

2019 Lynn Smith Community Leadership Award

To whom it may concern

It was perhaps telling when a group of all white journalists met with about a dozen people of color, and each took seats on their own side of the room.

Maybe it was a way for each of us to hold on to our comfort zones in what could be an uncomfortable meeting.

The Free Press asked leaders of racial diversity efforts at the YWCA to gather the group so we could hear how people of color feel they are portrayed in The Free Press. The group included a variety of people, from social workers and lawyers to working people and college-educated professionals.

Our job was to listen. And we heard plenty. People of color are portrayed mostly negatively in The Free Press. We show “dangerous black people” in crime stories with no balance showing positive stories for people of color, while white people are portrayed positively in feature stories on a daily basis.

When people comment on stories on our Facebook page, there’s a subtle racism running through some threads. People of color are rarely quoted as experts in stories even though many come from a broader perspective of being a person of color living in a mostly white world.

A mugshot of someone convicted of a crime with a short headline can create a racial narrative that is not there. Daily reports of the same type of story can create “racial optics” that again, transfer all too easily to an entire group of people.

The Free Press took the issue of racial narratives seriously. We wrote columns explaining the issue to our readers. We wrote editorials condemning local racism and charging the community to get involved. We proactively sought stories that would change the racial narrative, showing people of color in roles that showed community building, tolerance and acceptance.

Our efforts were met with tremendous positive feedback from communities of color and white residents as well. (Emails are attached to our entry)

We began to heal the racial divisions our country is facing with education, understanding and outreach.

Please consider this effort for the Lynn Smith Community Leadership Award.