

INVITE ACTION

A tool for community buy-in

IN AKRON, OHIO, AND UTICA, NEW YORK, non-profit community organizations use annual events and special programs to improve race relations.

In Wilmington, Delaware, and Marshall, Texas, hundreds of people have made a public commitment in writing to improve race relations.

In the Pacific Northwest, in Washington and neighboring parts of Idaho, you can still see placards displaying a message of racial understanding stuck in the windows of homes and businesses.

These efforts share a common element — they would not exist without the involvement of journalists who went beyond reporting about race relations to helping people take an active role in improving them.

“It was a gutsy, risky move,” Fannie Brown, executive director of the Coming Together Project, said of the *Akron Beacon Journal’s* leadership in getting her organization started. “It’s one thing to have information; it’s another thing to do something with it.”

Indeed, the same could be said of news organizations across the country that took the lead in finding ways to get community members personally involved in the exploration of race issues.

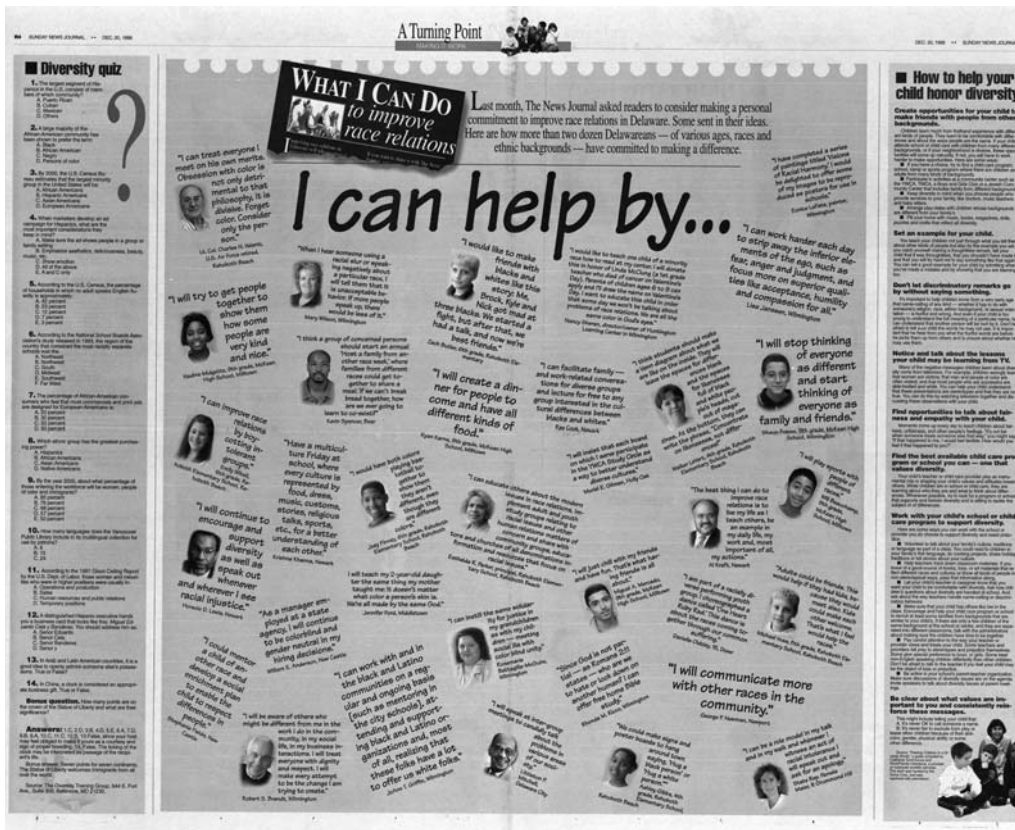
Of all the tools of civic journalism, engaging citizens in solving problems is the one that perhaps best defines the practice. This action is also, doubtlessly, one of the most controversial. It often takes journalists into unfamiliar territory, making them feel that they’ve crossed a line — the traditional barrier between neutral observer and vested participant.

ENCOURAGING INVOLVEMENT

Yet, nearly a decade of experience shows that newsrooms can invite community action without compromising their journalism. And some of the most “successful” race relations projects — in terms of lasting impact — were those that included an effort to involve the community.

These efforts took several different approaches, often used in combination.

- The most basic approach was to provide information about small, individual actions each reader could take. In a December 2000 series, the *Yakima Herald-Republic* included a sidebar headlined, “What to Do to Help Things Improve,” which included such advice as “Be wary of stereotypes” as well as the names of groups and meeting places where readers could socialize with people of different racial



The News Journal reported on potential solutions and invited readers to take action to promote racial understanding in “A Turning Point.”

and ethnic groups.

In a special insert section in September 1997, *The Charlotte Observer* invited readers to take a racial sensitivity test used in diversity training workshops. Readers could take the test in complete privacy and determine if they were “perpetuators, avoiders, change agents or fighters.”

- Some news organizations invited more public personal action.

The Spokesman-Review of Spokane, Washington, published its series “In it Together” as a counterpoint to a white supremacist group’s plan to march in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho. Knowing that tolerant voices in that region are often shouted down by hatemongers, *The Spokesman-Review* offered readers the opportunity to express their views publicly.

On the day of the rally, *The Spokesman-Review* tucked a 10 x 13-inch white placard reading “In it Together: Too Great to Hate”

into a series reprint in all the paper’s Idaho editions. It suggested that readers display them in car, business or home windows. “I still see them from time to time,” said Interactive Editor Ken Sands in an interview three years after the event.

- Several papers had readers make a commitment in writing to improve race relations and then published the names of those who sent them in.

The *Marshall News Messenger* in Texas made it easy by printing a coupon with a general pledge that readers only had to sign and send in.

The *Akron Beacon Journal* — with its project culminating at the end of 1993 — called for New Year’s resolutions aimed at racial healing and 20,000 citizens sent them in.

The News Journal of Wilmington, Delaware, printed not just names but also photos, along with the text of readers’ promises. Rehoboth Elementary School fourth grader Emily Witsil wrote, “I can improve race relations by boycotting intolerant groups.” Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Charles Valenti promised, “I can treat everyone I meet on his own merits.”

- Another approach was to examine local race-reconciliation programs with an eye toward increasing community involvement or to explore successful efforts elsewhere in the event that ambitious community members



MARK JOHNSON, OBSERVER-DISPATCH

Utica's Observer-Dispatch helped organize study circles aimed at improving race relations in the community.

might want to replicate them locally.

The News Journal offered an array of ideas for improving race relations in its final installment, including blended church services and multiracial peer counseling, and it made available a kit for programs that teach children respect.

KRON-TV devoted the final installment of its five-part "About Race" series to a program based in San Diego called "Community Cousins," which matches people and families of different races so they can form friendships across racial barriers.

In a race series on XETV, the FOX station in San Diego, reporter Darren Lyn focused on solutions such as a program called "Old

Town" that teaches tolerance to San Diego fourth graders and a hate-free campus campaign at the University of California-San Diego.

The boldest news organizations went a step further. They helped citizens take action.

SPOTLIGHTING SOLUTIONS

The *Akron Beacon Journal* is the trailblazer in this area. Newspaper executives gave civic leaders space in their own building to create an action organization to respond to its series "A Question of Color." Today, the Coming Together Project continues to sponsor programs and events as an independent non-profit corporation.

The *Observer-Dispatch* of Utica, New York, helped create a similar organization in conjunction with its 1995 series "Building Bridges." As the series ran in the news pages, then-editorial writer Tim Chavez took the unusual step of outlining on the editorial page his vision for improving race relations. This included the convening of study circles on the issue led by area clergy to spur more community action and interaction. Chavez then invited 30 local religious leaders to his newspaper office to discuss acting on his vision.

Afterwards he supported their efforts with editorials headlined with such exhortations as "Be part of next step toward unity" and "Join today." Within a matter of months, 500 people had participated in the study circles.

The Rev. Patti Lawrence, one of the pastors who attended that first meeting in Chavez's office, said in a recent interview, "I had no idea something with this kind of impact would grow out of it. We were just getting to know each other and build relationships and we all became friends. That's why we're still in it, to be honest. Friendship now is



OBSERVER-DISPATCH

The Observer-Dispatch ran this logo with dozens of stories promoting efforts at better interracial understanding.

what drives us — and the passion for racial justice as well.”

Bridge Builders is now a well-regarded organization that sponsors youth study circles and other programs, intervenes in racial disputes and even maintains its own city park — a former vacant lot, now Bridge Builders Park — where it holds forums every Monday night through the summer. Recently, a suburban church donated a canopy tent so the programs can go on rain or shine.

Lawrence said the group might eventually have come together anyway but it would have been much more difficult without the initial involvement of the newspaper and Chavez’s

“THERE’S A LOT OF WORK TO BE DONE YET BUT WE PUT IT OUT WHERE EVERYBODY COULD READ IT AND SEE IT AND HEAR IT.”

— THE REV. PATTI LAWRENCE

willingness to promote the study circles and other activities.

“I think their impact in the community is significant here,” Lawrence said. “Talking to people in other places that have tried to do this, we realize how important the paper was. I don’t know how you’d do it without the cooperation of the newspaper.”

Lawrence said the paper’s coverage of the

group dropped sharply when Chavez left for *The Tennessean* in Nashville in 1996. But by that time the group had established itself as a force for racial justice and is still called upon when an incident erupts. In addition, Lawrence has a monthly column in the *Observer-Dispatch*, as do other community activists.

ASSESSING IMPACT

So, is society better for the efforts of news organizations that have invited action on race issues? It is difficult to quantify the impact of such projects on human relations. And nowhere have they achieved what could be called trouble-free relationships.

But Lawrence, for her part, believes things in Utica would be a lot worse without Bridge Builders. “We’d be sitting in our own little boxes wondering why things happen when they do,” she said.

“There’s a lot of work to be done yet but we put it out where everybody could read it and see it and hear it. And when we need help, we have a place where we can go to get it.”



OBSERVER-DISPATCH

The Rev. Patti Lawrence is a leader in Bridge Builders, a Utica group formed with the help of the paper to promote racial understanding.

THE PROJECTS

Akron Beacon Journal: Launching Long-term Initiatives

Each fall, hundreds of people take to the streets of Akron, Ohio, in a demonstration ignited by racial differences. In this case, however, those differences are celebrated and participants are demonstrating their resolve to live together in peace.

The annual Walk for Unity is one of the visible, continuing outcomes of the *Akron Beacon Journal* series, “A Question of Color.”

There are other results in this manufacturing city of 225,000. The *Beacon Journal* went further than most news organizations in engaging its community on the topic of race relations and the seeds it planted in 1993 continue to bear fruit.



PHIL MASTURZO, AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

The success of the Coming Together Project prompted President Bill Clinton to hold the first national dialogue on race in Akron.

“I know that many of the discussion groups would not have taken place, the diverse groups getting together and talking, working together on projects and sticking with it — they would not have happened without the project,” said Fannie Brown, executive director of the Coming Together Project, the group that sponsors the Walk for Unity and is itself an outgrowth of the newspaper’s project.

“A Question of Color” was born of the turmoil that followed the 1992 acquittal of the white Los

Angeles policemen who beat black motorist Rodney King. Across America, race seemed to be an issue the media could no longer ignore. But the *Beacon Journal* wanted to distinguish its effort from others.

“We knew a lot of newspapers were going to try to tackle race relations in some form but we wanted to do something much bigger that would involve the community,” said then-Metro Editor David Hertz, “because I felt strongly the role of a good newspaper is to try to bring people together and, in this instance, on this topic, to make a difference.

“In our society, there are few issues as polarizing or as important as race and it was almost like a demand on newspapers to play a role in a community discussion of race,” said Hertz, who is now the business editor. “At that time, with the country fixated on what was going on in L.A., it was essential that we do that.”

GETTING THE PROJECT STARTED

Hertz and the paper's top editors held a newsroom-wide discussion on the best ways to approach the subject and there was general agreement it would take a large investment of resources. The paper was prepared to make that commitment.

A smaller group formed a task force on how to proceed. Members studied what other media had done in the area of race relations and confided frankly about how personal experience shaped their lives.

Through that process, they decided to explore half-a-dozen, hot-button topics — housing, education, economics, crime and personal relationships among them. They used polling, computer analyses and focus groups to get below the surface of those topics. But Hertz said the team put off the community-involvement aspect because editors were still reluctant to cross what they saw as a line.

That changed when the first group of stories appeared in February 1993. The picture those stories painted was so bleak and reader reaction was so volatile, editors became convinced they had to do something more to help the community come to grips with the information presented.

"We didn't want to be perceived as stirring things up and then just wandering off," said Bob Paynter, the series' lead writer. "We got some vitriolic responses to that first set of stories, as you always do. Whackos come out of the woodwork. The editors were taken aback and started thinking: Is there a way to give people some place to go and do something constructive with this?"

So the newspaper invited the community to respond in a number of ways. *Beacon Journal* executives — not the journalists working on the story — created the Coming Together Project to hold a series of community forums, where citizens could discuss the subject and work on solutions.

They hired a staff for the organization and gave it an office right in the newspaper building. The project brought together hundreds of people for the community forums and generated dozens of ideas. Churches began holding integrated services; members of different groups formed partnerships and friendships across racial lines to work for better understanding. Citywide, race became an acceptable topic of discussion instead of something polite people simply didn't talk about.

Hertz acted as a forum facilitator but he said he didn't think of that role as part of his job as a journalist. "This was more in the realm of community service and, actually, that's an interesting thing," he said. "I view journalism as a community service. This was a different aspect of community service."

The paper did cover one of the forums, Hertz said, and he had the curious and educational experience of being in the position of an ordinary reader when the story came out. He'd had no role in assigning the reporter or editing the story and he didn't know what it would say until he read it the next morning.

"I thought it missed the point," he said. "It was accurate but it missed the power of the presentations. The speakers made points that I felt were far more powerful than those picked up by the reporter."

GETTING RESULTS

The power of those forums on the community, though, was becoming more apparent. Toward the end of the year, as the series was winding down, the *Beacon Journal* invited readers to make a New Year's resolution to work for better understanding. Some 22,000 people responded.

The paper also decided the Coming Together Project should become a permanent fixture in Akron and helped its directors become a non-profit corporation. The project moved into its own offices and is now independent of the *Beacon Journal*. In addition to organizing the Walk for Unity, it continues to bring people of different races together for discussions and programs to address racial issues.

A major part of its effort is working with high-school and middle-school students on diversity workshops that involve more than 800 students a year.

"This is the best part for me," said Brown of the youth activities. "You get a very diverse group of students — not all A students or well-off students — but they all get a lot out of it."

Brown says that whenever she speaks about her group, she always praises the *Beacon Journal* for taking such an active role and she believes the paper's actions have improved race relations in Akron. "I'm convinced of it," she said. "We wouldn't have the relationships that have been established because of it. Race would not be something folks could discuss openly."

Beacon Journal editors are more modest about taking credit for any major changes in Akron although they do believe the project had some impact.

"I know it changed the attitudes and perceptions of the people who worked on it," said Paynter, "and I assume it did the same thing for some people in the community. The problem is how to measure that."

Quantifying social change is always difficult but the *Beacon Journal* did poll the community five years after "A Question of Color" and did find progress being made. When President Bill Clinton selected Akron in 1997 to initiate his "national conversation on race," largely because of the activities started by the *Beacon Journal* series, the paper again asked many of the questions it had asked in 1992 and found African-American residents far less likely to see race as a barrier in housing, education or career advancement.

There is still room for improvement in Akron but it is hard to escape the conclusion that the newspaper has made a positive contribution to the community.

Brown said the *Beacon Journal* indirectly may be responsible for improving other communities as well. The Coming Together Project is being replicated in three other Ohio towns and in Decatur, Illinois. Brown would like to see it spread even further.

"This is a timely project," said Brown. "The concept is open enough to fit in any community and any community adopting such a program will be better for it. The organization is all-inclusive. It deals with all races, religions, lifestyles, strengths and weaknesses. Anyone can participate and play a part."

Marshall News Messenger, Texas: Instilling Quiet Progress

Phil Latham was not some big-city carpetbagger when he arrived in Marshall, Texas, in 1998. He'd only moved about 100 miles, from one small east Texas town to another, to be editor of the *Marshall News Messenger*. Still, he was shocked by the state of race relations in Marshall.

Seething resentments still lingered over the Civil War, Confederate flags hung in windows, segregated shifts in local businesses were common, and blacks and whites rarely interacted.

"My 13-year-old daughter felt she couldn't have black friends here," he said in a telephone interview. "She was upset about it. She came home from school one day and asked, 'Daddy, why is there so much racism in Marshall?' And I began to wonder myself."

Even the newspaper he took over reflected the poor racial climate. Readership studies reported, in his words, "woefully small" black readership. "And if you looked at the paper, you'd understand that," he added. "I'm not saying we never ran a picture of a black person but this town is 40 percent black. There should have been much more in the paper."

The *News Messenger* has a circulation of about 8,000 in a town of 25,000. On this small stage, the story of how Latham took on the issue of race relations despite serious obstacles is a tale of remarkable journalistic fortitude. His results affirm journalistic exploration of race relations.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Knowing east Texas as he did, Latham understood that, as a newcomer to town, he couldn't take on the issue in print himself because it would be dismissed as the work of an "outsider." He devised a plan to open discussion in a way he hoped would not polarize the issue. He asked a group of 12 clergymen, six black and six white, to answer 12 basic questions about race relations in Marshall.

Their answers ran once a month through 1999. With each installment, the paper asked readers to sign a "covenant" to take action to overcome barriers between the races. About midway through the series, he began running the names of those who'd signed and sent in the covenant form.

It may seem like a basic, non-offensive approach: let religious leaders in this avowedly religious town answer such questions as "What grade would you give race relations in Marshall?"

So it was something of a shock to Latham when the town's largest employer called to say he



Editor Phil Latham knew he would be considered an outside agitator if he raised the issue of race in Marshall.

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12 QUESTIONS ON RACE

For the next year, the News Messenger will be examining the issues of race in Harrison County. To do that, we've asked 12 ministers — six white and six black — to answer 12 questions, one each month. Here are their answers to the first question.

Grade 25

Grade 51

Grade 65

Average grade 58

Next month's question

For the most part, predominantly white churches sat out the civil rights movement. Black churches were much more heavily involved. What part do you see play in the ongoing work for...?

Photo Illustrations by Len Russell/News Messenger

was pulling his advertising for the entire year because of the way Latham was stirring up trouble. Though he was just a few months into his new job, Latham says the paper's owner, Cox Newspapers, stuck by him.

More worrisome to Latham was the advertiser's threat to the white ministers who were participating. Latham did not wish to identify the advertiser but quoted him as saying the white ministers "would have to pay" for their involvement.

Latham said he called each of the ministers and gave them the option of dropping out but none did.

His concern had been even greater for the black ministers. To begin with, he had a hard time finding six to participate.

"There was not an up side to them. It was all risk with no benefit," Latham explained. "There's no advantage to a

The News Messenger had trouble finding black ministers to participate in answering "12 Questions" on race.

black person in Marshall to tell white people things are all screwed up. The next time you go into a bank to take out a car loan, you're the guy that doesn't like the way things are around here."

A few of the black ministers apparently reflected those fears even though they agreed to participate. They gave Marshall the highest grades on race relations — 80 to 85, even though the average of all the ministers was 58, so there was the suspicion that their ratings were not entirely sincere.

Similarly, as readers began sending in their covenant forms, Latham found very few African-American signatories. Latham was disappointed but understood. "There's no reason to identify yourself as a target," he said.

Overall, the covenant statement was a disappointment. Of Marshall's 25,000 citizens, 200 sent in their names. "Six of them are my family," Latham said. "Others came from churches where the whole youth group signed the statement."

Meanwhile, Latham was not making himself many new friends.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

As the year moved on, however, the series achieved a kind of success that Latham had never anticipated.

Dr. Ed Robb is a conservative, white, Methodist minister who is known for his vocal and passionate opposition to the church's acceptance of gay and lesbian members. Latham asked him to participate in his "12-Questions" series, thinking he would represent the most conservative view of the subject.

But Robb became the most outspoken proponent of greater social justice for African-Americans in Marshall and of more interracial understanding.

"I built some personal relationships in the African-American community, which were very helpful to me, which brought me more of an understanding of their frustrations," Robb said of his work on the project. One of those relationships was with Ronald Swain, the president of Wiley College, a local, historically black institution.

Completely on their own, Robb and Swain formed a Race Reconciliation Committee with seven other white members, six other black members and one Hispanic member. Robb said they meet privately to address racial issues in hopes of bringing about greater understanding.

"Liberals have been more involved in social justice issues than conservatives," Robb said, "but I wanted to demonstrate that persons with my background and philosophy are just as concerned about reconciliation as anyone else."

Latham considers the Race Reconciliation Committee and Robb's leadership of it the best outcome he could have hoped for. "Obviously," he said, "it's the exact effect you want as a journalist — to inspire others to take action. It's wonderful to see this at work so far."

To complete the hopeful turnaround, the *News Messenger's* big advertiser began buying ads again before the year was out. "I was glad, I'm not gonna lie about that," Latham said. And more recent readership surveys show a threefold increase in black readership and a jump in readership among 18- to 35-year-olds from 7 percent to 35 percent — the opposite of national trends in newspaper readership.

Marshall, of course, still has a long way to go to be a model city. Latham said the paper recently did an investigative project that found black residents three times more likely to be arrested than whites and, for certain offenses, five to seven times more likely.

"I keep telling people this isn't the way it is everywhere," Latham said. "I hope some day Marshall isn't that way. My kids have to grow up here. I want them to grow up in a better place."



Conservative preacher Ed Robb became an activist for racial justice after participating in "12 Questions on Race."

MARSHALL NEWS MESSENGER

Times Record News, Wichita Falls, TX: Generating Tepid Response

Carroll Wilson took some flak when he initiated a project on race relations in Wichita Falls, Texas. White community leaders tried to discourage the *Times Record News* editor from approaching the topic.

“All this article’s going to do is create problems. I don’t believe in stirring things up,” one anonymous, white businessman told him — a remark duly quoted in part one of the series.

But Wilson recalls the remark now with irony and a trace of bitterness.

“It didn’t stir up anything,” he said. “It tackled a subject that had to be tackled and it had no effect that I can tell. It went nowhere.”

In March 1998, the nine-part series “About Face” looked at relations between the blacks and whites in Wichita Falls from numerous angles: the town’s dismal history of discrimination, including the paper’s own culpability in distorting the image of the town’s black community; its segregated churches; its exclusionary business community.

Rigorously reported pieces showed clear evidence of bias in the justice system and in Wichita Falls public schools.

“I think I was justified in saying we got a bigger problem here than what we’re acknowledging. And ... THUD,” said Wilson. “We got almost no feedback. We got some good comments from folks in the black community. We got criticized by the Hispanic community because we didn’t

include them. And white folks acted like we’d never written it.

“I thought it was good. I thought it was accurate. I thought it would have an impact. But it didn’t and I can’t explain it and, frankly, I just gave up.”

Wilson’s disappointment is more acute, perhaps, because he did something in connection with

the project that he normally would not do. He tried to galvanize the community to respond to the series’ conclusions.

Wilson is frank about his ambivalence to civic journalism. In fact, the series itself relied mostly on solid but very traditional reporting techniques. Wilson did not go in for forums or discussion groups. For this project, however, he did see the value of including a variety of voices from many layers of civic life and, in the last installment, the paper proposed solutions.

After the series ran, he personally tried to put together a coalition of citizens from different

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—BOB MOORE, *EL PASO TIMES*



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The Wichita Falls Times Record News tried to stir the community to action with its 1997 series "About Face: Wichita Falls in Black and White." Editor Carroll Wilson was disappointed in the results.

parts of the community to explore ways to improve race relations. He cajoled civic leaders to come to meetings in his office, trying to persuade them to take on the mission.

The experience left him less convinced about the efficacy of civic journalism. "This project was designed to say, 'Here's a problem, here's what others have done, now what are you going to do about it? And the community said, 'Sit down, go back to your desk, screw you.'"

Bob Moore, managing editor of the *El Paso Times*, was also disappointed in the response to the series the *Times* published in partnership with KVIA-TV in 1998. "Our idea all along was that we'd pull together a coalition of people and we were hoping the community would take some of these issues and run with it and that never happened," he said.

Unlike Wilson, however, Moore believes *more* civic involvement by the paper might have helped generate a better community response.

“IF YOU WANT DIALOGUE TO CONTINUE, YOU HAVE TO INVEST IN MAKING SURE THERE’S SOME KIND OF FRAMEWORK FOR IT TO CONTINUE.”

—BOB MOORE, *EL PASO TIMES*

“We needed to spend a lot more time planning what to do next to facilitate further community discussion of this issue,” said Moore. “We thought we could start the dialogue and let the community go with it. But that’s naive and unrealistic. If you want dialogue to continue, you

have to invest in making sure there’s some kind of framework for it to continue. The community was looking to us for leadership and we didn’t realize that expectation until it was too late.”

Despite their disappointment, though, neither editor regrets doing projects on race

relations. They may not have had the visible, lasting impact that some projects boast, but both editors agree they did at least generate discussion of the issue on a person-to-person level. Perhaps that small step will lead toward better understanding.

Chapter Tips: *Involving the Community*

- Not everyone will want to cross the line to community involvement at first but, with persistence, journalists usually find activist projects don’t mar their integrity.
- Get your readers involved — use forums, discussion groups, mail-in pledges of support, anything to elicit action.
- Use your series on race as a text for education.
- Don’t just use reporters in the mix; executives from your organization can make a huge difference.
- Think long-term — many projects that started as short-term efforts became permanent.
- Understand that you may not always succeed in your intent or, at least, succeed to the degree you had hoped. Even in series that didn’t have a sweeping impact, most editors feel they had a positive effect on the community.
- Find or train a few leaders in the community.