



THE FACE OF THE NEWS
WJAR-TV
news anchor
Gene Valicenti

LISTENING TO LOCALS

WJAR Responds to Community Issues, Concerns

By Debra Kaufman

Special to TelevisionWeek

WJAR-TV NBC Channel 10, owned by Media General, serves the Providence, R.I.-New Bedford, Mass. area, the nation's 51st-largest market. With General Manager Lisa Churchill and News Director Betty Jo Cugini at the helm, the station focuses on news and public affairs coverage in a way that maximizes its impact on the community.

A recent example took place as the Wall Street meltdown began. "We threw out all the scripts," said assistant news director Christopher Lanni. "Instead, we did a live 10 Town Meeting with a panel of experts with different kinds of financial expertise, from mortgages to retirement, investments and so on." With an open phone bank and live Web chat, viewers from across southern New England were able to ask their questions.

That immediate responsiveness to events affecting the community is business as usual at WJAR-TV.

Last year, the community suffered several tragedies related to underage drinking. "Again, we threw out all the scripts and did a 10 Town Meeting with community and school leaders, parents and teenagers themselves in the studio to examine the topic," said Mr. Lanni. "Community feedback was astonishing. It really opened up a dialogue, especially in the one town that had put this issue on the forefront."

The station also boasts the market's only dedicated political reporter, Bill Rappleye. "Bill obviously does our day-to-day coverage on political stories," said Mr. Lanni. "He also mans the market's only bureau at the state house, so he has significant exclusive insight into the workings of state politics."

The station produces two public affairs programs, the 10 News Conference, co-hosted by Mr. Rappleye and iTeam reporter Jim Taricani, and, in election season, the Political Roundtable, with experts from both sides.

WJAR takes pride in its "fair, accurate and balanced newscasts." It has a

2008 Murrow Award Winners: TV-Small Market

Overall excellence: WJAR-TV, Cranston, R.I.

Continuing coverage: WKRQ-TV, Mobile, Ala., "Mobile's Makeover"

Feature: Hard news: WLTX-TV, Columbia, S.C., "Filyaw's Letters"

Feature reporting: News 10 Now, Syracuse, N.Y., "Dr. Seuss Winter"

Investigative reporting: WLOX-TV, Biloxi, Miss., "Home Sweet Meth Home"

News documentary: KTHV-TV, Little Rock, Ark., "50 Years: Central High Foundations of Freedom"

News series: WHAM-TV, Rochester, N.Y., "A Wish Before Dying"

Newscast: A-Channel Barrie, Toronto, "A-Channel News at 6"

Sports reporting: KCCI-TV, Des Moines, Iowa, "One Week: Highway 5"

Spot news coverage: WSLN-TV, Roanoke/Blacksburg, Va., "Virginia Tech Massacre Day 1"

Videography: KVUE-TV, Austin, Texas, "Seaholm Swan Song"

Web site: WSYR-TV, Syracuse, N.Y., 9wsyr.com

Writing: News 12 Connecticut, "David Springer Composite"

station ombudsman, Paul Giacobbe, a lawyer and former reporter, who acts as "the viewer's voice." Viewers concerned about any story can contact Mr. Giacobbe, who will watch the story and do his own research. "He makes an independent conclusion as to whether we were fair, accurate and balanced," said Mr. Lanni. "On occasion, his conclusions will force us to take another look at the story and make adjustments or retell it." ■

OFFERING A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Unity Award Winners Bring Compelling Vision to Reports

By Elizabeth Jensen

Special to TelevisionWeek

This year's Unity Award winners all come from correspondents who were looking beyond the usual news and ways of telling stories.

"Children of the Storm," the network TV category winner, was born out of CNN anchor/special correspondent Soledad O'Brien's middle-of-the-night brainstorm about a compelling new way to approach the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

Victor Blackwell, weekend anchor at Jacksonville, Fla., NBC affiliate WTLV, and photojournalist Bo Harris looked at the phenomenon of young black men who fail to finish high school in their two-part series "Dropping Out," the large-market winner.

And small-market winner "Way of the Warrior," which explores the role of Native Americans who have chosen to serve in the U.S. armed forces, was one producer Patty Loew was familiar with through her own family's history. It comes from Wisconsin Public Television and flagship station WHA-TV in Madison, Wis.

Ms. O'Brien, then co-anchor of CNN's morning show, said the idea of giving video cameras to New Orleans-area teens came to her one night in bed. Teens, she thought, could provide a different perspective on the city's challenging recovery, and would be at an age "where they were on the cusp of things happening" in their lives, just as the city of New Orleans was.

With a grant of nearly \$20,000 from CNN parent Turner Broadcasting to buy HD video cameras for 11 kids, the project was in motion. Ms. O'Brien, filmmaker Spike Lee and CNN producers and videographers started them off with a tutorial on filming. Mr. Lee was there mainly to inspire the kids, for whom "he's such a rock star," Ms. O'Brien said.

The children were encouraged to shoot video constantly from January to August, and their first-person stories played out in four- to five-minute chunks on "American Morning."

When Ms. O'Brien changed jobs, she took the project with her; the pieces were edited into a one-hour documentary for CNN's "Special Investigations Unit" that followed four of the kids in the years after the storm.

"I found the kids really have this resilience, no matter what," Ms. O'Brien said. Stories of survival as the city struggled with rising crime, she said, would be countered by the kids' protestations that they loved their city.

The kids' viewpoints also brought out the deeper story that had been New Orleans even before the storm



DIVERSIFICATION
Soledad O'Brien, left, and Victor Blackwell, below, are behind Unity Award-winning reports that give viewers insight into little-covered areas.



hit: "The issues were poverty issues, complicated by the storm," she said.

Although the project is over, Ms. O'Brien said she continues to talk to the kids, who still occasionally shoot video; CNN let them keep the cameras. "They did really well," she said. "It takes a lot to put together a good piece."

Dealing with similarly disadvantaged youth, WTLV's "Dropping Out" covered a nationwide problem that is particularly acute in the Jacksonville area, where 69% of black males in 2005 graduated late or not at all, Mr. Blackwell said.

The reports, which aired in in July 2007, profiled young men who dropped out and ended up in jail; it looked at their efforts to turn their lives around, he said. Mr. Blackwell anchors the evening and late-night weekend newscasts and is co-anchor of the weekend editions of "Good Morning Jacksonville."

The story examined some of the root causes, including a Florida law—part of the state's agricultural legacy—that allows young men to drop out of school at age 16. The reports also looked at an innovative "drop-back-in program," where students could go back to school at night and avoid the stigma of "being 17 and in the ninth grade," Mr. Blackwell said.

Some viewers offered mentorship to students, Mr. Blackwell said, and local organizations are mobilizing to find ways to reverse the trend.

Mr. Blackwell, who was raised by his mother in Baltimore, said he brought a unique perspective to these stories. "I have a lot of friends who could have been on the other side of the camera" in "Dropping Out," he said. "That's why I think it's important for me to tell those stories."

Unity Award Winners: Television

Network: CNN, Atlanta, Special Investigations Unit, "Children of the Storm"

Large Market: WTLV-TV, Jacksonville, Fla., "Dropping Out"

Small Market: WHA-TV, Madison, Wis., "Way of the Warrior"

Also offering a personal perspective was Ms. Loew, host of WPT's weekly magazine program "In Wisconsin." Her grandfather was one of 12,000 Native Americans who volunteered for World War I, even though he wasn't a citizen. As the idea for the film percolated, she said, she came to the realization that "I need to put my grandfather in this project."

A member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, Ms. Loew would ask veterans at powwows what motivated them to serve the country that hadn't always treated them well. "The assumed answer," she said, "is it's economics, opportunities, that there aren't any jobs on the reservation."

But that wasn't the whole story, she found. A Menominee veteran talked about the peace and friendship treaty his tribe signed with the U.S. in 1897, which he felt obligated him to serve. Other men were driven by their own Native heritage as warriors.

"The answers were much different than what I expected," she said.

The U.S. didn't always treat its Native American veterans with the same respect, Ms. Loew found. Because of stereotypes "both imposed and assumed," she said, Native Americans often were given the most dangerous assignments, and they suffered disproportionate casualty rates as well as higher instances of post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The film aired nationally on PBS in November. It had been offered to PBS stations as an optional program, but after Latinos protested at not seeing their own stories told in Ken Burns' epic World War II documentary "The War," PBS decided to add "Way of the Warrior" to its national feed. ■