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Gaines lecture tackles representation in media

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Mará Rose Williams (center) answers a question from the audience Wednesday during the 2023 John B. Gaines Family Lecture Series “The Impact of Representation in Media” at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Photo by Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com

Listening, not just “covering,” was the focus of this year’s John B. Gaines Family lecture series.

The event brought three women of color in journalism to Western Kentucky University's Jody Richards Hall on Wednesday night to talk about the importance of representation in news media.

Kyndell Harkness, now the Minneapolis Star Tribune's assistant managing editor of diversity and community, was the paper's photo editor in 2020 when George Floyd's killing sent shockwaves through the city. Her team won a Pulitzer for its coverage.

"I didn't see myself necessarily represented in my colleagues," Harkness said. "But I love taking pictures in different communities. They would see me, especially communities of color, and then see themselves. And that was important, I was able to give people dignity."

At first she was hesitant to take an editor role, but knew the paper's management needed her voice and experience as a person of color.

"It's important that you're in the room. You need to be in the room," Harkness said. "How many people that look like you are in that room that are making decisions day in, day out. I was the only person of color who was in the daily meetings where decisions were made."

Because of Harkness' editorial direction, the paper's coverage of that summer's historic events held more grace and nuance.

“I wanted to make sure that we were choosing for images that didn’t feel diminutive, or less-than, or pain-drenched,” Harkness said. “There had to be some kind of anger, but hope, in those photos.”

The paper did not run any photos from the video taken of Floyd’s death. Harkness said the Tribune made a purposeful decision to “make sure we see George’s face as often as we can.”

“Because we have to know who the victim was and we need to make sure people are familiar with him,” she said.

Harkness also made it a point to depict the looting that occurred during the summer protests as accurately as possible, avoiding harmful stereotypes.

“When it came to the looting that was going on, just as the protests were multicultural, so was the looting,” she said.

When former police officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of Floyd’s murder in 2022, the Tribune’s front page did not feature a court photo of Chauvin above the fold. Instead, the dominant image of that day’s issue was a photo of people celebrating the verdict after two years of painful waiting.

“We went with community first,” Harkness said. “The biggest impact was how these people were feeling at that moment, not necessarily that he’s going to jail.”

Harkness, now in a role focused on diversity in the paper's coverage and newsroom, shared that the Tribune has revamped its hiring process in an attempt to cut down on bias.

"If you don't have a candidate that isn't diverse in some way, then you have to stop the process and keep looking," Harkness said.

She shared that the paper is up to six persons of color in management as opposed to one or two in 2020.

Rochelle Ritchie, a 2004 graduate of WKU's broadcasting program and political analyst, was working for News Channel 5 in West Palm Beach, Florida, in 2012 when 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by George Zimmerman in the nearby city of Sanford.

She went to her news director asking to cover the story, but was told it wasn't local news. She was only given the green light to cover the shooting and subsequent protests when the local urban league made plans to go to Sanford, giving her a local angle.



“We have to fight to tell our stories,” Ritchie said. “And the problem is, we’ve heard ‘community’ a lot. Community oftentimes means white, unfortunately. And there is this ignoring of Black communities and stories unless it is centered around something as far as gun violence or some sort of a tragedy.”

Richie mentioned that many Black Americans suffer from vicarious trauma, “this cultural connection and universal thought” that any Black person killed in a high-profile shooting could have been them.

“It could have been my son, it could have been my daughter, and that’s why it feels so personal,” she said. “That’s why it felt so important for me to go to Sanford, because I have a brother that was the same age. I share a birthday with (Martin) ... if you’re going into a management position of any kind, you have got to think like that.”

Mará Rose Williams, the Kansas City Star's assistant managing editor for race and equity issues, spoke at length about the paper's "Truth in Black and White" project that apologized for the Star's history of ignoring Black communities and substantial negative coverage of minority populations.

Williams, like Harkness, was covering protests in her city following Floyd's killing. She expected to witness violent protesters breaking windows and destroying property. Instead, she arrived to find police officers in riot gear arranged four-deep.

"And they sprayed people with repellant, even though I was just like, 'they're just yelling at you, why are you spraying them with repellant?' " she said. "It was unnerving to me."

When Williams got home and finished washing off the repellant spray, she got to thinking about what she saw.

"I realized that what I saw was people of every age, people of every hue, people from every economic background, all people from all different places in one place with one common cause, saying 'stop the police brutality,' " she said.

Williams thought Kansas City was "ready to tussle with race."

Thus began her search back into the archives to find where the paper had failed to properly cover its Black and minority communities. She consulted local historians and the city's Black press to find gaps in reporting, and a disturbing pattern emerged.

Coverage of the city's deadly 1977 flood focused primarily on property damage, not the lives lost in the Black neighborhoods it destroyed. A visit by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. failed to elicit a peep from the Tribune. When the city's native son Charlie Parker, one of the greatest jazz musicians of all time, passed away in 1955, his obituary was but a tiny blip.

"I was able to put together a proposal and bring it to my editors and say, 'you have to atone for that. You have to apologize for that,' " she said. "You knew it was bad but we did it anyway, we have to say 'I'm sorry.' "

When Williams asked one of her fellow reporters, a white man, to work on the project, he asked her if a white man can write about Black issues.

"And my response to him was, 'this is not a Black issue, baby. This is all of our issue,' " Williams said.

She has been in a similar role as Harkness since January.

"Since then we've hired, I'd say, four or five different young people of color," she said. "I used to be the only one in the room and I'm not anymore."

Williams said when minority populations begin to see themselves and hear their voices in the newspaper, “it starts to come alive.”

“And guess what – when you start sharing those stories, they’re going to want to read about themselves in the paper,” Williams said. “People want to know that they are heard, and that’s all. It’s that simple.”

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