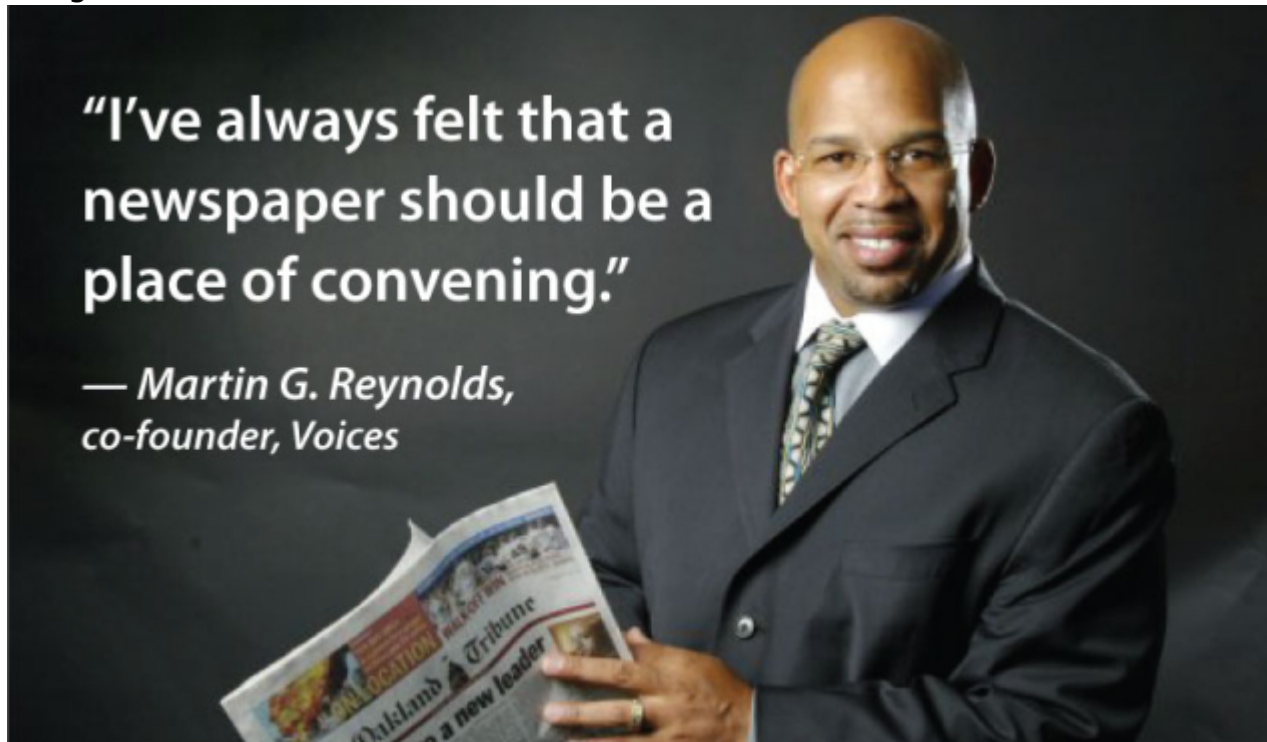


Oakland Voices Empowers Citizen Journalism

Image



Project a win-win for news organization and participants, says co-founder

Community members are being trained to produce news for local news organizations through a program sparked by the desire to see the Oakland Tribune do a better job connecting with the community beyond the pages of the paper.

The program, [Oakland Voices](#), will be starting its third class and second cohort of 10 East Oakland, California citizens this month. The class will engage in a nine-month training program to create news on an independent website and for the Oakland Tribune, says Martin G. Reynolds, co-founder of the program. He formed the idea when he was editor in chief at the Oakland Tribune in 2009.

“I’ve always felt that a newspaper should be a place of convening,” he says. “What better way to convene than by empowering residents from communities often left out of the conversation to participate?”

Oakland Voices helped spark a larger program dubbed Community Voices. The Voices program is run by the [Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education](#) in partnership with local news organizations.

After germinating the idea, the first Oakland Voices class was trained in 2010, with a second class in 2012. Reynolds says they discovered the idea was replicable, so the Maynard Institute found funding and worked with the Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, MS, to form the first of two Jackson Voices cohorts.

“I want to bring Voices to newsrooms across my company, Digital First Media, while working with the Maynard Institute to offer this model to news organizations across the country,” Reynolds says. “We in the news business need to begin thinking more like a collective industry than simply competitors, especially when we’re talking about engaging diverse communities and sharing the stories they have to tell.”

Voices correspondents provide a unique view into the community and will do stories the paper may view as too granular for existing, more experienced staff to write, Reynolds says.

“They are really helping us fill a gap in our community coverage and providing some perspectives we might otherwise not have,” he adds.

One “Health of the Hood” project saw Oakland Voices correspondents going out into the community and assessing health determinants such as the number of parks, liquor stores and services in a three-block radius. Ten people went out and logged the information, took photos and blogged about it. A reporter synthesized the information in a column for the paper.

“That sort of collaborative journalism is something I think is really exciting, it’s fun, it’s powerful, it’s inclusive and we should be doing a heck of a lot more of it across the industry,” Reynolds says.

The program also provides participants a sense of empowerment as they now have a direct line to the paper in a way they didn’t before. One graduate, for example, asked Reynolds if the paper would host a training session for her staff on social

media and some of the skills she learned through Oakland Voices.

“She wouldn’t have known about our capacity to provide those skills and that relationship wouldn’t have been there without Voices,” Reynolds says.

In addition to benefitting the community, the program has changed the perception participants have of the paper, of journalism and its value in society, Reynolds says.

“A lot of times the public doesn’t know what happens behind the scenes, so they perceive a lot more intentional slighting when we don’t do something right. Oftentimes there’s a misconception of what’s actually happening,” Reynolds notes.

The Voices program is launching Sacramento Voices this year. Community Voices may expand into up to 10 more cities, which is Reynolds’ greatest hope for the project.

He also hopes to see more news organizations “begin to sniff the fragrance of engagement” and see the value for their staff.

“At a time when the journalism landscape continues to be stressful to traverse, something like a Voices or other engagement project reminds us why we are doing what we are doing,” Reynolds says.

“I think it’s cathartic in a way for journalists to participate in this, so that would be my hope that they begin to see the value.”

Learn more about Oakland Voices at oaklandvoices.us.

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