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Death of journalists creates void

Black trailblazers Boyd and Bradley leave behind many great lessons

November 2006 marked the deaths of two journalistic giants whose careers should teach us much about journalism and diversity.

I speak of Gerald Boyd, former managing editor of The New York Times, and Ed Bradley, correspondent with CBS News magazine show "60 Minutes." Boyd, 56, and Bradley, 65, died within days of each other.

In the Times' obituary, Boyd was recognized for his leadership roles in work that garnered the newspaper nine Pulitzer Prizes. The topics: the first World Trade Center bombing; children of poverty; the complexities of race relations in the United States; and the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Bradley won numerous awards, including 20 Emmys. Among the Emmy Award-winning topics: schizophrenia; Chinese forced-labor camps; Emmett Till; and the effects of nuclear testing in Kazakhstan. Bradley also snagged the only television interview with Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

Their presence and their work mattered.

Both men were trailblazers, becoming "firsts" throughout their careers. Both men were journalistic powerhouses, covering the White House and producing high-quality work on a variety of topics, some that tackled race but most that went beyond race. And they were both high-profile African-American men.

Their loss will be felt for years to come, and perhaps for generations. With no Bradley on CBS and few top editors and publishers of color at daily newspapers,

who will serve as inspiration? Who will challenge the notion of what's news and who's news?

I have no doubt that there were little boys and girls — and likely some seasoned journalists — who watched Bradley and dreamed of someday stepping into his shoes. And, somewhere, youngsters are dreaming, as Boyd did, of becoming the top editor of The New York Times.

Both Boyd and Bradley recognized that their accomplishments opened the door for other journalists of color. Boyd helped launch a program in St. Louis to train aspiring black journalists. Bradley spent free time talking with young minority journalists. They both put their money where their mouths were in providing scholarships.

When the National Association of Black Journalists honored Bradley in 2005 with a Lifetime Achievement Award, he noted that he had seen changes in the television industry during his career.

"I look around this room tonight, and I can see how much our profession has changed and our numbers have grown," Bradley said in his acceptance speech, which is posted on the NABJ Web site. "I also see it every day as I travel the country reporting stories for '60 Minutes.' All I have to do is turn on the TV, and I can see the progress that has been made."

Progress? Yes, but not enough and certainly not quickly enough: no time to waste; too many stories that matter to cover.

One of those stories is race. An insight

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Just do it:

Tackle issues of race in your community without fear.

that Boyd offered about the 2001 Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times series, "How Race Is Lived in America," showed the importance of such work.

"I felt strongly that the racial divide remains the nation's most troublesome domestic problem and one that people remain unwilling to confront," Boyd said in the question-and-answer interview with Arlene Morgan posted on the American Society of Newspaper Editors Web site. "Today is a time of deep misunderstandings across racial lines. And instead of talking about this, too often there is silence. I feel that we pay a price both individually and society at large for this. So I thought The Times needed to find a way to explain what was happening to allow people to appreciate it and perhaps react to it. That's what we attempted to do."

Boyd's words echo almost as a challenge to media outlets: Tackle issues of race in your community without fear. It's a great story. That's one lesson.

Other lessons from the lives of Boyd and Bradley:

- Remember to give a helping hand and encouraging word to young journalists.
- Journalists of color can tackle any kind of story.
- And, perhaps my favorite lesson: Passion and dreams can take you wonderful places.

Commentary by

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