

## RAY BOONE'S SHRILL, TRUSTED EDITORIAL VOICE

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At 59 and after four decades in the news business, Raymond H. Boone could easily declare himself in the twilight of his career, ease back in his second-floor Broad Street office and let a newer pair of shoes pound downtown streets for editorial fodder.

Thousands of Richmond residents are hoping he won't.

Tens of thousands of others wouldn't notice his absence.

That might be the most striking irony of Boone's long career, one that has established his editorial voice as one of the shrillest but most trusted in Richmond's African-American community.

Boone's words are eagerly awaited across much of Richmond each Thursday morning when his weekly Richmond Free Press hits the streets. But they just as regularly pass unread and unnoticed in much of the Richmond area's largely white suburbs and inside its largely white corporate offices.

"Richmond is still a city made up of two communities superimposed on one another, and there's not as much overlap as some people might like to think," said Henry L. Marsh III, former Richmond mayor and longtime Democratic state senator.

"Ray Boone is a brilliant journalist who has been able to take advantage of that distinction."

Possessed of a tinder-dry temper that seems always on the verge of ignition, Boone has established himself as the watchdog over Richmond's black populace, first as the editor of the Richmond Afro-American and Planet for 15 years, and since January 1992 as editor and publisher of the Richmond Free Press.

Between the two editorships, Boone left Richmond for Baltimore, where he held down an executive position, and for Howard University, where he taught journalism.

But if people expected the 12-year interlude to have softened Boone's view of Richmond's ills and promise, they were mistaken.

In his January 1992 inaugural edition, Boone ran a banner headline announcing former Gov. L. Douglas Wilder's withdrawal from the presidential race - "Wilder's Bombshell. . .Jesse reacts to Doug's exit." Sharing space on the front page in that issue was an article correctly predicting that black-owned Consolidated Bank & Trust Co. would rebound after its first loss in 33 years.

It must not have mattered that the Wilder "bombshell" news was a week old and that on Page 3 of that issue was a full-page advertisement from Consolidated Bank wishing the Free Press well.

"We care about all matters that relate to Richmond today and tomorrow. All of our lives are interwoven. We all, whether we like it or not, are in the same proverbial boat. We must work together - or continue to sink," Boone wrote in the paper's mission statement, one that promised "to focus reliably on the status of racial justice in Richmond."

In the next issue, Boone teed off at one of his favorite targets, the Richmond Times-Dispatch, which had managed in a brief mention of the Free Press' appearance to mistakenly report the weekly's circulation as 2,500 rather than 25,000; to ignore the presence of another black-owned newspaper in the city, The Voice; and to incorrectly identify the Free Press' printer as its publisher.

Boone saw the miscues as a deliberate effort by the daily newspaper to embarrass him and his fledgling paper. He raked Times-Dispatch management for its "gross lack of knowledge about the black community" and urged it "to reverse its record of tearing apart Richmond, especially along racial lines."

To even casual readers it was clear, then, that Suffolk-born Boone was back in town and that his prickly brand of journalism was intact. Joining him were his wife, Jean, who is advertising director, and daughter, Regina, who is a photographer.

"I want it made clear in your story that I in no way cooperated with its preparation," Boone told this reporter after repeated refusals to be interviewed or to answer written questions.

He dismissed the suggestion that a story about him would help broaden the public's knowledge of him in the Richmond area. "What do I

need a forum for?" he asked. "I've already got a forum."

Friends and newspaper acquaintances shrug their shoulders at Boone's intransigence. "That's Ray," one person said. "He just hates The Times-Dispatch. It's that simple."

This is the same editor who 20 years ago fumed at the city Chamber of Commerce for its insensitive "Livin' Good" campaign during a period of nationwide high unemployment, who branded the Tobacco Festival Parade in Richmond as racist, and who once editorially instructed former Gov. Mills E. Godwin Jr. in the proper pronunciation of "Negro."

Why, Boone wondered, did the word keep coming out "Negrah" when Godwin had no trouble with words like "zero" and "hero"?

"In the beginning it was me and a part-time photographer," Boone has recalled of his move to Richmond in 1965. He'd been the Washington correspondent for Afro-American Newspapers Inc. and was asked by management to revive its struggling paper in Richmond.

His thirst for journalism, Boone has said, was fueled by an incident during his youth in Suffolk when he was barred from watching a semi-pro baseball game because of his color.

Newspapering was a way to attack discrimination. But Boone's introduction to daily journalism at the Suffolk News-Herald in 1957 found him stifled by the mantle of segregationist Virginia. His job title was Negro News Reporter.

Boone's determination helped him break free.

"I don't expect to be beaten often because I'm not going to be beaten easy. It's as simple as that," Boone once said, paraphrasing Frederick Douglass, an inspirational figure in his life.

With the Free Press, Boone was able not only to call his own shots and write his own editorials, but he also joined the ranks of Richmond's minority-owned businesses.

Free Press investors, most of them influential and long-standing members of black Richmond's political and professional families, say they eagerly welcomed Boone back to town in 1992.

Boone collected as much as \$250,000 in initial capitalization, according to several sources, impressing investors with his eagerness.

"He asked me for the money on a Friday at lunch and was in my office waiting for the check Monday," recalled one investor.

"I was probably one of the first people he talked to when he came back to organize the paper," said Leonard Lambert, a lawyer with deep Richmond ties who gets a stack of Free Presses delivered to his office each Thursday. "I was one of the first to get behind him and I did it because of Ray the person. I've known him for many years.

"He's an advocate with a voice that needs to be heard. I felt that his voice, his reporting, his opinion would be very valuable to the city.

"He gives another viewpoint. We'd been limited to the august Times-Dispatch and News Leader for many years and we needed a different perspective, a different light. Ray is one to tell the story like it is. He isn't afraid to speak up and he's not one to compromise his position because of any criticism he might receive."

Lambert recalled a weekend barbecue at Boone's South Richmond home during the summer and chuckled at the editor's thick-skinned chutzpah.

Wilder was a welcome guest that day but awoke the following Thursday to find himself the subject of a blistering Free Press editorial questioning his neutrality in the upcoming governor's race.

"I like Ray. He's a good man," said Wilder, dismissing the editorial as an expected consequence of public life. "I can take some responsibility for the success of the Free Press. I used to time news releases so Ray could report things on a competitive basis with the daily newspapers.

"He always had access to the governor's office."

While Boone helped spur the election in March 1977 of the city's first black-majority City Council - "Power To The People," his headline in the Afro-American screamed - it wasn't long before Boone realized political power might not be enough to bring equality.

"You've got to remember that it wasn't so long ago that the kind of stuff Ray writes was getting black folk killed in some parts of the country," said John Templeton, who succeeded Boone at the Afro and now runs his own paper in San Francisco. "But now things are different.

"One of the limitations of a politics-only agenda is that politics doesn't run the country. Economics runs the country. Ray's updated the

message."

While blacks may have gained political and population majorities, the number of Richmonders now stands at pre-World War II levels and the city's business core has badly deteriorated.

Boone hasn't ignored the blight; nor has he hesitated to point fingers.

City Manager Robert C. Bobb has come under especially severe attack. A Free Press editorial three years ago described him as "one of the principal ingredients that has kept Richmond stuck in the mud of strangulating mediocrity."

Earlier this year, after the firing of the city school superintendent, the Free Press attacked the "instability and ineptness" of the city's educational leadership. "Children are being crippled," the paper said.

Leonidas B. Young, City Council member and former mayor, deserved to be ousted last year because his advocacy for a mayor elected at large "revealed his inexcusable lack of concern for the protection of black voting rights," a Free Press editorial said.

Young, a Baptist minister, was re-elected and the paper offered faint praise. Still, an editorial couldn't help recalling the story of Elmer Gantry, the wayward preacher.

Now approaching its sixth anniversary, The Richmond Free Press has blossomed into one of the most broadly respected black weekly newspapers in the country, said Dorothy Leavell, president of the National Newspaper Publishers Association, which represents more than 200 black weekly papers.

"Ray is a nationally recognized force whose willingness to start up a paper in these times is not only unusual but an inspirational example of his dedication," said Leavell, publisher of the Chicago Crusader.

"Integrity may be too shallow a word to describe him and I hesitate to ask him sometimes how good a job I'm doing here because I know he'll tell me exactly what he thinks."

Chock-full of advertisements, personality portraits and Boone's biting editorials and with a heavy emphasis on city politics, the Free Press and its oversized distribution boxes are gradually nudging their way into the suburbs.

Boone is advertising for increased reporting and editing staff and there are suggestions that Paradigm Communications Inc., the Free Press' hometown corporate owner, of which Boone is chairman, will expand its presence in the news business.

"It's been a wonderful investment for me, very successful," said Dr. Elwood Boone Sr., a southern Chesterfield County physician and respected civic leader who with his son was an early Boone financial backer.

"I've gotten a full return on my investment and have plowed it right back into the newspaper," he said. (The two Boone families are not related.)

"I'm a pauper," Raymond Boone said curtly when asked if he's personally profited from the newspaper endeavor.

But his South Richmond home, purchased for \$250,000 from former City Councilwoman Carolyn Wake in 1992 and which has a swimming pool and three acres, suggests that Boone is hardly destitute.

Boone's longevity and the long tenures of his two principal reporters, Jeremy Lazarus and Hazel Trice Edney, afford the Free Press an institutional memory that is rare in the failure-filled weekly publishing world.

The Free Press also is grounded in an advocacy form of journalism that has always marked black publications, especially in Richmond, where Boone was credited with giving the century-old Richmond Afro-American the highest market penetration of any black paper in the country, according to Afro-American Newspapers Inc.

"He was the epitome of the crusader and a huge taskmaster who demanded professionalism," said Templeton, the former Afro-American editor.

(The Afro's Baltimore owners shut down the Afro-Planet last year, ending a historic but, in recent years, remote presence in Richmond. The paper had lost touch with the readership, several of Boone's financial backers said.)

Now Boone is looking at a publishing career with little direct competition, confident investors and advertising from major corporations and institutions that for decades shunned or simply overlooked the black press.

But Boone's form of advocacy, which at its best has fought housing discrimination, championed the needs of the homeless, and challenged an entrenched white establishment, also often seems rooted in the past and designed to benefit his own pocketbook as much as the black community at large.

"One of the real tragedies is that Ray came back here with so much promise and turned out to be someone who just seems to want to go after people," said a white former city politician who refused to be identified. "He's shoot-from-the-hip."

For Boone, who once characterized himself as a "warrior for justice," Richmond in many ways seems hardly to have changed from the days he first arrived and found it, in his words, a place where "racial discrimination was calculated to plague blacks from the cradle to the grave."

It was also a place then, he has written, where Richmond's daily newspapers, The Times-Dispatch and The News Leader, were the "mouthpieces of the oppressors" and "the undisputed leaders" of a "crude, perverted brand of journalism." The two dailies merged in 1992.

Boone hasn't backed off, excoriating The Times-Dispatch, white political leaders, black political leaders, and especially white business executives for actions that he perceives have furthered racism and economic injustice.

When the F. W. Woolworth Co. went out of business, robbing downtown Richmond of a retail outlet, the newspaper ridiculed the nostalgic stories of the day. Woolworth's, instead, "represented the epitome of the cruel system of racial segregation designed to demean and subordinate black people."

When Richmond Newspapers Inc., which publishes The Times-Dispatch, tried to block the Free Press in court from qualifying for lucrative legal advertising in 1993, the Free Press labeled the move "a sinister effort to do in" the paper and "a blatant attempt to maintain a newspaper monopoly."

"We shall not be moved," an editorial promised.

Even Hull Street gadfly August Moon came under admonishment for granting an interview to The Times-Dispatch last month after he was recognized by the Allen administration for his community work.

"Conservative extremists are always searching for Clarence Thomas prototypes," Moon was warned.

Few entities have come under steadier public attack than MediaOne, the local cable franchise that has moved its headquarters out of the city.

Boone has blasted company officials not only for their alleged failure to meet nondiscriminatory contract promises, but also for their failure to advertise in the Free Press.

MediaOne, the Free Press stated in an editorial, made a "segregation-era decision to boycott the Free Press and its family of 70,000 readers through a white-only advertising policy."

MediaOne officials responded that they had relied on the dominant media in regional markets to advertise and that 90 percent of its money went to broadcast advertising. A few weeks later, though, a MediaOne ad appeared in the Free Press.

Circuit City, also a rare advertiser in the Free Press and the loser in a highly publicized discrimination case, has been labeled in an editorial as "the No. 1 racist symbol in Richmond's corporate community" and as an "equal opportunity ripoff artist."

Boone also attacked Virginia Commonwealth University and its president, Dr. Eugene P. Trani, after a VCU-linked journalism group recognized "five white males" for lifetime achievement, thereby perpetuating the image of previous award winners as a "White Male Shrine," Boone wrote.

Of the 66 persons inducted into the Virginia Mass Communications Hall of Fame at VCU, four are of African-American descent and five are women.

While Trani is regarded in some quarters as the moving force behind downtown Richmond's and VCU's revitalization, the Free Press wondered editorially last summer if his many leadership positions mean he is wearing too many hats.

"The true test is whether he can walk the talk," the Free Press said of Trani.

At the same time, Boone wrote Trani privately to accuse him of "unbridled favoritism" toward The Times-Dispatch when it comes to spending advertising dollars. He called Trani's "token spending with the Free Press" despicable.

"It is little different from the practices of VCU and MCV during the days of harsh segregation when economic decisions were systematically made with the evil objective of keeping black people poor and subordinated," Boone wrote Trani.

In his Aug. 21 letter, Boone asked for a breakdown of advertising dollars spent by the Medical College of Virginia Hospitals and VCU, as well as by other entities Trani heads.

To help "facilitate" the alleged spending disparity, Boone wrote that he'd mailed copies of his letter to members of the boards Trani sits

on, to key legislators and city officials, and to black business and political groups.

In a 12-page response mailed to Boone, Trani detailed MCV and VCU investments in the black community, including some \$12.7 million in purchases with minority business owners.

The letter also detailed a huge gap in advertising money spent on the two newspapers by MCV and VCU, about \$1.16 million compared to \$66,500 since 1992.

Trani wrote that marketing surveys demonstrate that The Times-Dispatch offers "an effective way to reach the Richmond area's African-Americans."

Don Gehring, a VCU vice president, said the school remains committed to investing in the entire Richmond community and that advertising dollars will be spent based on sound business decisions.

"Ray gave us his best shot. And we've chosen to respond in a way that we think answers his concerns," Gehring said, adding that Trani sent his letter to the same people copied by Boone.

"Our concern is that maybe we haven't been doing as good a job of telling people what we've accomplished as we should have," Gehring said.

Whether Boone's drumbeat of protest is preserving Richmond's separateness or forcing a new recognition of the city's black population is a matter few people are willing to address openly.

One legislator said that he fears that the Trani-Boone imbroglio will cast a new pall over city politics and business investment. "There are a lot of feelings that have been hurt," he said.

"I thought it was a cheap shot," August Moon said of the comment about him. "In the newspaper business, you need controversy because controversy is lucrative." He still considers Boone a close friend.

"I'm not going to put myself between an immovable object and an irresistible force," said Clarence L. Townes Jr., a longtime friend and an investor in Boone's paper, declining to comment on Free Press content.

Townes, executive director of Richmond Renaissance, said he has tried to maintain strong ties to both sides of Richmond's color line: To judge either side too openly is unproductive, he said, "especially when we're talking about two entities with barrels of ink to spill."

One white business executive said Boone's constant refrain of criticism can sometimes come across as too defensive and too reactionary, chilling the willingness of some executives to venture into Richmond's politically tricky world of biracial initiatives. But the same executive said the strident conservatism of The Times-Dispatch's editorial page has a similar effect.

Others, like Templeton, see Boone as a proud streetfighter in the long struggle for black equality whose trust of the white establishment can be won only through the politics of genuine inclusion.

In early October, Boone received the economic empowerment award from the Richmond branch of the NAACP, a convincing testament that one sector of the Richmond community believes Boone is forging a positive path.

"In order for the Richmond community to reach its potential, we need a wide exchange of views and dialogue that's healthy and vigorous," said Marsh, a standard bearer of black political fortunes in Richmond for decades.

"I think Ray is contributing to the vigorous dialogue every week," Marsh added, describing Boone as a moderate. "My differences with him have been overshadowed by my admiration for him and the obstacles he's overcome to get the Free Press established.

"It's been a remarkable story and only a guy like Ray could have succeeded.

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