

Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics

To the judges,

In the spring of 2020, as George Floyd's killing by the Minneapolis police sparked a national reckoning on race, reporter Mará Rose Williams urged us to seize the moment. Her idea was to show how The Kansas City Star spent decades reporting on its city through a lens of white privilege and systemic racism.

Six months later, "The Truth in Black and White: An Apology From The Kansas City Star" was published.

In six stories and a column by editor and president Mike Fannin, the paper took an unflinching look deep into its 140-year history. The project documents a shameful legacy, one in which The Star and its then-sister publication, The Kansas City Times, disrespected, disenfranchised and blatantly ignored the city's Black citizens.

The traditional newspaper mission is that of community watchdog — holding elected officials and the powerful to account. Turning The Star into an investigative target was not a simple decision. While there was no conflict over our core values, there were challenges and uncertainties. How hard would we go after ourselves? How fair was it to upend the legacy of a paper that, for all the ways in which it failed the Black community, was still an essential institution that spoke truth to power at critical moments in the city's history? Would readers find this credible and convincing? And how could we prove that this was not just a look back, but an attempt to reset how we covered communities of color going forward?

Our biggest struggle came with setting the project's scope and depth. It could have easily been twice its final size. But we were a small staff, already stretched to the max covering a pandemic and a historically consequential election season.

Nevertheless, our team spent hundreds of hours studying decades of microfilmed pages of The Star, The Times and the city's Black newspapers, The Call and The Sun. They dug into state and private archives, congressional testimony and oral histories. We convened groups of scholars and community leaders to hear their views on the most important stories that went unreported. To the extent possible, we reached out to surviving Kansas Citians impacted by our flawed journalism.

Each story was supported by different decisions and rationales. Of foundational importance was to begin with an apology from the paper's editor. We also wanted to establish that The Star was founded by a white supremacist whose vision for the city included strict separation of the races,

and whose support for an up-and-coming real estate developer helped to establish a pattern of residential segregation that defines the city to this day. Kansas City's jazz heritage, a staple of current day Chamber of Commerce boosterism, was largely ignored when iconic musicians were making history in clubs just a few blocks from the paper. One story was still within the living memory of many Black Kansas Citians: The horrendous 1977 flood that was covered primarily as an assault on an affluent shopping district, not an event that destroyed Black lives and homes.

Another essential part of "The Truth in Black and White" was its forward tilt. We wanted to show that it was a beginning, not an end. To do that, we've taken a number of steps, among them creating and filling a new assignment editor's position for race and equity issues. We've also set up an advisory committee of community leaders to meet with us monthly over the next year for conversations on how to improve the breadth and depth of our journalism in all communities of color.

We hope, over time, to set things right, in ways both substantive and symbolic. Earlier this month, The Star announced it had removed founder William Rockhill Nelson from its masthead and website — his name, his words and his image.

We are proud to present "The Truth in Black and White" for your consideration.

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Links to the stories:

The truth in Black and white: An apology from The Kansas City Star

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article247928045.html>

As floodwater upended Black lives, Kansas City newspapers fixated on Plaza, suburbs

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article247164484.html>

'Brutes' and murderers: Black people overlooked in KC coverage -- except for crime

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article247235584.html>

Charlie Parker? Jackie Robinson? For The Star, Kansas City Black culture was invisible

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article246722461.html>

When civil rights movement marched forward, The Kansas City Star lagged behind

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article247769015.html>

Kansas City schools broke federal desegregation law for decades. The Star stayed quiet

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article247821130.html>

J.C. Nichols' whites-only neighborhoods, boosted by Star's founder, leave indelible mark

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article247787885.html>

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