

DTH Lacks Sensitivity In Minority Coverage

By Birshari C. Greene
Staff

Accurate coverage of African-American events in *The Daily Tar Heel* (DTH) has been less than acceptable for a number of people on campus, including the staffers. The problem continues while its complex solution is one that cannot be achieved overnight.

Kelly Thompson, DTH co-editor, said "I think our coverage is good. We just keep making stupid factual errors."

Jessica Lanning, the other DTH co-editor, said the paper had approximately 10 to 15 "For the Records" this semester, equaling about one per week. A "For the Record" is a printed correction to an error made by the paper, appearing the day after a mistake is made.

The recent mistakes made by the DTH in reference to African-Americans include:

—naming a picture of the Black Student Movement's (BSM) Opeyo! Dancers "Kappa Alpha Psi Sorority," which is a non-existent organization

—erroneously listing Arnie Epps' name for singing at the Homecoming football game.

—erroneously including Ann Ards' name in a coalition against hate crimes

—not identifying Chris Brown as senior class vice-president in a Harvey Gantt article

—waiting approximately 7 days after the incident to print an article about racial slurs on a Harvey Gantt poster in Mangum Dormitory.

—not attributing a voter registration drive and the Morrison Sleepout to their sponsor, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., until after the events were held.

Thompson said that the DTH was trying to rectify the problem in several ways. One is to make sure that reporters

have more access to background information, and another is to try to develop a system of beat reporting, where one reporter covers the same subject consistently, to be familiar with names and events.

Jennifer Wing and Nancy Wykle, University co-editors, said they were "re-vamping their beat." The University desk is where most of the minority campus events are covered. Wykle said traditionally, the BSM has always had a beat reporter, but other African-American organizations have not had them. "There are more groups out there than we realize. It's limited as to what you cover, so we cover what's most important."

Lanning said the reason why the BSM has always had a beat reporter was because "it had a tendency to be a unified group to promote the black community." When asked if she thought the BSM was the voice of the whole African-American campus community, Lanning said, "Good gracious no!"

Three new rules have resulted from so many mistakes: 1) if a reporter or photographer has two "For the Records," they are on probation and three equals removal from the staff, 2) a photographer is now required to fill out a regular form for the names of persons and organizations in pictures and must get more information about events that are photographed, 3) reporters are now required to check the names of sources with an editor present.

Some students do feel that the DTH has a lack of concern for minority events in particular.

Christopher Bracey, member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., said he felt like the DTH has exemplified a problem covering their events since

last spring. Bracey said, "I have spoken to them about how they had not given Alpha Phi Alpha any credit for voter registration and the for Morrison Sleepout until after the fact."

Bracey also wrote a letter to the editors, printed on Oct. 22, in reference to the mislabelled Opeyo! Dancers' picture. Bracey accused the DTH of blatant ignorance of African-American issues. In it he said, "...there is a history of ignorance, misunderstanding, and utter stupidity on the part of the DTH when it comes to minority events on campus."

Bracey's letter also concluded three things about the DTH. He said the staff was not competent enough to perform basic fact-finding and accuracy in reporting, the staff's repeated carelessness showed institutionalized racism in which the staff does not acknowledge, and the staff insists on remaining ignorant to minority issues although numerous efforts have been made by African-Americans to enlighten them.

Brian Wall, a junior from Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, wrote the editors an opposing response to Bracey's letter. Wall said Bracey was taking the whole issue a bit too seriously, titling his letter " 'Honest' mistakes do happen." In his letter, Wall said, "*The Daily Tar Heel* has done more for the Afro-Americans and their "minority events" than any other organization on campus. Why would someone be ignorant enough to downgrade the very institution that is his (Bracey's) friend?" Wall's letter included two solutions to Bracey's problem with the DTH.

"If Mr. Bracey is correct and the white students, faculty, and DTH staff are bigoted individuals then he and the minorities better pack their things and

get the hell out of Chapel Hill before we start constructing gas chambers as well as institutions for slave labor and slave trading.....or Mr. Bracey can wipe the chip off his shoulder, and cease with the 'me-and-my-oppressed-brothers' attitude and realize mistakes happen." Wall also stated that the first solution listed was not to be taken seriously.

James Benton, ombudsman (official representative) for the DTH, said the paper has a problem with minority retention as well as accuracy. "It's a double-bind. They want to attract non-whites into reporting, photography, and editing positions, but when they do get in, the atmosphere is difficult for blacks. He or she is always reminded that they're not white."

Myron Pitts, former assistant university editor to the DTH, who left the staff, said, "They never let me cover minority events. I felt it was my duty to look out for minority interests."

However, Natalie Godwin, currently an African-American reporter on the University desk, wrote the Oct. 24 article about the controversial statues in front of Davis Library.

In response to recent mistakes, Pitts said, "It does stem from racial callousness. They fail to do their homework."

Cedric Ricks, a senior in the School of Journalism said students have not trusted the DTH. "I think a lot of the people (staffers) are just insensitive, because most of the writers just 'happen' to be white."

Debbie Baker, a senior in the School of Journalism said, "The paper is lacking a diversified perspective. Everyone over there can basically give you an upperclass, middle-white perspective."

Baker said the paper does cover negative events when they involve African-Americans, but fails to recognize positive events, and if they are covered they are buried. "Why wasn't Laura (Anderson) on the front page?" Anderson's crowning of 1990 Homecoming Queen was printed on page three of the Oct. 22 issue.

In response to solutions to the DTH's problem, Benton suggests staffers learn ways that African-Americans may perceive as racist and avoid them.

Others students and administrators have suggested that more African-Americans on the staff would increase awareness of minority events, if they are permitted to cover them—Godwin was, but Pitts was not.

Benton said, "...but once you get blacks in there, it's an environment that still has to be conquered."

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