

# The Stories Not Told

By JACK GRAYES

A former New York Daily News reporter, Natalie Byfield, who, with her photojournalist husband, Clarence Sheppard, runs the Black Media Foundation, urged at a Unity Program meeting last Thursday that minority students become more involved in the field of journalism.

In 1988, said Ms. Byfield, a resident of Shirley who left the Daily News when Mort Zuckerman took over, only 4 percent of African Americans, 2 percent of Latinos, and 1 percent of Asians were reporters.

In 1996, she said, citing statistics provided by the Society of Newspaper Editors, the respective percentages were 5, 3, and 3. In the late 1960s, she said, the figure for African Americans was 2 percent, leading her to opine that diversity had not yet been achieved in the media.

## Voices Not Heard

The Black Media Foundation's aims, said Ms. Byfield, whose 5-year-old son, Kenya, is a kindergartener at the Hampton Day School, where she spoke to Unity's teenaged members, were "to teach media literacy, to address the underrepresentation of minorities in the media, and to improve communication art skills in disadvantaged communities."

"Because those," she said, "are the voices that are not being heard."

As a reporter of African American descent she had a difficult time at times in pursuing stories she thought needed telling, said Ms. Byfield. In particular, she cited a tortuous and ul-

timinately unsuccessful quest to write a story for the Daily News concerning a Harlem community center's allegations that black youths' civil rights were repeatedly being violated by police in the aftermath of the Central Park jogger rape and beating — a story that she had covered for the paper for four months.

## Skewed Coverage

She had alternately pitched the story to the city editor, to the suburban editor, to the Sunday editor, and finally — led up with newsworthy protocol — to the editor in chief himself, who agreed the story was worthy, only to see it run long after the fact buried among obituaries in the little-read Saturday edition.

"The coverage of crime in the city was so skewed," she said, that if, after reading the papers, she were dropped into New York from another planet, she would run from every black person she saw.

Because they controlled the police blotter, the police were a crime reporter's first cousin, said Ms. Byfield, who added, "I'm not going to say there shouldn't be a relationship between police and reporters, but who is it who makes the final decision as to what to report and what not to report?" Surely newsworthy crimes weren't limited solely to minority precincts, she said.

## Shrinking News Hole

Essentially, 10 corporate media powers devoted to the bottom line were deciding, said Ms. Byfield, what was being covered, read, and seen in this country. Though much hope lay, she said, in the freedom accorded by the Internet.

The news hole — already small because of the preponderance of advertising — had been reduced even further in recent years, she said, because of beautiful-people stories and puff pieces, "feel-good stories," that crowded out hard news stories about genuine issues.

Racial prejudice aside, everyone had certain biases and preconceptions, said Ms. Byfield, and to prove it she, posing as a contrite basketball star who said she had been charged with driving while intoxicated, conducted a lively mock press conference that because of various presuppositions ended "with no one the wiser as to the facts of the case."

## Shopping Trip

It was because she wanted her voice to be heard, said Ms. Byfield, and because of her conviction that it would not be heard at the Daily News that she and her husband had



NATALIE BYFIELD, a former New York Daily News reporter, conducted a mock press conference to demonstrate that everyone, to some degree, made judgments. *Jack Grayes*

begin the foundation, which in the summer at Fordham University runs a Dow Jones-sponsored journalism program for minority students to which she suggested that Unity Program students apply.

In other Unity Program news, William Hartwell, who oversees the increasingly popular group with Richard (Junie) Wingfield and Ava Mack, later said the program would sponsor a Christmas shopping trip to outlets in Lancaster, Pa., the day after Thanksgiving, a trip coinciding with a fund-raising fashion show put on by the Unity members and the appearance of a Hartwell-coached East End youth all-star basketball team at a memorial scholarship tournament in York, Pa.

That tourney, he said, "is played in memory of my best man's 5-year-old daughter, who drowned at a Girl Scout camp in York in 1997." The proceeds from last year's tournament resulted in the award of \$800 school-

ships to two York High School seniors, he said.

## Program Growing

The Unity Program and the memorial scholarship basketball tournament would split the fashion show's proceeds, Mr. Hartwell said.

As for the Unity Program's greater numbers — 68 had shown up the week before for a talk by Lucius Ware, head of the Eastern Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People — Mr. Hartwell said, with a smile, "The word is getting out. Kids need something to do, and I and Junie and Ava are committed to keep improving the program," which, Mr. Hartwell noted, included the study of African American history, work in conflict mediation and resolution, and substance abuse education.

"Each child has something special to contribute and something to gain," he said.

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## Libraries Recognized

The East Hampton Middle School and High School libraries are among the first school libraries in Suffolk County to be awarded Basic 2000 status by the State Education Commissioner, Richard Mills.

The recognition comes because the libraries are using computers and telecommunications technology to access information and resources beyond their doors. Each offers a two-way flow of requests and information into and out of the library.

The libraries are also considered "electronic doorway" libraries because of their computer technology and electronic networking abilities.