

WALK THE STREETS

A hunt for hidden community layers

RACE ISSUES OFTEN ARE INEXTRICABLY bound to a community's neighborhoods. Historic housing patterns may cause segregation, educational disparity, hostility and misunderstanding. Changing housing patterns may create integration, new economic opportunities and interracial friendships and families.

Simply going into the community and getting to know the differences between neighborhoods and how race has affected them produced excellent results in several of the projects we studied — notably those in San Francisco, Lexington, New Jersey's Bergen

County and southwest Michigan.

The projects took advantage of reporting techniques that are gaining wider use in civic journalism under the umbrella term “civic mapping.”

Mapping is a method of boring into a community to improve coverage — identifying its informal leaders and sources and the informal gathering places where people exchange information and ideas. Mapping invites reporters to probe what newsroom consultant Richard C. Harwood has identified as the five layers of civic life.

Reporters traditionally stick with the offi-

FIVE LAYERS OF CIVIC LIFE

1. **OFFICIAL:** *such as government and political institutions.*
2. **QUASI-OFFICIAL:** *such as citizens associations and advocacy groups.*
3. **THIRD PLACES:** *where people come together with a purpose, such as churches, coffee shops and recreation centers.*
4. **INCIDENTAL:** *sidewalks, back decks and other places where people bump into one another and interact informally.*
5. **PRIVATE:** *people's homes.*

From “Tapping Civic Life” by Richard C. Harwood
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The Herald-Palladium explored segregation in St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, Southwest Michigan's so-called "Twin Cities."

cial and quasi-official layers or sometimes go straight to the private layer for quotes or reaction to news. Reporting on race, however, lends itself naturally to reporting in those other layers, where the richest stories about racial issues are often mined.

The editors on the projects we examined did not call what they were doing "mapping" and many had never heard the term when they launched their projects. The compelling stories they produced, however, exemplify the rewards that come from such legwork.

Reporter Elizabeth Llorente of *The Record* in Bergen County says she spent weeks in Palisades Park talking to people at every level about how they perceived the influx of Korean and Guatemalan immigrants to what had been a working-class Italian and Irish enclave.

She found her sources, she said, "going into diners and town meetings, walking up and down the avenue, finding one person who introduces you to another and going to church parties and picnics where people are relaxed."

Her story captured the beneath-the-surface tensions in the community. Growing numbers of Guatemalan day laborers lining up on street corners hoping for a day's work made white residents nervous. At the same time, the long-time residents mistrusted Korean business owners even though they were helping the local economy.

Llorente's two-part 1998 series called "A Tale of Two Cultures" led to the hiring of Palisades Park's first Korean police officer and offers of free English classes for Guatemalans.

MAPPING NEIGHBORHOODS

One element several of the projects shared was a set of reporting tools applied to a variety of neighborhoods and ethnic groups within their circulation area. This allowed comparisons of key neighborhood features such as income, services and attitudes that often contribute to making race an issue in the larger community.

Sometimes the boundaries of a neighborhood are easy to detect. In southwest Michigan, the St. Joseph River cuts between the so-called "Twin Cities" of St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, creating not just a border but a barrier that has left each town racially isolated. Touristy St. Joseph is overwhelmingly white; economically struggling Benton Harbor almost completely black.

Ted Hartzell, metro editor of *The Herald-Palladium*, located in St. Joseph, said he found the tight boundaries and stark disparity shocking when he first arrived in 1996. "I said, 'I assume we've done a series on this' and someone said, 'No,' and I was dumbfounded," he recalled recently. "It may have taken a newcomer to get the series going."

The series Hartzell initiated—"Snapshots in Black and White: Can We Bridge the Racial Divide?"—ran throughout 1998. Reporters were sent out "just to do old-fashioned reporting," he said.

Reporters went into St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, identifying centers of community life and the informal sources who could be found there to illustrate and explain just how divided people were in those communities.

Under the headline “The Twin Cities are separated by more than a bridge over a river,” correspondent Boyd Nutting wrote of simply spending time in each place — “a walking survey,” as he described it — interviewing people in each city at different times of day.

“There are places and times when blacks and whites get together in the Twin Cities and places and times when the invisible curtain seems to drop,” he wrote. He quoted a 70-year-old Benton Harbor man saying, *“I go where I want to go, but when I feel eyes on me, you know what I mean, then I just move on.”*



THE HERALD-PALLADIUM

Herald-Palladium Editor Ted Hartzell found the segregation of St. Joseph and Benton Harbor shocking.

A sidebar looked at cafes, galleries and nightclubs that attracted patrons of both races. Their owners

concluded that music and the arts could bring people together.

Another reporter interviewed black and white clergy in each town and found a sharply different perspective on race relations. Though all spoke in conciliatory terms, white ministers tended to speak of racial “harmony” while black ministers spoke of “equality” and “justice.” Such a subtle difference could only have been detected through extensive interviews but it spoke volumes about the difference in circumstances and attitudes in the two communities.

Another *Herald-Palladium* installment examined the neighborhood of Fairplain, the only successfully integrated community in the Twin Cities area. Interestingly, Fairplain has no official boundaries, nor is it an incorporated community. But the paper identified its generally agreed-upon borders and even ran a literal map of the area — straddling Benton and St. Joseph townships — so readers would know the precise location. The portrait of life there — black and white kids shooting baskets outside one another’s homes, their parents picnicking together — was in sharp contrast to

the starkly divided communities nearby.

In addition to a satisfying and well-received series, Hartzell says *The Herald-Palladium* realized another benefit: an improved, more credible image in the community, particularly in Benton Harbor, which had received scant coverage except for crime stories.

“The paper was regarded skeptically by blacks,” Hartzell said. “The newsroom was almost all white. We had just one black reporter. And we were also handicapped by our history. Black people had been offended years ago by things *The Herald-Palladium* did or didn’t do.”

Hartzell said the paper is still working to correct that perception. Putting reporters in the community to write stories that went beyond crime or economic problems, that looked at the richness of life there, was a strong first step.

“They were glad we were doing it,” he said. “They wanted to tell their stories after all these years.”



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Careful reporting found equality is often the issue for blacks and harmony for whites in the Twin Cities.

THE PROJECTS

San Francisco Examiner : Touring your own City

Reporters at the *San Francisco Examiner* in San Francisco thought they knew their city. After all, the *Examiner* was a model of diversity itself and had created community beats assigning some of the best staff reporters to cover the African-American community, the Latino community and the Asian-American community, among others.

They learned, however, there is nothing like just getting out and walking the streets to really get to know a place after then-Managing Editor Sharon Rosenhouse arranged “walking tours” of the city (although staff members rode in a car to cover more territory). The tours were led by Max Kirkeberg, an urban geographer at San Francisco State University.

“My objective was simply to show people parts of the city that were rapidly changing and about which they knew little,” said Kirkeberg. “What they got out of these tours was that these unknown parts of the city are delightful places.”

“Even veterans of the area went to places they had never been before,” said Rosenhouse, now managing editor of the *Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “We knew the city was changing but, once you were on the ground in neighborhoods, you could see the changes were astounding.”

Rosenhouse dubbed these forays “New City Tours” after the project that inspired them and then was enriched by them. “The New City,” which ran in the *Examiner* throughout 1998 and 1999, was, itself, a walking tour of San Francisco.

“The New City” was less a project or a series of stories than the story of San Francisco at the end of the 20th Century. The city was being transformed dramatically — becoming a different place with a different population, different values, a different culture, a different look. “The New City” led readers through the myriad neighborhoods where the changes were having the most immediate impact and introduced them to the characters that made each place unique.

Consider the lead from the first article:

Ralph Barsi is 76, a native San Franciscan, a retired Teamster and a maker of raisin brandy. He is also a social historian of sorts.

Barsi has taped a white index card on the back of a frame holding two photos of his house — one taken recently, one 53 years ago. On the card, Barsi has recorded the names of every homeowner on his Crocker Amazon block since 1945.

In those days, his neighbors had names like Poletti, Ciucci and Quinlan. But the Wongs and the



Examiner reporters uncovered a whole new city when they started touring the streets of San Francisco. Among their discoveries: Ralph Barsi, a chronicler of changes in his neighborhood (above), and a vibrant Hawaiian community (below).

Ng and the Luis have replaced them.

The index card tells a story repeated on other blocks, in other neighborhoods, throughout San Francisco: An entire city is being remade before our very eyes.

You can bet Barsi was not in anybody's Rolodex at the beginning of reporting for "The New City." Indeed, you would be hard-pressed to find a single source in the entire series that was known to the reporter before reporting began.

DISCOVERING REAL PEOPLE

"There were no anonymous sources and none of the usual official sources," said Rosenhouse with no small amount of pride. "No mayors or supervisors. I think we quoted the city historian once. These were real people in real neighborhoods."

The reporters, however, didn't just go out and start walking through neighborhoods one day. After the project was conceived — simply through the observations of staff members noticing what was going on around them — the staff met for a brainstorming session. Rosenhouse said the ideas that came out were very useful. Already reporters had noticed changes in certain parts of the city.

In the Tenderloin district, for example, an influx of Southeast Asians brought families with children so the neighborhood was getting its first elementary school. In an area called Richmond, traditionally a Chinese neighborhood, there were more Vietnamese and, more recently, a growing Russian community.

Story ideas started to develop.

The business staff saw stories related to the influx



of dot-com money, which was displacing middle-class homeowners, a factor in the city's changing face. The sports department saw a story about the new athletic games being played in "The New City."

The *Examiner* then held a series of tutorials for reporters with community members and organizations such as the Chinese-American Voter Education Project. With that background, the reporters went out to start reporting. One of the first people they met was geographer Kirkeberg.

Kirkeberg took the series' three main reporters and their editor on his sweeping tour. The

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— SHARON ROSENHAUSE, *SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER*

reporters and editors took the tour. "It was a great, great way to build support from the ground up," said Rosenhouse. "Whenever you work on something big over a period of time, there are always moans from those not involved. But this one, people seemed to be interested in from the beginning. There was tremendous buy-in around the paper. Even people who had nothing to do with the project were invested in it."

With Kirkeberg's introduction, the reporters were able to bore into changing neighborhoods and find those telling details like Barsi's index cards. But to find a Barsi and establish the kind of relationship where he felt comfortable talking about his new neighbors — whom he still called "Chinamen," though jokingly — took an extraordinary commitment from the reporters and from the paper.

It also showed the paper it had been guilty of some degree of hubris. As Rosenhouse noted, "It's hard to admit you have so much to learn when you think you're operating at a pretty sophisticated level. We thought we were doing a pretty good job of covering this community and probably we were. But it wasn't good enough."

"The New City," she felt, added the missing dimension to the paper's coverage of the community, a dimension so valuable that it ceased to be a one-year project. It became a permanent part of the newspaper. Stories under "The New City" logo continued to run right up until the paper was sold in 2000.

group found the tour so enlightening, they asked him to conduct it for the other reporters and editors involved in the project. That group, in turn, decided it was something every staff member should do, whether they were involved in "The New City" or not.

Eventually more than half the paper's

Lexington Herald-Leader: Unmasking a Segregated City

How to explain it? Here was Lexington, Kentucky — graceful, peaceful, lovely Lexington — torn by racial violence: cars overturned, 20 people injured, angry protestors storming city council chambers. On top of being ugly and frightening, the racial dimension was shocking. How to explain it?

The *Lexington Herald-Leader* set out to answer that question as its task in the months that followed the 1994 riot, which was sparked by the fatal shooting by a white police officer of an unarmed black teenager.

In the meticulously reported project “Distant Neighbors,” the paper uncovered the public policy and private business decisions that had created a segregated city — the south side overwhelmingly white, the north and downtown largely black. The series prompted city officials to consider new incentives and zoning rules to encourage racial integration and more affordable housing.

Moreover, the *Herald-Leader*’s Tim Kelly, then editor and vice president, said the series helped explain a community to itself. Until the *Herald-Leader* wrote about race head-on, Kelly said, the community was in such a state of denial, it was unlikely to recognize and correct the practices that had led to the segregation, disenfranchising the black half of the city’s population.

“We helped make race a conscious issue in Lexington,” said Kelly, now president and publisher, in an interview. “We helped make diversity a conscious issue.”

USING EVERY TOOL

For “Distant Neighbors,” the *Herald-Leader* used every tool in its toolbox: census data, public records, computer analyses, polling and good, old-fashioned shoe leather. To bring the startling statistical evidence to life, a team of six reporters and two photographers spent the summer of 1995 getting to know seven neighborhoods in Lexington. The team explored how black and white residents interacted — or didn’t — in each neighborhood and explained how quality of life, attitudes and perceptions of the city as a whole varied from place to place.

Carol Hanner, now editor of the *Phoenix New Times* in Arizona, was then associate managing editor for projects at the *Herald-Leader* and edited “Distant Neighbors.”



LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER

Herald-Leader publisher Tim Kelly said the “Voices” and “Distant Neighbors” series “helped make race a conscious issue in Lexington.”

She said the neighborhoods explored were chosen because they represented an array of racial and income variations: poor and white, poor and black, middle- and upper-income black, middle-class white, upper-income white, racially mixed poor and racially mixed upper- and middle-class.

“We had assumptions and stereotypical ideas about what kinds of neighborhoods there were and who lived in them and we wanted to find out how much basis there was for that in fact,” said Hanner. “One of our primary missions was to take people to neighborhoods they might not even know were there — parts of town they never go to and have no friends in — and introduce them through the paper.”

Hanner created maps and charts of different areas showing demographic detail culled from census and property records. However, she said she knew that effort was just the beginning of understanding the neighborhoods.

“The statistics told us what physically had changed about the town,” she said, “but that doesn’t get at emotions and understanding and perspectives.”

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— CAROL HANNER, *THE HERALD-LEADER*

So reporters were paired up — Hanner wanted to get more than one perspective — and they were teamed with a photographer and given time to simply walk around a neighborhood, look around and chat with residents.

“The point was to talk about race, but we didn’t talk about race right off the bat,” she said. “We talked about life in that neighborhood: ‘What do you see everyday? Do you know your neighbors? What’s your life like? How do you

spend your time? Who do you hang out with?’ We had an eye toward getting to the conversation about race, but it’s not the kind of thing you’re going to unload on a stranger right away.”

Hanner said reporters used different techniques to penetrate each neighborhood, depending on the reporter and the neighborhood.

“Some went to neighborhood grocery stores or day-care centers, which is a good place to meet parents,” said Hanner. “There was some amount of man-on-the-street, which takes you to someone else, which takes you to a home. You know, you look for the busybody and knock on the door. There were a fair number of folks who just took to the reporters and invited them in.”

Of course these stories took time and having so many reporters detached on the project sometimes made filling the daily paper a challenge. She said the paper made good use of its interns that summer. But she said there was no other way to do the project but to give the reporting teams concentrated time in each neighborhood.

“You can’t immerse yourself if you keep having to leave to do news stories and take phone calls,” she explained. The payoff was the satisfaction of feeling they captured places accurately and presented them to readers in a way that opened their eyes. For instance, one of the most unusual neighborhoods profiled was a low-income white neighborhood that Hanner described as an “Appalachian-like enclave.” Another neighborhood Hanner believes was a surprise to most white Lexingtonians was the middle- and upper-income black neighborhood.

DISCOVERING YOUR NEIGHBORS

A common theme running through the pieces was that people *don't* know their neighbors as they once did and the changing definition of community makes it harder for people to understand those who aren't like themselves, whether they live nearby or far away. However, being physically segregated in your neighborhood and in your school makes it even more difficult for racial understanding to improve.

“Anytime you can present people and their stories and readers can see something of themselves in those neighborhoods and those people’s lives,” said Hanner, “the other person becomes, not just someone with white skin or black skin, but a person who’s valuable. It doesn’t produce legislation or impact you can measure nearly as well as you can with other types of issues reporting but maybe you put a little understanding in the back of someone’s mind that wasn’t there before.”

These stories were coupled with harder news: the analysis of home-loan applications that showed black families more than twice as likely to be turned down and therefore less likely to be able to own homes; decisions by the school board about where to put new schools and other educational resources; Realtors’ tendency to steer white families to the south side of town; city government policies on road development and sewer improvements. These stories made for a powerful package.

The series did not necessarily win fans for the *Herald-Leader*. Publisher Kelly says the paper got almost as many subscription cancellations as kudos. But the local chapter of the National Conference (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews) found the series did not polarize the community. It gave the paper its annual media award for working to improve race relations and understanding.

Chapter Tips: *Mapping*

Some editors may not call it “mapping” but covering race relations in a community seems instinctively to involve mapping techniques. Here are some tips taken from recent experiences:

- Walk the streets — take your time and find the “third places” and “incidental” locations where residents gather informally.
- Find the sources who aren’t usually quoted — get beyond local officials who are always quoted.
- Tell the story of an economically disadvantaged or segregated neighborhood and your organization will restore some credibility with that community.
- Include all your staff in neighborhood tours and in mapping techniques — it will create buy-in for the project.
- Use every tool in your toolbox — back up mapping with statistics and traditional reporting techniques to develop a strong package.
- Show your audience neighborhoods — and neighbors — they would never normally visit.