

From the High School Journalism website, presented by the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

» originally from HighSchoolJournalism.org **What inspired you to become a journalist?**

First, it was seeing Max Robinson, who was one of the first black national network anchors, on the ABC Evening News. My father loved watching the news and was always trying to find out about everything. We'd follow fire engines, and stand at accident sites. He even bought a police scanner so we could sit in the house and figure out what crimes were going on. To understand the codes, we had a code sheet with all the numbers. So it was a choice between being an attorney or a journalist, but I worked on my Male Traditional High School yearbook staff and was selected by the *Louisville Courier Journal* to attend a summer journalism workshop at Northwestern University. It's called the National High School Institute. That's when I really figured out that journalism was for me. I did my first real news and feature story there and actually covered a parade - my first interview with a stranger ever! After that summer of my junior year at Northwestern, I spent a week at the University of Kentucky's Urban Journalism Workshop putting together a newspaper. I was the editor of the newspaper that summer and it was quite an experience. At one point, none of the reporters wanted to finish their stories and they all wanted to quit. What a zoo!

Is there a difference between features and hard news?

Without question. Hard news should get the point quickly and oftentimes space is really limited. At the same time, those requirements don't mean that details and scene setting moments should be left out. Oftentimes, features are much broader and many times have a news peg. But features generally mean there is more space for story telling and capturing the lives and times of people and issues. Features are generally not as deadline oriented as news stories, which tend to be cracked out as quick as possible. With features, a writer can generally write with ease and haggle over words and thoughts more because of the additional time. Also, features can be more lengthy and detailed look at a subject or an issue and include months of research and interviews.

Do you have a regular beat?

I started at The Wall Street Journal covering all the non-U.S. automobile manufacturers. Then I

moved to covering Chrysler Corp. Prior to coming to WSJ, I worked for *The Detroit News*, where I covered economic development for the city desk and minority business for the business section. While at *The Courier Journal* in Louisville, I covered real estate, small business and minority business. At the *St. Petersburg Times*, I covered tourism on the business desk and moved to the Neighborhoods section where I covered South St. Petersburg, a largely minority area.

Currently, as a Page One writer for the *Wall Street Journal*, I covered a variety of subjects, most of which are tales from urban areas, but no one particular beat.

How do you come up with story ideas?

People. I talk to friends and strangers. I hang out in places, go to all sorts of events. I have associates who are police officers, detectives, lawyers, probation officers, ministers, public relations professionals, doctors, former gangsters, nail technicians, beauticians, funeral home directors, real estate developers, politicians, teachers, hospital administrators. I just have a wide range of sources and people I talk to about life and issues. And it's from those folks that I stumble on trends or issues - and I read newspapers and magazines and books. But most of my ideas are generated from what I see or hear.

How do you research the topics or people that you write about?

Currently, I've been spending months and months in court, dealing with transcripts, lawyers and court clerks. But most of my information comes from dozens and dozens of interviews. I often run pass my findings by some professional or person close to the industry or issue, ranging from some trade association to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. But there's no better source than those who are directly involved in the story. When it comes to people, neighbors, co-workers, church members, club friends—and enemies!

Do the same reporting standards apply to both features and hard news?

Without a doubt. Accuracy. Description. Thought provoking quotes. Often in features, there's more of a chance to paint wonderful pictures with words so detail is even more important. With longer periods to research and write, you can spend more time doing both—so instead of a day with a source, I can spend several days over several months. Or in the case of a crime or court story, I can dig and dig to find the PERFECT court cases to illustrate the points or I can search for the best character to use as the vehicle to tell the story.

Do you work alone or in a team with photographers and graphic artists?

No real journalist can say he works alone. I have a great editor—Ken Wells—who works on Page One at the *Wall Street Journal*. He understands my quirky ideas and gets excited about my zany stories and helps me craft and refine my thoughts and my writing. Also, we have a great graphics department.

Do you get a lot of reader reaction to your stories?

Indeed. It's crazy sometimes how I get hundreds of phone calls or letters or emails, depending on the story. For example, I did a story on these hair fashion shows that are really popular in Detroit. Some hairdos zip off, others have motors and move around and others put birds or bottles - some of the 'dos are two feet tall or more and every color imaginable. It was a Page One feature story. In addition to many other newspapers running the story, other major newspapers including the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Chicago Tribune* did their own versions. The

Hair Wars

story even made the television show rounds, being profiled on

Sally Jesse Raphael

and the

Queen Latifah Show

as well as several other entertainment shows.