,” said Magagnini. He said he hoped to give this large middle group the tools to overcome their reticence. “It’s not hard to

jump start [these friendships] once you have a plan and can find common ground for discussion.”

“Getting Along” told the stories of dozens of people who had overcome racial barriers to become friends. There was Clyde Von Essen who, raised in Minnesota, had never seen a person of color until he moved to California in the 1960s, when he was in his 20s. He recalled the first time, as a bank officer there, that he interviewed an African-American woman for a job: “I was nervous and she was just as nervous as I was,” he told Magagnini. But hiring the woman was the first step to opening himself up to friendships with people of other races, and he now counts his black next-door neighbors among his closest friends.

There were also the “Rainbow Girls,” a multiracial group of women who have been friends for 20 years since attending high school together. And there was David “Milk” Meriwether, the first white player on the Crenshaw High School basketball team in Los Angeles.

Gleaned from interviews with these and many other pioneers of interracial friendships, Magagnini put together a sidebar with advice for like-minded readers under the headline, “As a first step, just reach out.”



THE SACRAMENTO BEE

The Bee’s Steve Magagnini offered tips to readers who wanted to form interracial friendships.



© THE SACRAMENTO BEE.

As the first white basketball player at powerhouse Chrenshaw High School, David “Milk” Meriwether was also one of only two white students in the school of 2,700. Some of the students had never met a white kid before.

Among the suggestions:

- Make the first move.
- Look for common ground.
- Don't buy into stereotypes.
- Be aware of others' experiences.
- Don't condemn other races based on history.
- Don't ignore racism.
- Do the right thing.
- Don't accept racial humor.
- Don't base your attitudes on the media.

These ideas may seem basic but, as Magagnini pointed out, this territory is still fairly new for many people. These friendships couldn't have existed 35 years ago, he wrote, *"before the civil-rights movement broke down the walls that divided people by color. A series of legal decisions supporting affirmative action and desegregation have produced integrated schools, workplaces and neighborhoods — the incubators of racial harmony."*

One example that Magagnini cited was the military. He said the 145,000 military retirees in Sacramento often buy homes in the same neighborhoods, regardless of race and ethnicity, because of their shared experiences.

"Then their children go to school together, they live next door to each other, friendships form naturally," Magagnini said.

Skepticism arose in *The Bee* newsroom about the project. "Some reporters joked, 'racial harmony? Isn't that a self-cancelling phrase?' Others asked why it was a story, let alone a series," said Magagnini. But he said it didn't really bother him. He was more worried about public reaction. "I was concerned that the general public was not interested," he explained.

His fears were quickly allayed when more than 200 readers of all ages, genders and ethnic groups responded through e-mails, phone calls and letters.

"I think it is the best public primer on how to reduce racism that I've seen," said one reader. Another observed, "The 'Rainbow Girls' are our future."

There were some critics but far more readers who offered their own stories of learning and friendship. Magagnini said some civic leaders asked that he conduct community forums to stimulate more dialogue. "The editors chose not to do that but, if those had been done right, those would have been beneficial," said Magagnini.

The series got attention. The Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism honored it as an excellent example of racial and ethnic coverage. More importantly, said Magagnini, it was the most satisfying work he's done. "There's nothing I'm prouder of than this project," he said. "My only hope is that more readers are exposed to the ideas in the project and can benefit from them." The series is still available at www.sacbee.com/news/projects/getting_along/index.html.



The story of *The Rainbow Girls*, a multiethnic group of friends, got a very positive response from readers.

The Times-Picayune, New Orleans: Unearthing Environmental Injustice

When Japanese chemical company Shintech proposed building a plant in an already industrialized area of Louisiana, *The Times-Picayune* started covering the zoning battle as a daily story. Soon, however, the paper discovered that there was more to it.

Such plant location decisions were being questioned as part of a growing movement seeking so-called “environmental justice” for poor and minority groups who bear a disproportionate burden from living near contaminated sites.

As reporter John McQuaid wrote in the series “Unwelcome Neighbors:”

“What once were local zoning fights and pollution-permit decisions have become civil-rights confrontations that are stirring historic passions and grievances, exposing a stark, racial and economic fault line running under the surface of today’s prosperity.”

The four-part series, published in May of 2000, examined an economic-development policy and historic discrimination that has created documentable inequity in Louisiana. McQuaid cited an Environmental Protection Agency study that African-Americans in the state are 50 percent

“THE SERIES INFORMED READERS THAT A BIG PIECE HAD BEEN MISSING. PEOPLE WERE NOT BEING HEARD.”

— TIM MORRIS, *THE TIMES-PICAYUNE*

more likely than whites to live within a mile of a contaminated site and more than three times as likely to live near certain classes of large chemical plants.

Series editor Tim Morris said part of the reason the statistics in Louisiana are so negative is that such zoning decisions historically were made without public scrutiny.

“Papers tend to cover stories that come from conflict,” he said, “from people standing up in opposition; then papers are able to cover the dialogue. For many years, only one side was being heard. The state would step in and say, ‘This is economic development.’ By the time people would hear about what was going on, the process was so far along, there wasn’t much they could do.”

INTERACTING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Morris said the zoning battle that ultimately led to “Unwelcome Neighbors” marked a fundamental change of approach for *The Times-Picayune*. In turn, he believes that may have influenced a similar change by the chemical industry.

“We needed to communicate with the community first,” he said. “And as we covered the story

and Shintech decided to move its proposed plant and go through a whole new process ... they recognized, as more and more companies are, that you need to get community input first. You talk to them and they talk to you and they ask questions and you inform them, not in a public relations way, but have an honest discussion.

“The series informed readers that a big piece had been missing. People were not being heard.”

Indeed, if it is generally true that, as McQuaid writes, *“it’s easier to locate in low-income areas where land is cheaper and residents are less likely to object,”* it was doubly true in Louisiana, where many decisions creating industrial zones were made in the ’40s and ’50s, when African-Americans were effectively barred from voting by discriminatory state laws. Even after those laws were struck down in the ’60s, many Louisiana blacks lacked the resources to challenge major corporations seeking to locate in their communities.

These communities were often onetime plantations that had been divided among former slaves after the Civil War. Generations of families had continued to lived there, unaware of the potential for harm from exposure to nearby hazardous-waste dumps and chemical plants. McQuaid said one of the rewards of the series was getting to know the residents of these predominantly African-American communities.

“These are communities that don’t often get a lot of attention. They’re difficult to cover,” he said. “Being able to get to know some of the people and how they did things, the story became stronger because anyone could relate to their concerns. They were concerned about their health and their homes and where they lived. Anybody could understand being concerned about having your community degraded by years of chemical pollution.”

A poignant example was the community of Mossville, founded by freed slave Jack Moss in the late 1800s. Moss’ great-great grandnephew was head of Mossville Environmental Action Now; other descendants also still lived there. But their homes were worthless and local plants responsi-



The Times-Picayune documented the disproportionate share of factories, dumps and chemical companies placed near poor African-American communities in Louisiana.

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ble for a nearby chemical spill were offering small settlements so the residents could move.

“The ground is impregnated with one hazardous substance; people’s bodies with another. David Prince’s blood contains high levels of the toxic chemical dioxin ... Investigators believe it came from some nearby industry. His wife has ovarian cancer they blame on pollution from a cluster of nearby plants. The allegation is impossible to prove but that hasn’t dimmed their rage.”

“The community was being dismantled while we were doing the story — literally being torn down and people being moved elsewhere because it was not livable,” said McQuaid. “It was a striking example of what we were looking at.”

McQuaid said he took great pains to present all sides of the issue. “There was a lot of polarization on this issue,” he said. “Some people didn’t want to talk to me because they were afraid they’d get attacked by the other side but I didn’t want to delegitimize one side or the other. There were good points on both sides. It was kind of a typical American controversy. So it took a lot of effort but I think we made a strong statement on the issue but were still able to be fair to everybody.”

McQuaid said balance was crucial because the goal was to help people decide whether environmental justice was a legitimate issue. “It was often dismissed as nonsense, or irrelevant, but (the series) convinced people it was something to take a look at,” he said. “There were legitimate grievances.”

Morris said he judged the series’ success, in part, by the response from people on both sides who said all arguments were presented fairly. “Unwelcome Neighbors” also received the John B. Oakes Award for Distinguished Environmental Journalism.

“It did get people’s attention,” McQuaid said. “In Louisiana, things change slowly but it did get the attention of individual companies.”

Chapter Tips: *Identifying Issues*

- Cover more than just conflict in interracial relationships. If you look, there are a lot of positive stories.
- Look beyond the six basic areas. Find the special concerns and issues in your community.
- Rise above the cynicism in the newsroom. Readers have shown that they care about important issues.
- Help readers see the humanity in every race issue.
- Plan on the project taking longer than you think.