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Learning How to Tell a Better Story: A Glimpse at Making Media Connections 2005

What happens when you bring together some of the most recognized names in local and national media, representatives from hundreds of nonprofit and community groups, and one of the Midwest's leading training grounds for grassroots journalism?

You learn how to tell a better story.

Such was the focus of the 2005 Making Media Connections Conference, held June 1 and 2 at Columbia College Chicago, 1004 S. Wabash Ave. Sponsored by the Community Media Workshop, the 8th annual conference brought together a wide range of non-profit and community groups, along with media makers and content producers, to trade tips and techniques helpful in getting the important stories of our communities told.

Broken down into workshops, panel discussions and keynote speakers, the two-day event was attended by more than 350 participants and 70 presenters. Organizations as diverse as the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, Metropolitan Planning Council, AARP Illinois and Redmoon Theater were on hand to mingle and discuss strategy with representatives of media outlets big and small, such as the Chicago Tribune, CAN-TV and WBEZ Public Radio. Chicago Sun-Times columnist Mary Mitchell and award-winning author Alex Kotlowitz were among the event's speakers.

Wednesday, June 1, focused on specialized media and communication workshops, with such offerings as Becoming a Better Storyteller, Secrets of Effective PowerPoint Presentations and The Art of the Television Interview on the bill. Thursday, however, presented attendees with a smorgasbord of choices with no less than 22 separate breakout sessions on tap, covering everything from how to reach editorial page editors, working with PR agencies, keys to successful fundraising and how weblogs, or blogs, are transforming the media landscape.

For Beverly Moore, associate state director for AARP Illinois, the conference represented a chance to examine the ways in which access to media guides her work while picking up a few pointers she could bring back to her office.

"I enjoy coming to these sessions because it's good to get insight from reporters and find out how you can contact them," Moore said. "I particularly enjoyed the session with [Eric] Zorn and [Andrew] Huff on blogging, along with the one on building relationships with media. [Those sessions] reemphasized things I needed to know and reenergized me for what I do. They gave me ammunition to go back to my colleagues and stand my ground about what it is that we do and how we do it."

Perhaps most popular with many of the attendees were keynote speakers Kotlowitz and Mitchell. In his Thursday morning opening remarks, Kotlowitz, the author of *There Are No Children Here*, the 1991 story of two Chicago children growing up in public housing, encouraged the audience to focus on the untold stories of the world around them by emphasizing the need for small stories that reflect the universal human condition.

"The smaller the story is, the more powerful it is," Kotlowitz said, spotlighting the theme of storytelling. "Stories are what guide us, stories are what engage us, and stories help make sense of the world around us."

The act of telling stories is the act of hope, and of criticism.”

For her part, Mitchell won over the lunchtime crowd on Thursday with a mix of professionalism, humor and insight into such topics as the difference between Chicago’s two main daily newspapers, the way newsrooms operate and the rise of tabloid journalism geared towards youth. Both speakers took plentiful sets of questions from the audience.

By the end of the second day, the conference threw open its doors to the public with a pair of roundtable discussions focusing on the relationship between two of the city’s minority communities and the media outlets that serve them.

More than a couple hundred people listened and participated as noted Chicago journalist Laura Washington led Don Wycliff, public editor of the Chicago Tribune; Alysia Tate, editor and publisher of the Chicago Reporter; Roland Martin, executive editor of the Chicago Daily Defender and others through a discussion of the many issues involved in media coverage of black communities. At the same time, moderator Marilia Gutierrez of Reflejos Publications examined media issues for Latinos with Casey Sanchez of Extra, Linda Lutton of Daily Southtown, Ana Maria Soto of Columbia College Chicago and a host of others.

(For the full list of roundtable panelists and participants or to lend your voice to these conversations, go to http://www.newstips.org/interior.php?section=Calendar+Sub&main_id=473 for more about the African-Americans and media roundtable or http://www.newstips.org/interior.php?section=Calendar+Sub&main_id=469 for more about the Latinos and media roundtable.)

For some, such events as the roundtable discussions—and the wider Making Media Connections conference as a whole—cut right to the core of CMW’s mission and the need for better ways to tell the often overlooked stories that can be found in every community.

“The personal connections I made today were of the most value,” said Anita Evans, creative director of Free Street, a community-based theatre, music and writing program in Chicago. “[MMC] provided a great opportunity to make the names on a list turn into people whom I know and know what their passions are.”

Beyond helping further CMW’s mission of creating better relationships between the media and diverse communities, it was exactly these personal connections that proved most valuable for many of the attendees for 2005.

For Julie Somogyi, director of communications for the Girl Scouts of Chicago, time spent in close proximity to those she needs to get her message out proved once again to be what mattered most.

“The opportunity to meet journalists, editors and reporters, face to face, is still the number one reason I attend, year after year,” she said.

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