

COMMON GROUND: Race Relations In Savannah

# Media Moving Toward Diversification of Staffs, Coverage

By TONY WILBERT  
Staff Writer

Harold Jackson, the Savannah Morning News' first black reporter, vividly remembers his first day on the job.

As Jackson walked into the newsroom, a co-worker "pointed at me and said loudly, 'What's that monkey doing over there with a tie?'"

But Jackson, a 1968 summer intern, ignored the comment.

"I wasn't going to let anything like that stop me," he said.

Since then, the News-Press and other area news media have tried to diversify their news staffs and coverage. While some blacks and whites say they've seen progress, others say more must be done.

"There has been a bit of a change but not anything, we can say has been revolutionary," said Deacon Harry James of the First African Baptist Church. "There are many things that happen in the black community, and we don't get that (coverage)."

But most Chatham County residents think neither local newspapers nor television favor whites or blacks, according to a recent Georgia Southern University survey.

Respondents who did perceive media bias tended to see newspapers tilting toward whites and TV news favoring blacks.

Local media representatives say they are trying to give unbiased coverage, recruit more black journalists and increase their coverage of positive events in the black community.

"Our goal is to really cover our community," News-Press Managing



HAROLD JACKSON: First black News-Press reporter

Editor Rexanna Lester said. "We try to listen to what all people are telling us."

She said the News-Press has formed a community advisory board to learn what the community wants from the newspaper, is trying to attract more minority journalists and has sent editors to minority jobs fairs.

"We've been lucky to find some really good black candidates," she said. "We're fighting with the big papers to get the good candidates."

The News-Press, with a news staff of 72, has three black reporters, a black librarian and a black editorial assistant.

In addition to boosting minority

employment, the News-Press is working to avoid stereotyping blacks in articles and be more sensitive when reporting crime stories and identifying suspects, Lester said.

Savannah's TV stations say they're doing likewise.

"We represent our community and have to reflect our community," WSAV-TV News Director Dave Winstrom said. "We need a strong minority presence on our staff."

"Half of our viewers are black. Why shouldn't you have blacks represented?" added Doug Weathers, vice president of news at WTOC-TV. "They certainly are in our" newsroom.

WTOC has a news staff of 34, eight of whom are black, Weathers said. Four of the black employees are front-line reporters, two are producers and one is the chief photographer.

Winstrom said his news staff of 28 employs "eight or nine" blacks, including some editors and anchors.

Crosstown rival WJCL-TV employs three blacks on its 12-member staff, News Director Scott Pierce said.

A staff with 50 percent black employees "would be great," but black newsmen are in high demand, Pierce said.

"They usually skip over a market this size" and find work in bigger cities, Pierce said.

Concerning coverage, Pierce said his station doesn't target one audience over another.

At WSAV, Winstrom said there was talk about covering the black community and minority issues when he arrived three years ago, "but no one actually had anything on

a regular basis."

Now, the station airs "Perspectives," a weekly show that focuses on the black community's positive aspects, Winstrom said.

At WTOC, Weathers said he doesn't decide whether to cover a story based on the color of its key players.

"We try to look at a story as a story," he said.

However, Winstrom said he thinks complaints about only covering blacks on the crime beat make "a pretty valid statement. It says something, and we have to be sensitive to that."

WSAV's policy is not to identify suspects at large by race unless a specific description is available.

If police say they are looking for a black man who's 5 feet 10 inches wearing blue jeans, "I won't put it on" because it identifies many people in the area, Winstrom said.

The News-Press has the same policy and does not identify race without a specific description, Metro Editor Larry Peterson said.

Weathers said WTOC has a similar policy that requires specific descriptions from police before identifying a suspect by race. And then, "we repeat what police say," Weathers said.

The News-Press is improving, said Wanda Lloyd, a Savannah native and senior editor for USA Today.

"Growing up in Savannah, the paper was no friend of mine," Lloyd said. "It was a very racist publication that only talked about blacks when they got in trouble. It was a long time before I could think that the people could change."

But the paper has changed, she said.

"It's 1,000 percent better. I see a lot more positive portrayals of blacks," she said.

Tom Coffey, who worked for the paper for dozens of years including the 1960s when blacks first were included in obituaries and on society pages, said the News-Press has come a long way.

"We didn't cover the black community too well - not well at all," said Coffey, who retired as editor. "They were never integrated into the mainstream."

Black obituaries were not accepted. Instead, blacks had to buy death announcements.

But in the mid '60s, when Coffey was managing editor for the Evening Press, management decided to begin printing obituaries of black citizens and wedding announcements.

Coffey said the overall reaction was mild.

"There were some redneck whites who thought it was just awful," he said. "Surprisingly, there were very few who did that."

The black community, which had prodded News-Press management to act, welcomed that change and the hiring of Jackson - the first black reporter, Coffey said.

Jackson, who had already worked for the Morning News as a sports correspondent and copy boy, started as a reporter - a summer intern - in 1968.

As a correspondent and copy boy who ran errands, Jackson said he felt accepted by his co-workers. But the day he walked into the news-

room as a reporter, things changed.

He said his first month was boring because he was given no assignments. After asking for work, he finally was sent to a White Citizens Council meeting.

Jackson said he didn't know the council was a racist group. He thought he was going to cover and photograph a political rally. However, what he saw was former Gov. Lester Maddox speaking of a "nigger" in jail who would be put so far away in the building that he would need to have air pumped to him.

"It was very, very uncomfortable," Jackson said.

But his hard work paid off when Jackson saw his first byline under a headline stretching across the page. Being featured years later in a Newsweek story about growing business opportunities in South Africa and in a New York Times article about racial harmony in the South didn't match the thrill of his first byline, Jackson said.

"To me, I don't think there was a higher point," he said.

Jackson left the News-Press for graduate school at the University of Michigan, where he earned a master's in journalism and a doctorate in speech communications.

He is now president of JacksonHeath Public Relations, an Atlanta firm he founded. It represents Coca-Cola and Shoney's.

"The Savannah Morning News is more than a place where I sort of broke down barriers," Jackson said. "It's where I learned how to work with other people."

## Race Accounts For Most Complaints Received By Georgia, Savannah EEOC

By VICTOR EPSTEIN  
Staff Writer

Race continues to account for about 50 percent of the complaints received nationally by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and 60 percent of those in Georgia and Savannah.

One of the latter is Bill Wilcox, who claims skin pigmentation is the reason he was fired from his position as the Chatham County Sheriff Department's highest-ranking black deputy in 1985.

So is Hinesville police Sgt. Joseph Gillam, who says it is the reason he and fellow Sgt. William Tignor, who are white, were passed over for promotion this year in favor of a black woman they say is less qualified.

Federal and local officials say such cases are not unusual because race continues to play a prominent role in workplace disputes.

Gloria Barnett, director of EEOC's district office in Savannah, and Statesboro labor relations attorney Beth Bunce said outright discrimination has become less common as employers have become more aware of the cost of racially biased decisions.

However, they say cases of covert racism and reverse discrimination appear to be on the rise, and it can be devastating when workers are judged on group traits rather than individual ones.

"As a rule, people have gotten a little jaded toward discrimination cases and don't want to see that racism exists," said Bunce, Wilcox's lawyer. "But I know, as do others, that there is discrimination in the workplace - it's just getting harder to prove. . . . It seems like there's less overt conduct now and when there is discrimination, it happens behind closed doors."

### Paying The Price

Bill Wilcox said he found out firsthand how costly a racially biased employment decision can be for both employer and employee when he was fired in 1985 for planting a Christmas Day kiss on the cheek of a white co-worker.

"It all worked out for me in the end, but it was a nightmare," said Wilcox, who was wrongly accused of sexually attacking the female deputy. "Not only was I terminated, but it became a stumbling block on every job interview I went on for the next year."

"I still remember interviewing with the Savannah Police Department and being told that they wanted to hire me, but were afraid of the negative publicity it would generate because of the nature of my dismissal" from the sheriff's department.

Today, Wilcox is \$125,000 richer in compensatory damages, working as a lieutenant on the Savannah State College police force, and earning the benefits of a 20-year pension from the Chatham County Sheriff's Department.

In 1986, a court ruled that the charges against him were unfounded after the female deputy he was accused of assaulting said she had been pushed into filing the charges by Sheriff Walter Mitchell, who retired in 1991.

The whole incident revolved around an innocent Christmas Day peck on the cheek in 1984, Wilcox

EEOC COMPLAINTS FROM 1988 TO 1993	
<b>U.S. EEOC Complaints *</b>	
1988:	94,878 complaints, 50,959 race-related (53.7 percent)
1989:	90,193 complaints, 46,933 race-related (52 percent)
1990:	92,924 complaints, 48,828 race-related (52.5 percent)
1991:	94,113 complaints, 48,187 race-related (51 percent)
1992:	101,877 complaints, 49,309 race-related (48.4 percent)
1993:	109,585 complaints, 52,605 race-related (48.0 percent)
Six-year total:	583,570 complaints, 296,812 race-related (50.9 percent)
<b>Savannah District EEOC Complaints</b>	
1988:	202 complaints, 119 race-related (58.9 percent)
1989:	337 complaints, 231 race-related (68.5 percent)
1990:	602 complaints, 400 race-related (66.4 percent)
1991:	570 complaints, 334 race-related (58.6 percent)
1992:	589 complaints, 335 race-related (56.9 percent)
1993:	684 complaints, 379 race-related (55.4 percent)
Six-year total:	2,984 complaints, 1,798 race-related (60.3 percent)
* Complaints concerning discrimination based on age and disability, which were not illegal prior to 1990, are not included in these figures. Savannah office was established in 1988.	
Source: U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission	

said, followed by a viewing of family photos by the two deputies.

But it led to Wilcox's firing, Bunce said, and misdemeanor battery charges that continued to plague his law enforcement career for months afterward.

Wilcox, a major at the time of his dismissal, said Mitchell never wanted a high-ranking black in the department and wasted no time in seeking his removal after succeeding former Sheriff Carl Griffin in 1984.

He said exploiting the kiss was a poorly concealed, initially successful, but ultimately expensive attempt to achieve that end.

"Sheriff Mitchell would never address me by my proper rank, he would always call me Capt. Wilcox or Lt. Wilcox," said Wilcox, 45. "He limited my duties so that I never left the jail, whereas, I had handled everything and anything before under Sheriff Griffin."

"There were also a lot of little things - for instance, I was the only supervisor at my level who was not assigned a permanent car - but when he came downstairs with that battery warrant, it was still a complete surprise to me."

"Sheriff Mitchell said they would keep it all quiet and handle it internally," Wilcox said, "but by the time I got home a half-hour later, it was on the evening news."

Mitchell said he never discriminated against blacks during his eight years as Chatham County sheriff but would not discuss the Wilcox case, saying he is prohibited from doing so by federal court order.

Mitchell said the percentage of black deputies increased from 20 percent to 42 percent from 1984 to 1991, and the number of black supervisors in the department went from two to seven.

### Reverse Discrimination?

For the EEOC, which received 305,575 labor discrimination complaints and obtained more than \$200 million in settlements from 1981 to 1993, employment decisions based on race, religion, gender, disability and age have no place in the workplace.

It views reverse discrimination and discrimination cases similarly

because both deprive victims of their right to be judged as individuals, according to EEOC officials.

Joe Gillam, the white police sergeant, said he was passed over for promotion this year by a less qualified black colleague because of the Hinesville Police Department's desire for a black lieutenant.

Gillam said discrimination and reverse discrimination are two sides of the same coin to him and the fundamental issue is not race, but individuality. His EEOC complaint and that of Tignor remain under investigation; Hinesville officials have denied their allegations.

"Discrimination is discrimination, and I'm really not a believer in such a thing as reverse discrimination," Gillam said. "I don't think reverse is a verb that describes discrimination."

"Everyone wants to be promoted solely on their own merits and not at someone else's expense," Gillam said. "And if they have skills, they don't want to see them wasted when they are passed by in favor of someone else with less skills - there's no reverse in that as far as I can see."

Tignor declined to be interviewed. University of Georgia rural sociologist Doug Bachtel said the disparity between the percentage of EEOC complaints related to race in Georgia - 60 percent - and nationally 50 percent does not necessarily mean racism is worse here. He said the higher state rate is to be expected because blacks account for 27 percent of the state population compared with 12 percent nationwide.

Race has become a highly charged issue in the workplace, Barnett said, particularly at a time when many companies are downsizing.

Bunce said racism of all types continues to infect the workplace, and official statistics support that conclusion.

"It's not always easy to go in and actually prove that a violation has occurred because employers are more aware and the violations are less overt," Barnett said. "That makes it more difficult to uncover during the course of an investigation."

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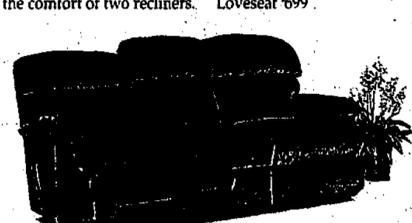
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