

ASNE “Covering the New Latino Community” keynote address
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INTRODUCTION

Thank you.

The story goes something like this.

A young man leaves his homeland seeking his fortune in America. He finds himself in New York -- broke, sleeping on the streets and at a disadvantage in job-hunting because he speaks only a little English.

With his last dollars, he takes the train to St. Louis, a city where he knows he will find many others who speak his language. He hopes to make connections and find a good job. On the train, someone takes advantage of his relative ignorance – and steals his overcoat. He arrives in St. Louis penniless, hungry and soaked to the skin.

He lands a series of menial jobs – taking care of animals, working as a gate operator at a ferry ship, as a deckhand on a boat, as a construction laborer and briefly as a waiter. He lives in the slums and on the streets.

He does not give up hope.

A promoter promises him and others like him good jobs as farm laborers if they pay up front for a boat ride to Louisiana. Some 30 miles downstream, the boat operator cons them into getting off the boat briefly and then takes off, leaving them to walk back to St. Louis.

Still, he does not give up. He hangs out around a building housing a newspaper published in his native tongue. A doctor located in the building takes a fancy to him and helps him land a lucrative job ---- burying people dying from a fast-spreading disease.

After almost three years in St. Louis, he is still poor and shabby. But his persistence finally pays off in a job as a reporter at the German-language newspaper.

In four years, his command of English improves and he earns a reputation as a hard-nosed journalist. He musters enough money to buy controlling interest in the paper from the bankrupt owners. He later sells it back at a hefty profit and invests in a failing daily newspaper called the St. Louis Dispatch.

After merging his paper with the competing Post, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch quickly grows -- and the Hungarian immigrant, a vagrant once taunted as “Joey the Jew” finds himself as one of the leading journalists of his day.

Now his name is synonymous with excellence in journalism.

The story of Joseph Pulitzer may not be exactly typical, but it contains common threads with the story of many families whose ancestors came to America seeking freedom and better lives, but also:

- Faced severe economic hardships.
- Struggled with language barriers; and
- Endured ethnic slurs and other personal insults.

So it is today with the Latino or Hispanic immigrants who are arriving in waves throughout our country, even in places like Wisconsin, Iowa and Nebraska – and throughout the areas where Lee Enterprises owns newspapers.

Let me tell you:

- A little about how our papers have attempted to cover the story.
- Some plans for the future.
- The internal and external challenges we face.
- Then, we can have a dialogue about this important trend for journalism today.

KEY PRINCIPLES

No discussion, though, is complete without a review of the basic values we hold for journalism in Lee Enterprises.

We are dedicated to the principle of being a true mirror to our community – that means reflecting the diversity in everyday and special coverage.

It also means being a candid friend to the community – providing a fair, balanced look at issues and problems, exposing racism but not pulling our punches on stories that might put minorities in a bad light.

We believe in paying special attention to the needs of those who are most vulnerable. And we believe we must lead the way in helping our communities embrace change and celebrate diversity.

We are far from perfect – but we're pushing our papers to improve, and to reach out to gather feedback through calls, letters and other mechanisms, such as the diversity advisory panel organized by our editor in Lincoln, Kathy Rutledge.

BACKGROUND

You heard this morning a lot of the context for what's going on in Lee markets. You don't need to be a demographer or work very hard to see what's going on. Just go shopping down at the Wal-Mart or drive past the Catholic church on a Sunday morning. Or look at the birth notices in your own papers. For instance, at my new hometown paper, the Muscatine Journal, Editor Jeff Young runs an annual list of all the births in the county. Just glancing through, roughly one-fourth to one-third of the births are to people with Hispanic surnames.

In the 1990s, the Hispanic population skyrocketed in places like Iowa (up 169%), Wisconsin (up 120%), South Dakota (up 101%) and Nebraska (up 155%).

Let me talk a little about Nebraska, since that's where I have the most personal experience.

Like the Germans, Bohemians, Swedish and Irish who settled Nebraska in the 1870s and 1880s, Hispanics come to the Cornhusker State today seeking jobs and opportunity. About two thirds come directly from another country, mostly Mexico and other Central American countries. About one-third move to Nebraska from other states, often California. They are attracted by a moderate cost of living, good schools and good social services. Many have relatives in the area.

In Lincoln, they find a strong Hispanic Community Center and churches with Spanish-language masses. And they find a daily paper that's doing its best to cover this continuing story.

WHAT WE'VE DONE

Veteran political reporter Don Walton spent the summer of 1999 working in Omaha investigating the dangers faced by a largely Hispanic work force in the meatpacking industry. The lede on his first story says it all: (Quote) "Lured north of the border by the hope of a better life, a largely Hispanic work force labors in Nebraska meatpacking plants under conditions some critics describe as a classic case of worker exploitation." (End quote)

In part because of the credibility Walton carries from 40 years of reporting in Nebraska, Republican Gov. Mike Johanns ordered his own investigation of the industry. The state later developed a workers bill of rights, including recognizing their right to organize for purposes of collective bargaining – not exactly a typical GOP platform plank. Johanns has made the issue something of a crusade, personally posting copies in meatpacking plants with the proclamation that the Hispanics are (quote) "valued citizens not only in the workplace, but in our communities." (end quote) Johanns explains his interest this way: (Quote) "I think about my own family. We came to this country at one point looking for a better life." (End quote)

Kathy Rutledge and Cathie Huddle, the editor and Sunday editor in Lincoln, will tell you more tomorrow about the continuing coverage in Lincoln, but since I'm talking first, I get to brag about our largest effort. In the summer of 2000, the Journal Star published "Far From Home," a four-day series telling the story of the Cazun (Ka-zoon) family, a Guatemalan household learning firsthand the great benefits and drawbacks of pursuing the American dream. Photographer Ted Kirk and reporter Angela Heywood Bible produced a dramatic series of stories and photos tracing Lincoln members of the Cazun family back to the village of Nancinta, where nearly every school student will raise a hand when asked if they know someone who lives in Nebraska.

"Far from Home" generated a lot of positive reader feedback, including these comments from Joel Gajardo (Ho-EL, Guh-HAR-dough), who was then executive director of the Hispanic Community Center. (Quote) "Reporting like this will help to diminish the misunderstanding that so often surrounds issues related to immigration, particularly of people coming from Latin America." (End quote) Gajardo (Guh-HAR-dough) said folks coming through his center were quite impressed with our series and they believed our overall coverage would help promote safer and more equitable working conditions.

I'm also pleased to report that Journal Star readers responded with more than \$11,000 in donations to help Nancinta's school, where bathrooms have no plumbing and where the library has no books. By working with the Lincoln Downtown Rotary Club, a Guatemala City Rotary Club and Rotary International, the money raised locally may be matched to produce even more help for Nancinta.

Other Lee newspapers have made significant efforts to reach out to the Hispanic community and to explain this important story to all readers.

For instance, in Mason City, Iowa, where Jane Reynolds is city editor, the Globe Gazette produced a series focusing on overall immigration, tying into the governor's program aimed at long-term efforts to increase the state's population.

The series culminated in a town hall meeting co-sponsored by a local TV station, allowing for a community dialogue on immigration and race relations.

Another good example comes from Racine, Wisconsin, which has tried to mainstream its coverage, writing about how local hospitals are recruiting bilingual health care professionals, covering the Hispanic Business and Professionals Association just like the chamber of commerce and even producing local stories about the Mexican presidential elections.

The Journal Times in Racine has also begun an annual project for Hispanic Heritage Month. In 1999, the paper did daily profiles of adults they called Hispanic Heroes. In 2000, they focused on youths in Hispanic Leaders of Tomorrow. In 2001, the spotlight was on Hispanic culture, tying into a local book-reading project featuring the well-known Rudolfo Anaya book, "Bless Me, Ultima."

WHERE WE'RE HEADED

I'm proud of what we've already accomplished in Lee, but we have a long ways to go. I'm excited at the prospects for several reasons.

First, we have real commitment from editors and reporters – a half dozen of whom are here today. At meetings of Lee editors, we've put diversity in coverage and staffing on the agenda as an annual topic. We have discussions in e-mail exchanges and other forums, such as in an online chat I recently hosted.

We've just hired our first Hispanic editor – I hope you've all had a chance to meet Gerald Garcia from The Southern Illinoisan in Carbondale.

And we're about to get an infusion of new ideas and talent from a group of newspapers we're buying from Howard Publications, including our first paper in southern California, the North County Times, which covers the north San Diego suburbs, where anywhere from 10 % to 40% of the market is Latino.

I had a great time there earlier this week sitting in on their Latino Roundtable. The group of local business, education and community leaders has

been meeting monthly for about five years at the invitation of the newspaper. They gather to talk about issues, politics and news coverage – and roundtable members look to the paper now as an ally, rather than an enemy. A couple of roundtable members say they even use the newspaper in their own education and citizenship programs, teaching newcomers that if they want to be part of the community, they must read the newspaper.

CHALLENGES

Of course, covering this story well is not an easy task.

For an 80,000-circulation newspaper like the Journal Star, these types of projects are a large investment of time and money. A 12-day trip to Guatemala and four days in southern California cost just under \$10,000 – about one-sixth of the paper's travel budget for a year.

And everyone struggles with the language issues. In Lincoln, for instance, the reporter who traveled to Guatemala has since left the paper to become a police reporter for the Raleigh News & Observer.

Really getting into the community and understanding it is a critical issue, but another one is in dealing with the rest of our readers. While most readers are broad-minded and fascinated to learn about other cultures, some readers are not. In Mason City, the paper was caught in the middle of some national coverage of the anti-immigration backlash. In Lincoln, we have not run into much resistance to our Hispanic coverage but we have heard remarks from readers who feel we put too much emphasis on coverage of Native Americans. That stems in part from the fact that Lincoln is home to a unique reporter, Jodi Rave Lee, who covers Native issues for all of Lee's newspapers. In addition, we now have two other Native staff members in Lincoln – probably more than any other mainstream paper in America.

We try to build reader acceptance in part by constant reminders that this type of immigration is a part of our heritage – it's a part of their heritage.

CONCLUSION

Nobody said this was easy.

You need to be dedicated to total coverage of your community. We've made progress on some fronts, but still falter in others (particularly the Vietnamese community and, in some respects, the black community).

You need to devote newsroom resources – and you need to devote your own time to building contacts and understanding in diverse communities.

In closing, I'd like to share an exchange I had with Jose Soto, a member of the Lincoln Journal Star Diversity Council and advocate for racial harmony in the community. He wrote to complain about the debut of a prep sports page last year – the first edition had no visible diversity to the page.

(Quote) “Please know that I am a "friend" and that at times friends will be bold and/or crass in telling it like it is, or as they see it,” Jose wrote.

He continued: (Quote) “So often I have heard that the best measure of a person's (or entity's) true character is not when they are under the magnifying glass of public scrutiny – or after having been corrected for an obvious and readily acknowledged shortcoming -- but when they are alone, un-watched and left to their own devices -- and awareness, and sensitivities, predispositions, preferences, and proclivities.”

I take that as a tall challenge – and hope you will, too.