



BLIND PREJUDICE

When I started writing a newspaper column two years ago, it never occurred to me that I was breaking through a major color barrier in this country.

I am an African-American woman who, in 1992, was assigned by the *Detroit Free Press* to write regularly about health and fitness. I entered the field as little more than a novice. True, I exercised and tried to keep healthy, but I had not written much about health issues. Still, I eagerly embraced this new challenge, believing it would allow me to dispense vital information to the paper's readers.

I was so busy learning my new craft, I did not immediately realize that I was one of the first African-American journalists in the United States to write about health and fitness for a major metropolitan newspaper. Although that thought soon came to inspire me, the honor turned out to carry a high price tag, one that clearly illustrates our society's pressing need for diversity in all its institutions.

AN OPEN TARGET FOR RESENTMENT

The first time a reader demanded to know why the *Detroit Free Press* was letting a black person have a column, questioning my "right" to write about being healthy, my initial excitement was doused. All of a sudden, the journalistic anonymity I had long enjoyed was gone; I could no longer hide



Ms. Jones, a former health and fitness columnist for the Detroit Free Press, is a national correspondent for Knight-Ridder, Inc.

*A Black
Journalist's
Clash With
Racism
Illustrates
The Need
For
Discussion
About
Diversity*

BY RACHEL L. JONES

behind a byline.

Before I became a columnist, newspaper readers might have been able to guess my racial background because I frequently wrote articles about African-American issues. However, they could never have known for sure that I am black. And it had never really mattered to me anyway, for I had long been determined to foster the inclusion of minority groups in our society, in any way I could.

But my *photo* now appeared with the column, once a week for the first year, every other week for the second. That fact, coupled with my tendency to write frequently about African-American health concerns, apparently made me an open target for resentment. The deeply rooted prejudices held by some of our readers seemed to blind them to the fact that I was the same professional, now using her news reporting skills to advocate health and fitness.

The anger and hostility directed at me were shocking at first. Anytime I wrote about men, particularly about the frighteningly poor overall health of African-American men, I was berated by (presumably) white men who derided what they saw as my lack of authority to discuss men's health. (I assume they were white because a few of them used racial epithets.) When, in one column, I was off a few milligrams on the recommended daily allowance of dietary sodium, a reader dashed off an angry letter suggesting it had been a mistake to let a black person write a health and fitness column in the first place, because black people were neither smart nor healthy enough for the job.

I was very upset by these attacks at first, but soon passed them off as petty and rooted in ignorance. My colleagues were very supportive and sympathetic, which helped. My editors sought to toughen me up; they told me I would have to get



used to such comments because I was now a “public figure.”

EMPOWERING MINORITY READERS

My skin soon thickened enough to handle these racist and sexist comments. But, fortunately, they were not the norm. I was overwhelmed, even humbled, by the tremendous support my column attracted throughout Michigan and indeed across the country. Women of various ages and races tended to be my staunchest supporters because, as a nonexpert, I reached them where they were, not where I thought they *should* be. I went out and tried new activities, or wrote about new research that could be vital to their health—and their response was tremendously positive.

Most important, minority readers wrote and called to thank me because they felt they had not previously been represented in the newspaper as active, healthy people. On the topic of fitness and health, as on so many others, our invisibility in newspaper pages had been blinding. I felt I was empowering thousands of people by adding minority concerns to the mix.

Ultimately, the negative comments about my column were as motivational as they were sobering. In fact, each one deepened my commitment to fostering diversity in American newsrooms and newspapers. I tripled my efforts to research African-American health concerns, such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cancer, and to bring them to the attention of a community desperately in need of education and prevention. I went out of my way to find and write about black bicyclists and runners, so that we also could be seen to be active and fit. And all this activity began to give *me* a sense of empowerment. It helped me cut through the frustration of having to deal with entrenched prejudice and misunderstanding.

THE DANCER AND THE DANCE

Often, when I am being an advocate for minority issues, I am aware that I may be seen as trying to have it both ways. On one hand, I do not want to be labeled a *black* reporter (I am a reporter peri-

od, thank you). At the same time, I revel in being an African American, knowing that in mostly white newsrooms I bring a voice to the table that is unique and vital.

In other words, I *do* want to be seen as an African-American reporter—but not as one whose mouth is gagged or who is trying so hard to fit in that she erodes her unique perspective. I have grown savvy enough to insist on performing a job that suits my talents, and on working for an organization that will respect that intricate dance I do to be myself yet merge with others.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE

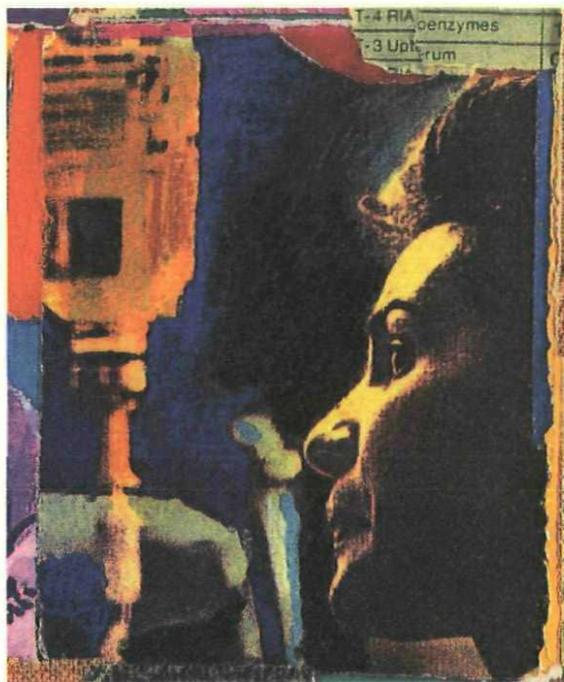
My experience, it seems to me, clearly illustrates the need to keep talking about diversity in newsrooms, health facilities, and indeed all types of companies nationwide. In an era when words like “diversity” are often scorned for being “politically correct,” it is important to remember that they stand for something real.

Although many whites seem to think racism is no longer a factor in minority people’s lives, that is a dangerous fallacy. For example, had a white woman taken on my *Free Press* column, she might have been blasted for a lot of reasons, but not because of her race. And there are *still* very few minority journalists writing about health and fitness in U.S. newspapers.

Recent statistics show that 60 percent of newsrooms are still staffed entirely by white people. And adding a minority reporter does not automatically eliminate racism. Imagine two reporters working together at the same job. They are equally competent, equally gifted—but one is harassed because of her skin color. This is not history. It still goes on.

I am enough of an optimist to think respect for diversity can be achieved—but only if we work for it. I may not have been a born health and fitness writer, but I grew to love it more and more with each passing day. And I know that my readers, hungry for advice, support, and encouragement in their health goals, could not have cared less what color I was, as long as I did my job.

That’s the name of the game. □



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