

Leona Allen transcribed

00:00:00 Chynerra Parker What first got you interested in journalism?

00:00:04 Leona Allen Um, this was a while ago (laughs), but I was on the student paper at Skyline in Dallas and had a really great journalism teacher, still my friend today, who got me interested. Skyline at the time was one of the first magnets in Dallas. She was very energetic and fun, and I was on the school newspaper and the yearbook staff there. So, I knew in high school that I was going to pursue journalism. I remember before that growing up here watching Iola Johnson on channel 8 who was like one of the first black women in TV period on the local news channels here and thought then I was going to be a TV broadcast journalist and a TV reporter. I kind of got the writing bug in high school, and it kind of took off from there.

00:01:07 CP And this is correct you graduated from UNT?

00:01:08 LA I did.

00:01:09 CP Okay. And your first job was at the Dallas Times Herald.

00:01:12 LA Nope my first job was actually at Harte Hanks (?) community newspaper. That had a lot of community newspapers here when I was in school. My first job-full time job- I was actually a senior at North Texas. It was North Texas then, not UNT. (Laughs) So, my senior year I had some really understanding instructors. And I was working full time, and I had a full load of classes as well. And I was able to use some of my work summary meetings for my public affairs classes, which was one of the only ways I got through school that year. And I actually worked for four years at the community newspaper before I went to work at the Times Herald.

00:02:00 CP Okay. And did you know someone when you got to the Times?

00:02:03 LA No, I started actually doing an internship at Harte Hanks through North Texas. And they were looking for-I was covering night meetings, and you know it was a summer internship. And they needed a reporter so they actually hired me full time. So it was actually through my internship at North Texas that they hooked me up with some editors at Harte Hanks.

00:02:35 CP Okay. So what was the newspaper office like when you first started?

00:02:39 LA I did a little of everything. We wrote stories; we sold ads; we laid the paper out; we shot photographs; I mean we did a little of everything - all the jobs. It's very much like what we did at the NT Daily. We did all the jobs, and I think it really prepared me for the job, which was doing a little of everything. We did some promotions; we did it all. It was very much a reporter job (you had that title), but you did a little of everything.

00:03:18 CP So, you can pretty much say you were multitasking.

00:03:20 LA Absolutely. We did it all.

00:03:24 CP Okay, so when you worked at the Akron Journal, what was it like to be part of a team that won a Pulitzer Prize?

00:03:33 LA Pretty exciting. None of us do the work thinking 'oh we're going to get a prize at the end,' but this was a year-long project that we worked on, so to have it validated that way was pretty remarkable. I remember I had moved to Columbus at the time. I was still working for the Journal, but I moved to The State House by the time the Pulitzers were announced that year. So it was still with the Journal but working at Columbus instead of Akron. And got the call from my editor, "You're not going to believe this; make sure you're sitting down. You won the Pulitzer. You can come up here, drive here 'cause we're having a big party." I actually stayed at the house of my reporting partner on the series that weekend because we all went, at that point, to all these parties; so it was pretty exciting and just validation that was pretty important work that we did on race relations in Akron and some of that work I understand that as long as I've been gone from there, 20 years now, that they're still having community meetings, that was really started with that project 20 years ago.

00:04:56 CP How did the story develop?

00:04:59 LA Akron was and probably still is to a certain extent a very white and black community. And in '94 the folks were still living in separate areas of town. Not in any kind of 'you have to live over here' kind of way, but very segregated. Still, it's a very segregated city with whites living in one area and blacks living in another area and some smaller numbers of other minorities. But brainstorming one day, the projects editor talked, and we started bouncing ideas like 'how can we get at that these residents in the city still live separate lives' and it started from there, just having conversations about how we could tell that story in a different way. What ended up happening is that we did it in segments. My part was housing. And how in reality people did not live - they may work together - but they live in separate parts of the city. There were all different parts of economic backgrounds, but they still were living separately. And my partner and I worked on why that is, and how we came to this point that people are living separately. Now some of it was pretty discriminatory real estate rules at the time and some of it practice: real estate agents taking white families to this area and not black families to this area. So we were able to explore what was really happening and how people lived. And the project was set up that housing was one segment, crime was one segment, business was one segment and schools was one segment. And my partner and I worked on the housing piece of it. So it really came from brainstorming sessions and us meeting and really trying to really get at what's happening in the city. And we always do this component every week, something that tries to bring the community together and there were series of a lot of meetings where we actually brought people together to talk about why is this? Why is your kid going to school with all black kids and why does your school go to school with all white kids? What's going on in the city? And I think it started a dialogue that really continues to this day.

00:07:48 CP Okay so working with a team, do you think it was beneficial to have that partner to help you do this project? Was it that much of a task?

00:07:57 LA Absolutely. It was kind of an experiment really in that it was a black reporter and a white reporter that were paired together on each of the teams by design. And we started out the project understanding that people come to their lives with different perspectives. I was raised in Dallas, and she was raised in Boston. I thought that by design that really affected the way they tell the story because I didn't interview just black people, and she didn't interview just white people but just bringing those different perspectives together made us ask each other questions and checks and balances. I don't think we would have gotten as rich a story or as frank a conversation if we did what the people before and only talked to certain people. There were some people who felt more comfortable talking to me; there were some that felt the same towards her, and I think we would not have been able to get the frank conversation that we got had we not been paired that way. She's one of my best friends still today because of that. We were able to have a really interesting conversation. I remember we were driving around neighborhoods - I was driving, and we saw a kid hanging out on the corner. Not a dangerous kid he was dressed like a teenager with jeans and a shirt. He was a black kid on the corner. I remember us stopping on that corner, and she chose that moment to lock our doors. And by then we were friends enough and open enough to say 'okay I don't drive around the city with my door unlocked either, but why did you choose that particular moment to lock your door? What made you do that?' and we were able to have a very frank conversation about it. You see her and she has her keys and you're wondering why she didn't lock the door before she left the parking lot and I think it had her eyes open and my eyes open and I don't think we would have been able to really report that story as effectively had we not been paired up as a team.

00:10:40 CP And how long did the project last?

00:10:42 LA The whole series reporting-wise was a year. My quarter part of it was three months. We did it by quarters, and then we had all of these forums after. The reporting time was probably about six months, and then we reported for three really hard months and then it was published. So it was in quarters.

00:11:11 CP Were you all taking pictures on the way?

00:11:13 LA No, we were interviewing people; we interviewed reams of people. We looked at real estate records and deeds and covenants for neighborhoods. So, it was a lot of research and a lot of talking to sources and a lot of interviews. A lot of people opened their homes to us to come chat, and we took a photographer with us.

00:11:38 CP so you all were just doing the writing

00:11:39 LA Mm-hmm. Or people wrote us and said 'hey, this person is an interesting person in the neighborhood,' or 'hey this person is good to interview. This lady has lived here for

40 years. You should talk to her about the history of the area and how things came to be.’ So a variety of sources we talked to—we got them from some people we knew in the newsroom who lived in a particular area so we talked to reams of people and tried to get at attitudes and why they came to be and how these neighborhoods get this way. So it was pretty fascinating to hear people talk through how they came to live where they did and why they lived there. What was interesting about Akron was that even people—most cities’ income is the leveler but in Akron at that time, even if people were in like incomes they didn’t live in the same neighborhoods if they were different races. So it was very not horrible, there wasn’t any ‘you’ve got to live in a certain part of town’ it’s just how people lived. I live over here. I can afford to live over there but I don’t. And then there were some people who were considered trailblazers. Even in 1993 if they were the black family that moved into the traditional white neighborhood. It’s just fascinating to look at things there.

00:13:24 CP Did you know that this series was up for a prize?

00:13:30 LA Well I knew we were doing some important work. What happens typically with stories like that that you’re working on for a long time you know you’re doing something important. Typically when a paper invests that much time and resources in something, it’s probably going to be entered into some contest; that’s just how it works. But I don’t think anyone of us conceived actually winning. It was a public service. So it was clearly deemed to be important to that community. So I don’t think any of us thought it would win or did the work thinking ‘okay this can win a prize.’ It’s really knowing the work was important and deep and rich.

00:14:24 CP So you reaped the benefits. You’ve been excited and invested. How has this affected your career?

00:14:30 LA Well it’s good to have at the top of the resume - really, really good. And it gives you the credibility. I went to the Beacon Journal to here 20 years ago. December 24th is my 20th anniversary here. So I left Akron and came to the Morning News. I was already familiar with a lot of the editors here, but I came back here. I worked at the Times Herald. Peter actually applied for a job here when the Herald folded, and there were no openings here that were right for me then and I went to Akron. So it opens some doors for you. You don’t have to explain to people what the Pulitzer means. You come in the door with some credibility. I remember wanting to come back home, and I was interviewing in Detroit at the Free Press as well, and it just gives you an entrée that not everybody has. It is a rare thing still, although they award a lot of them every year. It’s still very rare, so it gives you a good amount of credibility, and people say ‘okay, this person must have done something really good to win this award,’ but you still have to prove yourself. It may have opened some doors for me, and I think it did open some doors for me, but I still had to prove myself. You still have to do the work; you still have to do the now. And it’s interesting this past February I was on the—if you won a Pulitzer you’re invited to be a jurist. All the jurists vote on Pulitzer Prize each year. Each year all of the people that are

jurists-typically and many of them-won Pulitzer. So it's interesting being at Columbia having won the Pulitzer judging categories. It opened some door for me and still it's not like someone said "here are five jobs because you won the Pulitzer" but it gives you an amount of credibility not everybody has. So you're distinguished already from your colleagues. Everybody is lining up and you see 'okay this person has won a Pulitzer, I'm going to look at her differently.'

00:17:20 CP Congratulations to you for that. That's a great accomplishment. How was the transition from Ohio to Dallas Morning news?

00:17:36 LA Well. Dallas is my home so I was very familiar. My family's still here. The transition was harder from Dallas to Ohio for me because I didn't know a soul there. I was stepping out on faith, and I had to work. I figured if I was going to move across the country this was the time to do it. I didn't know a soul there. But I knew I felt good about the work that Akron was doing. So the work part wasn't a big transition for me. The cold was a big transition for me. The snow was a big transition for me. The gray and the sun not coming out a lot was a big transition for me. But coming back home was like coming back home. I started at the state house when I left the Beacon; then I came back here and reported for two months. So really part of the transition to the city was a big one for me. The real transition was 'okay, they're promising you you were going to edit at this newspaper but you're coming in as a reporter because that's the opening they have,' and so again I stepped out on faith and thought 'okay they're making me these promises.' This is what I really want to do next so it was an easy transition because my family was here.

00:19:12 CP So it was a little more comfortable. What other stories are the most memorable to you other than the series?

00:19:23 LA I remember one of the first stories I worked on when I came back here at the Morning News was about the historical neighborhoods in Dallas. I learned a lot through that story. It was black history month, and we were trying to find a way to do black history month stories in a different way. My part was to talk about historical black neighborhoods in Dallas, so I learned a lot and found a historian who was really really fantastic about historic black neighborhoods that I didn't know anything about. I knew a few of them but not how they got started or how 'oh this used to be freedman's town' and I knew about Deep Ellum as a big jazzy area but how was Deep Ellum developed? And Hamilton Park. So I learned a lot about neighborhoods here when I first started so that was a big deal for me. As an editor here, I think one of the most memorable stories was when one of our reporters did a story on Lauren Cavanaugh, who was the little girl who was locked in the closet by her mom and her stepdad for years. And recently Scott, who is one of our reporters, caught back up with her and looked at what her life was like. She told him a story, and it was an eight-part series about what her life had been like, how she got treated and how she actually has some amount of sanity after what happened to her. I think that's still one of the memorable stories I've ever worked on because it was such an emotional thing. And I think at the Times Herald I worked on a lot of stories and

one of them there was a serial killer. I was covering courts at the time a serial killer - Albright. He killed like several prostitutes, and he would cut their eyes out after he killed them. So I'm young and I'm like 'okay I'm going to be an important house reporter' and that was pretty scary. So after that you realize you can deal with anything. You've seen pictures of women with their eyes cut out. We should catch back up with him and see if he's still around. But he never came up for the death penalty-he's been on death row forever. I don't think he's been killed. That stuck with me because it was so crazy.

00:22:31 CP Do you think you have to have tough skin in the news world?

00:22:33 LA Yeah, I think it's so funny if somebody were to sit in on our news meeting and hear us joking of some pretty morbid stuff (laughs), they would think we were cold and heartless. But it really is a coping mechanism because, particularly covering courts, I saw some stuff that no human being ought to see. It was just horrible stuff. And I think you have to develop a 'wow I can handle anything if I saw that.' If you're not affected by it, then something is probably wrong with you. But you learn how to think: okay I have a job to do. Somebody's love one has just died; I got to go talk to his mom.' It forces you to have a strong reserve and resolve to cover this stuff because it's terrible. I've seen tornado victims and kids. So you have to develop a really tough exterior because you still have a job to do. It forces you to be tough and not be scared and be fearless. I can drop in the middle of any story or any city or any scene and feel like I can figure my way out because I was forced to do that. I remember a story in Akron where prisoners took over a prison and we were there for eleven days while the prisoners were negotiating with officials and they killed two of the guards. You see some stuff as a reporter and an editor and you have to remain calm and get through your work.

00:24:37 CP Have you found yourself taking a story home and not understand it or maybe crying about it?

00:24:44 LA Absolutely. At the end of a two week trial where a kid is being abused, it gets to you. And you have to try to compartmentalize it and try not to bring it home, you have to find some coping mechanisms. I exercise and I run you have to let out the steam or you will go crazy. But we were in a tough place people are crazy and they do crazy things. If you're in this business you have to develop some way to cope and rationalize what you're seeing and find some way to still get your job done. But yeah you're not a human being if you're not affected by some of this stuff. In the news meetings we crack jokes on some of this stuff and if someone was to hear us they would say 'oh my god I can't believe they're doing that,' but it really is a coping mechanism.

00:26:00 CP Well, during this journey have you faced any obstacles, gender issues, race issues?

00:26:12 LA It's interesting that it's not uncommon for me to be the only black woman in a room or in a news meeting, and it's not uncommon for me to be the only black woman in

leadership in jobs I have had. But I went to Skyline when Skyline was majority white. It's majority minorities no, but at that time Skyline was mostly white. I didn't live there. It's a magnet school, so we were bussed there. So I grew up with a lot of different races and ethnicities so I was comfortable in that environment. And my work environment hasn't been any different from that. So saying that, I feel like I am here for a purpose. I am still one of the only few black women in leadership at this paper. With that, you wish there were more, but that carries a responsibility. I feel like I'm here for a reason, and there are unique things I bring to the table because I am female and I am black. I don't hesitate to bring them to the table. So I wouldn't call it an obstacle. I wish there were more of us. But I'm not afraid to bring my differences to the table and speak up on a subject that I know something about, uniquely. And my bosses have been very receptive to that. I don't know how it is for people who feel uncomfortable speaking up. I've always been able to say 'wait a minute what you're thinking about this story is wrong. Let me tell me from my perspective what rally's going on here or what we should look at.' I feel like I have a lot of respect here because I've paid my dues here. And I think my bosses respect what uniqueness I bring to the table. I don't know how it is for people who are shy or feel like they can't speak up because I'm just not one of those people. I've had eight jobs at the Morning News since I've been here, and I've steadily moved up the ladder. I am near the top of the leadership pole - you want to grow - I'm no different from anyone else I want to go far here, so far I've been able to do what I want to develop in journalism and go far here. It's an interesting position to be in. Newspapers are traditionally white and male at the leadership place, and that's true across the board, not here but everywhere. Lots of women and minorities are coming up the ranks, but the leadership at newspapers nationally is very white and male. I have a seat at the table, and I don't hesitate to use it. I am here for a reason.

00:29:59 CP What is your normal day like?

00:30:04 LA I usually get here between about 8:30. I have a 10 year old to get to school so I get here about 8:30 or 8:45. And we start a series of news meetings. I'm usually out of here around 5:45 to pick up the kiddo and get her settled. I'm usually back at work when she gets down. I'm reading stories or answering emails or preparing some reports. So my days are pretty long, but that's just life in the newspaper business. I'm at the point where if I need to be at my kiddo's school for an event at 11 a.m., then I'm able to be at the school at 11 a.m. My bosses are very flexible about it. I'm not going to miss my kid's meetings for anything. My days are typically long. I work Monday through Friday. That's standard for me. But election night happens, and I know I'm going to work election night. Ebola happens, and you're working on a Sunday. So normal is Monday through Friday, I usually get here by 8:30 and leave by 5:30 and pick up my child and then get back to work for a bit after she's settled.

00:31:54 CP So, with a 10 year old, how do you create a balance with personal and work?

00:31:58 LA I work hard to get out of here by 5:30. I work really hard. I eat at my desk a lot so I'm not spending an hour eating so I have to catch back up after an hour. If my kid has a meeting, I am at that meeting. If there's a field trip then I volunteer at her school Tuesdays mornings helping her teacher. We are here for home-not the other way around. We are working so our families are comfortable and not the other way around. Because my bosses are flexible with me I turn around and I am the same way with my crew. I always tell them to do what they need to do. I just feel like we have so many hours we put in here all the time unexpectedly that you can take off here to spend an hour at your kid's school if you need to it's not unbalanced- instead there is a balance. My dad picks my daughter up from school two days a week to take her to soccer practice because I know I can't take that time to bring her from her after care to soccer practice at 6 p.m. It's just not going to happen. You just have to have a big support system and try to get yourself organized. I am a much more efficient boss since I've had my kids. You have to have your ducks in order and prepare for the unexpected. Cause stuff is going to come up. This is business. Like I said the Ebola victim happened Sunday at 8 p.m. I'm doing a conference call at my kitchen table and we had to talk about where we are going to send everyone. You expect it to be crazy.

00:34:06 CP Are you like deadline-sensitive? Do you carry yourself with that?

00:34:11 LA Absolutely. It's a deadline business. The paper has to be out at a certain time every night. It forced you to think 'I have to have this story by this time' and the paper comes out every single day, and it has to be filled every single day. And we've been working under this deadline pressure since the beginning, and you learn it and get used to it. When you don't have deadlines, your life goes really, really slow. So you kind of give yourself deadlines. That's kind of how I function now.

00:34:48 CP So, how has the newsroom changed now from then to now?

00:34:57 LA The newsroom is very different. At the core, we are now doing stories that matter to people, but now digital has now changed everything. Everybody is not breaking news first; everybody is now contributing to the website because that's where the industry is growing. Print is still a big part of what we do, but it's not growing it's declining. So the challenging thing now is to keep your print product stellar because it's still our institution while doing some innovative stuff on digital which is growing but it's hasn't grown yet so we try to work in a cycle now. Work for digital work for digital and work telling a story for print. We are much faster now. No longer are you waiting two days for stuff. If it happened, put it on the web. Ebola, and fire, anything put it on the web because we are in competition with the TV stations. We are all now fighting for viewers. We weren't always in a competition with TV stations, but now we are. So it's a much more competitive environment. I worked for the Times Herald, and the first thing you did was go across the street and get a copy of the paper to see if they have a story you don't have or if they beat you to something. Now people are on their phones and can look it up in an instant. So the competition to be first is big now. But we are still in the news business. So our

standard is to be first and accurate. So it's a challenge. It's way more challenging now. I don't think people are looking any more hours, but they are looking differently. They may be getting up at 6 a.m. and looking at twitter. If there was a 9 o'clock meeting you would put it in the paper the next day. Now you have to put it online, and you may have to refresh it and make it better and different for print because people are going to have already read that information yesterday. So we are working faster now. And more digital now. And we are in competition with many more people now. Not just TV but websites that report anything, and I think the thing that still distinguishes us is that we have a large staff of expert reporters that know what to do. Credibility is what we have. Credibility and credible reporters that have been in the business a long time is what separates us from our competitors. You're constantly looking for things that will set us apart. And what contexts and analysis will separate us from the competitors. The news room is much faster now. People are moving faster now, and we just didn't have to deal with that.

00:39:05 CP You did the fellow with Columbia University. What did that entail?

00:39:15 LA That was a year-long program. And I went to New York five times during the year. And you worked on a project the whole year. You would go there and get business leadership training, and every one had a specific project they were working on for their paper during that year. Mine was creating some digital community sites for our websites that exist today. So you would work on your project for your paper, but you would come back to Columbia four or five times a year to get instruction on how to deal with everything in the business world. There were a lot of professors talking about economics and how to innovate and how to sort through ideas to sort through the best one. So, it was part classroom, part practical work. And then you had a coach that you would talk to regularly to talk you through issues you had. And project development and how to sale them to people who don't work for you, how to get a team or people moving in the same direction when not all of them work for you. It was pretty enlightening because it was a year-long part classroom part work, all around something that you newspaper surely needs to get done. Being on that campus was innovating and invigorating because it kind of got your juice. In our class it was 24 people from around the world. You had two guys from a startup in Ireland; you had guy from the New York Times and you had a woman who worked for a publishing company. All around communication in journalism and all trying to figure out a way to transition an organization from their legacy of print to being more digitally focused. We were all in here trying to figure out our different projects for our different entities. I learned a lot from the guys form Ireland; they started a quick startup company and got things done. They learned a lot from us print people about building people and building brand.

00:42:16 CP And did you bring any of those things back?

00:46:16 LA Oh, absolutely. There are techniques and methods I learned there that I still use today.

00:42:31 CP So I did want to ask. What was the news like between Dallas Morning News and Dallas Times?

00:42:34 LA Intense! (Laughs) The Times Herald started out as an afternoon paper, and the [Morning News] was morning; then the Times went to morning, so there were two morning papers competing with each other. So it was probably the first newspaper wars in the country. It was intense. You were in the morning. I competed with a guy here who is one of the best reporters ever. We were both covering courts and at the time our press offices were across the hall from each other at Lew Steritt. You would get up in the a.m. and think what we each got that day. He'd come across the hall and ask how I got stories, and I wasn't going to tell him my sources! We ended up being friends, but it was tough competition. At the time, the Morning News was the more conservative newspaper, and the Times Herald was the more liberal newspaper. But we're all covering the same stuff and trying not to let the other one beat you. I was at the Herald the day it cloaked. I was in the middle of a trial and got a call on a Sunday and was told that this was the last day of the Herald and I had to get my stuff. So it was very intense.

00:44:58 CP Being that you manage the departments and salary and budget, do you consider yourself a spender or a saver?

00:45:10 LA I am a little bit of both. I have to do a little of both. I have to watch expenses because that part of my job, but when stories call for spending money, we spend money. Elections night we have to have more people here so we spend money; if someone wants to go to Liberia to cover Ebola, you have to come up with the money. So I do a little bit of both.

00:45:45 CP So do you carry those budget techniques home?

00:45:50 LA Absolutely!

00:46:00 CP (laughs) So, what are your plans for the future?

00:46:03 LA I don't know. I think I will always do something that involves being close to stories. The most interesting thing of my job is telling stories in ways people hadn't thought of before, so I'll always do that. I think I like mentoring, and I like working with reporters and I like the leadership part and having a seat at the battle. I think I will always do something that involves all of those things.