

# Blacks in Journalism

## Ernie Pitt & Minority Journalism

By Cedric Waddell Ricks

While the newspaper industry has committed itself to increasing the percentage of minority journalists in proportion to the percentage of minorities in the nation, minorities still face obstacles in obtaining upper level jobs in the industry, said Ernie Pitt, publisher of the *Winston-Salem Chronicle*.

Pitt said minorities face problems in the newspaper industry, but he used his experiences with the *Chronicle* to show that minorities could achieve their goals in the industry.

Pitt, a 1974 UNC journalism graduate, was the opening speaker at a three-day conference in Winston-Salem, Feb. 16-18. Sponsored by the *Winston-Salem Journal* and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), the conference recruited minority journalism students in North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia. Four students from the School of Journalism—Tracy M. Brown, Gerda Gallop, Jada Harris and Cedric Ricks—were accompanied by Associate Professor Harry Amana.

The ASNE, in recognizing the shortage of minority journalists committed itself in 1978 to increasing minority percentages in the newsrooms to equal the percentage of minorities in the nation. Fifty-five percent of the nation's daily newspapers still do not employ a single minority in the newsroom, said Pitt as he spoke to about 50 journalism students and their advisers.

Affirmative action is becoming the exception rather than the rule, and the chance for minority journalists to make their mark on the industry is disappearing, said Pitt. Minorities make up 7 percent of the staff in the newsrooms across the nation, a 3 percent increase over a 10-year period, but the U.S. minority population has increased to 25 percent, said Pitt.

Increasing the percentage of minorities is a problem, but a bigger issue is getting minorities promoted to higher positions in the newsroom. Minorities hold only 1 percent of upper-level management positions and are not being promoted as fast as whites, said Pitt.

Pitt, along with a friend from Nigeria, started the *Winston-Salem Chronicle*, one of North Carolina's few black-owned newspapers, about 14 years ago.

The two friends did not have much money and the paper was basically a tabloid, said Pitt. "I do not mean [we started] with \$1000. I mean zip," he said. "But we had a dream of providing the Afro-American community with a paper it could be proud of."

When he started the paper, Pitt, a

convicted felon, said he had no friends in the community, was 28 years old and had nothing to lose. He decided within himself that he would not fail. The price was total sacrifice. It meant working like hell every day," he said.

Speaking to today's minority journalists, Pitt said, "You may not have to do the same things I had to do, but you are going to pay some dues."

"You cannot edit the editorial page unless you pay some dues," he said. "You may have to stay up all night learning the English language."

It took three months for the first issue of the *Chronicle* to come out, said Pitt. A front page story was about a lady who sued her neighbor because the neighbor's rooster crowed too loud, he said.

In the last 14 years, the *Chronicle* has come a long way.

In 1983, the *Chronicle* was awarded first place for general excellence among weekly newspapers by the North Carolina Press Association.

The next year, the *Chronicle* won second place in the general excellence category but also garnished 12 additional awards, more than any other weekly newspaper had won in that competition.

In 1984 and in 1988 the *Chronicle* was named best Afro-American newspaper in the country by the National Newspaper Publishers Association. Over the past five years the *Chronicle* has won 150 awards, said Pitt.

The *Chronicle's* success comes at a time when the nation needs the black press because racism persists in society, said Pitt. "We have a conservative Supreme Court that is based on turning back the clock on affirmative action," he said. Every city that has 5,000 black families is a prime target for an Afro-American newspaper, he said.

The decline in the number of the nation's daily newspapers is especially good for the black press because, "it [provides] opportunities for black weeklies in areas where dailies stop, to become dailies themselves," said Pitt. Competition among papers is good because it provides more than just one point of view, he said.

Many Afro-Americans who are hired as reporters by the white press are limited to stories concerning only the Afro-American community, even though most of these reporters prove they are capable of covering other stories, said Pitt. At Afro-American papers there are more opportunities for reporters to cover all types of news, he said.

The dismal rate of minority hiring by

the press is bad news, but it can also be good if minorities take the opportunity to fight for a job, said Pitt. "If someone told me, 55 percent of newspapers have no minorities, I'd get me a job," he said. "You should view that as an opportunity."

Pitt said the black press, along with small community papers, are excellent places for reporters to improve their skills. Minority college students can begin developing their skills on campus

### Winston-Salem Minorities Job Fair

By Gerda Gallop

Four UNC journalism students traveled to Winston-Salem Feb. 16-18 for a minorities job fair sponsored by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the *Winston-Salem Journal*.

Cedric Ricks, Tracy Brown, Jada Harris and Gerda Gallop along with faculty member Harry Amana attended the three-day conference held at the Ramada Hotel in Winston-Salem.

Sixty students representing twenty colleges in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia attended workshops on tips about resumes and interviews, dinners with speakers, and interview sessions with recruiters.

Among the thirty newspapers seeking interns and staff were: *Newsday*, *The News and Observer*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Charlotte Observer*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Greensboro Daily News* and others.

UNC alumnus Ernie Pitt, publisher of the *Winston-Salem Chronicle*, highlighted the first evening's events with his dinner address. Pitt told students how he started the *Chronicle*, one of 12 black-owned newspapers in North Carolina.

UNC alumna Rhonda Hubbard-Beatty and her mother, Edith, led a workshop on resume and interviewing tips.

"I hope that friendships were established and contracts were made, because it is important that students have experienced contact with professionals," said Fred Flagler, associate managing editor of the *Winston-Salem Journal* and coordinator of the job fair.

The minorities job fairs were started in 1970 by ASNE and are co-sponsored by the Carolina Journalism Task Force for Minorities in Communications, Flagler said.

Various regional newspapers host the job fairs each year, Flagler added. Last year's conference was held in Raleigh.

newspapers, he said.

"You are going to make mistakes, and you will. I bet 80 percent of you have made mistakes; this is a perfect place to write and find out your weaknesses," said Pitt.

"Before going to *The Washington Post*, develop your skills," Pitt said. "Give yourself a chance. [There is] nothing wrong with working as a reporter."

### Newsday Minority Job Opportunity Conference

During the 1960s, the Kerner Commission issued a warning to the media that urgent action needs to be taken to solve the problem of under representation of blacks in newspapers and television. So today, in response, newspapers and television stations have stepped up the hiring of minorities. They have also taken steps to aggressively recruit minority college students pursuing careers in communications through minority training programs and job fairs.

On February 24 and 25, I, along with three other journalism students attended the *Newsday* Minority Job Opportunity Conference in Long Island, New York. Filled with excitement and anticipation, I eagerly awaited my chance to talk with "the big wigs" of newspapers. However, once I began my interviews, my perspective about attending the conference changed.

I realize that many white students probably feel black students gain an unfair advantage by being allowed to attend such conferences, but this is not the case.

Several of the recruiters I interviewed with asked short, direct questions mostly about my writing experience and news clippings. In very business-like terms, they explained what (and who) they were looking for, so you the interviewee knew by the end of the interview whether you were qualified or not.

After several of my interviews, I walked away feeling discouraged, that I didn't "measure up." However, I realize that these newspapers have standards to maintain, and that my being black does not qualify me alone. To them, I am just another applicant seeking an internship at their newspaper who must demonstrate, black or white, that I am qualified and experienced enough to be hired.

And that's the way it should be. So white students and others who may feel that black students are getting "all the lucky breaks," take note: it just isn't so.