

‘Leona Allen: Woman behind the Pulitzer Prize’



By

Jessica Mitchell
Chynerra Parker
DeAnn Thomas

Even in the early '90s, Akron, Ohio, was still a segregated community to a certain extent, even though no laws existed to keep the races separate. The reporting staff at the *Akron Beacon Journal* set out to uncover the reasoning behind this separation and to illustrate the differences in a way that would help the community understand their hidden biases.

Throughout a year, the reporters, including Leona Allen, examined different aspects of the community, like housing, crime, businesses and schools. The series sparked a dialogue within the community that has lasted for the past 20 years, and it earned a Pulitzer Prize for public service journalism.

“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,” Allen said. “But, I don’t think any 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.”

Winning the Pulitzer Prize not only validated the importance of the work, but it gave some credibility and status to the reporters, which helped Allen return home to Dallas to work for the *Dallas Morning News*.

Allen had grown up in Dallas, where she got hooked on journalism while attending Skyline High School. She studied journalism at the University of North Texas, where she landed her first newspaper job at the Harte Hanks community newspaper. Allen said experiences working at the NT Daily campus newspaper helped teach all aspects of the newspaper business, which was important when she first started working in the newsroom at the Harte Hanks newspaper.

“I did a little of everything,” Allen said. “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 was very much a reporter job (you had that title), but you did a little of everything.”

After four years of working at the community newspaper, Allen went on to work at the *Dallas Times Herald*. While covering the court beat, she learned how tough being a reporter could be. She covered the murders committed by Charles Albright, a serial murderer who killed prostitutes and cut out their eyes.

“So, you have to develop a really tough exterior because you still have a job to do,” Allen said. “It forces you to be tough and not be scared and be fearless. I can drop in the middle of any story or city or any scene and feel like I can figure my way out because I was forced to do that. . . . You see some stuff as a reporter and an editor, and you have to remain calm and get through your work.”

When the *Times Herald* went under, Allen moved to Ohio to work for the *Beacon Journal*, where she covered the housing section of the series on race relations in Akron. She

moved back home to Dallas to work for the *Dallas Morning News* on Dec. 24, 1994. Now, in her 20th year at the *Morning News*, she serves as the deputy managing editor.

“I am still one of the only few black women in leadership at this paper,” Allen said.

“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 that I bring to the table because I am female and I am black. I don’t hesitate to bring them to the table.”

Allen strengthened her leadership skills through the Punch Sulzberger program at Columbia Journalism School, where she served as a fellow for a year, working on a project creating some digital community sites for the paper. She said that the newspaper has changed a lot since she started working at the Harte Hanks newspaper, including transitioning to an even faster paced, digital world. She plans to continue to work in the newspaper business going forward.

“The most interesting thing of my job is telling stories in way people hadn’t thought of before, so I will always do that,” Allen said. “I think I like mentoring, and I like working with reporters. 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.”