

Honors Lecture, Scholastic Journalism Division, Aug. 11, 2017

First of all, I want to thank all of you who have stayed ... and I want to reassure you that this is not a Powerpoint. Powerpoint software, but it's just photos, mostly.

Thanks also for inviting me to do the honors lecture for the Division. I am speculating that this is primarily about longevity – and that's perfectly fine – it's a tremendous honor to be here.

I took some time to look back at the list of previous honors lecturers. - Some of them are people whose work I've followed ever since I started my own academic career.

People like Jack Dvorak, whose Journalism Kids Do Better book is still on my bookshelf, with its post-its and highlighting that remind me of the first academic paper I ever did – for this division in 1997.

And another, Lillian Lodge Kopenhaver, who wrote about high school superintendents with David Martinson in an article I read while writing that same paper. Jack and Lillian are among my superheroes of scholastic journalism: people who have given us important research and established an enduring foundation of knowledge for the rest of us.

I did have one of those “what have I agreed to?” moments after thinking about the two of them. But – keeping in mind the idea of my longevity – I went back into my files to look for some inspiration.

One of the first things I found was a report on school journalism in Chicago in 1991 ... and I brought it mostly to show you who was there. Mark Goodman was there – Candace Bowen, who was then Candace Perkins – and me.

My first exposure to urban scholastic journalism had come just a couple of years before this, when Neal Robbins, who as you see organized this event, developed a summer journalism writers camp for high school students. He asked me to teach a class for advisers

that ran simultaneously, and I plunged right in. After all, I'd worked in newspapers for 13 years, I'd worked with high school kids at our newspaper, and I'd taught in the cherub program at Northwestern. I was ready.

In a first assignment, I asked the teachers to describe the demographics of their school – all the who-what-where type of stuff, but also things that characterized their school and the challenges they would face.

The papers were pretty stark: Several said 100 percent of their students were eligible for free lunch. They said students didn't read. They said students couldn't write. Students weren't particularly motivated by grades – or much else except money, they said.

None had papers that published regularly. Most said that students were scheduled into their journalism classes simply for scheduling convenience – not because they had any interest in journalism. None of the teachers knew how large or small their classes would be in the fall. None had any returning staff. None of the teachers had a sense of basic student press rights – they would talk about not letting the kids “write what they wanted” because they figured that surely they would go off on some obscene tangent.

Most were English teachers and knew writing but little about reporting or design or photography or production. They didn't know how to structure a class to reach a production goal or how to grade a student who was taking photos and not writing. They didn't have a budget for publication. Most didn't have even a single computer. Most didn't have a single camera, so they used their own. One adviser said her goal was to “publish once.”

This was another breed of student journalism for me -- urban student journalism, specifically Chicago Public Schools student journalism.

I had to figure things out as I went along. What did they need most? What could I give them that would make things better – even a little

better? I did make it through this experience – the teachers set some attainable goals for themselves and their publications, created basic style books for their publications, wrote job descriptions and set up deadlines. I know that most of them reached some of their goals, and they told me that they considered the class useful.

But I wasn't ready to move on from that experience. It stayed with me. At the time, I was working at the Medill School of Journalism, and I went to the dean, Ed Bassett, whom some of you may remember. Bassett knew everybody, especially people who had grant money. By 1990, we had a grant from what was then called Chicago Tribune Charities to "adopt" Hirsch Metropolitan High School in the Chatham neighborhood of Chicago.

The adviser at Hirsch had been a student in my adviser class, and her school had just been designated a "school of communication." That designation did **not** mean that the school had functioning communication programs.

The Tribune grant funds allowed me to entice other faculty from Medill, including my colleague Michael O'Donnell and a photographer friend of his, Tony Kelly, into this project. We ran journalism workshops at Hirsch for students, brought Hirsch students up to Medill for even more workshops, and – most importantly – enlisted O'Donnell's class of grad students to propose redesigns for the Hirsch paper, the Hirsch Metro Herald.

The redesign the adviser and her staff selected made a big difference in the newspaper; the principal was thrilled – such a grand transformation for her new School of Communication! – and some students said they planned to major in journalism in college.

But as these things often go in Chicago Public Schools ... the highly motivated adviser got an administrative job – and the adviser position went to a teacher who was new and inexperienced in journalism. So

this project falls into the category of one of those “sometimes things work, and sometimes they don’t” projects.

A research aside at this point: In the Chicago Public Schools, change is constant. In a survey I did in 1995, the numbers were startling: 60 percent of city advisers had less than five years on the job; 20 percent were in their first year. And half of the city advisers had never considered advising media until they were asked to do it – often in their job interviews.

So ...moving forward a little bit in my files: A few years later, in spring of 1995. I had a special project at Chalmers Middle School, about four miles and a world away from Roosevelt University, which is on Michigan Avenue, facing Lake Michigan. Chalmers is in Lawndale, a high-poverty and high-crime neighborhood on Chicago’s West Side. The principal had received a grant to create a newspaper for the school and the community, and at the end of the school year, someone suggested a modest summer program at Roosevelt. We could get free lunches for the kids through the mayor’s office, and the school arranged for a school bus for them. We settled on four weeks.

I actually remembered most of what I’ve just told you. But when I started through my files, I discovered that I’d kept a journal of the four weeks. It was a treasure – it included my first exposure to Cornella, a kid who worried me at first: She didn’t seem to have it together, couldn’t really take notes even as well as the other kids – the kids snickered at her, and the teachers rolled their eyes.

But – incredibly -- she turned out to have a talent for reporting; it was a chance for her to ask all the questions she usually asked that just annoyed everybody else.

When we toured a Coast Guard ship at Navy Pier, she took the lead in interviewing.

Here’s what I said in my journal: “A guy walks near us who clearly is an officer; even these kids can see that he’s an officer. They start

asking questions. Cornella is buttonholing this guy (she's almost as tall as he is), notebook in hand, poking at his chest and his medals and ribbons. "And what's this?" she says, poking at his chest.

"Kuwait," he says, which means nothing to her. "And what's this?" she says, poking him again. "Humanitarian service," he says. She keeps asking until she's covered everything on his uniform. "

That was Cornella at work. When we had the kids step out to Buckingham Fountain in Grant Park – that's the fountain on the cover of the AEJMC convention booklet -- and assigned them to describe what they saw, the other kids saw water, a fountain, the lake in the distance. Cornella spotted all the ornate carved animals and fish in the base of the fountain.

At the end of the program, we asked the students to write individual letters to their principal, Mrs. Blackman, to tell her what they'd learned from the program. Cornella's letter ricocheted from one experience to another, but described each one in enthusiastic detail.

And she closed with, "Mrs. Blackman, I'm glad I did come because they taught me things that I never knew about. And I got smarter and smarter every day."

So you DO win some.

These two episodes are sort of the full-color photospreads that stand out in my brain of my early years in scholastic journalism. The third segment I'll bring to you will focus on the Scholastic Press Association of Chicago, or SPAC. I'm SPAC's director, and it's based at Roosevelt.

The organization is for public and private high schools in the city only, and its main activities each year are a journalism contest and an all-day workshop extravaganza and awards ceremony.

For much of its existence, SPAC was served by a steadfast group of officers – a teacher named Joyce Spight was president for nearly 20 years, long after she had left Chicago Public Schools and actually,

even after she retired to Tennessee, if you can believe it. Another teacher was secretary for almost as long, through his appointments as journalism adviser at two different high schools. A third was treasurer for a double-digit period.

We've had a faithful membership, too: A few years ago, for our 20th anniversary conference and awards luncheon, I asked the teachers announcing award-winners to mention how long they'd been members of SPAC.

Fifteen years. Eighteen years. One of them had been coming since the first contest and workshops. They've kept coming because SPAC gives them a sense of community – a group of people with similar problems, similar interests and similar situations. More importantly, it gives them a chance to have their students' work recognized and publicly acknowledged.

One of the teachers told me this past spring something I've heard repeatedly: "... all teachers should get the chance to see their students receiving awards for their work. It's so affirming to us all."

Much of what we do has been made possible by grants. Chicago Tribune Charities, the funder of the Hirsch High School project, became the Chicago Tribune Foundation and then McCormick Foundation. The Foundation has funded SPAC the past 12 years,, thanks to Mark Hallett, a journalism program officer at the foundation.

Mark contacted me because he had been told I'd done a survey of high school journalism advisers. By then, that survey was 10 years old. When he suggested a new survey, I agreed to do it if the foundation funded an adviser event and workshops to discuss it – once it was finished.

The survey found, predictably, that the percentage of viable school newspapers was dropping. We gathered a good amount of qualitative material as well.

But the survey and its followup event seemed to give SPAC and me some credibility with the foundation, so we applied for a renewal of our grant. We, the officers and I, wanted to punch the request up a little bit, specifically to stabilize SPAC

We'd been running our Newspaper Excellence Contest every spring since the organization was founded, and we held a spring workshop featuring professional journalists, followed by an awards luncheon to recognize the contest winners. But money was always very tight – it was virtually impossible to raise the price charged for students to attend, and teachers resisted membership increases as well. So we gave no other awards, scholarships or recognitions and limped along.

SPAC's officers and I talked about what we'd LIKE to do.

- We wanted to send a student to a summer journalism workshop every year.
- We wanted to send a journalism teacher or media adviser to a summer journalism workshop, too.
- We wanted our own “journalist of the year” competition, just for Chicago public and private high schools. And we'd like to give the winner a small college scholarship.
- And we wanted the foundation to support students who couldn't afford to attend otherwise. (Last year, that was about a third of the 250 students attending. The cost is \$5.)

We were hoping that the McCormick Foundation folks would buy into at least a couple of these things on our list. Actually, they bought into all of them – and added ANOTHER award for “principal of the year” – for a principal who had been most supportive of school media.

So the SPAC conference has become a much bigger deal. We actually have some out-of-town presenters. Some are familiar names and faces here in the division.. Frank LoMonte was our keynoter ...

Adam Maksel talked with the teachers ... and Stan Zoller, who doesn't really count as an out-of-towner, but regularly attends our conference.

But the nominations and applications we get for the student awards are a high point of SPAC's year. Sometimes the nominations seem pretty standard,,, a faculty member nominates a student as journalist of the year because she's been tireless in redesigning the paper and in dogging other students to meet deadline.

Then an application will just stop the judges cold. Like this one: A student named Ronald, hoping to go to a summer journalism workshop, told us first about how much he liked interviewing, and how he was by nature a curious person. And then he said:

"Right now I'm beginning to work on a story that has been affecting my life. I know many young black men like me who have been killed in shootings. I didn't think about reporting on this until I read a column by Trymaine Lee in the New York Times, "On the Beat of Black Lives and Bloodshed." I never thought about writing about this. Three people who were close to me died this year. Since I read Lee's article, I've started thinking that reporting on this could be one way of dealing with it. I want to find out more about why this is happening. I think people deserve to have their stories told."

The first reaction to this is along the lines of "poor kid – he shouldn't be dealing with such things. "

And of course that's right. But I also see that journalism, with its simple acts of reporting and then telling people's stories, has become a path that Ronald can follow.

Ronald was editor of his school paper this past year and our journalist of the year. His journalism teacher told us, "Ronald's main focus has been on serious journalism, covering pieces of great consequence, such as ...the trauma faced by so many of his peers who had friends and family members murdered in the Austin neighborhood. He has

not been afraid to cover emotional issues; he's listened with care and reported on people who are hurt."

This past spring, we held our 25th anniversary SPAC workshop and awards ceremony. We decided that a celebration was in order: All the kids got t-shirts, and the teachers and advisers got visors that I personally LOVE. They say "Make journalism great again."

Our speaker at the Chicago Cultural Center, where we've held the awards ceremony for the past 10 years or so, was John Kass, columnist for the Tribune, who told the students that they represent the future of journalism.

SPAC itself represents teachers' and advisers' commitment to the future of journalism and to students whose voices deserve to be heard. I've been honored to play a role in keeping the organization alive.

SPAC has also linked our advisers and me to other communities of people who share our values – the Illinois Journalism Education Association, headed by Sally Renaud of Eastern Illinois University; the Illinois High School Association, which runs our statewide journalism competition, after an intense campaign a dozen or so years ago, led by our dear departed friend James Tidwell; and most recently, to the band of advocates led by Brenda Field and Stan Zoller who paved the way for Illinois' new student press rights law.

It's been inspiring to work with all of them and with so many of you.

Just one more thing: I have a confession to make, and you're the first to know. This past spring when we celebrated SPAC's 25th anniversary ... well, it actually was its 26th. I don't quite know how we got the founding year wrong, but I found the correct year when I went through the old files.

So I have the Division to thank for setting SPAC's record straight.

Thank again, and all of you have an invitation to attend the SPAC conference in March. I only speak for five minutes at that.