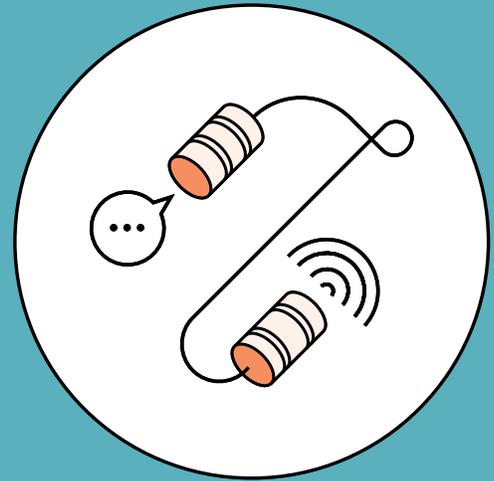


THE MANAGER'S ENGAGEMENT PLAYBOOK

**IT TAKES ON-THE-GROUND RELATIONSHIPS
TO COVER COMMUNITIES, BUT IT TAKES
MANAGERS TO KEEP THOSE RELATIONSHIPS GOING.**

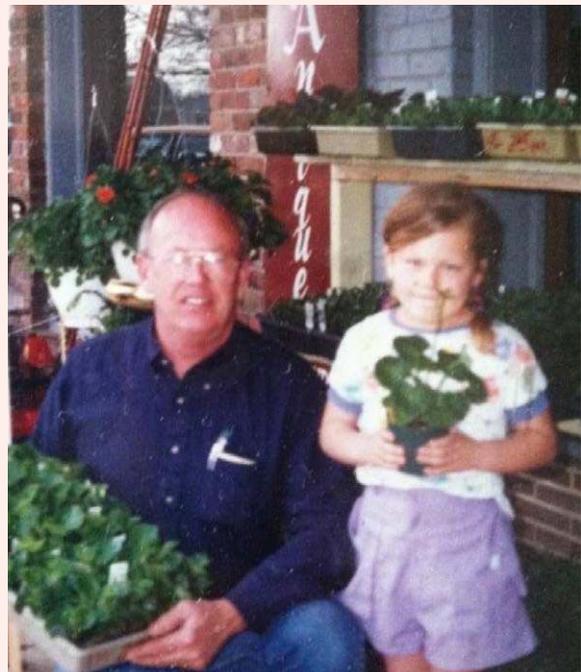
By: Mary Margaret White



BREAKING CYCLES OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT

My hometown of Drew, Mississippi is a four-way stop sign on a two-lane blacktop. There is little more than a gas station and pharmacy there now, but during my childhood in the 1980s, Main Street was alive. My parents owned a small furniture and appliance store and I learned early on the value of community, helping those in need and treating people with dignity. Don't get me wrong, the Mississippi Delta was (and still is) socially segregated, but my parents were fair and honest business people.

We offered Western Union wire services at our store and people of all ages would come in to wire money to relatives.



Mary Margaret White (at right) and her father Tom P. Miller in front of their family store in Drew, Mississippi in 1986. (Photo courtesy of Mary Margaret White)

I was young and didn't understand this booming aspect of our business. My father explained to me that a lot of people don't have bank accounts, so that's why they don't mail checks.

"Well, where do they keep their money?" I replied.

Daddy explained, in a local colloquialism, that lots of folks don't have "walking around money" and if they do, they don't trust banks.

I'll be 40 years old next year. I can recognize now the systemic oppression that plagued my hometown and still permeates my state. I started my career in state government, building public programs to support community artists and arts organizations. In my early days, we'd launch programs based on national-level playbooks and take them into small town Mississippi — and they'd just fall flat. They didn't meet the unique needs of our communities.

So we learned to do what should have seemed so obvious: We started instead by visiting communities and listening to their stories, documenting their needs and building programming around community priorities.

When I came to Mississippi Today in 2017, I knew that I wanted communities at the center of every aspect of our work. This turned out to be more challenging than I had imagined. Editors, journalists and social media leads were working from their desks at our newsroom in the state's largest city, removed from the rural, impoverished enclaves that make up the majority of our state. Mississippi Today was launched in 2016 as a statehouse watchdog, nearly doubling the capitol press corp that year with our three political reporters. Holding power to account was a top priority for the newsroom; that focus helped establish beats across important policy areas of education, healthcare, infrastructure and justice.

Those beats began to flourish, though, when we moved beyond the confines of the capitol and into the community.

I've had four titles since I began my career in news: Marketing and Branding Director, Marketing and Development Director, Executive Director and now, CEO. My responsibilities have changed but one thing has stayed the same: I stay involved in Mississippi Today's public programming and events. I spearheaded our early work in community-centered panel discussions on education policy. I woke up early to beat the August heat to set up information tables at local festivals. I packed my car with Mississippi Today give-aways and toured local breweries with reporters in tow. With each conversation about who we are, what we do and how we are different, it became more and more apparent that there were stories going unreported that we could only learn about by just showing up, introducing ourselves and listening.

In the fall of 2018, "engagement" grew into a buzzword across the news industry. I found space in our budget to send two team members who worked on the website and in marketing, Lauchlin Fields and Elizabeth Hambuchen, to the Online News Association (ONA) annual conference. In previous years, only management had attended ONA and had used it primarily as a networking opportunity. We were at an inflection point in shifting gears on how we talked to and reached readers, and the investment in that long weekend in Austin paid off.

Lauchlin and Elizabeth came home on fire for engagement journalism, and an idea for a no-cost approach to creating an engagement mindset across the organization. It involved establishing a team of reporters, marketers and designers to spearhead engagement at Mississippi Today, a 10-point approach that spanned across newsletters, social media, story display, events, data, membership and more. We had several reporters who showed tremendous interest in expanding their skills beyond traditional reporting. I gave this ad hoc team of marketers and reporters the green light to stretch beyond their job descriptions, and help us chart new waters in engagement journalism.

As a manager, I sat in on early meetings and helped shape initial priorities for the team, but what I mostly did was give them the space and authority to implement what they had learned at ONA. The team met regularly and liaised with the newsroom at large to launch surveys, social media conversations, texting lines and a myriad of other engagement tools to better understand the information needs of our readers.

This makeshift committee is now an established three-person Audience Team, which Lauchlin leads, and an official part of our organizational structure. They've created workflows and office hours and a weekly internal email that keeps everyone in the organization up-to-date on new projects, training opportunities and outreach.

Many newsrooms in the South battle a legacy of distrust in communities. We are still a new organization, not saddled with this history. Our nonprofit model has afforded us true editorial independence both from outside influence and market vulnerability.

Our challenges are great. Follow the paths of population loss and food inequality in Mississippi, and you'll find yourself in news deserts. If your hometown grocery store is closed, it is most likely that your newspaper has folded too. In that situation, when you are thinking about the basic needs of your family, an informed citizenry is not at the top of your priority list.

We believe that good reporting and the accountability it inspires can change the trajectory of our state. I believe that community-centered news can break the cycles of disenfranchisement that have long plagued media access in Mississippi. At the end of the day, I do this work because I love this state and I want better for her people. Our work is as much about public service as it is about information and I remind our team of that core value at every turn.

Author Kiese Laymon wrote an [essay](#) for Mississippi Today this fall. In both the essay and the [online interview](#) he talks about “the courageous work of unlocking Mississippi’s abundance.” This is the work of Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Margaret Walker Alexander and even our little newsroom, Mississippi Today. I’ve always believed in and recognized Mississippi’s abundance, but my work at Mississippi Today has given me a deep, profound understanding that the unlocking can never take place until our oppressive systems are examined, revealed and rectified — all things that good journalism can help us achieve.

Here are some of the lessons I have learned along the way, that might help other managers and newsroom leaders. Remember that you are not alone in this work. You have our community, colleagues and even your childhood experiences as your guide.

STEPS

1. Be intentional in your hiring. What does your community value?

For the first two years after launch, we didn't have a photographer on staff. Once we began publishing our own, original photos, the site came alive. The joy and pain and layered beauty of this place called Mississippi enhanced the storytelling in a way that AP images were never able to accomplish.

Due to the nature of our community-centered reporting, having a smart, empathetic [photo-journalism](#) is key to our work. We have been fortunate to have two incredible photographers at Mississippi Today, both Eric Shelton (Report for America Corps Member 2018-2020) and Vickie King have an exceptional ability to quickly make people at ease in front of their cameras and to show folks that we are there to serve them through photography, not to exploit them.

Mississippians have seen a lot of parachute reporting. To have photojournalists who are born and raised in Mississippi makes a difference when visiting a family who has just lost everything to rising flood waters. It makes a difference to people who have lost their jobs and are living in their cars in a family member's front yard. It makes a difference to these individuals who entrust us with their stories, with themselves, and it makes a difference to our readers, too.

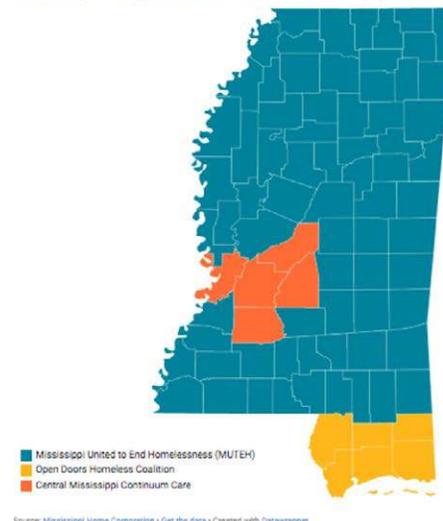


Harness racers compete during the second day of competition at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Miss. on July 31, 2018. [Read the full story.](#) (Eric J. Shelton, Mississippi Today/Report for America)

Hire for heart. Your team is the most important representation of your brand, and if trust is a core value, then you need staff that is intentional in their relationship building. I am passionate about keeping talented Mississippians in Mississippi, but if you can't find qualified candidates from your community, state or region, make sure to onboard new staff in a way that roots them in the place where they will work. Offer a curated list of books, articles and music from the area. Introduce them to your networks and help them find a local mentor in their field — no matter their level of experience.

Rental Assistance for Mississippians Program (RAMP)

Mississippi is administering \$18 million in rental assistance to applicants who are behind or short on rent payments due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Applicants should contact the Continuum of Care program in their region:



Source: Mississippi Home Corporation • Get the data • Created with Datawrapper

An interactive map gives readers information about rental assistance. [Read the full story from Mississippi Today, Aug. 21, 2020.](#)

2. Invest in professional development for your team and make room for failure.

When COVID-19 hit, we had to take a hard look at our budget and cut expenses. One of the first cuts was conference travel and professional development. This was a hard pill for me to swallow because I believe that growing your skills as a reporter, finding community among people with similar jobs and responsibilities and learning how to better serve your readers are all essential to our organizational values.

Our team was gracious and understood why we made the change. Plus, most conferences had been postponed or cancelled altogether. What happened next surprised me, though. Through Medium articles, curated pandemic newsletters and just by simply paying attention to the field, people across the newsroom started popping up on Slack with ideas they wanted to test in order to reach our community when in-person gathering was off the table: Our audience lead launched a texting line; Our editorial cartoonist started doing weekly live [drawing lessons](#) on Facebook; Our reporters [doubled down on data](#), taking cues from big time media companies and modifying the approach to work for Mississippi.

Not all of it worked perfectly right away, but through collaboration, feedback and testing, we eventually got it right. And we all felt better about living and working and serving through the pandemic.

Perfection is the enemy of good. Give your team the tools and networks to generate new ideas and then let them try. As a manager, don't hold your team to having every detail fine tuned before testing out a new approach or concept. The learning often comes in the doing.

3. Build conversations into the editorial process — without expecting stories every time.

Our [Public Newsroom](#) program in the Mississippi Delta taught us so much about listening. We began hosting these events across the region in 2018, where community members offered reporters feedback on big stories and ideas about what issues were going unreported. The Public Newsroom work got off to a slow start — We had to find the right gathering places and times, offering sandwiches rather than cookies, sending people home with resources rather than just talking, talking, talking.

Here's the original [Listening Post Collective Playbook](#), which offers ideas and tools for building community into your editorial work.

When the pandemic began, we wanted to capture that energy without gathering in person. The world was already experiencing Zoom fatigue and while our surveys continue to produce great information, they lacked the interpersonal connection that our reporters missed. Enter the [Community Ambassador Program](#).



Kelsey Davis, Mississippi Today education reporter, hands out Post-It notes at an event at King's Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Clarksdale, Mississippi in March, 2019. (Photo by Elizabeth Hambuchen)

To be honest, no one loves the name, but the intention is something we can all get behind: Find contacts in small towns and communities around the state and invest the time to build relationships. Check in and say hello. Talk about family and recipes and pets and plants. Our editors know that not every interaction will result in a story, but that's what's exciting about the Community Ambassador Program.

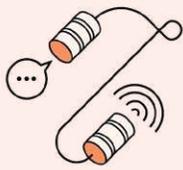
When a story does develop in these small enclaves of Mississippi, we will have advocates on the ground to help us connect the dots and report authentically.

[JMR's Participatory Journalism Playbook](#) is a guide to incorporating more views into your reporting, based on the work of Jesika Maria Ross at Capitol Public Radio. It can provide inspiration for new ways of thinking about how we report on communities.

Public programming can be a lot of work, but it can also be invigorating. We have a mix of formal programming and informal, individual approaches to community engagement. If you have a reporter who is feeling burned out on their beat, assign them to building community conversations. Encourage them to get into the community without the expectation of turning over a story. This helps remind us all why we got into the work of journalism — to get to know life experiences beyond the ones we've had ourselves.

Author note:

Mary Margaret White, a Mississippi Delta native, manages the business and development side of Mississippi Today as CEO. She works closely with foundations and donors to ensure reporters have the financial support they need to do their work. She also collaborates across departments to make sure everything Mississippi Today does aligns with its mission of public service journalism. Mary Margaret is a fellow in the 2020 Online News Association's Women's Leadership Accelerator, serves on the board of the Craftsmen's Guild of Mississippi and is an advisory board member for the Center for the Study of Southern Culture.



LISTENING POST COLLECTIVE

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