

R-G's "Street Gang" Story Was Flawed

Lacked Balance, Supporting Evidence

by Doug Bates
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We were wrong. Sometimes it takes courage and humility to say those words. Eugene police displayed both traits this past week when they publicly apologized for characterizing a group of South Eugene High School boys as a "gang" in an article published in The Register-Guard last month.

The reference was in an April 12 article on reports of Southern California street gangs moving to the Northwest. The story included a Eugene detective's description of South High's "Sanchez Brothers" as a Latino gang. "We regret that the information we provided the newspaper was not accurate," a deputy chief said.

For a police department, it was an extraordinary statement. Register-Guard editors can't recall a previous apology of that nature.

Something tells me it's time for this newspaper to show a similar dash of courage and humility. If the police are willing to admit they blew it, so should we.

Our April 12 article was flawed. It reported that Eugene has "a growing street gang problem" but provided no supporting evidence beyond graffiti in downtown alleys and the alarming statements of one detective (who named three Eugene "gangs" but admitted he couldn't say whether they were committing crimes).

One of the three groups mentioned by the detective was the "Sanchez Brothers." However, in its subsequent apology, the police department said the boys in the group "are not a street gang and should not have been so labeled." It turns out that none of the boys who formed the group is a Latino, as originally reported. In fact, a former member says the group (now disbanded) was just five friends, whites and non-whites, who liked to hang out together and wear matching baseball caps.

Part of our problem is semantics. "Gang" isn't necessarily a dirty word. (As a kid, I was known to pal around with some Oakridge teen-agers sometimes called "the gang," and it wasn't a pejorative label, although we pulled a few neighborhood pranks.) Our April 12 story, however, provided only one definition of gangs: the L.A. street version, notorious for violence and drug dealing.

Neither the detective nor our article accused the Sanchez Brothers of any wrongdoing. But we could have spared them the unfair and inaccurate "street gang" label by checking first with school officials, the boys themselves and members of Eugene's minority community.

Our story quoted the detective mentioning two other Eugene "gangs" — one involving whites and the other Blacks. Neither was accused of anything beyond showing "strong similarities to L.A. street gangs" in the way they associate and dress.

I'm troubled by that sweeping generalization, and so are some Eugene people who visited our newsroom this past week to voice concerns about our April 12 report. A small but impressive group of citizens—both white and Black—told R-G editors that our reporting damaged race relations in Eugene. They said our "gang" story contributed to a negative racial climate in which non-white young men are subject to increased suspicion and hostility—especially when they associate in groups, but even when they walk down the street alone.

The visitors told us they're just as opposed as police to the notion of street gangs getting started in Eugene, and they told us they want this newspaper to report the problem if it happens. However, they said our April 12 article served only to inflame racial hostility while failing to substantiate the claim that the gang problem is here.

I find myself agreeing. Our gang story contained unsupported statements, relied on only one Eugene source and lacked balance (no attempt was made to get comment from minority groups or the young men supposedly operating as "gangs").

But my intent here isn't to crucify the reporter. We have editors here, including me, who are supposed to spot faulty reporting and get it fixed. Four pairs of editors' eyes saw that piece before publication. I'm told that even though one editor detected a problem and raised strong objections to the story, nobody put the brakes on it.

Our usually reliable system of checks and balances failed us. How? I think it stemmed in part from an inherent weakness typical of most newsrooms at U.S. newspapers. All of our editors are white. And although we like to think of ourselves as an idealistic and relatively enlightened bunch of journalists, we sometimes fail to be as sensitive as we should be in realizing the impact our news product has on non-whites in the community.

One thing's on our side, though. We know we have this problem (our visitors this past week helped remind us), and we're working on it.

Meanwhile, the "gang" story isn't over yet. Although police retracted what was said about the Sanchez Brothers, there's been no apology for labeling the other two Eugene groups as gangs. In the weeks ahead, we'll be examining that point while exploring the broader subject of race relations in this community.

Local Poet Awarded "Golden Poet Award"

Nyewusi Askari, a Northeast Portland-based poet, has added another award to his growing list of honors. World of Poetry's Board of Directors (Sacramento, California) has voted unanimously to honor Askari with its Golden Poet Award for 1987 in recognition of his poem, "Meeting With a Stranger." According to Eddie-Lou Cole, World of Poetry's Poetry Editor, "The Golden Poet Award is to poets what the Academy Award is to actors. It is the highest honor World of Poetry is able to bestow on a poet." To be eligible for the Golden Poet Award, the poet must have won three or more other awards for poetry.



Nyewusi Askari

The presentation will take place at the World of Poetry's Third Annual Poetry Convention, August 11, at the Las Vegas Hilton in Las Vegas, Nevada. Last year's convention was held in Orlando, Fla., where Askari was presented with The Silver Poet Award in recognition of his poem "A Smoothspeed Moment." More than 2500 poets, actors, writers and social activists attended. These included keynote speaker Maya Angelou, and noted actor Vincent Price, who gave a reading of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven."

This year's convention will feature Afro-American poets Etheridge Knight and Sherley Anne Williams. Ms. Williams is the author of the celebrated novel "Dessa Rose" and "Some Sweet Angel Chile," a volume of poetry. She will present "A Look at Afro-American Poetry." Mr. Knight is a highly acclaimed Broadside Press poet. He has been awarded fellowships by the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He will read "The Essential Etheridge Knight."

This marks the second consecutive year Askari has received an award from the World of Poetry, a California-based publication, which boasts a membership of 689,000 poets from America, twenty-seven foreign countries (including Black South Africa), and twenty-seven provinces.

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