

Alice Bonner: "Developer of Journalism Careers"

By Sharif Durhams
NEWS EDITOR



lice Bonner, a journalist who has spent 25 years expanding her horizons by covering the world and helping young journalists find a place, returned to school last spring to help expand the horizons of others.

"I've always had a sense of duty to try to break people into the field—especially people like me," Bonner said.

Bonner is one of the four inaugural Freedom Forum Fellows at UNC. This program of the Pointer

Institute for Media Studies allows professionals to earn an Ph.D. in journalism in just over two years. Bonner said she was glad to have an opportunity to take time off from her job as director of journalism education at The Freedom Forum to work with this innovative program.

"This was a good opportunity for me," she said. "When The Freedom Forum launched this program, it was a chance for me to be in on the ground floor."

As a reporter and assistant city editor for The Washington Post, Bonner entered the newspaper industry at a time when blacks were making great strides in journalism. She acknowledged reporters like Bob Maynard for helping blacks get jobs at mainstream newspapers.

"He was one of the first generation [of blacks reporting for mainstream newspapers] that literally integrated the papers," she said. "I consider myself to be part of the second generation of blacks in the mainstream. We kind of stepped on the shoulders of those who came before us."

Though she received her a bachelor's degree from Howard University in 1971, Bonner said

college classes could not teach her the realities of the marketplace. A summer program at Columbia University run by black journalists taught her how to deal write from an insider's perspective.

"People from all walks of life who wanted to be journalists were given 12 weeks of training," Bonner said.

Because of the help she received from professional journalists, Bonner said she felt she had an obligation to assist others. For this reason, Bonner has taught classes at Howard, The University of Maryland, and directed the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education during her career.

"The idea of bringing other people in, teaching them and helping other people—I didn't originate that," she said. "The first generation of blacks brought me in."

Bonner said due to integration, advances have been made in integrating the news industry, but newspapers must continue to work adequately reflect the communities they serve.

"We can help fill the gaps of the American story," she said. "We see efforts to bring more diversity to journalism as 'job action'. The end goal is to cover our communities in ways that have never been covered."

Bonner said she and other journalists have tried to inform the industry about the lack of attention paid to the problems of the poor. "If you look at a lot of newspapers to this day, there is either a lack of balance or a lack of representation," she said.

Part of the problem in covering the disenfranchised has been a widening of class differences in America, Bonner said.

"We weren't that far away from segregation, so we had [many] black people who knew the black community," she said. "It's an indication of the widening gap between socioeconomic groups."

The structure of the newspaper industry and the mindset of editors also cause problems in covering the reality of poverty.

"By nature, we cover institutions and there really aren't institutions [of poverty] beyond the welfare building," she said. "Nobody covers poverty on a regular basis. It's seen as not worthy of being covered."

As a part of her contribution, Bonner said she has tried to instill the need for balanced coverage of the disenfranchised into young journalists.

"I don't know how to teach or to help people without building that into how to make up for the communities that are not being covered," she said.

Bonner said that she tried to find ways to influence young journalists at the Post, but the opportunities did not exist there. "They didn't have and wouldn't create a job that would let me create, so I left," she said.

As a recruiter for Gannett, a media conglomerate that owns 92 newspapers, Bonner said she had contact with young journalists, but unlike working for a single paper, she could not find specific opportunities to show journalists how to cover the underrepresented. "I had the job I wanted, but the effect wasn't the same," she said.

When she left Gannett and began working for the Freedom Forum as director of journalism education, many opportunities to reach students came her way. One was working with a summer workshop for black high school journalists that was held at UNC for four years. "That was one of my happiest challenges at the Freedom Forum," Bonner said.

Now, Bonner has to balance time between being a full time mother of a daughter with a physical disability, studying for classes and, learning more about economic justice and covering poverty from professors and professional journalists.

"I'm pretty busy," she said "I'm a full-time mother. My daughter is 16 and a half, and this is the first time in her life I haven't hired help to take care of her. I also have had a chance to get to know people I've only learned of from a distance."

Bonner said that while studying at UNC, she hoped she could work with Journalism Professor Harry Amana to teach students how to cover poverty. She said she has already created a "mock-syllabus" for such a course.

"I think if you have the commitment, you can teach these things," she said. "I'm not going to be what anyone would call a traditional professor. I see myself as more of a developer of journalism careers."