



Every Journalist Should Know

By: Hadiya Presswood

Herbert White was five years old when he knew he wanted to be a journalist.

“The light went on for me with a real tragedy; I was five the night Martin Luther King was shot and killed and I was so impressed with the way ... they (Chet Huntley with NBC News) went about telling the story,” says White. “I don’t know who Martin Luther King is, but these guys are great.”

The Winnabow native got his first taste of news reporting during his teenage years, writing for his middle school paper, and later at Johnson C. Smith University, majoring in Communication Arts. There he worked for the campus newspaper and held summer internships with WGIV radio, WBTV and Wilmington Star News.

Herbert White, editor-in-chief of The Charlotte Post

White says his experience in radio was his foundation for broadcast and it challenged him to be a more descriptive writer. He prefers print because of the power and historic record of the written word. He describes writing as “the linchpin of all communication; if you have a command of writing, you have a command of messaging.”

In 1984 he graduated and worked for various North Carolina publications. White not-so-fondly recalls the time he spent commuting daily from Charlotte to Statesville, about an hour-long drive, while working for Iredell County News.

“Back in those days, before computers became the way to do things in this business, you had to lay out the paper by hand with exacto knives, wax, and paper ... and we’d be in the office until midnight, maybe 2 a.m.”

After staff reduction ended his employment there, he added freelancing to his skill set and began contributing sports articles to The Charlotte Observer. The summer of 1987, The Charlotte Post had a position listed for a female editor for the lifestyle section. White, seeing an opportunity to get firmly established at a newspaper, pitched himself to The Charlotte Post’s editor and convinced her and the publisher to consider him; ultimately, White landed the position.

He began writing general assignments and feature stories. Overtime, as other editors left the publication, he rose through the ranks and in 1991 became the managing editor, now editor-in-chief. His duties include news gathering and assigning stories, writing articles, editing reporters’ stories, editing videos and producing a podcast.

“My hands are in everything; they have to be because it’s a small shop,” says White.

Since 1878, The Charlotte Post has reflected Charlotte’s Black community interests. White wasn’t necessarily looking for a Black niche publication, he says it chose him.

“The Post during that time, like most community publications, was a smaller mom-and-pop shop that was focused on community issues but didn’t necessarily have the scope to think bigger in terms of issues ... now we’ve developed reporting that gets into the weeds of what this means to you as a citizen or a taxpayer or a student.”

White challenge the claim that everything doesn’t have to be about Black people. He, and The Charlotte Post, tell the stories that are of general interest and relatable to the Black community.

“We pull back that veil, we say ‘this is a conversation we need to have,’ says White. “There’s no endeavor that human beings will get into that should exclude Black folks and their experiences from it.”

White has spent a sizable portion of his career writing about Black interests. His most memorable experience was covering The Million Man March in 1995, for which he received an award from the National Newspaper Publishers Association.

“I got there a day or two before, went to the march and for me it was a mind-blowing experience on a personal and professional level,” says White. “It was the greatest story I ever told.”

When it comes to the future of journalism, White says, “no one in authority actually knows” how it will develop, but he believes the traditional model, an advertising and reporting relationship, is becoming defunct. He proposes that support for local press will resurge as publications learn how to leverage their brand and generate community engagement. As publications seek to reinvent themselves, White stresses the importance of seasoned journalists alongside new reporters to preserve credibility and maintain the legacy of truth and community.

In the meantime, he says, “the two things that every journalist should have: you should have command of the language and you must have imagination ... or you’ll be stuck in the past before you know it.”