



Kim Daniel, whose decade-plus struggle for housing was chronicled and aided by stories about the bureaucratic hurdles she faced.

Photo by Brian Munoz, St. Louis Public Radio

## Michael Brown's death inspired a journalist to zig while others zagged

By Richard H. Weiss

Two well-worn clichés concerning journalists:

- Good reporters run to the danger.
- They zig when others zag.

I have long aspired to be a good journalist.

But running to danger was impossible for me 10 years ago after a police officer shot Michael Brown in Ferguson. His body was left on the pavement for hours, with outraged citizens taking to the streets.

I was in an entirely different realm. On a lake. In northern Minnesota. Sunny. Breezy. 80 degrees. Eight hundred miles from danger.

Still, I felt some responsibility to a region where I had lived nearly all my life. What could I do? What should I do? Maybe I could zig where others zagged.

I never did hit the streets to cover what came to be referenced diplomatically as the “unrest” in the aftermath of the shooting. It was covered to a fare-thee-well by local and national media. The Washington Post and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch won Pulitzer Prizes for their coverage. After running to the danger,

reporters from those outlets and more stood up heroically to harassment threats from cops, protestors and rioters. Some suffered injuries.

In the aftermath of the shooting, then-Gov. Jay Nixon formed the Ferguson Commission, which found that the shooting was emblematic of decades of systemic racial inequities in our region.

A year later, the commission made 189 recommendations to address these problems. As a last act, it stood up a nonprofit called Forward Through Ferguson with the idea that it could work with citizens, already established NGOs and local policymakers to bring those recommendations to fruition. Forward Through Ferguson, led at the time by Nicole Hudson, recruited what it called “story catalysts.” I raised my hand to become one.

Nicole assigned me to work with a brilliant strategist, Eric Ratinoff. I say brilliant because he actually is, but also because he supported a ziggy idea that I had. Rather than focus directly on the policy recommendations (which others were doing), let's write stories that help people

understand why those changes are necessary. Rather than use buzzwords like systemic racism and bullet points to make a case, let's shine a light on the families in our region who have suffered under that system and who coped with, among other things, real bullets coming into their homes.

Instead of tweets and hot takes, let's go long form and weave an engaging narrative.

I had a model in mind, having recently read Isabel Wilkerson's “The Warmth of Other Suns.” Published in 2010 and named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize the following year, the book traced the Great Migration of African American people from the Southern United States to northern and western cities between 1915 and 1970. It focused on three families, highlighting their struggles and shining a poignant light on their plight. In the reading, you were able to identify with the moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas, sisters and brothers and take them into your heart.

Not long after publication, Wilkerson was interviewed about her work by Krista Tippett,

host of “On Being,” a public-radio program and podcast. Wilkerson described how when African American families arrived at their destinations from the South, they were shunted to the wrong side of the tracks and hemmed in by all manner of laws and public-policy prescriptions.

Wilkerson said she believed changing laws and public policy was important, but insufficient. She called for “radical empathy... to put ourselves inside the experience of others to allow ourselves the pain, allow ourselves the heartbreak, allow ourselves the sense of hopelessness that they are experiencing...”

“And so,” Wilkerson said, “I view myself as on kind of a mission to change the country, the world, one heart at a time... I feel as if the heart is the last frontier, because we have tried so many other things.”

To me, that was as good a North Star as a journalist could ever hope to find. So I suggested to Eric that we similarly trace families in our region over generations and share their stories of what it was like to live in St. Louis.

Go for it, he said.

## A toe in the water

That first story, about the Caldwell family, took just several weeks to write and report, but I did have a bit of a head start. I had gotten to know Evita Caldwell a little bit back in 2000, when she was a 10-year-old. I spent maybe 40 hours over several months sitting in her fifth-grade classroom at Jefferson School in the O’Fallon Place neighborhood just north and west of downtown St. Louis. It led to a four-part series with J.B. Forbes’ photography in the Post-Dispatch called “A Better Place to Grow Up,” about how a developer, civic leaders and educators struggled to reach and teach at-risk children and bolster their families and neighborhood.

Remarkably, nearly 15 years later, Evita got in touch with me. No longer at-risk, she had defied the odds, graduating with a degree in communications from Saint Louis University.

I wondered how many others enjoyed as much success. In 2015, I collaborated with Evita on a follow-up story that we called “All Grown Up,” also with photojournalist J.B. Forbes. It appeared in the St. Louis American as a special section, with a shorter version running on the front page of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. That story helped jump-start Evita’s career in communications, and also led me to get to know her family much better.

So for Forward Through Ferguson I wrote something like 5,000 words about the challenges the Caldwell family faced over generations in St. Louis. Lindy Drew, now widely known as one of the authors of *Humans of St. Louis*, provided the photos. Thankfully, our story had a happy ending. The Caldwells were thriving.

But not so happy, for me anyway, was

the fact that Nicole Hudson moved on and Forward Through Ferguson under new leadership was no longer interested in the project that Eric and I conceived.

Still, I wanted to continue doing those stories. Then I had a kind of eureka moment. Maybe my wife Sally Altman and I could create our own nonprofit to support this work. I went to a few friends for seed money. I attended a class on how to create a sustainable nonprofit, form a board and stay kosher with the IRS. We created a website (Evita Caldwell helped), and in 2019 we launched with a diverse board that included journalists, an accountant, an attorney, educators, a college student and an actor/filmmaker. They ranged in age from 25-75 and with a multitude of lived experiences that could inform our thinking.

We hired journalists, photographers and presentation specialists to write more stories and shared them at no charge with mainstream media, including the Post-Dispatch, St. Louis American, St. Louis Magazine, Jewish Light, St. Louis Public Radio and the Riverfront Times.

## Covering Covid

Then Covid happened, and we kicked into a higher gear with the 63106 Project. The title references the ZIP code in our town with the most problematic indicators of health. A study jointly conducted by Washington University and Saint Louis University in 2014 had shown that the average life expectancy in 63106 was 67 years. One digit and just a few miles away in 63105 (otherwise known as Clayton), life expectancy was 85.

The bullet points in that report explain why. But how did families actually live it day by day? How would they endure in the time of Covid?

We found several families in the 63106 neighborhoods who agreed to share their stories with our reporters and photojournalists. We weren’t interested in drive-by, one-and-done stories. (Some cynics call those kinds of pieces “poverty porn.”)

We produced a series on each family, checking in and writing about them every few months through the course of the epidemic. The Post-Dispatch carried stories about two families, with the Riverfront Times, St. Louis American and St. Louis Magazine featuring one family each.

Did it do some good, move the needle a little bit in the community? I think on the margins. But it had a tangible impact on the families we covered. Post-Dispatch columnist Aisha Sultan, a reporter and filmmaker with the 63106 Project, followed Tyra Johnson, a St. Louis single mother, for two years during the pandemic, documenting the challenges that school closures and virtual learning created for her four children.

As a result of bringing Tyra’s story to light, readers and viewers raised funds to purchase a new car to replace her stolen vehicle, paid for insurance coverage for one year, and donated

## Pruitt-Igoe residents targeted in tests seek redress

US Army sprayed zinc cadmium sulfate into air around housing complex in the 1950s



This scene represented order and a path to the St. Louis Plan. On the west of East 8, 2018

**PRUITT-IGOE RESIDENTS** who lived in the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in the 1950s, many seeking redress for the US Army spraying zinc cadmium sulfate into the air around the complex in the 1950s.

The Pruitt-Igoe housing complex was a massive project in the 1950s, designed to house the poor. It was named after two federal judges who had earlier had an unsuccessful bid to fund the project. The complex was built by the St. Louis Housing Authority and was one of the largest public housing projects in the world. It was eventually demolished in the 1970s due to structural problems and social issues.

Pratt Igoe residents, some 75,000 in all, were displaced from their homes in the 1950s, and many sought redress for the US Army spraying zinc cadmium sulfate into the air around the complex in the 1950s. The project was named after two federal judges who had earlier had an unsuccessful bid to fund the project. The complex was built by the St. Louis Housing Authority and was one of the largest public housing projects in the world. It was eventually demolished in the 1970s due to structural problems and social issues.

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more than \$20,000 to a GoFundMe created by a reader to benefit Johnson’s family.

Moreover, Sultan’s accompanying film, which aired on Nine PBS and was shown at the St. Louis International Film Festival, sparked an important discussion on how state and local resources can be used to address these issues for thousands of children in our region. And she has used it as a springboard to do more work on social-justice issues through filmmaking.

I chronicled the plight of Kim Daniel, a 50-plus-year-old woman who had survived several near-death experiences over the course of her life due to a congenital heart defect. Daniel had waited for more than a decade on a list to qualify for a Section 8 housing voucher that would allow her to relocate from a crime-ridden neighborhood to a safer housing complex and less stressful environment. (She actually had survived having bullets fired into her unit.)

But just as Daniel got qualified to relocate, she suffered a seizure that put her in hospital for two months. She could no longer get around without a walker or a wheelchair and would need a more expensive accessible apartment.

Initially, the St. Louis Housing Authority denied her request for additional support. Remarkably and wonderfully, our stories about her plight over the course of the next few weeks led to a reversal. Daniel is now happily ensconced in an accessible apartment in a much safer neighborhood.

Over the course of 2020-21, we went to great lengths to engage faith and civic organizations with the 63106 Project. Overall the sessions were attended by more than a thousand people. In each, our storytellers and the family members they covered shared their experiences and challenged participants to think about how they can address inequities as engaged citizens. Organizations involved included the Archdiocese of St. Louis – Peace



The River City Journalism Fund created a Commentariat, a way of amplifying the voices of young writers who come from marginalized communities. Here (from left) are Michael Bostic, Moriah Morrow and Elizabeth Franklin. Their commentaries on casting their first presidential vote were published June, 2024 in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. They were recognized at a League of Women Voters event at the Sheldon.

Photo by Richard H. Weiss

& Justice Commission, Cultural Leadership, Eliot Unitarian Chapel, Faith & For the Sake of All, Interfaith Partnership of Greater St. Louis, Jewish Community Relations Council, Kirkwood United Methodist Church, Mirowitz Center, National Council of Jewish Women — St. Louis, and the YWCA of Metro St. Louis.

The 63106 Project, funded by individual donations and generous grants from the Washington-based Pulitzer Center, helped us raise more funds to do more stories. But then I got some jarring news.

## The founding of the River City Journalism Fund

An editor at the Riverfront Times said the newspaper's parent company, Euclid Media, wanted to explore starting a nonprofit journalism arm as had been done in other parts of the country by for-profit publications.

Gosh. How could our little mom-and-pop outfit compete with that? The publisher had staff and infrastructure to support such a venture. On the other hand, we had one advantage. We already had nonprofit status and it might take Euclid as long as a year to get its new venture certified with the IRS.

So I got in touch and asked for a meeting. What if we teamed up?

I ended up being directed to Sarah Fenske, then executive editor of the Euclid chain. Within six months, we rebranded the effort, created a new board and became the River City Journalism Fund (RCJF). We found the resources to do even more social-justice stories, to train young people from marginalized communities to write commentaries, and to offer paid fellowships to two bright and up-and-coming scholars at Washington University.

I have met no finer journalist in St. Louis than Sarah. She is a skilled writer, editor, media

strategist and spokesperson. She also brought star power. She was widely known as the former host of "St. Louis on the Air" (where she still hosts a monthly legal roundtable) and is a regular on Donnybrook on Nine PBS.

Sarah recruited more writers for the River City Journalism Fund and edited their work. Some appeared in the Riverfront Times, but in other local media outlets as well. Together as editors, we were able to increase the quotient of meaningful, in-depth stories in our time and in our town.

The stories can be found at rcjf.org, pulitzercenter.org, stjewishlight.org and stltoday.comz. Here are a few examples for readers who might want to take a deeper dive.

RCJF advocates for marginalized communities:

- RCJF speaks up for the people of Pruitt-Igoe.
- RCJF follows the money on behalf of Missourians facing eviction.
- RCJF explores St. Louis County's inequitable application of the death penalty in a series called "Shadow of Death."
- RCJF finds major flaws in St. Louis' College Kids savings account program.

We work with young writers to find their voice and develop their skills as journalists:

- My first presidential vote.
- Finding my place in the world,
- RCJF revisits the Lynch slave pens.
- RCJF probes the Lindbergh Legacy.

Our work has been cited by the Associated Press and CNN and discussed on nearly every local talk show. Our stories have won numerous awards and have been attached to briefs filed with the Missouri Supreme Court. And more recently we were honored with Focus St. Louis's What's Right With the Region Award.



Sarah Fenske.

Photo provided by St. Louis Magazine



Sally Altman and Richard Weiss.

Just several weeks ago, we came to another inflection point. One of our media partners, the Riverfront Times, laid off its staff and essentially went belly up with a sale to an as-yet-unknown buyer.

RFT's demise was a major blow to the region's media ecosystem. It has led to serious discussions among donors and nonprofit stakeholders about how we can sustain and enhance quality journalism in the region.

Sarah lost her job at the RFT but quickly rebounded. She is leading a major digital expansion of St. Louis Magazine's local news coverage. Meanwhile, she continues in her unpaid role as RCJF's executive director.

So we will continue working on zigging when others zag. Or as the late, great St. Louisan and Hall of Famer Yogi Berra famously once said: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."