

'The Race Beat' is his beat



Photo by Ann Borden

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— HANK KLIBANOFF

BY ANDREW M. SCOTT

From covering the emotional farming crisis during the Reagan administration, to his efforts to shed light on the civil rights era, Hank Klibanoff has spent his life telling important stories that have affected people's livelihoods.

Klibanoff is well known, along with co-author Gene Roberts, for the book "The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle and the Awakening of a Nation," which reflects on how the media covered the civil rights movement. It won a Pulitzer Prize in 2007, among several other awards.

"Writing 'The Race Beat' was an extraordinary opportunity for me and exposed me to a history I thought I already knew but didn't," he said.

But the experience that journalism provides has always been an influence on Klibanoff's life.

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That passion for journalism extends back to his childhood.

"I love having a front-row seat on news and always have," Klibanoff said. "Even as a young kid, my mother would tell me 'Time to go to bed,' and I would balk. She would ask 'Why not?' and I would reply, 'Because I might miss something.'"

Klibanoff's career includes writing at numerous newspapers, 20 years of reporting and editing jobs for The Philadelphia Inquirer, and six years as the managing editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Today, he is the James M. Cox Jr. Professor of Journalism at Emory University and managing editor of the Civil Rights Cold Case Project. It's a multimedia, multi-partner project that uses investigative reporting to dig out the truth behind unsolved racial murders that took place during the modern civil rights era. Led by the Center for Investigative Reporting, the project uses professional reporters, documentary filmmakers, multimedia experts, public interest advocacy groups and lawyers to fill in missing information, to correct myths and to bring exposure, reconciliation and sometimes criminal prosecution.

One of the project's most recent stories involves revealing a man whose family claims he was involved in a 1964 Louisiana murder in which a black store owner died of his injuries four days after Klansmen forced him to remain inside while they burned his shoe-repair shop.

"There is just this massive amount of information of terrible things that happened to people in modern times, and so much of that information has remained hidden in government files or in the heads of people no one has asked," Klibanoff said. "What we are doing is trying to finish writing the rest of that history."

Prior to re-joining the Society of Professional Journalists in 2008, Klibanoff was a member and officer of the now defunct Mississippi chapter during the 1970s while working at the Biloxi Daily Herald, now called Sun Herald. During that time, the chapter was active in making changes in state law for open records and open meetings.

What brought Klibanoff back to the organization was its continuing energy.

"I was asked to speak at a conference and was bowled over at how many people were coming to the conferences and how many programs there were," Klibanoff said. "I liked how there was the whole academic and student part of SPJ."

That sentiment is no surprise, as Klibanoff is also involved on the board of directors for VOX Teen Communications, a non-profit youth-development organization in downtown Atlanta. It's dedicated to giving teens skills and resources to raise their voices about issues affecting their lives. ♦