
Sometimes Things Aren't Black and White
BLACKSPANIC COLLEGE
BY
H.B. KOPLOWITZ

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Dome Publications

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Cover
"Evolution of the Spirit" (wall mural)
by Elliott Pinckney.
B&W photo by Jaime D. Butler.

Introduction

"Blackjack, put down the news editor!" I pleaded.

Blackjack Loco, a strapping, 25-year-old gangbanger on parole aka photo editor for the student newspaper at Los Angeles Southland College, was striding across the newsroom with the news editor, a hellasexy coed named Tashena, slung over his shoulder like the "Rape of the Sabines." As the faculty adviser for *The Explorer*, I was trying to get Blackjack, Tashena and the rest of the newspaper staff organized. There was also the assistant photo editor/high school gangbang wannabe Holden; Tyrone, the movie reviewer/porn addict; Nakida the sports editor/exotic dancer; and Leroy, Caveman and Mars, The Three Stooges of Rap. (To protect the innocent and spare the guilty from cheap shots, most names have been changed, including the name of the school.)

From the fall of 1998 through the spring of 2002, I was a part-time journalism instructor at Southland College in South-Central Los Angeles. For much of that time I was also the faculty adviser for *The Explorer*, an eight-page student newspaper that came out about once a month when it came out at all. Most people have never heard of Southland College, but President Bill Clinton visited the campus while I was there. So did Vice President Al Gore, former South African President Nelson Mandela's ex-wife Winnie, and basketball's Dennis Rodman, who along with Kobe, Shaq and the rest of the Los Angeles Lakers, practiced in the gym.

Southland offers associate degrees and certificates in various majors and occupations, but there wasn't much of a journalism program when I got there, and there was less of one when I left. Some have suggested that was because of a lack of institutional support, while others said it was because I was a racist, and maybe I wasn't right for the part. But it wasn't for a lack of trying.

Rising from the ashes of the 1965 Watts Riots, Southland is one of the few predominantly black colleges west of Texas. It's in an area between Inglewood and Watts known colloquially as Inglewatts, and to get to work from my residence near Hollywood, I'd drive south through a slice of Koreatown and barrios, then push 100 blocks

deeper into the churning underbelly of South-Central L.A.

Hemmed in by a Kmart, fast food restaurants and gas stations on two sides, and a freeway and light rail commuter tracks on the other sides, the campus consisted of four angular buildings and several weathered bungalows that housed student services and a magnet high school.

The Odessa Cox Building — named after a community activist who spent decades campaigning for a college in South-Central — contained the administrative offices, along with a tiered library and balconied auditorium. Filling the outside west wall of the Cox Building was the most striking feature on the campus, a brightly colored, four-story-high mural called "Evolution of the Spirit." Created for the 30th anniversary of the school by Compton artist Elliott Pinckney, the mural portrayed red, pink, black and yellow abstract figures dancing, prancing, or perhaps playing basketball, above symbols of the arts including books, paintbrushes, a piano keyboard and comedy-tragedy masks.

South across a teeming quad from the Cox Building was the rectangular, pink and white Lecture Lab, with turquoise tubular railings and grates on the exterior walkways and stairwells. The LL building contained classrooms and "labs," including a journalism lab on the third floor, where my office was located. Just east of the LL building was the Tech building, which was full of computer, science and engineering gear. South of that was the newest addition, the Rec Center, which featured an outdoor Olympic-size pool, weight rooms, dance studios and sparkling gymnasium where several men's and women's professional basketball teams practiced, including the Lakers, Clippers and WNBA Sparks.

There were also tennis courts and a baseball diamond that was mostly used by the community, since the school didn't have a baseball team. Few students, other than the men's and women's basketball teams, got to spend much time in the gym, while the football team had to play in a subterranean "stadium" with rickety bleachers. And the closest thing the school had to a cafeteria was a catering truck, nicknamed the Roach Coach, to which the college presidents (there were three in the four years I was there) turned a blind eye and allowed on campus in violation of college district rules.

While airy and modernistic, the solid, earthquake-proof concrete construction, sturdy doors, noisy hallways and exterior walkways, with their latticework of rails and grates, also had the feel of cell blocks in a minimum security prison. Lacking a student center, the Roach Coach was one of several unofficial hangouts on campus. Others included "the yard" or quad between the Cox and LL buildings; behind the gym, which is where the jocks congregated; and a sidewalk between the Roach Coach and the LL building, which I dubbed Nigga Alley, because in the few seconds it took me to walk it, clusters of set-tripping bangers would repeatedly use the n-word. Nigga this, nigga that, nigga nigga nigga, as I strained to maintain a nonplussed manner, registering neither shock nor amusement.

The explanation — not that I ever asked — was that there's a difference between "nigger" and "nigga." The former is what Richard Pryor learned not to say while in Africa, while the latter is like "chick" or "dude." Of course whites could use neither word, although the term seemed to be creeping into Hispanic conversation. One day at the Roach Coach, my stone-faced demeanor was severely tested when a tiny Latina high school student standing in line in front of me turned to her Latina friend and nonchalantly asked, "What are you gonna have, nigga?" and her friend responded, "I don't know, nigga, what are you havin'?"

There were plenty of gang members on campus, but no gangs, and the buildings were remarkably free of graffiti. Nor was there noticeable friction between black and Hispanic students, at least on the surface, which is where I was most of the time. I was told the neighborhood was more Crip turf than Blood, and you'd see more blue than red clothing on campus. But in general the school was a degangsterized zone, and especially on hot days, a lot of the niggas would wear neutral white sleeveless undershirts called wife beaters.

Since the 1960s, the population of South-Central had changed from black to blackspanic — roughly half black and half Hispanic — yet of the college's 6,500 students, only 15 percent were Hispanic, while nearly 80 percent were black and 5 percent "other." The percentage of blacks on campus was even higher during the daytime, because many of the Hispanic students took night classes. The faculty and staff were nearly 60 percent black, and everyone mentioned

should be presumed to be African-American unless otherwise noted.

The difference in the demographics of the campus and surrounding community reflected a creative tension in the school's mission, between Odessa Cox's vision of a gateway for inner city blacks to advance in a multicultural society, and a bastion for the preservation of black culture — both a way out and an extension of the hood. A two-year vocational program, sports factory and feeder school into the state's four-year universities, and a welfare system of grants and loans for long-term students, "lifers," whose tenure — and clout — at the two-year school often lasted longer than their teachers. One more unstated mission of the college was as a political base for the "community." While Southland is funded by state and local taxes, and administered by a countywide board, its primary political benefactor was the feisty six-term Democratic congresswoman from Inglewood, U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters.

Given the makeup of the college and surrounding community, there were a surprising number of white teachers and administrators at the school, and for a few years a white interim president. But over four years, I could count on one hand the number of white students I had in my classes. Then again, in the five years I'd once taught an English composition class at a community college in central Illinois, the same could be said of my black and Hispanic students.

I'd be lying if I didn't admit that for a white, Jewish, middle-class 40-something who grew up in a small town in the Midwest, an immersion into the "black experience" was one of the lures of the job. Another was becoming involved with a student newspaper again. When I'd been in college in the heady post-Watergate 1970s, working on a college newspaper had been both a blast and a turning point of my life, pointing me toward a career in journalism. Now it seemed like an opportunity to relive the experience and perhaps be a positive influence on "at-risk" youths. If I didn't get whacked.

When I first interviewed for a teaching job at the college, one of my interrogators, the burly and brooding vice president of Student Services, Dr. Wesley, asked me how I would adjust my teaching methods for "urban students." I said I didn't anticipate changing anything, and that I thought everyone should be treated the same. But I was bluffing. The closest life experience I'd had to being immersed

in another culture was the eight years I'd been a public information officer for a state agency that funded services for people with disabilities.

What I'd learned there was to treat people with disabilities the same as the non-disabled, that is, neither to pity nor extol them as "super gimps." I also learned that people tend to be proprietary about their pain. Within the disability community, the deaf, blind, paralyzed and retarded argue over who is worse off, and compete with each other and other minorities for scarce government resources.

One of my assignments at the state agency had been to publicize the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. One way to do that was to explain how it added another category — disability — to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, sex, national origin or religion. At one point I wrote a press release making the analogy that while blacks had to sit in the back of the bus, people in wheelchairs couldn't get on the bus at all, and while literacy tests and poll taxes were used to deny blacks the right to vote, inaccessible polling booths kept people with mobility impairments from exercising their democratic rights. I also noted that like other minority groups, there's a lot of irrational fear and hatred of the disabled that justifies a federal law to protect them from discrimination.

The press release was approved by my superiors, but our office secretary — the only black in my division — said she was offended that I was comparing the black struggle for civil rights, with its history of lynchings, fire hoses and police dogs, to crippled people dragging themselves up the steps of Capitol Hill to show the inaccessibility of Congress. But it's not just a black thing. Some Jews take umbrage at blacks who describe slavery as an African Diaspora, or segregated neighborhoods as ghettos. So even though I disagreed with the secretary, I realized hers was a visceral reaction shared by many blacks, and I stopped using the black civil rights analogy in my ADA propaganda.

It was a lesson I should have heeded when I started teaching at Southland College. You gotta be careful about what you say.

Part I:
H.B. Loco

Chapter 1
Spring Semester, 1998

Like a lot of life's more interesting adventures, my sojourn at Southland College was born of panic and desperation. After a lackluster career in journalism and a stultifying decade as a flack for a state agency in Springfield, Illinois, in 1995 I was ripe for a midlife crisis. In my mid-40s, single, no kids, stuck in a dead-end job in a no-fun town, no prospects and nowhere to go. Oh that magic feeling.

So I did what a lot of lonely people were doing at the time, which was troll the chat rooms of America Online, where I met a woman in the entertainment industry, who lured me to the city of second chances and encouraged me to rekindle my dream of becoming a writer. I got a six-month stint at a film school, where I took a couple of screenwriting classes, then became a part-time editor at a news agency. I also wrote columns for a weekly.

Back in the Midwest I'd enjoyed teaching composition at a community college, so I applied with the Los Angeles Community College District, which has nine campuses from the San Fernando Valley nearly to Long Beach. The newest and smallest of the campuses, Southland, which I'd never heard of, called me in for a job interview. When I looked it up on the map, I realized the school was in South-Central, which was not one of the places I had been hanging out, so I wasn't overly disappointed when I didn't get the job. But a year later, out of the blue, the chair of the English Department gave me a call that went something like this:

"Can you start next week?"

"Is this a job offer?"

"According to my records we already interviewed you, right?"

"Right."

"Whew. That means we don't have to interview you again. Yes, this is a job offer."

The English chair, Mitch, was a laid-back speech teacher and musician in his 30s who lived near Pasadena and drove a Porsche. He said there was a last-minute opening for a part-time instructor to teach three classes — an evening Journalism 101 class, an after-

noon newspaper editing lab and a photojournalism class, also in the afternoon, where I would be teaching students the soon-to-be anachronistic art of developing black-and-white film. The English chair didn't ask and I didn't bother to tell him that the last time I'd been in a darkroom was my junior year in college.

Actually, I was less concerned about my lack of darkroom experience than my lack of dark people experience, especially "urban students." Back in the '70s I went through my hippie stage, hitchhiking around, smoking pot and listening to the blues. I'd been to the demonstration and was hip to civil rights.

But being streetwise for the '70s didn't make me streetwise for the '90s, and truth be told, I tend to be uneasy around blacks. Scared of getting mugged, guilty about the slavery thing, intimidated by the jive. I think of it as a phobia — Afrophobia — like homophobia, which is an irrational fear of gay people. Then again, I tend to be uneasy around most everybody, not just blacks and gays, which is at least equal opportunity. I'm not proud of it, but I tell myself that as long as I make an effort not to let my paranoia affect how I treat people, I'm not a bigot.

However, turning down a job at Southland College just because the students were mostly blacks and Hispanics would not only have been racist, but cowardly. I could give in to my fears and insecurities or I could confront and perhaps overcome them. I could teach the students or I could fail to teach the students, but I at least had to try. I hadn't sought out this opportunity, but now that it had presented itself, how could I turn it down without feeling like a sissy? And most compelling of all, how could I pass up a journey into America's own heart of darkness, its racial abyss?

On my first day in the abyss, I met the two other journalism teachers — another part-time instructor and a tenured professor, both named Jake. We were all white, and two of us were Jewish. The part-time Jake was the faculty adviser for the student newspaper because the full-time Jake, although a popular teacher and seasoned journalist, was nearly 80 years old. Both had worked for newspapers and wire services, as had I. But I was also computer savvy, while they barely knew how to transfer a file from a floppy disk to a hard drive, much less navigate the emerging Internet.

The journalism lab was a regular-sized room carved up into two tiny faculty offices and a bullpen area that doubled as a classroom and newsroom for the student newspaper. In a corner was an ominous revolving door that led to a cramped darkroom with stools, sinks and a couple of old enlargers for printing pictures. There was no broadcasting equipment.

I had expected a student newspaper in the hood to be a muckraker, but there weren't many journalism students around, and *The Explorer* was mostly rewritten press releases and class assignments. The newspaper was supposed to be produced by journalism students under the general supervision of the journalism faculty, and the students did write most of the stories and take most of the pictures. But the publication was mostly put together by the faculty adviser, who did the editing and layout.

I was supposed to team-teach an editing and layout class with part-time Jake, but he did the lectures and I oversaw the lab, which was more like study hall. The photography class I was inheriting had been taught by a professional photographer who left to start her own photography school, so when I took over, the students were getting nowhere near the same level of instruction. And except for the old enlargers and a couple of broken shell cameras, there was no equipment.

Luckily, one of the students in the class knew more about photography than I did, being the house shooter for a strip club, and until he dropped out, I had him teach me as well as the students how to mix the chemicals, develop negatives and use the enlarger. Other times I'd take the students around campus with their mostly automatic film cameras or pass around my single-lens reflex camera from home and assign them to shoot pictures of the weather, a softball game, computer lab, student art exhibit or whatever we stumbled upon.

I could teach the basics of photography, like how to work the controls on their mostly automatic cameras, and the relationship between lens opening, shutter speed and depth of focus field. But when it came to explaining how exposing emulsified silver dust to a blink of light could result in an image of what the camera was pointed at, I confessed to them that it was magic to me.

Besides, except for hobbyists and artists, photo film was going

the way of vinyl records. More important, I told them, was what I called Rule No. 1: When using any camera, and especially my camera, place the strap around the neck and keep it there. Some days went OK and some days were a bust, but my camera always came back intact.

Another delicate lesson was explaining how to get facial features to show up in pictures of dark-skinned people. Either the rest of the picture would be underexposed or their faces would turn into featureless blobs. The previous teacher had left behind primitive dodging tools made out of wire and duct tape, so during the printing process, I showed them how to wave the flat spoon-shaped "magic wands" over the faces of what I called "people of low contrast," so the faces would have more detail but be lighter than the rest of the picture.

The Journalism 101 class was a Wednesday night affair with only five students — an older woman who liked to talk, a young Latino taking the class to learn English, a stylish Latina who was considering going into broadcasting, and two other young Latinas who would rather have gone clubbing than be at school. They were all taking the class at night because they worked during the day, and for any given class at most three would show up, and usually late.

Some nights I'd sit there for 20 minutes, eating a bagel from the Roach Coach and doing the slow steam before anyone would arrive. Other nights I'd finish my bagel and leave in a huff, only to be snagged by one of the students just driving up in the parking lot. Somehow it never occurred to me that between their jobs, L.A. traffic and family obligations, making a 7 p.m. class wasn't that easy, and I should have pushed back the start of class by a half-hour. New and insecure, I was more concerned about imposing discipline and order and establishing my authority as teacher.

My classes lurched along in fits and spurts. I kept waiting for that Hollywood movie moment where the teacher and class "connect," but it wasn't happening. And by the end of the semester, assigning grades posed a host of ethical dilemmas. On the basis of attendance alone, everyone in my 101 class deserved to flunk. But when I factored in their English skills and how prepared they were for the class before they took it, how well I'd taught it, their goals in life and the impact on those goals that flunking them might have, assigning a

letter beside their names became a slippery curve, or what I came to call "holistic grading."

In that first Journalism 101 class, I gave the stylish Latina an A, even though her news stories were pretty basic, because I wanted to encourage her interest in journalism and she showed up for class the most. The Hispanic guy still couldn't speak a lick of English, but I gave him a B for showing up and trying. The older woman who liked to tell stories got a B for talking too much, and the two nightclubbing Latinas got C's for never buying the textbook.

The high point of the semester involved the older woman and provided a learning experience — for me. She'd written a story about the small magnet high school on the campus that had a 90 percent graduation rate, which is exceptional for any high school, especially one in South-Central. Her lead simply said, "Central College High School has a graduation rate of 90 percent." I showed her what a feature editor might do to her story, schmaltzing up the opening something like, "It's in one of the poorest areas of the city and many of its students are from disadvantaged families, but Central College High School graduates 90 percent of its students."

She gave me that ofay look and said she wanted her byline off the story. Breezily I told her she had a right to her opinion, even though it was wrong, and that after the story came out in the school newspaper she'd feel different. I gave the story to Jake the newspaper faculty adviser, but when *The Explorer* came out, the lead was back to the way she had written it. When I asked Jake what had happened, he said people in the hood don't need to be reminded about where they live, which is why the school was called Southland College instead of South-Central College.

At the next 101 class, I used her story to talk about audiences and how the same story should be written different ways for different audiences with different sensibilities. And I said that in this case, the student understood the audience for the school newspaper better than I did — that she was right and I was wrong.

She brightened and launched into one of her stories: "You know, I was talking with one of my friends down at the welfare office (where she happened to work), and I told her I used to think my teacher was pretty hip. But after what he did to my story, now I think

he's a racist." Realizing what she'd just blurted out loud, she quickly added, "but now I don't think so, anymore."

It was the first time I would be called a racist at Southland, but, somewhat inevitably, not the last.

Chapter 2
Fall Semester, 1998

Even though I had taught three classes at Southland, I was totally unprepared for the fall 1998 semester, when I was given the Journalism 101 morning class usually taught by old Jake. On the first day I casually strolled in with my usual bottled water and bagel from the Roach Coach, expecting another near-empty class. But as I started to unwrap my bagel, the room rapidly filled with more than 40 students, the majority of whom were muscular, animated, chattering young men in gaudy gold chains and shiny or grubby sweat suits. It was as if all the set-trippin' gangbangers kickin' it in Nigga Alley had suddenly been transported into my classroom. I put the bagel aside as my throat constricted with adrenalin. One thing was for sure, I was no longer in Kansas.

"What are you all doing here?" I finally blurted out.

Opal, an older woman who turned out to be bright and opinionated, but barely literate, raised her hand. She said the school guidance counselors had been telling students that Journalism 101 was easier than English composition, and many of the students were dodging writing classes. Journalism 101 was also popular with jocks because old Jake had acquired a reputation for letting them run wild, and the niggas in the sweat suits turned out to be half the Southland Cougars football team.

This was not good. It was supposed to be the feeder class for the lab classes used to produce the student newspaper, but there weren't any journalism students. In fact, most were taking the class not to learn how to write but to get out of writing.

Next I did what I usually do at the start of a class, which was ask a question about current events, trying to get everyone to loosen up. But they didn't need loosening up. Everyone yelled their opinion at the same time and nobody would shut up when I asked. Like old Jake before me, I soon lost control of the class, which turned into nebulous gab sessions. I don't remember much of what we talked about except for the day we got on the subject of gun control and I asked for a quick show of hands — how many people in the room

were packing heat? To my dismay, just about every hand in the room shot up except mine.

In addition to Opal and the football team, there was an ex-con who liked to say "whack," a budding community activist who went on booming baritone diatribes, and skimpily clad coeds who could distract half the students — and me — just by stretching. Things got so out of control that I decided to bring a referee's whistle to class. The football team thought that was pretty funny, but blowing the whistle would only quiet things down for a moment and then they'd run another play. So one day I came in, blew the whistle and laid down the law. No more wandering in late or leaving early, no more talking out of turn, and the next time I had to blow the whistle because someone was too loud, whether it was a football player or Opal, who was one of the worst offenders, then everyone on the football team would lose half a grade point.

Mouths dropped open around the room. The football team couldn't believe I would so blatantly discriminate against them, while the rest of the class chuckled uneasily. But for the first time the entire semester I had their attention. When several players protested it wasn't fair, I said I needed them on my team, and that as student athletes, they should set a good example. One of the players — only later did I find out it was the starting quarterback — got up, snorted, "this is bullshit," and sauntered out of the room. I held my breath, but no one followed him out the door. And I felt like I'd gone out on the playground, taken a swing at the biggest bully and lived to tell the story.

About 30 minutes went by — it was the quietest class in weeks — when the quarterback poked his head in the door and gestured at me to step outside. Well, I'm thinking, the moment has arrived. If I walk out that door I'm going to get stomped in the hallway, and if I don't, I'm a candy ass.

In a daze, and with all the students' eyes on me, I trudged across the room and out into the hallway, where I was confronted by a stocky man about my age wearing a sweat suit and sunglasses. He also had a whistle around his neck. "Hi," he said and extended his hand, "I'm Coach Washington."

To my gigantic relief it was "Coach Dub," the football coach/

athletic director. He said he'd come to talk to me because one of his players claimed I was discriminating against the team. That I'd asked them to help me control some noisy lady and what were they supposed to do, tackle her?

I told him the class was out of control and his players were a big part of the problem, which is why I took such drastic action. (I later learned he had a similar rule — whenever any of his players forgot their helmets, the rest of the team had to do push-ups.)

In front of the quarterback, he told me that academics came first in his mind, and if I had any more trouble with his "boys," I should talk to him and he'd take care of it. I wish I could say that was the happy ending, but in fact everyone continued to rant and rave in class, only I didn't have the guts to blow my whistle again, and things went on pretty much as they had before.

The final exam I gave them turned into another fiasco. I thought having the students write their own obituaries would give them a chance to reflect on what they wanted to accomplish in life. Wrong.

Obituary writing is a lost journalistic art, but at some point most reporters have to write an obit. If the person they are writing about is famous, they have secondary sources to crib from. But for most deceased people, the reporter has nothing more to go on than the funeral home notice, which is a form filled out by a funeral director with the most basic information about the recently departed.

News organizations have different policies on revealing the cause of death and embarrassing facts about dead people, which are sometimes the same thing, e.g., suicide, AIDS, overdose. They also have different standards for private individuals and public figures. But the bottom line is that obits aren't about people's deaths but about their lives.

Between death and deadline, most reporters don't have time to write the story of a person's life, which is why big news organizations have canned obits already written for famous people. But whoever the person was, the trick to writing an obituary is to look through that dry funeral notice and give the deceased some dignity by picking out what that person should be remembered for and plug that in the lead, between the person's name and date of death, i.e., "Betty Boop, devoted mother and grandmother of 12 children and 27 grandchil-

dren, died today at age 97," or, "Elmer Fudd, who won a Silver Star for heroics in the Pacific during World War II and was Grand Pooh-Bah of the Secret Rites Club, died yesterday."

I like to give unconventional final exams, and had gotten the idea to have the students write their own obits from the teacher's guide to the textbook. But it turned out to be a bad idea. Or maybe I was too dramatic when I read the instructions to the class: "At 11 a.m. today, you died," I said and paused. "Complete the following 'funeral notice' form, and based on your information, write your own newspaper obituary in third person and past tense." I also asked them to write an epitaph — "a phrase, sentence or paragraph describing what you should be remembered for" — and gave the examples "writer, raconteur and teacher at Southland College" and "loving wife, mother and soprano in her church choir."

A cold chill rippled through the room. Scattered objections soon coagulated into consensus — to a person they protested that writing about their own death would jinx them. I tried to explain about the lost art of obit writing and how they should be thinking about their lives, not their deaths, but they would have none of it.

I pointed out that the time of death was 11 a.m., which had already passed, so no hex, but they still said no way. I tried to compromise, suggesting that they could fill in my name on the exam but put in their own information. Not good enough. OK, they could use my vital statistics. But they didn't want to jinx me either.

Looking back, I could have changed the final to having them write a resume, listing their jobs, education, and extracurricular activities, and have them write a summary of what made them a good job candidate, and it would have amounted to the same thing. But faced with yet another challenge to my authority as teacher, I stuck to my guns and told them there are lots of things they do outside of class that are much more dangerous to their health than taking my final exam, so stop pretending to be superstitious and write the damn obituary.

They did, sort of. Accuracy was certainly an important part of the grade, but some of them misspelled their own names, intentionally, to nix the hex. Others made up preposterous stories, like that they were 116 years old or big claim to fame was an appearance on *The Jerry Springer Show*. Anything but a sober assessment of their lives

and what they wanted to accomplish.

Chapter 3
Spring Semester, 1999

In the spring of 1999 the worm finally turned, literally. First, the chair of the English Department changed from Mitch, the laid-back dude with a Porsche, to Marc, a Jewish guy with a ponytail. I didn't mind Mitch — he was seldom around so he never caused me any grief. But Marc and I seemed to hit it off, and he wanted to get organized.

An effort was made to persuade old Jake to retire, but teaching had become his life — he was afraid that if he quit teaching he'd wither up and die. The administration ordered him to take a physical, which he passed with flying colors, but school officials managed to delay the process long enough so that he had to go on a paid medical leave for the semester. Taking advantage of the fact that he happened to have a library sciences degree, they schemed to take away some of his classes and stash him in the library when he came back. I happened to be in the English Department office when Marc mentioned to another teacher that he needed to hire someone to teach Jake's public relations class. I piped up that I'd spent eight years in public relations, and he gave me the class.

He also met with me and part-time Jake, the newspaper faculty adviser, to talk about our class assignments for the next semester. He said he wanted the three newspaper lab classes — newswriting, editing and photojournalism — to be taught by the same person, and since Jake knew even less about photography than I did, he gave me the three classes for the next semester, which also made me faculty adviser for the newspaper. Even though it meant less work for Jake, I could tell he was steamed. But I was ecstatic. I had been putting out "underground" newspapers since I was a kid, and the chance to oversee a student publication again sounded like a hoot.

But that wasn't until the next semester, and I had to get through the current semester. In addition to public relations, which I had never taught before, and photography, which I was still fumbling at, I was also teaching Journalism 101 again, which had a whole new crop of football players and was once again out of control. After one

particularly raucous session, I went over to the gym and took Coach Dub up on his offer to take care of his boys for me. He seemed more than happy to oblige.

That was a Wednesday, and the next journalism class wasn't until Monday. But at Thursday's public relations class, the first student in the door said she'd heard I'd ratted out the football players. Her brother happened to be the captain of the team, and he told her that at the last practice, the coach made all 13 players in my class run up and down the bleachers for two solid hours. Monday, the football team came in moping, but nobody took a swing at me. The ensuing class was not what I would call quiet, but things had receded to a dull roar.

It was also that Monday that "The Worm" himself, basketball player/freak show Dennis Rodman, signed with the Los Angeles Lakers, which meant His Badness would practice at the college several days a week, along with the rest of the team. The Lakers, who had not yet hired Phil Jackson as coach the first time, had recently moved out of the Great Western Forum in nearby Inglewood to the newly opened Staples Center downtown, and were practicing at Southland's gym until their new training facility was completed south of LAX.

I figured Rodman was the kind of news that might be of interest to the students, and if they wouldn't calm down to my pace, I'd try to rev up to theirs. At the next class I stepped out from behind the table I usually cowered behind and casually sat on top of it, then began to tell them a story about the world's worst student — me — and how I was a hippie dropout and all, but that I went back to school and got involved with the school newspaper, which gave me a direction in life, self-confidence and respect, not to mention a lot of fun — that journalism didn't have to be a drag.

I worked my way around to current events and asked what was going on in the news, and someone said Rodman, like it was a joke. I seized on it. "Do you realize the biggest news story in town is right across the street at this very moment?" I asked.

The football players already knew and acted blasé, but some of the other students were surprised to learn the Lakers practiced in the gym. Reaching the point of no return, I went through with the move I'd rehearsed before class and stood on top of the table. "Playtime is

over," I announced. "We're going to start doing real-world journalism, and our first real-world story is going to be Dennis Rodman.

"Who," I barked down at them, "has the *balls* to go over to the college security office and ask the police if anything is going to change now that Rodman is coming to campus?"

To my amazement, Rashon, a usually surly and scary looking linebacker, took the bait. "I can do that," he said. "You want me to do it right now?" he asked and started to rise, like he was pulling one over on me. I thought about it for a moment and decided what the hell. "Go for it," I said, and off he went.

"Now I need someone with the balls to talk to the president of the college and ask her if anything will change because of Rodman," I said. Someone else's hand went up and she took off to chase down the story. Next, I said I needed someone to go ask Coach Dub how things will change at the gym with Rodman on campus. Four hands shot up, all football players. I chose one, and off he went.

"All right," I continued, "now I need someone with King Kong's balls to go up to the sports reporters and ask them what they think of Rodman and how he changes their job." Suddenly the mood shifted. "You're not allowed to go near the media," several football players protested. "Pussies!" I bellowed. "Since when did they pass a law you can't talk to sports reporters? Balls. Who's got the balls?" Up went the slender arm of one of the female students. "I'll try," she said.

I assigned the rest of the students to do "student on the street" interviews and find out what other students thought of Rodman joining the Lakers. Then I said I needed one more student with the biggest balls of them all, Godzilla's balls, to get to Rodman and ask him what he thought of Southland College. The football players hooted and hollered. Never happen. "How do you know unless you try?" I challenged them.

Haltingly, and then more assertively, a shy and crack-skinny student named Tawnia raised her hand. "I'll do it," she said with a shrug.

At that moment the player who went to get the quote from Coach Dub came back, and his timing couldn't have been better. He said the coach had offered to hook up a student with a player for an interview. Class ends and I'm jazzed. I head over to the gym to see if instead

of one student, the coach can set up a press conference with several Lakers for the whole class. After being shown into his office, I started out by thanking him for disciplining his players. He chuckled and said no problem, like he enjoyed it.

He said a press conference might be hard to do, but he'd talk to the Lakers P.R. head about letting a journalism student cover the practices with the professional media in the balcony of the gym. And like the rest of the media, at the end of practice the student could go onto the gym floor and talk to the players. That as long as the student behaved, the school newspaper ought to have a reporter covering the Lakers when they were on campus.

Over the weekend, Rodman turned up at the Marina del Rey restaurant where one of my students bused tables part-time. The student had the presence of mind to snap The Worm's picture, and it occurred to me to create a special "Rodmania" section of *The Explorer* built around his photo and Rodman stories from the 101 class.

The student who shot the picture of Rodman was Blackjack Loco, a streetwise ex-con who at that point was in my photo class. I first encountered the 25-year-old "retired" gang member the previous semester in my riotous Journalism 101 class — he was the one who liked to say "whack," as in "that's whack, dawg," and brag about his gangbanging days and life in the clink. His gregarious personality and virile physique belied his intelligence and malevolent past, and made him irresistible, especially to females.

Over 6 feet and 200 pounds of restive muscle, he was not someone to trifle with, and I was not especially pleased that he showed up the next semester in my photojournalism class, or that he started badgering me to buy him lunch at the Roach Coach. I took it for a hustle, until I finally broke down and agreed to buy him his damn lunch, only he ended up paying for both of us, which was the real hustle, because it meant I owed him lunch the next day. Next thing I knew, Holden, a lumpy, make that schlumpy, yet endearing, high school gangbang wannabe, who was also in my photo class, got into the act, and we became a regular lunch bunch. And the wall between teacher and students — not to mention black and white — started to crack.

There are basically two kinds of teachers — hard ones you hate at the time but remember fondly, and easy ones you like at the time but later wonder if they were trying to get in your pants. I recognized that if I began fraternizing with students, even a little, I would be forfeiting my chance to become that first kind of teacher. But I also realized that just wasn't my nature. I was way too curious.

So I let Blackjack and Holden cajole me into driving them to the nearby Burger King, and then to barbecue joints, taco barns and fish shacks deeper and deeper into South-Central, finally reaching the heart of the hood — the Brolly Hut hamburger stand on Crenshaw Boulevard. Holden, who wasn't quite old enough for his learner's permit, began instructing me on my driving (I didn't slouch enough), explaining how I should casually loop my right hand over the steering wheel while dangling my left elbow out the window, turn my cap around, crank up the radio until the speakers buzzed, and for chrissake, weave in and out of traffic more.

Holden's parents were separated, and when one couldn't handle him, the other would take over for a while. His mom worked at a TV station and encouraged his interest in photography, which is how he found his way into my class. Like Blackjack, he was bright and outgoing, and a goof-off. He liked to flash gang signs and write graffiti, and one day he attempted to teach me one of those ghetto handshakes, a quick half a shake, slide, snag and snap. He and I did it a couple of times, but I couldn't get the snag right, so he and Blackjack demonstrated. Blackjack didn't want to do it, but reluctantly took Holden's hand. Casually, they shook, snagged and then snapped their fingers so in unison that it sounded like the crack of a whip.

For me, inappropriate humor is a perverse bonding mechanism, and one day while we were on a lunch run, I told them an old joke about a white guy who wanted to be a Polack. His doctor tells him it's a very dangerous operation because they have to take out half his brain, but he says do it anyway. And when the guy comes out of the anesthesia, his doctor says he's sorry, but his scalpel slipped and they had to take out 90 percent of his brain. And the guy says, "Y'all's shittin' me, bro!" There was a pause, and then Blackjack and Holden just roared.

And they gave as good as they took. One time the three of us were

in the darkroom, and Holden composed a spontaneous rap about his days at a private school in the San Fernando Valley — which he'd gotten thrown out of — where there'd been a lot of Jewish kids. He starts rapping about "Jew boyz in the chood," and he's got the Hebrew "ccchhh" *down*.

They took to calling me "cuz" or "homie," and on rare occasions "big homie," but I guess the ultimate expression of acceptance was when Blackjack bestowed upon me my own gangsta moniker — H.B. Loco.

My perception of Blackjack began to change the day I was in a hurry to get home after class and he still wanted to print some pictures, so I let him stay alone in the darkroom. Like a prison trustee, I put him on his honor to lock the door on his way out and leave everything that was inside, inside. It was with some trepidation that I returned the next morning, only to find the darkroom as if it had been invaded by elves. Blackjack had not merely cleaned up after himself, but scrubbed, organized and moved a broken enlarger out of the way. Of course, other times I caught him in there with some brown sugar, and we played cat and mouse on that issue for the duration.

Blackjack lived about halfway between school and my place, and one day he asked for a ride home to the one-bedroom apartment he shared with his mother — he slept on the living room couch. He didn't talk much about his Caribbean dad, who was somewhere back in Brooklyn, where Blackjack had been born. Except for the weekend busboy job and student loans, he lacked a steady income, or a car, and bumming rides from me started to become a habit (it also became a habit for half the other students in my afternoon classes, who were in similar situations).

Over time he began taking me the scenic route, pointing out such historic landmarks as the car wash popular with carjackers and corners where drive-bys were common. He also gave me travel tips, like never stop for jaywalkers because that's how you get jacked, and at a stoplight, stop at least a car length behind the vehicle in front, in case bullets start flying and you need to make a quick getaway. Also, never use a drive-through window at a fast-food restaurant, and leave the car unlocked when you go inside, again, for a quick getaway. He also took me to graffiti walls and tried to get me to recognize the

difference between ghetto art left by taggers and more ominous gang messages.

After a while I began letting him do some of the driving — as the former wheelman for his crew, he had skills — and asking him about his life of crime. He was convicted, he said, of "borrowing" a car from a girl he'd just met, but he and his fellow "crimies" had committed numerous burglaries and strong-arm robberies, at one point becoming "Dumpster bandits" whose M.O. was to hide in the trash bin behind restaurants and ambush the owner at the end of the night when he took out the garbage. They'd rob the restaurant, split the loot, fly to Vegas and party.

It was a not-bad life and he never got caught for the really bad stuff he did — he claims to have escaped two high-speed police chases in stolen rental cars by driving into covered shopping center parking lots and fading into the crowd — so I asked him what made him decide to leave the life. He said prison. The first time a prison guard asked him to drop his pants for a cavity search, he vowed he would never put himself in that humiliating position again.

At one point, Blackjack won a $1,000 photojournalism scholarship from the *Los Angeles Times*, and he decided to use it to buy a camera. I agreed to drive him to a camera shop, and on the way I stopped at an electronics store to buy a computer chip. When the clerk went into the stockroom to get the chip, Blackjack quietly asked me for my keys. I gave him a puzzled look, but handed them over. He casually pressed his elbow down on a corner of the top of the glass display case, and with my key, deftly pried another corner up high enough to reach inside. "Your keys can unlock a lot more than your car," he whispered, and then silently laid the glass back in place, without taking anything.

Next we went to a little camera store in Culver City that was crammed with new and used gear, and I turned to him and stated the obvious: It must be hard to spend his scholarship money on something he could just as easily steal.

"Damn straight," he chuckled, yet with an edge. He explained how easy it would be to knock over the place, pointing out the locations of the two security cameras I hadn't noticed, obstructed sight lines to the street and other factors I would never have thought about.

"But then I think about that prison guard," he said. "I put that camera in one hand and the prison guard in the other hand and I think, is one worth risking for the other? No way."

Another touchstone for Blackjack was a physical therapist he'd once seen at work in a prison hospital. The therapist was helping victims of car crashes, shootings and other traumas rehab their bodies, and Blackjack thought it was a worthwhile thing to do. So after four years in Folsom, San Quentin and several other California prisons, he enrolled at Southland College to become a rehabilitation therapist himself. But to get a degree he also had to take some composition courses, and an academic counselor told him Journalism 101 was easier than English, which is how he ended up in my class.

As for why Blackjack enrolled in my photography class the next semester, I assumed it was because he had pegged me for an easy mark. It took me a long time to realize, and longer to accept, that something I'd said or done in that 101 class had made an impression on him, and like the prison guard and the rehab therapist, I'd become a touchstone. This baffled me, because I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to be like me. I didn't even want to be like me. But Blackjack was a high risk parolee — two of his former crimies were already back in jail, one after a couple of months, the other after a couple of weeks — so a square like me might be what he needed to avoid the same fate.

Or not. Sometimes we went out at night, and one time he asked me to take him and one of his posse, Sammy Loco, who had just gotten out of jail, again, to dinner. We were driving through the hood when we passed by a production crew shooting a music video "on location" at a block party, and it was quite a scene, with Klieg lights illuminating a large crowd of partying people milling about, hoping to get into the show.

Returning from dinner we came upon the video shoot again, only this time we stopped and got out. The timing was perfect, as they were finally ready to roll tape. Someone with a bullhorn explained that everyone was supposed to imagine there was music and to merrily dance past a buffet table that had been set up. Most of those who had been partying for hours were unaware that the taping was finally beginning, so we found ourselves at the front of the line. I felt awk-

ward, trying to sashay past the food. But when Blackjack conga'd down the line, the spotlights lit him up.

Afterwards, the three of us wandered through the crowd to where some of Blackjack's former associates were drinking beer. It was the first time he had seen them since getting out of prison, and they did some catching up. It was clear that the associates were very much still in the life, and one of them began asking Blackjack if he'd thrown weights while in the pen. They began bantering back and forth about who could lift how much and how many reps, and I got the prickly feeling that if either of them gave a number that was too high or too low, there'd be a rumble.

As the conversation progressed, Blackjack and Sammy kind of shifted to my left, and the associates rotated to where I was almost behind them. When the weightlifting discussion ended in a stalemate, one of the associates suddenly noticed me.

"Whodat?" he growled, like a bear coming out of hibernation, and his companions started to glare at me.

"I'm with them," I said, and began to sidle over to where Blackjack and Sammy had moved.

Blackjack paused, just long enough for me to imagine him saying what Tonto said to the Lone Ranger when they were surrounded by Apaches: "What do you mean *we*, paleface?" But eventually he said I was "cool," although, at that moment at least, I definitely was not.

We made an odd couple, but there was also the matter of street cred. By hanging with a teacher, Blackjack gained credibility on campus, just as I got cred for hanging with a banger. Sometimes I was his bitch and sometimes he was mine, but it was reassuring to have someone who could walk the walk watching my back. Like the time we were walking up the stairs to my office, and from across Nigga Alley, Alonzo, the starting fullback on the football team, who was in my 101 class, was standing with some of his teammates. "Hey, Mr. K.," he yelled up at me. "Let me hold a dub."

I smiled at Alonzo, but under my breath I whispered to Blackjack, "What's a dub?"

Blackjack rolled his eyes. "Dub is short for the letter 'W,' which is short for Washington," he whispered back.

"Like Coach Dub?" I asked.

"No, dawg, *George* Washington," Blackjack hissed. "He wants to borrow a dollar."

"You can hold my dub," I hollered down at Alonzo, "while you blow me."

I could see Alonzo stiffen, like he'd been dissed in front of his friends, and the English Department secretary, Dejanna, who happened to be walking up the stairs ahead of me, turned around and gave me a look of sadness, like I was about to get mugged. But I had Blackjack behind me.

Meantime, for better and for worse, I had unleashed the Rodmania theory of journalism on Southland College and was trying to ride Dennis Rodman *To Sir, with Love*, standing on tables and challenging students to bring me the balls of Godzilla. Needless to say, any scheme hinging on Dennis Rodman was high risk.

Coach Dub had suggested I attend the next Lakers practice, and I decided I should go through the motions of being a student reporter before assigning the exercise to a student. So the next time the team practiced at the gym, I dug out my reporter's notebook and joined the professional sports reporters on the upper level of the gym. Ten of the Lakers were running plays under a basket, while their gargantuan center, Shaquille O'Neal, sat facing them on an oversized medicine ball, like the king on his throne. Intruding into the scene, like a court jester, meandered the team's newest acquisition, Dennis Rodman, who was trying to juggle three basketballs. But he bobbled the balls, which bounced into the practice area, disrupting the scrimmage.

As the practice came to an end, I followed the dozen or so reporters onto the floor. Shaq was still sitting on the big ball, only now he was rocking back and forth and pressing a basketball between his knees as a trainer threw more basketballs at him.

With gold rings sprouting from every facial orifice, Rodman suddenly came bounding by, batting a basketball off his arm and checking *me* out with a psychotic grin. In a corner, Eddie Jones and Kobe Bryant were doing TV spots for L.A.'s WNBA team, the Sparks, which also practiced in the gym, while player Rick Fox was being interviewed by KCBS sports reporter and former NFL player Jim Hill.

I joined a small cluster of reporters who had formed a semicircle around the Lakers' interim head coach, Kurt Rambis. After grilling the coach about trade rumors, the reporters turned to Rodman rumors, asking whether he'd been late to practice again. Rambis denied Rodman had been late and the pack moved on.

Finding myself alone with the coach, I introduced myself and asked him what he thought of Southland College.

"I like it," he said. "I mean, I've only seen the gym, but I like it, the gym and the weight room."

Mission accomplished. Confident that my students could do the same, the first student I chose to attend a practice was of course Tawnia, the one who had raised her hand when I had asked who had the balls to ask Rodman what he thought of Southland College. Holden, the high school gangbang wannabe, got wind of it, and on the day of the practice he begged me to let him tag along and take pictures. Since the agreement with Coach Dub was for only one student, I shooed Holden away. Until it dawned on me how monumentally stupid it would be to *not* have somebody take pictures.

With officious laminated *Explorer* press passes I had created on my home computer dangling around their necks, off went Tawnia and Holden to cover the Lakers, and I began to teach my class. But within minutes they were back, looking sheepish. Holden said that because more than one reporter had shown up, Coach Dub had thrown them both out, and wouldn't let them back in unless they got a note from me. Embarrassed but unrepentant, I hastily scribbled a note explaining how one student was a reporter and one student was a photojournalist, etc., and off they went again.

After class I went over to Coach Dub's office to apologize. But he shrugged it off and the "miscommunication" was well worth the risk. Damned if Holden hadn't shot off four rolls of film.

In what would become a pattern, the student I sent to cover the practice didn't show up for the next class, and the next class after that she showed up late.

"I'm having trouble getting started," Tawnia said when I pressed her for her story.

In front of the class I asked her what had happened. "Well, Magic Johnson was there," she said grudgingly

I said that was news and wrote it on the chalkboard. "What else?"

"Well, Kobe Bryant doesn't want Eddie Jones to be traded."

How do you know that?

"I axed him," she said.

"That's great," I said. "What else happened?"

"Well, I sort of had my picture taken with Kobe," she said.

I scolded her lightly, reminding her that reporters aren't supposed to be getting autographs and having their pictures taken, and she said it wasn't her fault, that Kobe forced her to be in the photo.

"More news, player sexually harasses student," I joked and wrote it on the chalkboard — somewhat presciently, as Kobe later got accused of rape in Colorado. "OK," I said, "that's at least three things you could write about. Order them for emphasis, write a lead and write a story."

So she sat there and by the end of class had written about 150 words. No order, no lead, no story, just the basic facts. I asked if she could stay after class to type her story into the newspaper's computer, and she sullenly said OK, and off we went to the "newsroom."

She typed her story into the one working computer, which was in one of the cramped side offices, and then we switched places and I made her sit behind me and watch as I edited her story. I could feel her sneaking a peek over my shoulder, not necessarily comprehending, but at least curious.

As I corrected her spelling and grammar and cross-examined her to draw out more details, it didn't take long to flesh out a decent story. At the end I said that even though she hadn't written a very good story, she had been a very good reporter — making observations, asking questions and writing down quotes — so that as an editor I was able to construct a story from her notes, which was the most important thing.

I don't think any of that made a dent. But then she said, "Can I have a copy? I wanna show my mama," and for the first time I felt like the Rodmania method of journalism was starting to pay off.

Blackjack and the rest of the photography students helped Holden develop his film, and the pictures came out great, with a variety of far, medium and close-up shots, enough for a "proper" picture page. Not just "grip and grin" posed shots, like the one of Kobe and Tawnia, but

Shaq practicing free throws, Derek Harper sitting on the floor, Magic and Shaq together, and most impressive of all, a close-up of Shaq's enormous feet.

When I asked who wanted to be next to cover the Lakers, about the only hand to go up belonged to Javana, another crack-skinny student with extensive tattoos. And like Tawnia, it took a couple of classes for her to come back, and then she said she didn't have a story. So we went through the same drill — I asked her what happened, and she said nothing — except, well, it was the first practice for Glen Rice, who said he was happy to be with the Lakers ... and Shaq really is tall ... and Ruben Patterson is rude ... and Rodman didn't show up.

Sounds like a story to me, I said. Write a lead, put in quotes and just write what you said. She tried, but by the end of class she still had notes rather than sentences. But we went up to the newsroom, she typed her notes into the computer, I edited them and we had another story.

Finally one of the male students — though not a football player — said he was ready to cover the Lakers. And it was the same deal with Kendell, who disappeared for a couple of days, then showed up with notes but no story. But when I asked him what happened at the practice, it turned out he'd done some serious reporting. He said Rodman showed up late again and had a private meeting with Coach Rambis and that afterward neither would say what the meeting was about.

"What do you mean they wouldn't say what the meeting was about?" I challenged.

He said he axed them and they wouldn't tell him. "Wait a minute," I said. "You asked Dennis Rodman what the meeting was about?"

"Sure," he shrugged, like wasn't that what he was supposed to do?

At that point I announced to the class that Kendell had won the Godzilla balls award. By asking Rodman a serious question and getting a quote, even if the quote was "no comment," he had brought back the balls of Godzilla. (Within days, it was reported that The Worm's brief marriage to former *Baywatch* babe Carmen Electra was crumbling, and she soon filed for divorce.)

It was getting close to deadline for the final *Explorer* for spring

semester. Using desktop publishing software on my home computer, I laid out Holden's pictures with the students' stories and added headlines and captions, creating a two-page centerfold spread, which I called "Lakers Beat." Ah, but when you hitch your wagon to a Rodman, you'd best expect the unexpected.

When I proudly presented "Lakers Beat" to Jake, who was still the faculty adviser, he said he thought it was more appropriate for the school newspaper to cover the college's sports teams, like track and tennis, than a professional basketball team.

He reminded me he had let me put two Rodman stories in the previous issue and that as far as he was concerned there had been more than enough Rodmania already. He was willing to put one of Holden's Lakers pictures in, as long as it wasn't of Rodman. One. But no more stories on the Lakers. None. And certainly no — I thought he was going to pop a vein in his forehead — circusy two-page spread with that clown Rodman. He added that I could do whatever I wanted with the newspaper in the fall, when I would be faculty adviser, but this was his last issue, and he'd be damned if he was going to be embarrassed by having another batch of Lakers stories on his watch.

Now I had to face my students and try to explain. Rejection, I told the class, is the writer's stock in trade. Writers — people — can be defeated by rejection, or they can learn from the experience and become stronger. Different editors have different philosophies about the news, and just because one editor rejects a story doesn't mean another won't print it. Shop it around, I advised.

I considered various possibilities, from the *Los Angeles Times* on down, but eventually settled on *News To Use*, a four-page newsletter produced by the journalism class at the on-campus high school. When I gingerly broached the idea of publishing "Lakers Beat," the high school journalism teacher agreed, and Rodmania was back on track. Sort of. The high school newsletter didn't have quite the panache of the college rag, and wasn't really printed at all, but Xeroxed on legal-size white typing paper turned sideways and folded in half. But it was better than nothing, so I went home and reconfigured my layout, turning the two-page spread into a four-page "Special Insert" into their newsletter.

I was relieved that I'd managed to salvage something out of Rod-

mania, and the student reporters felt a little better. But Holden was inconsolable. Disappointment became resentment when the annual *L.A. Times* scholarships were announced. To honor a former Southland student who became a promising photographer for *The Times*, before he died in a domestic dispute, *The Times* doled out three scholarships a year to Southland journalism students.

Blackjack got one, as did Mars — one of my 101 students who'd written several stories for the newspaper — and the third went to Bethany, the newspaper's student editor. Holden was odd man out.

Adding insult to injury, the faculty adviser told Holden the reason he didn't get a scholarship was because the committee felt he didn't have enough pictures in the newspaper. It was hardly lost on Holden that the reason he didn't have more clips was that the faculty adviser had rejected his Lakers pictures.

When I came into the journalism lab, Holden was bouncing between tears and rage. I told him to hang in there. He was still young and he'd get the scholarship next semester if he kept taking pictures. Then I half-joked that at least he couldn't cry racism, because all the winners were black. By how quickly he responded that he was glad Blackjack had won, I could tell he had already done the math. Another Columbine was averted, but Holden had lost what little interest he had in photojournalism.

Chapter 4
Fall Semester, 1999

Still smarting from his Monica Lewinsky impeachment ordeal, in early July 1999, President Bill Clinton went on a "poverty tour" of the United States. Stops included Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, East St. Louis and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Ostensibly promoting an administrative initiative to encourage investment in areas left behind during the Internet boom of the 1990s, the tour afforded Clinton an opportunity to visit some of the few places in the country where he was still popular, and that included South-Central Los Angeles.

It was about a month before I was scheduled to become faculty adviser to the student newspaper when Marc, the chair of the English Department, called to tell me U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters had convinced the White House to add Southland College to the president's itinerary. In less than a week, President Clinton would be on campus for some sort of economic summit, along with Waters, Gov. Gray Davis, the Rev. Jesse Jackson, Magic Johnson, actor Edward James Olmos and a bunch more celebs and policy wonks.

Marc said the interim president of the college — a white woman with the unfortunately antebellum name of Dr. Roberta E. Lee — had made arrangements for the school newspaper to have a student reporter and photographer included in the White House media pool coverage. Who did I want to send and what were their Social Security numbers for the Secret Service? I stammered I'd get back to him, he said not bad for my first newspaper as faculty adviser, and I said yes sir howdy and hung up.

There was just one problem: There was no newspaper staff. Blackjack and Holden might be able to pass for photographers, if I could find them, but I didn't have any student reporters ready to cover a presidential visit. I didn't have any student reporters period.

So I humbly called the former faculty adviser (after losing control of the newspaper he'd gotten a job at another college), who gave me the phone number of Bethany, the former student editor, whom I barely knew, and who was no longer on the newspaper and had

in fact just graduated. But when I said covering a presidential visit would look good on her resume, she agreed to do it.

I was unable to reach Holden, but Blackjack returned my page, and we held our breath while the Secret Service ran his Social. As a parolee, Blackjack was not allowed to vote in California, but the feds approved him for the presidential press pool.

While Clinton was popular in South-Central, South-Central was not particularly popular with the Secret Service, and Blackjack and Bethany were among the few students, faculty or local residents who got within a rock-throw of the president. On the day of the event, a perimeter around the Cox Building was set up with yellow crime scene tape. The president's limo moved briskly through the neighborhood and onto the campus without stopping, then rolled up a sidewalk to a side door of the Cox Building, where Clinton disappeared into the school library with barely a nod to the distant crowd.

Inside, Blackjack shot pictures and Bethany got quotes while the politicos and celebs talked about economic development for the hood. Blackjack got more than enough pictures for a two-page spread, and Bethany wrote a cohesive story.

That still left the rest of the newspaper to fill and a newspaper staff to fill it, but I had a plan: I would build it and they would come. When school started, about a half-dozen students were enrolled in the newspaper lab classes, including Blackjack and Holden. I had another 25 students in the Journalism 101 feeder class, but once again they were mostly football players who could not have cared less about journalism. Besides, football practice was in the afternoon, the same time as the newspaper labs. Other students had jobs in the afternoon.

To lure more students onto the newspaper staff, I tried to turn the newsroom into a hangout, like when I'd been in college. Blackjack and I cleaned out the newsroom and taped movie publicity photos from Hollywood studios on the walls. I got the one working computer hooked up to the Internet and let students play rap music. And Marc agreed to purchase another computer for the newspaper — a globular translucent blue Apple iMac.

I also made fliers and went down to the admissions office to beg late-enrolling students to take journalism, and strong-armed my cur-

rent and former 101 students to join the newspaper. One who did was Dejanna the English Department secretary. She was smart and mature, but I was not thrilled with having a potential spy who could blow the whistle on what a slack ship I was running. On the other hand, it was helpful to have another adult on the premises to help maintain decorum. Besides, as the person who processed all the paperwork for the English Department, and represented civil service employees in grievances, she knew everyone on campus and their business, and thus was just as much a spy for me as she was for the administration. While she didn't want to become a journalist, she was reliable and knew the difference between the district chancellor and the college president, so I assigned her to interview the new chancellor and made her assistant editor.

Another 101 student who joined the newspaper was the scholarship winner, Mars, who had energy and writing ability, but was more interested in graphic arts than journalism. He was a quick study, but impatient with details. So when I asked him whether the story he'd written about a Paul Robertson Scholarship might be a Paul Robeson Scholarship, he didn't much care about the difference — old school. He also bristled when I told him he was not supposed to make up quotes, even if they sounded better than what was actually said.

Mars was also a practical joker, once tipping over chairs in the classroom and leaving pseudo-gang graffiti on the chalkboard, causing me to drag Blackjack out of another class to come look at the "vandalism" and see if he could decode the "gang" signs. Then again, Mars was one of the few who cared about deadlines or layout. For the first issue he interviewed the president and vice president of student government, and after the high school massacre at Columbine the previous April, he wrote an editorial on "white-on-white crime," noting that of the FBI's 10 Most Wanted, seven were white guys. Because of his interest in graphic design I made him layout editor, even though I did most of the layout on my home computer.

Linda, another 101 student, was the only Hispanic student on the newspaper. Smart, outgoing, reliable and willing to learn, I made her feature editor. In the course of researching a story we never did on the secret places where students have sex on campus, Blackjack showed me some beds in the nursing classrooms occupied by life-

sized mannequins for the nursing students to practice on. I had him take pictures and Linda do a cutesy story on the nursing program, which I headlined "Dummies Teaching Students To Be Nurses." And when several students complained that they hadn't gotten to see Clinton, I had Linda write about her experience catching a glimpse of the president.

Basically, she said she was curious to see what Monica Lewinsky saw in the president, and that when he rode by in the motorcade, she felt his charisma. "I need something ethnic," I urged her as I finished editing her story, shamelessly trying to pander to Hispanic readers. "*Papi chulo*" (hot papa), she suggested, so I ended her story "Now I can say I understand what Monica Lewinsky saw in Bill Clinton. *El presidente es un papi chulo!*"

But between the first and second editions of the newspaper, she walked into the newsroom one afternoon and Blackjack engulfed her in a bear hug that included grabbing her booty, and that was the last I ever saw of Linda. She also turned out to be the last Hispanic student who worked on the newspaper while I was there.

Although sports were a major part of campus life, sports reporters were not. Male students, especially student athletes, seemed to think writing stories about other male athletes was gay. The first sports editor was Clarence, another 101 student who wore tennis sweaters and had an Ivy League accent. But he didn't have Ivy League language skills, and he took editing as an insult to his manhood. So after turning stories about the football team and the track coach into an ordeal, he disappeared after the first issue.

In addition to Blackjack, whom I made photo editor, several of my other former 101 students showed up for the newspaper labs. One of them, I was somewhat distressed to discover, was Alonzo, the linebacker I'd said could hold my dub while he blew me. But he wasn't holding a grudge. I was elated to see Tawnia and Javana, who had done the first Lakers stories. And for the first issue Tawnia managed to write a story about a neighborhood watch meeting held at her mom's house.

Meantime, Blackjack was doing his own recruiting. His first find was 18-year-old Tashena, whom he delivered to the newsroom like a captured concubine. Tashena was simply stunning, as well as smart

and personable, and I made her news editor. Tashena brought Nakida, who was as good looking as Tashena, and sometimes danced at local strip clubs. Nakida begat Nyesha, who was as cute as Nakida, and Nyesha begat Chanise, who wasn't half bad herself.

I constantly had to pry Blackjack off the recruits, and everyone off each other, instituting what I called the "no touching" rule, which made me feel like a referee for professional wrestling. A student, usually Blackjack, would put an illegal hold on another student, I'd invoke the no-touching rule, and then they'd break apart and flamboyantly accuse each other of making the first move. Inside the darkroom was like a cage match with the lights out.

Other recruits included slackers and misfits looking for a free ride, like the lesbian basketball couple, Barbara and Tenice, who showed up for the photo class just enough so I wouldn't drop them, and did just enough so I wouldn't flunk them, but not enough so I shouldn't have. Same with Joanne and Alonzo.

Tyrone, 23, had joined the newspaper largely because he had gotten thrown out of the English lab for looking at Internet porn on the computer, and the newspaper computer had an Internet connection. Rounding out the staff were two people my age. Tom, who'd taken my P.R. class, was earnest but couldn't write a lick. Martha I nicknamed James Brown because she not only looked like the Godfather of Soul but talked like him — not even the other students could understand a word she said.

But the biggest slacker of them all turned out to be Holden, who got out of photojournalism and deeper into pot after his Lakers pictures got spiked. Though enrolled in the class, he found one excuse after another not to write any stories or take any pictures. Nevertheless, to make up for his missing out on the scholarship, and to the delight of Holden and every other student in the class, I made him editor-in-chief.

"If it bleeds, it leads." So goes the cynical editor's adage. Big news is usually bad news, and the worst news is death. Whether it's thousands of people killed in a natural disaster or a college football player killed in the hood, death is news. But what if a black teenager gets snuffed in a gang-related drive-by shooting in South-Central

L.A.? Should it make a sound?

It had taken six nerve-wracking weeks for the Great White Jewish Bwana and his mostly black student newspaper staff to put together one puny eight-page tabloid. And by the time it rolled off the presses in September 1999, the feature and sports editors had disappeared and everyone else was pretty burned out, especially the Great White Jewish Bwana, who had done nearly all of the story assigning, editing, headlines, captions, photo digitizing, layout and proofreading.

In the process I'd gotten a great education in digital layout and other aspects of newspaper production. But little of that knowledge was trickling down to the students, who just weren't around enough, and when they were, they were usually doing anything besides journalism — Tyrone hogging the computer looking at porn, Blackjack waiting in line to check his email, Holden selling blunts over the phone and on a good day someone at least doing homework from another class.

To the extent that after much nagging the students would go somewhere, gather information, take pictures and eventually write a story, it was a student newspaper. But if I didn't heavily edit their stories they would be inaccurate and incomplete to incoherent, and if I didn't do headlines and layout there would be no newspaper.

Plan A had been to have a newspaper staff with specific students responsible for photography and layout, along with news, feature, sports and editorial editors in charge of specific pages, and an overall student editor-in-chief to assign stories and enforce deadlines. Except for Blackjack, who took care of the darkroom, that didn't work.

Plan B was to have the students be responsible for their own stories, from writing through layout on the computer, writing headlines and captions and adding photos. But after turning in a late rough draft, students could disappear for weeks at a time. If they did show up, a headline could take an hour and a caption a day.

Plan C was to enforce Plan B, no matter how long it might take. But that would mean fewer than the three measly newspapers that were coming out a semester, which I feared would not be conducive to my job security. So I fell into the same trap as previous faculty advisers — if there weren't any students willing to put in the time to to put out a newspaper, I would.

And it became insidious. Whether in the name of copyediting, modeling, showing how it should be done, recruiting students, providing accurate information to the campus, chronicling events for future historians, or a public relations tool for the college, I was reveling in playing newspaper editor in the hood, and once I began juicing up the product, it became a slippery slope.

Still, I was pleased with the first issue, as were the powers that be. For one thing, I'd cut the production cost in half because I'd laid out the newspaper on my home computer rather than send paper layout dummies to the commercial printer. I also got a nice letter from President Lee asking for extra copies to send to the college trustees. It was addressed to Mr. Klopowitz, but I knew who she meant. However, any hope I had that the first edition would inspire more students to get involved in journalism, or that the current staff might catch byline fever, quickly faded. The newspaper made barely a blip, and now it was time to do it again.

It would be natural for there to be a letdown for the second issue, a presidential visit being a tough act to follow. But then one of the school's football players was murdered. Marcus Johnson, a 17-year-old freshman backup linebacker, was leaving a girlfriend's house late at night, deep in the hood, when three young men, possibly gang members, rolled up, and one shot him in the chest. In addition to the football players, who knew the victim and were going *en masse* to his funeral, some of my other students knew his family, while still others had gone to high school with his girlfriend.

At the start of my next Journalism 101 class I asked, as I normally did, "What's news?" figuring at least one football player would recognize that the murder of one of their teammates was, among other things, news. I was wrong. Like writing their own obituaries, talking about the death of an acquaintance, at least to an outsider like me, made them irritable.

I incorporated the real-life murder into the class, teaching the textbook chapter on police reporting and trying to get the students to see the various angles to the story and how they were uniquely suited to cover it. Some of them complained that the only news that ever gets reported out of South-Central was murder and mayhem, which was racist. Whether it was a black thing or a gang thing, the vibe was

that I shouldn't go there.

Yet go there I did. Wouldn't other students want to know that one of their classmates had been killed? Doesn't the victim deserve to be remembered? Shouldn't media pressure be kept on the police to find the killer? Yes, inner city crime gets over-reported, but *The Explorer* was a campus newspaper, and a student on the campus had been murdered. True, reporting the story could invade the privacy of a grieving family and, if sensationalized, could reflect negatively on the community. But isn't that all the more reason for journalists from the community to step up and do the story accurately, responsibly and sensitively?

Uneasy shifting in chairs. "Why can't we move on to something else?" one student kept asking. Still I persisted, trying to get enough information for a story. The football players gradually revealed they had turned the victim's locker into a shrine and were wearing black tape on their helmets during games. I asked all the students to write a paragraph describing their reaction to the death of a classmate, and finally Tyrell, a stout interior lineman and one of the team leaders, grumpily agreed to write about the funeral.

Tashena attended a news conference with LAPD Chief Bernard Parks and the victim's family and returned with a story about a reward for information leading to the capture of the killer. But when I asked her who was offering the reward, it turned out there was no reward. She also had quotes from family members and Coach Dub, or at least general approximations, which she presented, and I accepted, as quotes.

The day after the funeral, Tyrell was a no-show for class, as was the rest of the team. When he finally did return, a week later, he still had no story and no intention of having one. He grudgingly agreed to be interviewed by an older student, Polly, who wrote a story that was little more than notes. I also assigned Polly and Nyesha to get reactions to the murder from the players because most of the students never wrote the paragraph I had assigned.

Liberally rewriting the reporters' notes and adding information I had wormed out of students myself, I wrote a story that began: "He was an outgoing, smart, athletic 17-year-old freshman in his first semester at Southland College. A backup linebacker for the Cougar

football team, Number 40, Cheerio, nicknamed both for his playful personality and love of a certain breakfast cereal. A graduate of Crenshaw High School who hoped to study computer graphic design.

"But on the night of Oct. 20, Marcus Johnson was leaving the home of a female acquaintance when, police say, he was approached by three men, one of whom fatally shot him in the chest. The LAPD has released a composite sketch of the gunman and says the shooting may be gang-related. But as of press time the suspects remained at large, leaving family, friends and classmates to wonder, why?"

Because of the vibes I'd picked up from the class, I decided not to run the story at the top of page one, but instead started it in a small framed box at the bottom of the page and jumped it to page three.

Racial profiling was one topic that was of interest to students. So for the top of page one I chose a story by Mars, whom I'd promoted to titular student editor — and demoted Holden to assistant photography editor — about a campus forum with the sponsor of a "driving while black" bill in the Legislature. The bill would have required cops to record the race of people involved in traffic stops, with the goal of gathering statistics to prove what the students already knew — that while people of all races commit crimes, blacks most often get stopped by police on suspicion of being suspicious.

Herman Sadler, the school's poly sci teacher, who was also a Democratic campaign consultant and political commentator, organized the forums, in which he brought local officials on campus to make presentations and take questions from students. The sponsor of the driving while black bill was Kevin Murray, a 38-year-old state senator who represented Culver City, but was rumored to sometimes live outside his district, in tonier West Hollywood.

Murray got the idea for his bill after getting pulled over by the police at 1:30 in the morning while driving his red state-leased Corvette through Beverly Hills. The bill had passed both houses of the Assembly, twice, but both times it had been vetoed, first by the conservative Republican Gov. Pete Wilson, and then by his more liberal Democratic successor, Gray Davis.

Reflecting the opinions of most of the students at the forum, who felt that no matter how high a black person rises in wealth, fame or power, when they get caught at something, they're "just another

nigger," Murray said that even though he was a state senator, as a black man he still felt threatened and a "target" whenever he got stopped by the police.

The pictures from the forum were boring, so to illustrate the story, I got one of the campus cops to have Holden "assume the position" against a squad car, slap on the cuffs and guide him into the back seat, as Blackjack and I snapped pictures. I explained to Blackjack that you usually want the light behind you, but sometimes you can get a more dramatic shot by shooting into the light. As the officer put the handcuffs on Holden, I stooped down and aimed the camera up at them and the sun, giving the photo high contrast and obscuring their identities. I further explained to the students the shady ethical ground we were on, and identified the picture as a "dramatization" in the caption. Holden was thrilled with his front-page picture, but I doubt his mom was.

The third page-one story, by Dejanna, was about a group of disgruntled (black) faculty and staff who wanted to get rid of the interim (white) president, Dr. Roberta E. Lee (who'd been "interim" for more than three years), and replace her with a permanent (black) president. Her detractors said she was autocratic and not from the community (white). Her (white) supporters said that although she was not much of a people person, unlike some other campuses, which were in the red, the school's budget was in the black.

I also assigned Dejanna to do a "people feature" on old Jake. Were it not for Jake — and the administration's eagerness to replace him — I probably wouldn't have gotten hired at Southland. Yet he was also the reason I wasn't working there full-time, and part of the reason the journalism program was floundering. Half blind, hard of hearing and gimpy, he still managed to negotiate the freeways between South-Central and the San Fernando Valley every day, and was mentally agile, personable and popular with students.

I barely knew old Jake, and had gotten conflicting impressions of him from students and teachers. The students found him to be an interesting and knowledgeable codger, while the faculty whispered stories about classroom incontinence and narcolepsy. A spry and proud Sephardic Jew, Columbia School of Journalism graduate and former UPI wire service reporter, Jake had taught at the college and

sometimes advised the newspaper since 1977. He had also worked for the *Baltimore Sun*, written several books and screenplays and traveled extensively in Europe.

As Jake had gotten older he'd slowed a bit, and the school began taking away his classes and making him a reference librarian. But he clung to his position as the only full-time tenured journalism teacher, meaning the newspaper faculty adviser position was filled by a succession of part-timers, of which I was the latest. If Jake did resign any time soon, with my good relations with the current department chair, I had a solid chance of getting hired full time and eventually getting tenure.

When I found out Jake was in the library and had just turned 80, the headline "Octogenarian Librarian" jumped into my head, and I assigned Dejanna to do a personality profile of the college's senior faculty member. They had a pleasant conversation during which he told her a lot of interesting stuff, but there was just one thing. He didn't want the story to mention his age. He also told Dejanna this would be his last semester — that he intended to retire.

Leaving out his age would have ruined my cutesy headline, if not the story, so I went over to the library to introduce myself to Jake and cajole him into seeing, journalist to journalist, that a story about the oldest faculty member probably should mention the age of the faculty member. He said he was superstitious about revealing his age, but I could use it if I really wanted to, and then he again said he planned to retire at the end of the semester.

To me, "Senior Faculty Member to Retire" sounded like an even better headline than "Octogenarian Librarian." But putting journalistic instincts ahead of personal feelings, I told him that until he officially resigned, we weren't going to report it as fact. Later I found out it was not the first time he had told someone he was going to retire and didn't. And sure enough, the next semester he came by my office to gravely inform me he couldn't quit just yet.

In addition to news, features, editorials and sports, for the second edition I added an arts section, mainly because I had several students who would only write movie or music reviews. Tyrone the porn addict came from my 101 class, during which he'd asked if he could do movie reviews instead of news stories. At first I said no, but finally

agreed he could write reviews of movies that had a "local angle," a concept we continually sparred over.

For example, he said he should do a review of *The Mummy* because it starred The Rock, who was a professional wrestler, and Southland students liked professional wrestling. But when I suggested he review some documentaries being shown on campus during Black History Month, he asked me, "What's the local angle?"

I finally made a deal with him that as long as he continued to pump out movie reviews, he could look at porn on the journalism computer to his heart's content. And Tyrone had a big heart.

Leroy, 18, was the son of Cassie, an intelligent and attractive woman from my second 101 class. Cassie lost her "A" when she quit coming to class a month early and blew off the final exam for reasons she never explained to me. But several weeks into the next semester she showed up and asked me to let her son into my class.

Leroy was tall and lanky and constantly listening to rap music on his Walkman headset, which he didn't bother to remove during class. He listened to and could replicate a staccato rapid-fire rap that was even harder to understand than regular rap. Leroy turned out to be a friend of Mars, and the next semester he began hanging out at the newspaper, mainly because I let them play rap music on the computer. After much goading, he wrote a review of a martial arts movie called *Storm Riders*, which he deemed "the greatest movie ever made."

Hanging out with Mars and Leroy was Clyde, who I dubbed Caveman because of his scruffy hair and beard. Unlike the other students, who mostly listened to rap, Caveman preferred heavy metal, and in particular a genre called Death Metal. I asked him to explain the difference, and he wrote a story about some Norwegian Black Metal bands whose purported exploits included suicide, murder, arson and grave desecration.

According to Caveman's piece, Death Metal is a sub-genre of Heavy Metal, and Black Metal is like Death Metal, except with satanic overtones. I headlined the story "Killer Music" and rewrote the lead: "A lot has been said about the effect Heavy Metal music has on the people who listen to it. But maybe more attention should be paid to the risks it poses for those who perform it."

Y2K. Post 9/11, it takes a moment to even remember what Y2K stood for, much less the trepidation with which the year 2000 was greeted. At the time it seemed like a big deal, and Mars did a story about the so-called Millennium Bug, a computer glitch that threatened to destroy civilization as we knew it. He interviewed the head of the campus computer department, who said Southland was "Y2K compliant."

I assigned the Journalism 101 students to pick the most important events of the 20th Century. In order of how I laid out their responses, they included: World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, rap music, Roe v. Wade, the 1960s, computers, the assassination of Martin Luther King, the JFK assassination, hip-hop, airplanes, television and Jackie Robinson.

Dejanna wrote about the new teacher contract, which included a 10 percent raise over three years, and Tashena wrote a story about another of Sadler's forums, with Inglewood Mayor Roosevelt Dorn, a former judge, who talked about the state's "three strikes" law and how it wasn't working, especially for black people.

Congressional Black Caucus members Maxine Waters and Julian Dixon, NAACP Executive Director Kweisi Mfume, health professionals and patients came to the campus to hold a "National Town Hall Meeting on AIDS," where, according to a heavily edited story written by Nakida, Mars and Caveman, participants "told the community what they didn't want to hear: AIDS is no longer just a gay white man's disease."

According to the story, AIDS had become the leading cause of death for African-American men ages 25-44 and the second leading cause of death for black women. The Congressional Black Caucus had asked the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to declare a state of emergency to fight AIDS in the black community, which had resulted in $156 million in federal grants to fund prevention and education programs throughout the country.

Southland had a less sophisticated (though no less effective) approach to controlling AIDS in the black and Hispanic communities. That would be Nurse Carol, an idiosyncratic albino Canadian whose cramped clinic in one of the barracks was another popular

hangout for slackers and students with all manner of health/personal problems. She was also known as Nurse Condom because from the Captain Kangaroo pockets of her nurse's smock she would produce not just lollipops but multicolored and flavored rubbers, which she'd pass out like party favors, no questions asked.

Despite all the football players who had gone through my 101 class, the only sports stories that got written were by women, and Blackjack and Holden would take pictures of only female athletes or cheerleaders. The only way I ever got game pictures in the newspaper was if I bummed them from Professor Jones, the head of the science department and an avid amateur photographer.

The biggest sports news of the semester was the football team's roller coaster season, which ended with a thrilling bowl game victory. When no one wrote a story, I just couldn't let it pass without having it chronicled in the newspaper. Tashena got the byline, but the story was mostly written by me, based on accounts from the players in my 101 class and a video of the game I borrowed from Coach Dub. I ended the story with the team dedicating the season to "17-year-old freshman linebacker Marcus Johnson, who was shot to death leaving the home of a female acquaintance. Johnson's assailant has not been found."

Chapter 5
Spring Semester, 2000

The Spring 2000 semester may have been the dawn of a new millennium, but the student newspaper still had the same old problem — a lack of students. And what few students there were were mostly the same students as the previous semester. Another problem was that the faculty adviser was having way too much fun.

One very welcome addition to the newspaper staff was Venus, who was also in my 101 class and actually majoring in journalism. A military veteran in her 30s, she was streetwise, opinionated and up on current events, and we'd stand out on the third-floor stairwell trading Marlboros for Newports and talking out of school. Once I teased her by asking if blacks had a month dedicated to them — Black History Month, which is February — how come whites don't get a month? "Whites get the whole rest of the year," she shot back. "And blacks get shafted anyway because February is the *shortest* month." Inevitably the conversation would end up with one of us saying, "sounds like a story," and we'd go from there.

Venus had the chops to be a journalist, but like most of the other students, in the beginning she had poor basic writing skills and no computer skills. She made steady improvement in both areas and I made her assistant editor only because she didn't want to be editor-in-chief. I kept Mars as the editor, even though he preferred a second title, which I also gave him — layout editor. Alas, once again the real editor was the faculty adviser.

The top story of the first newspaper of the semester, by Tashena, who was back as news editor, was about the return of the "Manchild Conference" to Southland College. Named after author Claude Brown's gritty 1965 autobiography about growing up in Harlem, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, which I'd read in high school, the conference was geared toward mentoring young African-American males.

"Manchild" was the brainchild of Henrietta Anderson, one of the two deans of Academic Affairs, who organized the first conference in 1993. Held during Black History Month, it became so successful that

the district began to hold it on other campuses, where it became less popular. This year it was back at Southland, where it drew some 900 people from the campus and the community.

Another of Venus' stories that made the front page was about Southland shortening its semesters from 18 weeks to 15 weeks. Southland and other campuses were following the lead of Santa Monica City College, which saw a spike in enrollment when it shortened its semesters. Teachers would receive the same salary and benefits for six weeks less work a year, plus extra pay if they chose to teach six-week "intercession" classes, so I was surprised that only two-thirds of the faculty voted for it.

For the "Speak Out" page, Mars wrote an editorial slamming an issue of the day — the state of South Carolina flying the Confederate battle flag over the Capitol Building. "With racism and 'Southern tradition' still being allowed to run amuck in South Carolina and other states where the Confederate flag still flies from public buildings as well as pickup trucks, sometimes I wonder just how far we've really come," he wrote.

In my increasingly reckless efforts to spice up the newspaper, we found a graphic on the Internet of a Confederate flag with the slogan "I ain't coming down" printed on it, and ran it large and stark above the editorial. Above that I once again couldn't refrain from slipping in a too-clever headline: "Confederacy of Dunces." Later that year, lawmakers moved the flag from the capitol dome to a pole at a Confederate monument in front of the Statehouse.

The media do lots of things, from writing about celebrities to selling groceries. But the single most important thing they do is cover elections. It's why freedom of the press, along with speech, religion and assembly, is first among equals in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights.

As I explained to my Journalism 101 class early in the semester, unlike most countries throughout history, America is a democracy, where "the people," a restrictive but ever-growing concept, get to choose their own leaders through free elections. And for a democracy to work, the people need to know, as Richard Nixon so famously put it, "whether or not their President is a crook." Which is where the

media come in.

I was explaining the importance of election coverage to my Journalism 101 students because I was leading up to a bitter pill for them to swallow. There was a state and federal primary election in March, and for the second newspaper of the semester, the faculty adviser was planning a special edition "Primary Primer" for *The Explorer*, in which everyone would have to pitch in. Even those who didn't want to.

Doing candidate profiles and explanations of some 21 state ballot propositions wasn't as sexy as Lakers stories. But as I explained to the class, most media outlets do a lousy job of covering the candidates, focusing on the horse race rather than the issues, and a lot of media consumers tune out what little serious coverage there is.

After challenging them to name candidates or ballot measures, I pointed out that their lack of knowledge was no less than most of their fellow students (or myself), and that if we got out an election edition, it might be the only information some students would have on the candidates and issues. That covering elections is not only important for the *Los Angeles Times* to do, but also community newspapers.

Implementing such a scheme required teamwork and organization. When that didn't happen, I went to a backup plan I'd used on other projects, like Rodmania, which I called a "scramble." What began as an orderly matching of students to candidates and propositions rapidly devolved into a mishmash of assignments as students dropped out of the class or reappeared after lengthy absences. I double and triple assigned the same stories to different students and assigned more stories to the few students I thought would actually write them, and assigned the most important stories to the students I hoped would turn out to be the most reliable.

Somehow, it worked. The "Special Election Extravaganza" was just four pages — half the usual eight — but comprehensive. It included brief profiles on the five major presidential candidates — Al Gore and Bill Bradley for the Democrats, George W. Bush, John McCain and Alan Keyes for the Republicans — and summaries of all the ballot initiatives.

The students endorsed Al Gore for president, mainly because Bill Clinton had endorsed him. They endorsed expanding gambling

on tribal lands because it would help Indians become more self-reliant, and opposed prohibiting same-sex marriages because it ain't nobody's business but their own. They also supported a proposition that would have repealed an earlier proposition spearheaded by Hollywood liberal Rob Reiner that had increased the tax on cigarettes to fund early intervention programs for children, because they thought smokes should be cheaper. And they opposed a measure that would have made it easier to pass local bond issues to fund construction projects for schools, including community colleges. Even though they all attended school and few owned homes, they felt decreasing the number of voters needed to approve a bond issue from two-thirds to a simple majority would be unfair to property owners.

Although Alan Keyes was a conservative Republican fringe candidate, he was the only black running for president, so I got two students to do pro and con pieces. Ramell, a new addition to the newspaper staff, made his case succinctly: "I'm voting for Alan Keyes because he is black ... Even if Keyes is whitewashed or just another Clarence Thomas, his family is black, and no black man will ever forget slavery. Even an Oreo would feel the pressures of the black community more so than a white president."

Venus was no less succinct in her opposition: "Never judge a book by its cover, nor a candidate by his skin color. Just because Dr. Alan Keyes is black doesn't mean he represents the views of most or even many African-Americans ... You may not know that Keyes is against abortion, even in cases of incest and rape. Like black U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, he is against affirmative action. He also opposes increasing or even having a minimum wage law, and along with the income tax would end most social welfare programs."

To illustrate the debate over Keyes graphically, I got cute again, taking a mug shot of the candidate off the Internet and running it next to the same picture in reverse negative. We later got a nice letter from a district board member, and at least the students who worked on the stories knew more about the election, even if only a handful actually voted.

On April 15, 2000, then-Vice President Al Gore went slumming.

Actually, he visited Southland College to attend an "inner city economic summit" sponsored by Operation Hope, a nonprofit investment banking group founded in the aftermath of the Rodney King riots/rebellion of 1992. The Information Superhighway Vice President also attended the grand opening of an Operation Hope-financed cyber cafe in South-Central, and then headed to Beverly Hills, where he met up with Philanderer in Chief Bill Clinton for a star-studded political fundraiser hosted by SKG studio moguls David Geffen, Jeffrey Katzenberg and Steven Spielberg.

Of course Gore's visit was the lead story, to what should have been the best edition yet of *The Explorer* under my tutelage. Twelve pages, new eye-catching spot color in Cougar blue, with a modernistic new masthead designed by Mars, newsy stories and the centerfold listing all the students who'd made the President's and Dean's Lists. And it would have been the best except for one problem. "Slumming."

The problem wasn't with Mars and Venus, who covered Gore's visit and co-wrote the story (although we had to use Professor Jones's pictures because my camera battery died). According to their story, Gore said African-American and Hispanic families average a tenth of the wealth of white families, and that a digital divide in computer technology between wealthy and poor school districts perpetuates the income gap.

They also teamed up to interview interim President Roberta E. Lee, who had gotten in a dust-up with some of her critics at a district board of trustees meeting. After a succession of students, staff and teachers addressed the board, criticizing the lack of a power-sharing agreement between campus constituencies and the administration, an annoyed Lee told board members, "No president will be able to resolve the shared governance problem until these people get their act together."

"These people," being mostly black people, took it as a racial slur and the story spread through the campus. Venus and I walked outside to smoke a cigarette on the third floor stoop and decide how to handle it. We'd been talking about questions for her and Mars to ask during the interview — the issues of shared governance, lack of a cafeteria, goals, accomplishments, etc. — but what to do about "these people"?

While Venus would have preferred a college president from the community, she also knew how the community could twist words to put ofays on the defensive, and she didn't believe the president was being racist when she said "these people," but was referring to her critics, who just happened to be black, so a story about the brouhaha wouldn't be news so much as sensationalism.

I agreed with her, but also argued it was news, if only because everyone was talking about it. I also felt it would be a good journalism experience for Venus, because to be fair and accurate, she would have to ask the president to explain what she meant. Venus wasn't too keen on that, but I said that while it might be an uncomfortable moment, the president would probably welcome an opportunity to get out her side of the story.

I often repeated the reporter's credo to my students: If your mother says she loves you check it out. And before they could ask Lee about what she'd said, we wanted to be sure she'd actually said it. Fortunately, in her capacity as a representative for the clerical workers, Dejanna, the English Department secretary who'd stayed on as a staff reporter although she was no longer taking journalism classes, had attended the meeting, heard the president say it and even had a transcript of the proceedings.

Venus and Mars structured their interview questions from softballs to increasingly tough, with "these people" toward the end, so if Lee threw them out of her office, they'd still have enough information on other topics for a story, which played out much like the interview. President Lee talked about her accomplishments, plans for a campus food service, if not cafeteria, and the snarl over shared governance. Near the end Venus popped the question and reported it thusly:

When *The Explorer* asked Dr. Lee about the March board of trustees meeting during which she allegedly used the term "these people," she seemed relieved to have an opportunity to set the record straight.

"What I said was that 'these people,' meaning Southland College, will have to get their act together and decide how they want to do shared governance, or it will make no difference who's president, there won't be any shared governance at Southland College," she said.

The story ended with her saying that after four years as interim president, she would not seek to become permanent president.

The third front-page story, by Mars, was about Southland receiving a $200,000 NASA "science incubator," including a flight simulator, wind tunnel and $65,000 Silicon Graphics Workstation similar to those used to create special effects for the movie industry. The equipment came compliments of Rep. Waters, who'd gotten Southland added to a grant list of 11 other schools in low-income areas throughout the country. The program was meant to narrow the digital divide and inspire minority students to become scientists. What we didn't report was that the sophisticated NASA gear began arriving before the school president or district chancellor and board had been told anything about an incubator, and President Lee had to persuade peeved trustees to accept the gift *ex post facto*.

I was especially pleased with the movie "Reviewz" (to jazz up the newspaper and use up space, I'd put headers at the top of all the pages with a "z" on the end, like "Newz," and when it got back to me that some of the Hispanic students had complained to their teachers that it was misspelled, I added more, like Sportz, trying to keep the buzz going). Tyrone reviewed a movie about the popularization of hip-hop culture called *Black and White*, starring Brooke Shields, Robert Downey Jr. and Mike Tyson, among a host of other campy celebrities, and he panned it.

"The movie was supposed to be a telling of hip-hop in America and how it affects other races of youth, but it is no more than a money-hungry cop show trying to capitalize on the popular success of rap," Tyrone wrote.

We sparred over him using the term "suck" in his first review, but after that I encouraged him to work it into all his stories as a stylistic hook. So in his opinion, *B&W* "sucks big time." I headlined the story "Movie 'Black and White' is Green All Over."

Tyrone also wrote a rant blasting the Motion Picture Academy for giving Kevin Spacey the best actor Oscar for *American Beauty* over Denzel Washington, who had been up for his portrayal of imprisoned boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter. He even came up with a funky headline: "Denzel Gets 'Hurricaned' at Oscars.

There were two reviews of Oliver Stone's paean to professional

football, *Any Given Sunday*. Tyrone gave it a thumbs up: "great, great film and in no way at all sucks." I was also able to get one of the football players, Kendrick, to compare and contrast the movie with his experience playing on the football team.

There was also a story about an annual campus job fair written by Jasper, a lifer who had been attending the two-year college through at least three previous newspaper faculty advisers. I'd been warned about Jasper — that he was a bit of a rabble-rouser (and a Blood) — but he was a friend of Blackjack's and appeared no more threatening than a lot of the rough trade that came through my classroom. He was also smart and funny and seemed to know the basics, having worked on the newspaper before I'd been there. Which was a good thing, since he wasn't around enough for me to teach him anything else.

He'd been living off student loans and a succession of student jobs on campus, the latest being an assistant in the audio-visual department, where he worked for Dewayne Bass, a talented jazz vocalist who'd been one of those people to complain about President Lee at the board of trustees meeting. Jasper's job was to loan out TVs and VCRs from a small supply room in the LL building. While nominally enrolled in one of the journalism labs, the class hours overlapped with his work hours, and he was more often in the supply room, playing dominoes with his friends. But in exchange for an occasional story, I'd give him a passing grade. *Quid pro quo*.

Jasper's story about the job fair noted that twice as many recruiters showed up as the previous year. He had quotes from students and recruiters, and gave me no clue to just how challenging a student he would turn out to be. With a picture by Blackjack of a recruiter from the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, I boxed the story and ran it at the top of the page.

For Sportz, Tashena did a story about the basketball banquet and Southland track standout Petula Richards, who'd qualified to try out for the Olympics in the 100-meter dash representing her native Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (formerly part of the West Indies in the Caribbean).

A new student, Chantey, wrote about a student bodybuilding pose-off in the Little Theatre, an annual event with the rowdy ambiance of a male strip show, although women also competed. Blackjack

came in second in the men's division, losing the top prize because his legs weren't as developed as his chest and arms. He told me that was because he had a prison physique — nobody behind bars does squats unless they want to get buggered.

Ramell wrote a year-ender on the men's and women's sports teams. I'd asked for a summary lead, but what he turned in was "Southland College was grooving to excellence again this year." I urged him to come up with something less abstract and more concrete, like how the football team won a bowl game and the men's and women's basketball teams both improved their records, but he got defensive. I persisted, then realized I was over-coaching yet again. So I left Ramell's lead alone and let him headline the story "Cougar Athletes Grooving to Excellence." And in retrospect, it's a stronger lead than what I'd had in mind.

About here one might ask, why was I writing nearly all the headlines? Part of the reason was that you can't write a headline until you know how long it has to be, and you don't know that until you've laid out the newspaper. And layout usually happened under deadline pressure late at night on my home computer. For those stories that got laid out earlier, I'd ask the reporter or any student to fill in headlines, but they weren't around very often, so I'd end up doing it. They knew I would, which was part of the problem.

Anyway, it was four in the morning and I was fading, but the newspaper was in the can. The stories, pictures and headlines were all plugged in and all the white spaces covered. All I had to do was take the computer file to the printer and *voilà*, another newspaper.

But as I sat there, half asleep, looking over the completed newspaper layout on my home computer screen, I began to "tweak." And as I tweaked, I kept coming back to that top story on page one. Headlined "Gore Attends Economic Summit at Southland College," it was as limp as my dick at 4 a.m. The start of the story was what is known as the "a meeting was held" lead — "Vice President Al Gore appeared at an inner city economic summit here at Southland College sponsored by Operation Hope Inc." (I saw the word "here" in so many student stories that I finally began leaving it in, believing it to be local vernacular.)

The solution to the "a meeting was held" lead is to instead tell

what happened at the meeting. And to do it in 28 words or less. Instead, I got lazy and tried to featurize it. What I came up with was a 53-word monstrosity: "As World Bank and International Monetary Fund leaders met in Washington, D.C., amid demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience, Vice President Al Gore went 'slumming,' appearing at an inner city economic summit here at Southland College sponsored by Operation Hope Inc."

I squinted at what I'd written, and it was like there was an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. The angel pointed out that "slumming," while meant as a gibe at a politician who took a side-trip through the hood before heading off to a glitzy fundraiser in Beverly Hills, might be a tad disrespectful. But the devil said go for it — don't just put it in the lead, fix that limp headline as well!

So in big bold letters I typed, "Gore Goes Slumming at Southland College" across the top of page one. I stared at it, and finally the lights flickered on. The bedrock of safe editing boils down to another simple ditty: When in doubt, leave it out. And while "Gore Goes Slumming" was certainly more of an attention-grabber than "Gore Attends Economic Summit," it was dangerously glib.

Just as important, "slumming" wasn't what the students whose bylines were on the story had written. Once again I was over-editing, going beyond fixing style and accuracy to embellishing. So I put back the limp headline and lead, did some final twiddling and toddled off to bed. I slept soundly, feeling I had dodged a bullet. When I got to school that afternoon, I had a printout for the students to proofread, but there were no students around, so I dropped off the disk at the printer and forgot all about "slumming."

The first inkling I got that something might be amok was the next day, shortly after the students had distributed the newspapers throughout the campus, and I happened into the English Department office looking for Marc, the chair. Instead I ran into Dejanna, the department secretary and *Explorer* reporter. Over time we had become cordial to chummy, and she looked at me with a bemused smile and asked as gently as she could, "Do you really think Southland College is a slum?"

"Oh no," I said, both responding to her question and realizing that in the fog of the late-night layout, I must not have deleted what I

thought I'd deleted. I blushed and stammered something about how it was meant to be a dig at Gore, not at Southland ... that I'd been fiddling with the story but I thought I took it out ... I, uh, gotta go."

In the privacy of my office I grabbed a newspaper and was relieved to see that the offensive headline was gone. But there it was, the monstrosity lead, "slumming" and all. I blanched and felt a major case of Afrophobia coming on, but I didn't have time to curl up into the fetal position because the phone was ringing. It was Venus, whose byline was on the story. If I may paraphrase, she said, "Slumming? What's up with that, Hal?" Venus was sophisticated enough to know what I was going for, but also tuned into the community enough to know that "slumming" wasn't going to fly. And again, it wasn't what she'd written.

I did my apologize-like-a-madman routine, explaining as best I could how I'd started fiddling and thought I'd taken it out, and chastised her for not being there to proofread the story before it went to the printer. To her credit, she shouldered her share of the blame. "I should have read it before it went to the printer," she said, "because I'd definitely have taken it out. *Def*initely."

Next I called Mars, whose byline was also on the story. Not being around much, he hadn't seen the newspaper or heard anything about it, and when I filled him in, rather than being pissed, he broke into laughter. Again I paraphrase, "Hal, you ole hippie, still talking that '60s trash." I apologized anyway and said I'd figure out some way to make it right.

Next I scurried back down to the English office, hoping to alert Marc that a shit storm might be brewing before he heard it from someone else. He hadn't, and being an ole hippie himself, he'd read the story and "slumming" hadn't jumped out at him. He told me not to beat myself up too much, that it wasn't so much racist as simply me having a "tin ear." And then he gently chided me, not for the first time, about how the newspaper was looking too good, too polished, and that I ought to let the students have more control over the final product, warts and all.

As I returned to my office to ponder my next move, I realized that at least my job was secure. The one person most sanguine about my gaffe would be the top dog herself, interim President Roberta "These

People" Lee. Because I'd just taken the spotlight off her white ass and shined it on mine.

Journalism textbooks don't generally have a chapter on how to write corrections. When to write them, and most importantly, how to fudge them. But having written so many in my time, I figured I was something of an expert on the subject. So why not use my predicament as a case study on newspaper damage control for my Journalism 101 class?

This was not sheer lunacy. It seemed like the best way to break the ice with the students on "slumming," at least better than me standing there and apologizing. Plus, I desperately needed a focus group to help me craft my response to the community.

The first thing my focus group revealed was that few had read the newspaper or heard anything about "slumming" word-of-mouth. At this point I considered aborting the lesson and my correction. It was a tough call. It was the last week of school, I didn't teach during the summer, and everything would probably be forgotten by fall. But I just didn't want it hanging over me; there may even have been an element of penance in my decision to proceed.

So I laid it all out, how the students had written the Gore story one way and how I'd edited it another, then unedited it, then somehow it got un-unedited and ended up in the newspaper. They looked at me blankly, like what's the big deal, and once again I considered reconsidering my correction. But I plunged ahead, explaining how different audiences react to things in different ways, and how some might take "slumming" as a slur against the college (not to mention racist, which I didn't mention).

When I asked how they would handle it, some thought I should write a correction while others thought I should let it blow over. Nobody felt particularly strong either way, until I told them the in-class assignment would be to write a correction for the Gore story, and they all agreed the let-it-blow-over strategy was far superior.

Next I told them about the fine art of fudging a correction, the first step being not to call it a correction at all but a "clarification." Also, not to "apologize for the error" but "regret the error." I told them they needed to explain the error and how it happened, put the best spin possible on it, and above all, be brief. What the students

handed in was brief but not especially helpful. Some were corrections and some were clarifications, but none had what I was looking for — an out.

For I was dealing with no mere typo or factual error, but an embarrassing exposure of my character as well as my over-editing. Dejanna had gone easy on me when she'd asked if I thought Southland College was a slum. What she meant was, did I feel like I was slumming by teaching at Southland? It was an image I had desperately tried to avoid because the brutally honest answer to that question was, well, sort of.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, slumming means, "to visit impoverished areas or squalid locales, especially out of curiosity or for amusement." Another definition is "the visitation of slums, especially for charitable or philanthropic purposes." But you don't hear about black urban professionals visiting Appalachia, and certainly the term more commonly refers to affluent whites going to poorer black areas, whether to provide social services or dig the scene. And I was guilty on both counts.

One might argue I wasn't slumming because I was working there, but in some ways that only made it worse, since I was getting paid to go slumming. Sure, I was attempting to "give something back" to the community. But what I was teaching mostly wasn't relevant to the few students who found their way into my classes, and most of their out-of-school problems were so far beyond my range of experience that I could offer little guidance. What was left was me hanging out in a demilitarized zone in the hood and soaking up local culture — instead of nightclubbing in Harlem I was teaching in South-Central, but the "curiosity" was the same. I hadn't taken the job to go slumming, but it was an easy shot for someone to take at me — just as I had tried to do to Gore — only I'd managed to do it to myself.

OK, enough self-flagellation. I went this way and that on explaining how it happened, but there was no way to make me look good. So I wrote a "clarification" saying only that slumming "inadvertently" got into the story. Borrowing some wording supplied by Marc the English chair, I added that during the editing process "the faculty adviser had inserted the word to describe how some might characterize the calculated political purpose of Gore's visit but not the com-

munity itself." As for fixing the blame, there was no way out. I took full responsibility — "the error was totally the fault of the faculty adviser and not the students who reported the story." As if anyone thought otherwise.

Since there wouldn't be another issue of the newspaper until fall, I put my clarification on a leaflet, had it Xeroxed and slipped it into everyone's mailboxes. I don't think it did any good — in retrospect the blow-over strategy would have been better — but it didn't do any more harm. At least not right away.

Chapter 6
Fall Semester, 2000

When the fall semester began, Southland had a new interim president, Dr. Don Williams, whose snowy white mustache gave him the kindly look of Uncle Ben. An administrator from the college district's central office, he'd switched places with Dr. Roberta E. Lee, who took over the district's campaign to pass Proposition A, a $1 billion bond issue for new construction on its nine campuses, including $100 million for Southland.

The fall semester also brought a change in my teaching assignment. I had been teaching an 80 percent load — three newspaper lab classes and Journalism 101 — and under union rules, if I continued at that rate they'd have to make me full time. So the college cut me back to 60 percent and hired another part-timer, a Nigerian named Ikechukwu, to teach the Journalism 101 feeder class.

One more change was that I decided to go with "Hal" on the masthead instead of my pen name "H.B." because I sensed the initials sounded uppity. I still had medical insurance, but my future at the school became ever more tenuous as my class rosters, even fattened with ringers who were almost never there, continued to be less than half the 15 students required to keep a class open. There were only a half-dozen new additions to the three classes. But having a school newspaper was good for reaccreditation and good for the college, so the *status quo* continued.

With the exception of Tashena, who still dropped by to see Blackjack but stopped working on the newspaper, most of the old faces were back. (Students were allowed to take the lab classes up to three times each, and some would enroll in more than one class at a time to help me pad enrollment.) Mars was broke and bored and had decided to join the Navy to see the world, or at least something other than the cramped home in a gang-contested neighborhood where he lived with his sister, her husband and their babies. To keep him in school I offered to pay his tuition (which at the time was only $11 per credit hour). He accepted and later reimbursed me.

Ronetta was related to Venus but didn't share her interest in jour-

nalism, and Sylvester was full of amazing stories but he couldn't write a lick. Joey was a promising photographer with a new digital Nikon camera, but one day he was in the newsroom talking to me while in violation of Rule No. 1, and sure enough his camera slid off a chair and smacked the floor, and he stopped coming around much.

Damon worked at a record store, where he spent most of his time, dropping by the newspaper office long enough to hand in a CD review of a local rap group, sometimes his own. He was more interested in public relations than journalism, but was a decent writer with a nose for news. Sometimes he wanted to make up quotes and bylines to plug his own bands, but his knowledge of the local music scene was an asset.

Working with what I had, I continued to guide the newspaper staff toward basic news coverage. Venus — who finally agreed to be editor because she was doing most of the stories anyway — interviewed the new interim president, who talked about his plans for the campus. He said there had been tension between former President Lee and some factions on campus, and that district officials felt "removal of one of the components was best for the college."

Venus also wrote about Rep. Waters being on campus for the unveiling of the new NASA Aeronautics Lab, which was named in her honor. Blackjack chipped in with a story and pictures of the new cheerleading squad, and his friend Jasper took some cheesecake pictures of a Transfer Club pool party.

I made Damon assistant editor for the number of articles he turned in, which included the story on the pool party and a story about a local rapper, Johnny "Mousberg" Burns, whose new CD was coming out posthumously — he'd been shot to death in Compton. And he did a story on local hip-hop artist D.E.X.'s video debuting on BET, and brought D.E.X. on campus so Holden could take his picture. We ran into some problems on that, since he and D.E.X. were related, and Damon didn't want to reveal that they had the same last name.

Damon also did a story about an election for president of the Associated Student Organization, the first *Explorer* story on student government in a year. In the spring election for student body president — an event that had not found its way into the newspaper —

June, one of the lifers, whose French beret was a familiar sight on campus, had defeated Willie, a volatile newcomer who favored more of a Malcolm X look, with opaque sunglasses and shiny suits with thin lapels. But the election had been overturned because night students — who were mostly Hispanics — hadn't had an opportunity to vote. We finally caught up with the story after June had been elected again in the re-election.

But getting the election results turned out to be trickier than I'd expected. When Damon told me the Office of Student Services that oversaw the election wouldn't tell him the vote total, I couldn't believe it, so I called the office myself and Dr. Wesley told me they wanted to keep the results "private," so as not to hurt the loser's feelings.

I lightly suggested to him that a secret election wasn't a very good civics lesson for students, but he held firm. Damon could have called the President's Office, or the newspaper could have filed a Freedom of Information request, which would have been a good learning experience for the students. But they weren't that interested and I felt embarrassed for Wesley. I finally struck a compromise — he agreed to tell Damon the vote total on the earlier election, which had been overturned.

One story that didn't get in the newspaper was about a Board of Trustees meeting during which, according to Jasper, a group of students and staff beat back an alleged attempt to get rid of one of the deans of Academic Affairs, Henrietta Anderson. I was only dimly aware of the factions on campus jockeying for power, but it was rumored that Anderson was trying to leverage her relationship with Rep. Waters to become school president, and I'd heard Jasper was part of the Anderson cabal, which made me wary.

I had never met Anderson and wasn't opposed to running a story about the trustees meeting where the issue had come up. But I told Jasper that to be fair he should get the other side of the story by calling the district office and giving the chancellor, Stan Casey, or former President Lee, a chance to respond to whether anyone had been trying to get rid of Dean Anderson and why. When I felt he made a less than half-hearted — and unsuccessful — effort to report both sides (he hadn't interviewed the dean, either), I spiked the story,

which did not go down well with Jasper.

While it may have been good journalism, once again I'd gone past advising to dictating. If I'd kept my vow to let the students' stories be published warts and all, after trying to get Jasper to fix the story, I would have allowed it to go in as he had written it. Even with reservations I could have let him turn it into a column and run it as an opinion. I left out the story from an overabundance of caution — when in doubt, leave it out. But I was also being cautious about letting my newspaper get used for someone else's agenda, when it wasn't my newspaper at all.

For the second newspaper of the semester I decided to do another election primer. Besides, the November 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush looked like it might be close. Only this time I didn't have the Journalism 101 class to help, which meant more work for fewer students, who didn't want to do it anyway.

Like the first time, I made up forms for the students to fill out and divvied them up among the students. The system worked pretty well. Students who filled out the forms were able to turn them into stories pretty easily, and if they couldn't — or wouldn't — I did.

Some students turned in stories and some didn't, and that was reflected in the staff box. Damon got demoted to staff writer for low attendance and Jasper got left off for doing nothing. Ronetta was promoted to assistant editor for good attendance, although her main contribution was that she'd learned how to scan pictures into the computer.

The third and final newspaper of the semester featured two stories that reflected the split personality of the campus. Page one had a story by Sylvester on International Day, when teachers and students from diverse ethnic backgrounds showed off their cultures, while page three had a story by Jasper on a visit by presidents and recruiters from six historically black colleges in Georgia, Alabama and Texas.

Damon was back as entertainment editor, with two stories that were local only in the sense that they were about black entertainment — new releases by No Limit Records, the "number one" black-owned independent record label, located in New Orleans, and a story about Black Entertainment Television, the lone African-American-owned TV network, being acquired by media giant Viacom.

But the main reason Damon had returned was because he wanted my help writing an exposé of the Six Flags Magic Mountain amusement park. Over the weekend he and his friends had gone to Six Flags to celebrate a birthday, but they'd been turned away at the gate by security guards who told them that they "fit the criteria." He told me it was a blatant example of racial profiling and he wanted to blow the lid off the scandal.

As with Jasper's story on the alleged coup to get rid of Dean Anderson, I encouraged Damon to do his exposé as long as he attempted to get the other side of the story. And as with Jasper's story, I was skeptical. At my weekend job at the news agency I'd handled several stories about melees at Magic Mountain involving gangs of marauding youths, so to speak. Understandably, the theme park wanted to maintain a family atmosphere, and frankly, Damon and his crew would fit just about anybody's criteria.

I remembered the day at school I was walking to my car when a tricked-out black van with red trim and tinted windows slowed as it rolled up on me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the driver-side window slide down a crack and a dark face hidden behind sunglasses say "hey" in my direction. I pretended not to hear and kept walking until the voice came again. "Hey, Hal." I turned around and it was Damon. I'm sure my face went from very white to very red in an instant. So I could see how overcautious security guards might have gotten spooked at the sight of six hip-hopped young black men in a pimpmobile, and how a request for I.D.s might have escalated into a shouting match and then ejection from the park.

All Damon had to do was write that he'd been denied entry to Magic Mountain because he was black and the readers of *The Explorer* would have believed him, each having had their own experiences of getting kicked out, not getting in, denied service, pulled over, searched or followed around because they "fit the criteria." But I told him that if he really wanted to get something done about racism at Magic Mountain, he needed to convince those who had never been profiled, i.e., white people, and that the first white person he might try convincing was me.

From there I began questioning him like a reporter — or a policeman — and the more details I drew out of him, the more credible his

story became. He said he and five of his friends, all in their late teens and early 20s, had gone to Magic Mountain on a Sunday afternoon to basically have some yuks and check out the booty. Normal stuff. He conceded that two of his friends were dressed in hip-hop garb, but not gang colors, and both he and the friend whose birthday it was were former U.S. Air Force Security Specialists, kind of like M.P.s, so they weren't reflexively defensive around law enforcement types.

He said that when they drove up in a Plymouth Voyager and parked, a theme park security car pulled up nearby and three guards began watching them. The security car circled the parking lot and then returned. Damon and his friends tried to ignore them and walk to the entrance, but were told to stop.

The guards picked out two of Damon's friends and asked one of them, "yes or no?" The friend said he didn't know what the guard meant, and the guard said he was going to read from an index card he was holding, and that if the friend said yes, the guard would search him and the vehicle, and if he said no, he and his friends would all be thrown out of the park.

When he asked why they wanted to search him and his friend, a guard said they "met the criteria." And when the friend asked what the criteria was, the guard said that for security reasons he couldn't say.

Both men eventually allowed the guards to search them, and Damon said no contraband was found. But the guards still wanted to search their van, which belonged to another friend who hadn't been searched. The owner of the van asked why, if nothing was found on the two who had been searched, did they still want to search his van? The guards — who had now grown to a swarm of about a dozen — responded that unless they allowed them to search the van they would be asked to leave the park. The driver refused to let the guards search his van and they were told to leave, which they did, peacefully, but with a lot of frustration, Damon said.

I didn't pursue why the friend refused to allow his vehicle to be searched because it didn't seem relevant. This was pre-9/11, and it seemed to me that without probable cause, the guards had little reason to search a van that would be left behind, along with whatever might or might not be in it, while Damon and his friends were in the

park.

I told Damon he was halfway home, that he had his side of the story. Now he had to get the other side and call Magic Mountain. I told him to identify himself as a reporter from a school newspaper, not as someone who had been denied entry to the park, and to be respectful rather than accusatory. His goal was to find out the criteria used to stop and search would-be park goers, and why his friends had been denied entry on Sunday.

Damon called Six Flags security, which transferred him to the public relations department, where a spokeswoman told him she didn't know anything about anything. But after a few of his questions regarding criteria and racial profiling, she said she'd find someone who could answer his questions and had him leave his phone number.

The next day one of the main Six Flags spokespersons called *The Explorer* office and told Damon he did not know the criteria for searching patrons, and that if he did he wouldn't tell the reporter for security reasons. He called again on Wednesday to say the only group that security remembered turning away on Sunday had marijuana, which, Damon maintained, was not his group.

The story was almost complete. I told Damon he had gotten what amounted to a no comment from Six Flags, which was OK, but I'd like to see him give it one more try. I suggested to him that if they wouldn't say what the criteria was, maybe they would say what it wasn't.

So Damon called the P.R. department again and got hold of yet another spokesman, and asked him flat out if Six Flags' secret criteria had anything to do with racial profiling. The spokesman said race was never a consideration during a routine stop of a park customer.

Great, I told Damon. He had gotten the park to go from a no comment to a denial, which made for a stronger story. Now he could tell both sides of the story and let the readers decide.

Headlined "Security Policy Questioned at Magic Mountain," with a subhead saying "Blacks told they 'fit the criteria'," the story began: "Is the amusement park Six Flags Magic Mountain using racial profiling to harass park visitors? Known as a place the whole family can enjoy, like any privately owned business, Six Flags has the right to deny service to anyone the company desires. On Sunday,

Nov. 26, at about 2:20 p.m., Six Flags did just that."

Writing in first person, he described what happened when his friends went to the park and the company's comments on "criteria" and the spokesperson's denial of racial profiling.

"My friends and I aren't so sure," his story concluded. "I just don't understand how Six Flags could be so insensitive," he quoted one of his friends saying. "I'll never go there again." And another friend said, "I think that we at least have the right to know why we were asked to be searched."

It turned out to be a scoop of sorts. Shortly after Damon's story came out in *The Explorer*, the mainstream media reported that a class-action lawsuit was being initiated by others who claimed they'd also been harassed and unfairly denied entry to Magic Mountain because they were black or Hispanic.

Ronetta had good attendance, but she wasn't being much help. I got her to do a story on two brothers she knew who were child actors, but she was having trouble getting started. Even if she wasn't the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree, she was still underachieving. I decided it was because she had a low self-image, and in desperation gave her a pep talk à la Jesse Jackson.

I sat her down in front of me, and as her cousin Venus looked on with bemusement, I told her to repeat after me: "I am."

"I am," Ronetta said haltingly.

"Not stupid."

"Not stupid," Ronetta repeated softly and laughed nervously.

"Again," I said, "Louder. I am."

"I am," she said slightly louder.

"Not stupid."

"Not, stupid," she stuttered.

"Again," I encouraged her. "I am not stupid."

"I am not stupid," she repeated.

"Again. I am NOT stupid."

"I am NOT stupid," and she seemed to get into the call and response.

After several more repetitions I said, "that's right, Ronetta, you're not stupid. You're as smart as anyone in this room. Now go

write that story." The spell lasted long enough for her to put together seven paragraphs.

I finally got another underachiever, Holden the high school pothead, to review a concert by the on-campus high school's gospel choir. He panned it. Ever teaching — or meddling — I suggested he shouldn't compare an amateur gospel group to professionals, and wasn't there anything positive he could say about his classmates. In the four-paragraph story he conceded, "the choir put on a dynamic performance, as they soothed the crowd's rowdy souls with their smooth sounds."

Sylvester did a sports story on Southland sprinter Petula Richards, who'd made it to the Olympics. Sylvester was about my age, but he dragged himself around campus with a wheeze, and when I asked him why, he said he'd been the victim of a random drive-by shooting that cost him a lung. Sometime later he pulled up his shirt and showed me the scars from the bullet wounds to his riddled torso, and said the attack was not random. Rather, he said, in the 1990s he used to be a smalltime music producer with a recording studio in his home, and that in the classic Motown mode, he'd been taking street urchins and helping them become rap artists.

He said that at a music showcase in L.A., a certain West Coast rap mogul — the same one often mentioned in connection with the East Coast-West Coast rap feud and unsolved murders of rappers Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. — heard one of Sylvester's acts and sent two of his "associates" over to Sylvester's table to make him one of those offers you aren't supposed to refuse. The carrot was a modest buyout of the artist's contract with Sylvester, while the stick was implied, he said.

Even though a certain West Coast rap mogul could have done a lot more for the group's career than Sylvester, he said he turned down the deal because he didn't want his kids getting mixed up with the wrong people. Some weeks later, he said, he was outside his house when two guys drove up and began shooting him. He said they shot him so many times they had to stop to reload and couldn't believe he was still alive. They finally left him to die, but he survived.

"Sounds like a story," I said.

But Sylvester said he preferred to keep the lung he still had.

Another story we never did grew out of one of those bitch sessions on the stairwell, where Venus and I would grab a smoke and complain about how little was getting done. Why were there so few journalism students, why hadn't the few students congealed into a team, and why, whenever the going got rough, did so many students just give up?

Venus said it wasn't just the newspaper that students weren't taking seriously; the problem was campuswide. I said, sounds like a story, and suggested we do a special "Losers Edition" with investigative journalism attempting to answer the question: Are Southland students quitters? The students began collecting anecdotal evidence, like other classes that saw enrollment drop during the semester, or how few students were in school clubs or running for student government.

Even with growing evidence, I said that before we could publish such a controversial story, we'd need more than a few teachers complaining about their students — we'd want hard evidence, like statistical data. One of the students called the district office and got hold of someone whose job it was to collect data used for budgeting and planning purposes, and he said he just might have the number we were looking for.

One of his reports measured "class retention sizes" — the number of students enrolled in classes at the start of the semester versus the number who complete classes — between 1995 and 2000, and the results confirmed our suspicions. Of the nine district campuses, Southland had the highest class dropout rate.

It was a smoking gun, but I got cold feet. To do the story, we'd have to get into why Southland students were quitters, and that presented a veritable minefield of social, racial, class and cultural issues that would have to be handled delicately, if at all. The data showed that the school with the highest dropout rate also had the highest percentage of blacks, and other district colleges in poorer areas with more minority students also tended to have higher dropout rates.

Some of the teachers interviewed had touched on the economic and social hardships many of the students faced off campus. But another prickly aspect to the quitter story had to do with a possible connection between class retention rates, student financial aid and lifers. Education loans to Southland students were drying up because

numerous students had used the system to live off the loans but not attend classes until they maxed out their eligibility. Then, a goodly number defaulted.

And then there was the matter of faculty complicity in another aspect of the scam. To keep the spigot flowing and avoid having to repay the loans, students had to stay in school, and at least one teacher I know gave passing grades to some students who were attending classes seldom if at all. And I'm sure I wasn't the only one. All the part-time teachers — nearly two-thirds of the faculty at the time — had a financial incentive to inflate enrollment so their classes wouldn't get canceled. The same incentive applied to grade inflation — teachers who gained a reputation for being tough graders often saw enrollment in their classes go down.

With that and all the out-of-school hardships many of the students faced, it was very tempting for part-time instructors to keep some slackers on their rosters. And if the class retention rate factored in all those students who got passing grades even though they seldom attended classes, or who went to class but still deserved to flunk but got passing grades from instructors trying to keep their jobs, well, it boggles the mind.

One juicy story, but I didn't want any part of it. The bottom line was that it would look like the white faculty adviser of the school newspaper had called black students lazy welfare cheats. I had given the newspaper staff the idea and coached them on how to gather evidence, but this time there was no way I was going to take their notes and turn them into a major investigative piece. This time they would have to write the story themselves or it wouldn't get done. It didn't.

One last story that did get in the newspaper, written by Venus, involved a "field trip" I took her and Blackjack on. The news agency where I worked on weekends wanted me to go to the L.A. County Clerk's Office on election night, just in case the Internet crashed, and later drop by the newsroom to see if they needed an extra hand. I asked my boss if two of my journalism students could tag along to observe real journalists at work, and he gave a grudging OK.

Well, that was the night of the goofy Bush-Gore presidential election, and quite a moment to study the media. On the ride to the clerk's office, the radio was reporting that Gore had won three crucial

states, including Florida, which meant he was in good shape to win the election. Although we were supposed to be objective journalists, there were smiles all around.

We arrived at the clerk's office early, so we found a local eatery with a TV, ordered some food, and watched as Florida, which had been colored blue for Gore, got changed to white, which meant it was still up for grabs.

"The worst in journalism was now on display," Venus recounted in her story, which was titled, "Ballot Blues: Election Night Brings Out the Best and Worst in the Media." "In journalism you are supposed to get it first, but first get it right. Now it appeared that by calling the race for Gore the media had gotten it wrong. The map became symbolic of a gang war — red on one side, blue on the other and chaos in the middle."

We returned to the county building, where my job was to stick around long enough to make sure the primitive Internet hookup to the clerk's office was working, which it was. Next, we took off for the news agency, where about a half-dozen reporters and editors were typing in election returns at their workstations, and watching several televisions that were all tuned to different channels covering the election.

Once again we were staring at "The Map," when the white state of Florida changed yet again, this time going red for Bush. Totally deflated, we left the news agency to wallow in our misery over drinks at my place. It was midnight Pacific time, making it 3 a.m. Eastern time. Suddenly the map changed again. Florida, which had been red for Bush, turned white yet again.

"We were elated that Florida was once again up for grabs, but could detect no such elation in the faces of the tired and embarrassed news anchors," Venus wrote. "Tom Brokaw stated that he did not have egg, but a whole omelet on his face. What I learned that night about journalism totally contradicted what I had been taught, which is that 'even if your mother says she loves you, check it out.' If members of the broadcast media had followed that simple rule in journalism, they may have been able to eat that omelet instead of wearing it."

At semester's end I took Blackjack, Holden, Mars, Jasper and a couple other students to the HomeTown Buffet for a meal and a rap session, not in the hip-hop sense but in a '60s sense, or perhaps both. Either way, there was a lot of jiving going on, and at one point I got them talking about the 1992 Rodney King riots. Known locally as an "uprising" (the 1965 Watts Riot is called a rebellion), blacks, outraged at a jury's exoneration of four white police officers who were caught on videotape beating a black man at the end of a car chase, went on a rampage through South-Central and beyond, setting fires, looting and beating up white people.

At least that's how white people saw it. Jasper recalled with certain relish how people he knew sent the message, "no justice, no peace," by smashing store windows and grabbing liquor, guns, clothing, groceries and electronics, and the temporary gang truce that followed, which created a sense of black solidarity and 24-hour block parties where anyone was allowed on anyone's turf to share the loot. It may not have been 40 acres and a mule, but it was a start.

I asked Jasper what he wanted to be when he got out of college, and he said community organizer. He added that he was already pretty good at it.

No one else at the table boasted about the riots like Jasper did — Blackjack said he spent the time holed up in his apartment — but they all felt some justification, if not pride, in what happened. In my classes I had heard similar views expressed on other issues, like the O.J. verdict. Whether or not Simpson killed two people, it was cool that he beat the system because white people beat the system all the time and black people get screwed by the system all the time. And if O.J. getting off really pissed off white people, well, so much the better. Let the injustice be on the other foot for a change.

Other examples of what I'd call honkyphobia include the belief by some that AIDS and crack cocaine were created by white people to get rid of black people. Like many conspiracy theories, they contain kernels of truth clinging to a dubious chain of circumstantial evidence. The CIA has done business with drug lords, and some dealers who sold crack in black neighborhoods have claimed they got their drugs from CIA operatives. AIDS has hit Africa the hardest, and blacks have been victimized in the past by white doctors, like the

infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment.

But it took a leap of faith — bad faith — to conclude from there that whites want to turn blacks into drug addicts or invent a disease that kills more blacks than whites. And when students in my classes expressed opinions I thought were honkyphobic, I'd challenge them. In one class, some of the jocks argued that professional basketball players were like slaves because they couldn't sign with any team they wanted and were traded, like chattel, by mostly white team owners. I pointed out that slaves aren't paid millions of dollars or treated like celebrities, and don't have the choice of quitting. I said that comparing professional basketball players to slaves was an insult to slaves.

After Jasper finished reminiscing on the 1992 uprising, I did it again. Calling it "the culture of black victimization," I said I could understand the outrage over the Rodney King verdict, and the pent-up anger and frustration that blacks must carry around all the time. I could even understand rioting every other decade or so to release some of that rage. But believing that because blacks had suffered so many injustices, it was all right to run wild in the streets, was a recipe for disaster — chaos instead of community. No matter how much blacks have been screwed over by the man, that didn't make it OK to riot and loot, get away with murder, smoke crack or have dangerous sex. Everyone should take personal responsibility for their own actions.

I started to launch into a lecture my dad used to give me about how Jews had to be twice as good as everyone else if they wanted to get ahead in the world, and how the same principle applies to other ethnic groups, but suddenly I stopped, sensing that might sound patronizing — and that maybe I'd already crossed that line.

Jasper looked at me like I was from Neptune. "Why did you decide to teach at Southland?" he asked.

The table went silent as I pondered my reply. Rather than bullshit them with some story about me going into South-Central to help the disadvantaged, I went with the truth. I said I'd applied for a teaching position with the district, and by luck of the draw got offered a job at Southland. That when I first found out where Southland was located, I was a little uptight, but I took the job anyway and was glad I did,

because I'd met a lot of neat people, including those sitting at the table.

It seemed to float with everyone, except perhaps Jasper.

Part II:
Fungus Amongus

Chapter 7
Spring Semester, 2001

By January 2001 I had been working at Southland College for two years, and I should have gotten the hang of it by then. But I still had too few students, and those I did have weren't taking the newspaper, or me, seriously. The first day of class (a misnomer, since I hadn't taught a roomful of students since Journalism 101 was taken away from me), a new student came in, plopped her newborn on my desk and changed a stinky diaper in front of me. Another time I came into my office and discovered what appeared to be a dead body sprawled over my desk. Snoring. It was Tyrone, who was back, along with his porn habit, as was Blackjack and his booty habit.

I needed to get more students involved, but was a poor recruiter. I printed fliers, gave awkward presentations in English classes, even made cold calls at the admissions office during late registration, buttonholing students and begging them to take journalism. Nothing worked.

Blackjack continued to be my best recruiting tool, luring a succession of female students, but more for their aesthetic qualities than interest in journalism. They helped a little, but did not, as I'd hoped, draw more male students. My second best recruiting tool was Venus, who had gotten half her extended family to take my classes. Other incentives — free food, rides home, a place to hang out, help with homework in other classes, flexible attendance, easy grades — attracted all the wrong kinds of students. Except for Venus and Blackjack, nobody volunteered to do much of anything except what I could badger them into.

Not that it was all negative. Blackjack had become a capable photographer and Venus continued to do the main stories, although her other classes were taking up more of her time. Among the new students, Turell could draw cartoons, and Althea, a member of the women's basketball team who had been in my 101 class, helped out when she wasn't at practice. And I caught a break when Louella, a public information officer interim President Don Williams had brought with him from the district office to Southland, dropped by to

get some pointers on news releases and agreed to write a few stories.

The news didn't stop just because there was no one to report it, and there happened to be a lot of news as the semester began. The college was holding a "Founders Day" for Odessa Cox and others who helped start the college. The men's basketball team had won the state community college championship for the first time, the big bond issue Proposition A was looming, and Winnie Mandela was coming to campus.

Winnifred Madikizela-Mandela. Like Clinton the year before, there weren't a lot of places the controversial ex-wife of former South Africa President Nelson Mandela could go in America and expect a receptive audience, but Southland College was one of them. And she didn't let the students down, walking on stage with a raised fist and greeting them as "kidnapped brothers and sisters."

Long an outspoken leader of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement, she'd also been convicted of involvement in the 1988 kidnapping of four young activists and murder of a 14-year-old boy by her bodyguards, known as the Mandela Football Club. And she'd been unrepentant in her testimony before Archbishop Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997.

She married African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela in 1958, four years before he was imprisoned, and was by his side when he was released 32 years later, in 1990. But they separated in 1992, and when he was elected South Africa's first black president in 1994, she was elected to Parliament and became a critic of his government. She lost her seat a year later but remained popular, especially with South Africa's poor.

According to Venus' story, when interim President Williams heard she was on a speaking tour in America, he invited her to Southland through the offices of then-retired congressman and former Lt. Gov. Mervyn Dymally, who later become a state assemblyman again. At her appearance in the Little Theatre, Williams introduced the 64-year-old Madikizela-Mandela as "Queen Mother." She set aside a prepared speech on AIDS and instead talked briefly about the ongoing struggles for freedom and democracy in South Africa and here, and then took questions from the audience.

"There is no such thing as African-Americans, but Africans in

America," she said. "I am worried about the Africans in America because you, too, are not yet free."

She revealed that her efforts to end apartheid included building bombs and teaching others how to make explosives. "I use to deny it, but now I can say it today," she said.

The only time she mentioned her ex-husband was when a student asked how she felt seeing Nelson Mandela when he was finally released from prison, and she responded, "Absolutely nothing, I felt nothing," sparking surprised laughter and applause from the audience.

When a student asked why she has been criticized in the past, Mandela suggested it was for the same reason boxer Mike Tyson was convicted of rape, "when he could have any woman he wanted," and why a story came out about the Rev. Jesse Jackson having a baby out of wedlock at the same time he was protesting the presidential election results in Florida. Although Blackjack had taken a great picture of Mandela standing at the podium with her fist raised, I ran the story on page three.

For page one I chose Louella's story on Founders Day, which was a composite of news releases she'd written while organizing the event, and which I'd helped edit. One of Blackjack's finds, Calista, wrote a story on Proposition A, the billion-dollar bond issue, and Tyrone reviewed *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which did "not suck at all."

Turell did a five-frame cartoon about a Southland student who prepared for the new semester by spending all his money on sneakers and Fubu jerseys, then complaining he doesn't have money for textbooks. Heading toward a sign that read "dead end," the student says, "Well, I may not be learning anything, but I sure got the phattest gear on campus!"

It was Black History Month, and when Tyrone wouldn't, I got Turell to review a movie from a black film festival on campus: "During the summer of 1919, whites instigated riots against blacks, who were expected to mop and scrub floors. Instead of retaliating with guns and knives, many blacks fought back with paint brushes, trumpets and pens. The result was a movement known as the Harlem Renaissance."

The Sportz page continued to be a problem. It was the first time

the basketball team had won the community college state tournament, yet I couldn't find a student willing to do the story. The campus sports information director agreed to write a brief article, and I bummed enough already-picked-over tournament photos from Professor Jones to make a picture page.

Finally, there was Dean Anderson's ninth annual Manchild Conference, the biggest ever, with 1,200 attendees, and I got into another spat with Jasper. To help me inflate enrollment — and help him with his student loan — I had let Jasper enroll in two of my classes, even though he hung out in the supply room, playing dominos, instead of going to class. But he wrote a good story about Professor Jones, who had been honored as "Manchild Man of the Year." However, at one point he quoted Professor Jones as saying, "It's the biggest honor I ever had, the biggest moment of my life. Especially because the congresswoman (Maxine Waters) and Chip Murray (pastor of the First A.M.E. Church) were there, and it gave me a chance to say that I think Dean Anderson should be the president of the school."

The last part of the quote sounded to me like Jasper thought Dean Anderson should be the president of the school, and I was concerned that maybe he'd added onto the professor's words. When I couldn't find Jasper to ask him about it, or Professor Jones to verify he'd said it, in frustration I deleted it — when in doubt, leave it out.

At the last moment, as I was having students proofread the final layout before sending it off to the printer, Jasper showed up and caught the omission. He was livid, accusing me of playing politics with the newspaper, and I accused him of the same thing. But we talked it out, and when he insisted that's what Professor Jones had said, I put the quote back in. Jasper was mollified, but ever more suspicious of me, and the feeling was mutual.

The newspaper turned out great, but once again I'd done most of the work, and I was fed up. Since no one had done any editing, I took away everyone's title, alphabetically listing the 12 students who'd contributed anything as "staff writers and photographers." I sat the students down and explained why I'd taken away their titles and urged them to show some initiative and come together as a team, or at least show up more often.

I announced I was no longer going to be Mr. Nice Guy, and handed out a memo expanding on the "no touching" rule. Until further notice, there would also be no more using the office phone for private calls, no more viewing porn, checking email or playing music on the office computer, no more sleeping or diapering babies on the teacher's desk and no more bumming food or rides off the teacher. No more nothing except journalism. Blackjack and Venus backed me, but Tyrone was crushed that his porn supply was cut off again.

The next day, I walked into the newspaper lab and it stank like a beauty salon. Nyesha and Chanise were attaching hair extensions, which wasn't on the list, but was clearly violating the spirit of my new rules. At first I was intrigued, having never seen how the procedure was done. Two hours later it was still going on and I was fuming.

The other students were waiting to see how I would respond to this challenge to my new rules. Even though it shortened my already too-short roster, and even though I liked Chanise and Nyesha, I dropped them from the class. I told them that they were welcome to return the next semester, but I had to make them an example. It was especially hard to drop Nyesha, who sometimes lived in a car with her family.

No More Mr. Nice Guy wasn't making life any easier on what remained of the newspaper staff, either. Another election was looming with Prop. A on the ballot, along with a competitive city primary to replace Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, who had to step down because of term limits. On campus there was even less interest than usual in the election, as none of the major mayoral candidates were black — two were Hispanic and four were white.

In addition to the six main candidates, there were nine fringe candidates and I wanted profiles on them all. The problem with wanting 15 candidate profiles was that to edit the students' stories, I had to know enough about 15 candidates to profile them myself. I used my research to do a column for the weekly I was writing for, and when the students didn't do their own research, I eventually let them crib from my column to write their stories so the election preview would get out before the election.

Venus wrote a page one editorial urging students to vote for

the billion-dollar school bond issue, and another on three community college district trustee candidates who came to Southland for a debate — they were all for Prop. A, too. Dennard, Calista, Turell, Blackjack, Althea and grudgingly Tyrone did profiles on the six main mayoral contenders, while Calista, Turell and Blackjack teamed up to do the nine fringe candidates. Jasper was a no-show.

The mayoral primary and subsequent runoff election reflected the fickle political currents in the city's ethnic makeup. According to the 2000 Census, Hispanics had replaced blacks as the largest minority group in California, and of Los Angeles' 3.7 million people, 46 percent were "Hispanic or Latino of any race," 30 percent were white, 11 percent black and 10 percent Asian.

Although whites had become a minority in L.A., they continued to be its most affluent residents, while the majority of Latinos continued to face many of the same problems as blacks, including poverty, discrimination and gangs. But some blacks felt as threatened by the growing Hispanic population as some whites, and many Latinos as well as Asians would rather preserve their own culture or blend into white society than form a multiethnic coalition with blacks.

All that played out in the election. Antonio Villaraigosa, who grew up in East L.A. and became a Chicano activist, then a Democratic assemblyman and Assembly speaker before being term-limited out of office, handily won the primary. At the time, much was written about how he represented a new generation of Angelenos who didn't see everything in terms of race — a Clintonesque candidate who could transcend ethnic politics. Had blacks and Hispanics come together in a blackspanic coalition for the run-off election, they could have made Villaraigosa the first Latino mayor of Los Angeles in over a century.

But he was opposed by City Attorney Jim Hahn, another Democrat who, though white, happened to be the son of the late L.A. County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, who was beloved throughout the city and especially in South-Central, where he grew up and made sure his constituents got parks and hospitals. Villaraigosa won endorsements from a rainbow coalition that included the *L.A. Times*, Democratic Gov. Gray Davis, pro-business Republican incumbent Mayor Richard Riordan, and Councilman Joel Wachs, who in addition to being

a conservative Jew from the Valley, was gay. But the rainbow didn't include many urban black voters. It was Hahn who had the backing of Rep. Waters and the community, along with the white, conservative San Fernando Valley.

The election came down to a choice between, as one of Villaraigosa's campaign slogans put it, "voting one's hopes or fears." I voted my hope that the moderate coalition Villaraigosa had put together was more than window dressing and that he planned on being inclusive, rather than my fear that if he got elected he'd pander to his Chicano base and I'd have to learn Spanish. But a majority of whites and a whopping 71 percent of black voters weren't ready for a Latino to take over City Hall, and in the end fear, and Hahn, won.

While some decried the result as a return to racial politics, others noted that blacks and whites voting for the same candidate, for whatever reason, represented another kind of multiethnic coalition. But the new mayor promptly alienated all the blacks who'd supported him by firing Police Chief Bernard Parks and hiring former New York City Police Chief William Bratton, who was charismatic, but irrefutably white.

Following the election, Parks, a 38-year veteran of the LAPD, decided to run for the City Council, with an eye on the mayor's job, and poly sci teacher and political consultant Herman Sadler got involved in his campaign. When I ran into Sadler at school a few days after the mayoral election, I asked him if Parks was running for City Council to get back at Hahn for firing him, and might a contest between the two of them for mayor in four years turn into a race war.

Sadler chuckled. "When hasn't there been a race war?" he asked.

The top headline to the third newspaper of the semester was "Four College President Finalists to Visit Southland." After nearly five years without a permanent college president, the district had finally authorized a search committee, headed by former congressman Dymally, that had come up with four finalists.

Venus also interviewed former Southland President Lee, who had moved back to the district headquarters to implement Prop. A — voters had approved the billion-dollar construction bond issue. But when Venus asked what was meant as a softball question — whether

the campus would finally get its first priority, which was a cafeteria — Lee responded with bureaucrateze, saying each college would set priorities through shared governance, and that there would be local input in identifying and setting priorities. In other words, while there was plenty of bond money to build a cafeteria, the school still didn't have the funds to operate one.

Tyrone bashed the latest crop of blacksploitation films, reviewing three movies, including *Kingdom Come*, which he hadn't actually seen, but "according to my best source (my mother), it's a big disappointment." It starred Jada Pinkett, LL Cool J and Cedric the Entertainer, "all of whom have acted in way better films and should be pimp slapped across the face for being a part of this film." *The Brothers* was a "straight male copy of *Waiting to Exhale*," in which "the actors did their best, but the story and the direction of the movie made this a disgrace to not only black men, but men in general." The "most promising yet disappointing" was *Exit Wounds*, pairing rapper DMX with action star Steven Segal, which, Tyrone said, started out like *Romeo Must Die*, but turned into "*The Matrix, Part 2*, in the ghetto."

We ran into an editorial dispute when I suggested he soften his sign-off. "They all suck pussy," I said, might be going too far with the suck routine. He disagreed. We asked Venus for a second opinion, and of course she thought it was sexist, offensive and gratuitous, but Tyrone wasn't swayed. He finally agreed to allow Marc the English chair to be the final arbiter of good taste. Needless to say, Marc also agreed that "suck pussy" was beyond the pale. Tyrone sulked and wouldn't write an alternative ending, so in the end I simply truncated it to, "they all suck."

I was pleasantly surprised when Turell said he wanted to write about a bill in the Legislature that would allow undocumented immigrants living in California to pay the much cheaper in-state tuition rate to attend community college. California residents paid $11 per credit hour, or $660 for the 60 credit hours needed to attain a two-year associate's degree. Out-of-state students paid more than 10 times as much — $141 a credit hour, or $8,460 for a degree.

Through job training and English classes, community colleges offer a pathway into the mainstream for immigrants, as well as other

minorities. But $8,460 was way more of a barrier to the mainstream than $660, and a Hispanic assemblyman from Southeast Los Angeles, Marco Antonio Firebaugh, had reintroduced a bill to allow undocumented immigrants living in California to pay the lower tuition.

Those who felt threatened by immigrants — mainly white Californians who had become a minority compared to all people of other races, but were still 76 percent of registered voters — thought it was unfair to allow non-citizens financial advantages over Americans from Alabama or Wyoming, who also had to pay the higher tuition. Indeed, allowing "illegal aliens" to stay in California at all, much less to attend college on the cheap, didn't make sense to a lot of people, including Gov. Gray Davis, who had vetoed Firebaugh's bill the first time it had been approved by the Legislature.

Turell became aware of the issue through a magazine article, and I suggested he localize the story by interviewing some Southland students for their opinions. Turell was for the bill — he started his story, "Did you know thousands of gifted California high school graduates are denied their education rights and can't go to college?" and ended it, "In the months to come, expect more protests from teenagers demanding to learn."

But the comments he got from other students were mixed. One student said the governor vetoed the bill because illegal immigrants can't vote: "I don't think he cares — he doesn't have to look these kids in the eye and say you can't go to college."

Another student, who was Latino and born in America, stated, "I think illegal immigrants should pay out-of-state tuition. We all have to follow rules. If I'm hungry, I can't just walk into a grocery store and expect free food. So if I'm hungry for an education, I can't expect a free education. I believe if you love this country and want to be a part of it, you have to go through the proper channels. If I went to another country and demanded free education, they'd laugh at me."

Later that year, California lawmakers again approved in-state tuition for undocumented immigrants, and following some lobbying by Mexican President Vicente Fox, Gov. Davis signed the bill into law.

Turell also came up with a cartoon about "rolling blackouts."

California had "deregulated" the utility industry, enabling Enron and other companies to fleece the state out of billions of dollars by creating an artificial energy shortage to drive up prices. To avoid massive rate increases or utility companies turning out the lights on entire cities, state regulators came up with a plan to ration electricity by turning off the power here and there for an hour or so at a time, so-called rolling blackouts. Turell drew a cartoon with the caption, "If rolling blackouts came to Southland College," showing several sets of eyeballs, with one set saying, "Please turn to page 64 in your textbooks," and another set of eyeballs, with a toothy grin, responding, "Anyone got a match?"

He still needed to blacken the rest of the cartoon so it looked like the students were trying to read in the dark, and I showed him how we could scan his cartoon into the computer and reverse the image, turning day into night. But when we did that with his cartoon, the lips and teeth on the toothy grin came out looking like Memín Pinguín, the Afro-Mexican comic-book character with exaggerated black features. Concerned that someone might be offended by the Ubange lips, I suggested that Turell black out the mouth, which he did. But like with the Gore mistake, the wrong picture ended up in the newspaper, although this time nobody noticed.

As the newspaper was about to go to the printer, Jasper showed up with another of his hot scoops. He said the Office of Student Services, which last semester had kept the election tally secret, was about to hold another election with only one person on the ballot for all of student government — the incumbent student body president, June.

There had been rumors that June was tight with the heads of Student Services, and for whatever reason — lack of publicity, apathy, conspiracy or "Negro time" — she was apparently the only one who had filed a candidate application on time. Still, I couldn't believe Student Services would sanction such an election. And once again I was suspicious of Jasper, who was friends with Willie, who was among those who had missed the deadline. But when a student reporter called Dr. Wesley to check it out, the dean confirmed every detail. When asked how the remaining positions would be filled, he said the ASO president would appoint them.

To go with the story, I got Turell to whip up a cartoon. Titled,

"Party of One," it showed a student at the voting booth saying, "There's just one candidate on the ASO ballot! Is this a democracy or a dictatorship?"

Armed with the newspaper, Jasper and a group of students raised a stink at the next district Board of Trustees meeting. The day after that, interim President Williams convened a meeting in his conference room with Dr. Wesley, Jasper and 16 other complaining students. According to a front-page story in the next edition of the newspaper, Williams praised the students for wanting to become more involved in student government.

"I was wondering where you have been," he said. "I support student government. I commend you for stepping up. This is your student government and it will be no better than what you make it. You have stepped up to the plate and said 'I want to be involved.' I could not be any more proud of you than I am today."

Following the meeting, Dr. Wesley reopened the application deadline and rescheduled the election.

It had been a tough semester for No More Mr. Nice Guy and his students. But in one way my cracking the whip — and shortening the second and third newspapers to four pages instead of the usual eight — had paid off. We published a fourth newspaper, the first time I'd been able to get out four editions during the same semester.

Dubbing it the "good news edition," I made it a "year-ender," highlighting the school's accomplishments over the past 12 months, from the passage of the billion-dollar bond issue to the basketball team winning the state championship, plus a page listing all the honor students. I assigned Althea to do a roundup story, and recycled earlier *Explorer* stories and pictures to create a centerfold picture page of other memorable events for the year.

Ironically, the inspiration for the good news edition came from Dr. Wesley, whom I'd run into at a student assembly in the Little Theatre. Tall, thickset, dark and formidable, he was sitting at the end of a row. I kneeled down next to him on a step and whispered that Louella had told me he'd compiled a report on student achievements during the semester, and that *The Explorer* wanted to do a story on it. Still smarting from the newspaper cartoon and the student election fiasco,

he glared at me. “Why would you want that report?” he huffed. “It’s good news. All the media does is report the negative.”

He was so gruff I thought he was joking. And before I realized what I was doing, I’d slapped him on his thigh and scolded, “That’s not true, we do lots of good news stories.” He glared at me and seemed to be struggling over whether he was going to swat me like a fly or eviscerate me with his gaze. Eventually he grunted and ignored me, like I wasn’t worth the bother. But the seeds of the good news edition had been sown.

In addition to a positive story on the report, reworked from Louella’s press release, Blackjack did stories on theater students performing their award-winning one-act plays and Professor Jones’ Physics Hall of Fame inducting two people. Louella recycled a news release she’d written on Southland theater students winning awards at a national drama competition, and even Jasper chipped in with a story about a social science professor and “campus griot” whose book of poetry was being published. Tyrone wrote two movie reviews, one on *All Access*, an Imax movie about musicians (“The movie does not suck at all, but the price does.”) and *Mummy Returns* — “this movie has no suck value whatsoever,” meaning he liked it as well.

Sylvester, the aspiring music producer who’d said he’d been shot by thugs sent by a certain rap mogul, was no longer in my class, but one day he showed up and asked for my advice on getting a story in the media about a friend of his who had died in Texas. He said the death was ruled a suicide, but he believed it had been an old-fashioned lynching.

As usual, I was skeptical of Sylvester’s story, and knew other journalists would be as well. So I told him that instead of going directly to the media, he should contact some civil rights organizations, especially the Southern Poverty Law Center, which used lynching pictures in its mass mail fundraising solicitations, and let them carry the water for him. He did, and a couple of weeks later Sylvester returned to my office clutching a front-page story from the *Los Angeles Times*. Citing the Southern Poverty Law Center and the FBI, the story said the case had been reopened. I’m not sure which of us was more stunned. “Sounds like a story,” I said, and Venus agreed to interview Sylvester and do the story behind the story.

What we didn't know at the time was that before Sylvester made his phone calls, a prominent African-American lawmaker in Texas had urged investigators to reopen the case because of past racial violence in East Texas. Some months later, the hanging was again ruled a suicide.

Calista covered "Say the Word," a spoken word festival organized by Marc, who was about to go on sabbatical. "It looked like beatniks had invaded the Little Theatre May 9," the story began. "Billy Higgins, dressed in colorful African garb, beat a bongo drum and Fred 'Shangle' Jones softly tooted his flute and blew jazz through his golden saxophone as professional poet S. Pearl recited her poems to the rhythm."

There was only one problem. The performance had been a tribute to famed Los Angeles jazz percussionist Billy Higgins, who had recently died. Oops.

And then there was the rescheduled student election. According to Venus' story, Jasper's friend Willie won the election for ASO president, defeating incumbent June. But the dean of Student Services again refused to release the vote totals.

At semester's end I decided to attend graduation exercises in the gym for the first time. Blackjack was getting his diploma, and even though it felt gay, I wanted him to know I was proud of him.

Chapter 8
Fall Semester, 2001

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, I awoke to my clock radio, which was tuned to National Public Radio. Still in a dream-like state, I heard somber voices saying something about an airplane crashing into the World Trade Center, a second plane smashing into the other tower, the Pentagon being struck by a third, and that every airplane over the entire country was being grounded. At first I thought it was an updated version of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio hoax. I rolled over and turned on the TV, where every channel was showing the Twin Towers crumbling, over and over. My heart sank. This was real.

I checked my emotions and was relieved I wasn't feeling a flicker of guilty glee that Wall Street yuppies and the military industrial complex had just taken a hit. We may not like to admit it, but sometimes we secretly root for the bad guys — Bonnie and Clyde, the Unibomber, O.J. — so toppling the dual symbols of capitalist America and poking a hole in the Pentagon could easily have stirred up some anti-American sentiments left over from Vietnam that were recently inflamed by the bizarro election in Florida, U.S. Supreme Court putsch and ascendancy of the right-lurching Bush II junta.

9/11 was one bodacious move. But as I lay there gaping at the TV, all I was feeling was dread. And it was with a sense of shame that I realized, at that moment at least, I was glad that Bush and the ruthless rattlesnakes around him, rather than wishy-washy Al Gore — whom I'd voted for — was in the White House. Suddenly, I didn't want my mommy, I wanted my daddy.

I wondered what the students at Southland College were feeling, and tore myself away from the TV to rush out to the campus for my afternoon classes and to rev up my students for the biggest story they would ever cover. I should have known better. By the time I got to the campus, it was nearly deserted.

Finally, one of my new students arrived. I'd assigned Lakita to cover a Black Student Union meeting previously scheduled for that morning. At the time it seemed like a fairly simple meeting story,

although I didn't understand why a school that was 80 percent black needed a BSU (except as a place for former student body presidents to go, as June had become the head of the BSU after losing the rescheduled ASO election to Willie). But Lakita had tears in her eyes and said she couldn't write the story.

"Why not?" I asked, thinking she was probably upset by the terrorist attacks.

"Because the meeting was all about you."

"Me?" I said, incredulously. "What are you talking about?"

"They called you a racist."

The whole world had changed, and so had mine. To say that the semester had gotten off to a rocky start would be an understatement. When I got my class rosters a week before the start of the semester, there was only one student enrolled in two of my classes and none in the third. Marc, who had been my benefactor, had gone on sabbatical, and the administration was putting the heat on the new English chair, a down-to-earth white woman named Suze, to cancel my classes. The Internet bubble had burst, the school was running out of money and the new campus president, Barbara Lewis, had put out the word — any class that didn't have 15 students would be axed.

Suze salvaged two of my classes by arguing that without them there'd be no student newspaper, which could hurt reaccreditation of the college, which was looming. But my salary was cut by a third and I had to start paying for my health insurance while doing the same amount of work.

My two mainstays, Blackjack and Venus, continued working on the newspaper even though they'd taken my classes so many times they were no longer eligible to enroll in them. (Though Blackjack had graduated, like a lot of grads he continued taking classes at the school to earn more credits before attending a more expensive four-year university.) Louella, the school's P.R. person, also helped out. In the end, which is not to say the end of the semester but the end of the second week, when classes could no longer be canceled, I'd managed to cobble together 15 students for the photo class and nine for reporting/editing.

The future didn't look any brighter because Journalism 101 had

been canceled the previous semester, and this semester there were about a dozen football players in the class, along with a couple others who were already taking my classes. The handwriting was on the wall — between the school's faltering financial situation and persistent low enrollment in my journalism classes, I figured this would be my last semester teaching at Southland College.

Despite the low enrollment, as at the start of every other semester, I vowed to let/make the students have more control over the production of the newspaper, even if it meant we didn't get out as many editions. The new recruits included Tim, a pleasant, clean-cut 15-year-old from the on-campus high school, and Sandy, a mild-mannered, guitar-toting, motorcycle-riding Caucasian, the first and only white student I ever had at Southland. They were both enthusiastic about working on the newspaper, as long as they didn't have to write anything. Blackjack had recruited a former member of his crew, Russ, hoping school would keep him out of trouble, but Russ was having problems with his girlfriend — the mother of his baby — and wasn't around much. Jamila, Dennard, Debbie, Lakita and Joey were around even less.

And then there was Jasper. The previous semester, playing No More Mr. Nice Guy to the end, I'd threatened to drop him from the two classes he was enrolled in for lack of attendance, jeopardizing his student loan. After we had a discussion — and knowing that his girlfriend was pregnant — I still dropped him from one class and gave him a low grade in the other. I would just as soon not deal with him again, but I was desperate for students, and when I ran into Jasper at the start of the new semester, I invited him back saying "all is forgiven." After all, he was one of the dwindling number of students who had taken the prerequisite Journalism 101 class.

"Aight," he said, and we shook hands. A few days later, not only did he show up for class, but he brought along two Hispanic students he'd recruited, Rosa and Alberto. No matter, I found out later, that the recruitment process had included smoking marijuana before class. Bodies were bodies, and I was especially pleased to see some Hispanic bodies. It was Monday, Sept. 10, the day before the world turned upside down, and I was kicking around story ideas with Blackjack, Venus and a few other students when a buzzed Jasper and

the two stoned Hispanic students arrived.

My eyes lit up when I saw the Latinos. Over the summer, the *Los Angeles Times* had published an article headlined "Los Angeles School Hangs Onto Its Black Heritage," which noted that while Hispanics had become a majority in South-Central Los Angeles, Southland had become even more of a predominantly black college. I wanted a reporter to talk to local students and administrators to get their reactions, and it occurred to me that having a Hispanic student do the story might be interesting.

The *Times* story began, "Southland College, born of the riots in the 1960s, is believed to have the largest percentage of black students of any college or university on the West Coast despite being surrounded by increasingly Latino high schools and neighborhoods." According to the story, while the percentage of African-Americans living in South Los Angeles had dropped from 61 percent in 1990 to 47 percent in 2000, over the same period, black enrollment at Southland had grown from 68 percent to 78 percent.

Further, it quoted former congressman Dymally, who had become the Legislature's liaison to community colleges, as saying Southland officials were moving too slowly to adjust to the inevitable increase in its Latino enrollment. "Some of my friends are in denial," said Dymally. "We have to deal with that fact of demographic change."

Former Southland President Williams told the *Times* that the college offered programs that appealed to "black cultural sensibilities," such as a black film festival and the L.A. Watts Summer Games. The story also noted that 57 percent of Southland's full-time faculty were black, compared to an average of 14 percent at the district's eight other campuses.

I pitched the story idea to the Latino students, which turned into a discussion of why more Hispanics weren't taking journalism, and then into differences between black and Hispanic students in general. Rosa said most of the Hispanic students took night classes because they worked during the day, while blacks took day classes because they had student loans or were on welfare. "They're lazy," she said.

Feeling that Rosa was headed into dangerous territory, and sensing that Jasper was starting to steam, I cut her off. "Blacks aren't lazy," I said. Trying to choose my words carefully, I continued. "One

of the differences between black and Hispanic culture is that blacks are more familiar with government grants and scholarships, which are also for Hispanics and others, but fewer immigrant families take advantage of those opportunities because they're scared the government will deport them."

This was not just speculation on my part. In my previous life as a publicist for a state agency for the disabled, the department had done a "needs assessment" survey and found, as many similar studies have found, that Hispanics are "underserved" for a variety of reasons, one of which is distrust of the government (another reason cited in the surveys is strong ties among extended Hispanic family members).

I tried to change the subject, asking the students for other story ideas. Rosa said she'd like to do a story about textbooks being too expensive. I asked her if she was aware of a program that provided students with vouchers to help them cover textbook expenses. She said she wasn't, so I suggested she do a story letting other students, especially underserved Hispanic students, know about the vouchers.

"I got no problem getting textbooks." It was Blackjack, who proceeded to demonstrate one of his shoplifting techniques.

I grimaced. "Another example of black culture," I quipped.

Everyone laughed at my joke, knowing I was being sarcastic. Everyone, that is, except Jasper, who had had his fill of cross-cultural horseplay. With bloodshot eyes he scowled at me. "This is bullshit!" he said and stomped out of the room.

Following an uncomfortable pause, I said I hoped everyone realized I'd been joking, and finished divvying up story assignments. Most of the students left, including the two Hispanics. Blackjack, Venus and I were about to take off as well when Jasper returned with three other students I'd never met before, including a stylishly dressed dude with wrap-around sunglasses and baleful glare who turned out to be Willie, the new student body president.

My Afrophobia kicked in as Jasper and Willie began peppering me with insulting questions and accusing me of being a racist. Willie asked me how many black friends I had and called me a poverty pimp. Jasper dredged up every misstep I'd ever made. Did I think stealing was a part of black culture? Did I think blacks were lazy, quitters, or all on welfare? Did I think Southland College was a slum? I had a

negative attitude. I wasn't from the community. I had an "agenda" for the newspaper. And recalling the rap session we'd had at HomeTown Buffet, Jasper said the only reason I taught at Southland was because I couldn't get a job anywhere else.

Next they turned their venom on two of the few black friends I did have — Venus and Blackjack — all but calling them Uncle Toms for not turning against me. I have no doubt it was the first time either had ever been accused of not being black enough.

Jasper ended the encounter with a threat. "We got rid of Wesley and we can get rid of you," he said, referring to the former head of Student Services, who had been canned over the summer, partly because of the student election screw-ups. And then Jasper muttered one final epithet under his breath as he got up to leave. "Jew."

It doesn't take much to intimidate me, and I was definitely intimidated. But I was relieved that I had deflected Jasper's anger away from the Hispanic student who had blurted out that blacks were lazy. I also felt bad for Blackjack and Venus, and apologized for getting them caught in the crossfire. But they were more concerned about my state of mind, reassuring me that they didn't think I was a racist, at least no more so than most white people. We agreed that around other students we couldn't kid around like we'd been doing, and I gave them a ride home.

The incident weighed heavily on me that night, but the next morning I all but forgot about it, because the next morning was 9/11. I rushed to the campus, only to find that while the rest of the world was transfixed by the terrorist attacks, the Black Student Union had gone ahead with its regularly scheduled meeting, only whatever had been on the agenda got replaced by a presentation by Jasper and Willie on how to pressure the racist white journalism teacher out of his job.

It was Lakita's first story for the newspaper, and she'd been sitting in the meeting for some time before realizing that the teacher they were calling a racist was the same teacher who had assigned her the story and would be reading and grading it. She'd barely met me and didn't know what to think. Lakita had signed up for journalism, but she sure hadn't signed up for this.

I was stunned that with all that was going on — not just the terrorist attacks, but Jasper's new baby — that he and the Black Student

Union had nothing better to do than start a vendetta against me. I told Lakita it was all right, that she should let it rip, but that to be fair she should also interview me for my side of the story.

Lakita still didn't want to do a story. Nor did she want to tell me what they'd said about me during the meeting. But I pressed her anyway, and eventually she told me. It was mostly what they'd accused me of in class, with a few added wrinkles — they also claimed there were too many white teachers in the English Department. After getting what I could out of Lakita, I told her she didn't have to do the story and we'd find something else for her to do, but I never saw her again.

As I was about to go home, Jasper showed up with a large and officious woman who identified herself as secretary for the Associated Students Organization. She "invited" me to attend an ASO meeting Friday morning, during which, I presumed, I'd be asked whether I was or ever had been a racist. She also put me "on notice" that from now on, everything I said in my class would be "documented."

Swell. Apparently Jasper had decided to make me the target of his next community organizing campaign. I called Blackjack and Venus to refresh my memory of the previous day's incident and get our stories straight. Yes, they'd also heard Jasper call me a Jew. It was time to start a paper trail and alert my superiors. That night, while most people were watching the unfolding drama of 9/11 on TV, I spent several hours composing a memo to Suze the English chair.

"I hate to burden you so soon after all the time you spent bartering over my classes, but a situation may be brewing that you should be aware of," I began. I briefly described what had transpired in my classroom and told her about the ASO invitation and BSU meeting, "at which I was apparently a main topic of discussion, along with the overall racial composition of the English Department."

"I believe this is a tempest in a teapot," I concluded. "But knowing the propensity of Jasper and the ASO to flex their muscles, sometimes by showing up at board of trustee meetings, I thought you should know."

The next day there was a reception for Barbara Lewis, the new college president, during which I got a feel for the post-9/11 mood on campus. There was no dancing in the streets, but none of the speak-

ers at the reception — attended by faculty members and administrators, the chancellor, district trustees and other dignitaries — dwelled much on the attacks on America or the thousands who had perished. While white America was entering a hyper-patriotic mode, the mood in the hood was more stoic, like this wasn't the first time they'd experienced violence and death, up close and personal.

After the reception I went up to Suze's office to deliver my memo and ask for her advice. Suze read the memo as I sat there, clucking over my encounter with Jasper and Willie. But as I'd intended, the part about the racial composition of the English Department really caught her attention. She offered her sympathy, noting that I wasn't the first teacher to get bullied by a student. In fact, I wasn't the first teacher Jasper had gone after. He'd also had a run-in with the associate dean of Academic Affairs, who was Asian. Suze strongly advised me to decline the invite to the ASO meeting, at which I would likely get ganged up on, figuratively, at least.

On my way out I ran into Diane, one of the other white English teachers, who asked me why I was looking glum. I told her I had a student running around telling everyone I thought stealing was a part of black culture.

"Well, isn't it?" she asked.

I couldn't tell if she was testing me or what. I paused, looking for some middle ground. "Everybody steals," I finally said. "Stealing is a part of everybody's culture."

I was also taking heat from another quarter. Dean Anderson had sent a memo to Suze noting that most of the students in my classes hadn't taken the prerequisite Journalism 101 class. Lying, I told Suze that was news to me, but that some of the students might be taking the 101 class at the same time, which had been allowed in the past. I said it would never happen again, and the issue went away. But I had to wonder whether the dean had been tipped by Jasper, and if they were working in collusion. The dean had never crosschecked my roster before or she would have caught me before.

Meantime, I still had a newspaper to get out, and a shrinking student staff that was decimated and demoralized. I called a staff meeting for what students were left and told them that America was

under attack, as was the student newspaper, and that like the rest of America, we as individuals and as members of different races and backgrounds had a choice — we could pull together or fall apart. I said I obviously had a conflict of interest in deciding how to cover the story about the racist journalism teacher, and that I couldn't be involved in assigning the story or editing it, which was just as well, since I wanted them to take more responsibility for putting out the newspaper in general.

Then I returned to 9/11, giving a short lecture on the difference between a tragedy and a disaster — both are tragic, but more people die in a disaster — and how when either occurs, newspapers have to tear up the front page and start over. Then I asked for ideas on how to localize the terrorism story to Southland College.

Filling the silence, I began asking more questions. What if it happened here? Does Southland have an emergency plan for a terrorist attack at the college or a dirty bomb at nearby LAX airport? What do the students think about the terrorist attacks? Are any students being called to military duty? Eventually, Russ agreed to find out if the school had a disaster plan, and the rest of the staff said they'd ask other students about their reactions to the attack.

I had no classes on Fridays, but considered making a special trip to the campus to attend the ASO meeting and try to turn things around with an aggressive speech along the lines of Clarence Thomas.

"This is a low-tech lynching," I'd start out defiantly, pause, and in a calmer tone continue. "That's the kind of thing I might say in my classroom to get the attention of my students. But calling me a racist because I sometimes use racial humor is like accusing Jesse Jackson of being anti-Semitic because of his Hymietown joke."

Then I'd turn to my accuser and say, "Jasper knows I'm not a racist, but he also knows I'm white, and he's counting on you to believe they're the same thing. But I believe you're smarter than that. Instead of trying to get me fired, I invite you to take my class and become involved with the school newspaper, to build it up instead of trying to tear it down."

Coulda shoulda woulda. Unless I hit a home run, I coulda made matters worse. And if my Afrophobia kicked in, things might have gotten ugly. So I decided not to play Jasper's game. Instead, I took

the "high road" and maintained the attitude that his accusations were so baseless and offensive that responding to them was beneath my dignity.

I hoped that by ignoring Jasper, over time he would find somebody else to pester. But I was also giving him free rein, and probably made the student council feel snubbed. For I was indeed the subject of the ASO meeting, so much so that Sandy, the Caucasian reporter — whom I'd assigned to cover the meeting before we found out I was on the agenda — decided not to write a story or cover student government anymore.

Over the weekend I got a call from Jake, the 82-year-old tenured journalism teacher, who was still teaching journalism history and public relations, but spending most of his time as the reference librarian. Jake told me that Jasper had asked him if he'd like to become faculty adviser for the school newspaper again, as he had been years ago. Jake said he declined, but called to alert me that a student was going around offering other teachers my job.

Monday, Jasper met with the English chair. According to a memo from Suze to Dean Anderson, "it was obvious Jasper was angry about Mr. Koplowitz's alleged remarks in class. However, Jasper also spent much time stating how he thought *The Explorer* could be improved, a side issue, but Jasper was intense about his suggested changes."

His suggestions included me teaching layout instead of doing it myself, a "partnership" with the *L.A. Times*, and being available during the mornings, although all my classes were in the afternoon.

Her memo continued, "When I asked Jasper what he wanted, he said he wanted Mr. Koplowitz removed as the head of *The Explorer*. This action seemed extreme and unwarranted."

The memo noted that when she next talked to me, I agreed that teaching layout was a reasonable request, but added that what had begun as a misunderstanding during a class discussion seemed to be escalating, that I was starting to feel concern for my "personal safety."

Indeed, walking from my car to the classroom, into the throngs at the Roach Coach and through Nigga Alley, was becoming a trudge. I did my photocopying for class and picked up my mail at the Reprographics Office, where Jasper had started working, and other times

we'd cross paths at the lunch truck. Whether or not he might take a poke at me, I never knew where I stood with other students, especially those I didn't know.

One day at the Roach Coach I was waiting to pay for my sandwich and get to class when the young woman taking my money began giving me lip about my attitude. I walked away wondering what that was all about, when a Hispanic student came up and told me to ignore her because the cashier was in the ASO. The Hispanic student was Rosa, the one who had said blacks were lazy. She seemed sympathetic and I invited her to rejoin the newspaper staff, but she didn't.

The next day I had to put out another fire. Venus brought me what she said was an editorial she'd written, but when I read it, it was her resignation. Trying not to appear panicked, I told her that if she quit she was letting the race baiters win, but it was her decision.

She said she'd think about it, and a couple days later she returned. As we stood out on the stairwell smoking, she said she and Blackjack had sought the advice of another teacher they respected, who had apparently joined the growing chorus against me. The teacher told them they had to choose a side — the community or me — because they couldn't be neutral in what was going on.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I'm here, ain't I?" Venus replied, forlornly.

Through the darkening clouds a ray of sunlight appeared. *The Wave* newspaper wanted to set up a partnership with the college. *The Wave* was the most prominent black-owned newspaper in the city, and a partnership could benefit both their newspaper and Southwest students.

Louella, the school's P.R. person, asked me if I wanted to represent the journalism program in the developing partnership. Several days later we met with some *Wave* executives who wanted to hold a student assembly to announce a journalism internship.

About 20 students from my classes and Journalism 101 showed up for the presentation. Suze and Dean Anderson were also there, as was Jasper. And during the question-and-answer session, Jasper asked the publisher of *The Wave* what he thought a student should do who felt the student newspaper was being supervised by someone

"not from the community" who had a negative attitude, and identified me by name. He again accused me of saying that stealing is a part of black culture, and that I didn't want to work at Southland.

"That's totally inappropriate," I broke in. "Jasper, if you have a problem with me, let's get together privately and talk it out. But trying to embarrass me in front of a bunch of students and newspaper executives isn't doing the newspaper, this school or race relations in general a bit of good. I'm going to apologize for you to these gentlemen, but I'm not going to apologize to you because I don't owe you an apology. You owe me an apology."

At least that's what I should have said. Instead, I rolled my eyes and remained silent. The publisher said he had no opinion, but his general advice was to go through channels in a grievance process. Neither the English chair nor the dean spoke up to say Jasper's remarks were out of line, and I stood there feeling like my pants were down. Suze left the room before I asked the newspaper representatives to explain the process for students to become interns. They said they wanted 250-word essays turned in to a contact person at Southland, who should forward them to *The Wave*. Then one of them asked who the contact person should be.

As the journalism teacher, I was the logical choice to handle the essays. But being outranked by Dean Anderson, I wanted her to say the essays should go to me. There was an agonizing pause before the dean, who had not been involved in any of the planning for the partnership up to that point, said she would be the contact to accept the essays. She also opined that working at *The Wave* could teach computer, clerical, marketing and other skills that could benefit all students, and suggested widening the scope of the program to include other disciplines as well as journalism.

After the assembly, the *Wave* executives seemed bewildered. I tried to chill them out, downplaying Jasper's comments as an unfortunate situation I was having with a student, something that teachers sometimes go through in academia. I kept things general because the last thing I needed was for their bewilderment to turn into curiosity, and then a story in the most prominent black newspaper in Los Angeles.

Later in the day I checked my phone messages and there was one

from Dean Anderson. She said she wanted to meet with me regarding the "issues" Jasper had raised during the assembly. Sensing that Anderson was not an honest broker, before returning her call I went to see the English chair, who said the dean told her she wanted to set up a mediation session with Jasper and me. Suze advised me not to accept mediation, but to return the dean's call and agree to meet with her alone.

That night I contacted my teacher union rep, Winston, who happened to be another white English teacher, and asked for his advice. Winston told me not to return Anderson's call because he would contact her in the morning, and that I should wait to hear back from him before doing anything. He also said there was a student grievance process I might have to go through. Groovy.

The next day I wrote another memo to Suze, titled "Harassment and Slander," recounting what had occurred during the assembly. Then I emailed Marc, the former English chair who had gone on sabbatical, bringing him up to speed on my travails.

After dodging Dean Anderson's calls for a week, I agreed to meet with her. She began the interrogation with the kind of open-ended question a suspicious wife might ask her cheating husband. "So what happened?"

"What happened with what?" I parried, like a guilty husband.

She asked me to describe the incident during class with Jasper, and I told her about the discussion of story ideas, the student saying blacks were lazy, my clarification regarding differences in black and Hispanic utilization of government programs, Blackjack's joke about shoplifting and then my joke about black culture. I also told her about Jasper returning with three other students, the abusive questions, accusations, threats and epithets; the ASO and BSU meetings, during which they talked about ways to force me out of my job; and reminded her about Jasper harassing me during the *Wave* presentation.

Anderson gazed at me inscrutably and occasionally jotted something down on a yellow legal notepad. Finally she asked what I was willing to do to have the situation resolved.

"Anything," I said.

"Would you be willing to meet with the student and me for a mediation session?" she asked.

Against the advice of everyone I'd talked to, I responded, "sure."

She then said Jasper had rejected mediation and was filing a student grievance against me. Later, I asked my union rep if I could file a grievance against Jasper, and he said that as on many campuses, no similar procedure exists for teachers harassed by students.

When I returned home, an email from Marc was waiting for me: "If it's not too late to say so," he wrote, "I still recommend getting off the defensive and taking the offensive. If you don't, you'll be eaten up. And don't beat yourself up over not increasing journalism enrollment; you received absolutely no institutional support."

"Hm," I wrote back. "I'd say your last email hit the nail on the head — too late!"

Dean Anderson subsequently wrote a science fiction version of our meeting, entitled "Circumstances Surrounding A Complaint About A Journalism Instructor," and sent it to her boss, Joanne Burly, the vice president of Academic Affairs. She also instructed Suze to put her account of my situation in writing.

The dean wrote that during the *Wave* presentation, Jasper "expressed concern" that I'd said "stealing is a part of Black Culture" and "Blacks use the victimization excuse." She said Jasper was "stunned and embarrassed" by my derogatory remarks, which he felt were "racist" and "culturally biased," and that he contacted the ASO President and two other students who "queried" me.

Queried? Her description of our meeting was no less fanciful: She said I "apologized" and felt my statements were a "mistake," and that when Blackjack demonstrated his shoplifting technique, "Mr. Koplowitz said he stated that there were "cultural differences." Her interpretation of me saying Jasper threatened to get me fired and called me a Jew was that I claimed Jasper had made "veiled threats" and "uttered a name in a derogatory tone." She also noted I felt like I was being slandered, as well as "intimidated and threatened," but that Jasper "feels equally threatened by the unprofessional conduct and level of comfort displayed by a faculty person making such remarks as quoted herein."

In a reply memo, Suze took exception to the dean's use of the word "threatened." "These are two very different meanings of the word threatened," she noted. "Jasper's feeling of embarrassment or

anger are not the same as Mr. Koplowitz's feeling that he is in physical danger. We should not confuse the two issues."

Despite the distractions, somehow we got out a newspaper, late but respectable. Indeed, Blackjack and Venus really stepped up, along with Louella. I went easier on the editing and tried to get all the students to write headlines and captions and learn layout, and made sure there was a heavy emphasis on 9/11.

The top story on page one was about the school's emergency/disaster plan. Blackjack's crimie Russ had found out there was a plan, but that was about it. At the last minute I asked Louella to turn his notes into a story, but left his byline on it. It was headlined, "College Has Emergency Plans for Terrorism," with a kicker, "Would you know what to do if terrorists struck at Southland College?"

The other front-page story was a compilation of vignettes the students had written about other students' reactions to the terrorist attacks and impending invasion of Afghanistan. Headlined "The Fright is On," it began with a football player Blackjack had found whose friend, a 20-year-old Army reservist, had been called to active duty. Blackjack got one picture of the student in his football practice uniform and another of his friend in his combat uniform, shot through a cyclone fence at an armory in Inglewood.

Another Southland student, a 21-year-old woman who'd joined the military to pay for her education, said her duffel bag was packed and waiting at her front door because she could be activated at any moment. A third student had a friend whose cousin was aboard one of the airplanes that crashed into the World Trade Center. "It makes me nervous because it can happen again," he said. A former sailor attending Southland said he believed the U.S. should either bomb or feed people, and he would prefer bombing, while several other students opposed invading Afghanistan, with one saying he believed "President Bush started the whole thing when he used their country to test out bombs."

A child development major said she thought the airlines should "tighten up security," but the disasters wouldn't stop her from flying. "I was shocked, because a gang of lives were lost," she said. And a 35-year-old electronics major said he was "surprised and devastated"

because he had friends who lived in New York City, but he didn't believe terrorists would target his community. "I don't believe a terrorist attack would happen at Southland because we have the same complaint as Osama bin Laden — oppression," he said.

With pictures by Blackjack, Venus did a full-page interview with the new college president, Barbara Lewis, who said the first project to be built with the $110 million the college was getting from Proposition A would be a student services center. She said the new building would not include a cafeteria, but that she would attempt to provide an area where students could eat in an improved environment, i.e., the Roach Coach would remain.

Venus also asked her about the *Los Angeles Times* article that claimed Latino enrollment had grown at Southland, but administrators had been reluctant to adjust academic programs.

"Lewis noted Southland is a community college, 'community' being the operative word, and that the demographics in the community have changed and are continuing to change," Venus reported.

"Southland is open to anyone from this community who wants to come," Lewis said. She added that some adjustments might become neccessary as demographics continued to change, but there was no immediate need to adjust the school's academic program.

Getting in the 9/11 angle, Venus asked her about safety issues. Lewis said the campus was one of the safest places people could be, and the school had more than adequate security.

The Lakers had moved out of the gym to their new training facility in El Segundo, but the L.A. Clippers had moved in, and Jamila and Tim attended "media day," when local news reporters were at the school to interview the team. Armed with questions we'd worked out beforehand, Jamila managed to get a 9/11 slant into her story. "Clippers Happy to be at Southland, But Sad About Terrorist Attacks," the headline read.

One of the new members of the team, 22-year-old Elton Brand, said that while looking forward to the basketball season, he was saddened by the terrorist attacks. He said that as a kid he grew up seeing the Twin Towers, and their destruction was a shock.

Another player, 21-year-old Lamar Odom, who would go on to gain off-court fame by marrying a Kardashian, also grew up in New

York. According to Jamila's story, "He said none of his relatives perished, but a lot of relatives and friends witnessed the devastation. He said basketball helped soothe his mind through the devastation."

Tim got a variety of pictures from different angles, including an overhead from the second floor that we used as the lead art. He also helped lay out the page.

Louella found a 9/11 angle in a review of EYE-Speak, a "living artists" project involving 50 African-American artists and 50 Latino artists at both Southland College and Glendale Community College. The artists rendered their "visual impressions of the times we live in" on sections of canvas that would be compiled into a 150-foot-long mural. The chair of Southland's Arts Department called EYE-Speak "a landmark event, bridging the black and Latino artistic communities." She added, "The September 11 attack really had a profound impact on the painting sessions. It altered the impressions that the artists presented."

Louella also did a story on Southland College getting reaccredited, which was good news for the college, but bad for me, because the college wouldn't need a student newspaper until the next time it was up for reaccreditation.

Blackjack wrote the story on the *Wave* presentation, which got buried on page five. The story noted *The Wave* was offering a $1,000 stipend for a student to work at the newspaper, but it didn't mention anything about Jasper and his criticisms of me. And despite the stipend, I couldn't get any of my students to apply, and I did try, but they didn't like that Dean Anderson had usurped my authority any more than I did. As for the "black culture" incident in the classroom, the BSU and ASO meetings and filing of a student grievance against me, I'd taken myself off that story, and without my prodding, none of the students got around to writing about it.

I was looking for a tasteful way to commemorate 9/11 graphically in the newspaper without appearing more gung ho than the community — and without using an American flag logo, which I was sick of seeing in other news outlets. I decided less would be more and went without color, leaving blank the header boxes, which usually said "Newz," "Sportz." Reviewz," etc., turning them into somber gray stripes atop each page. But the newspaper still needed one more

element, and that was the lead art — a front-page picture to go with the emergency plan story.

Shortly after 9/11, I'd taken the photography students on a walk around the campus, looking for things to shoot, and came across the two flagpoles in front of the school flying the state and U.S. flags. After several days of eerily quiet skies, airplanes were soaring in and out of LAX again, and their flight paths often took them low down Century Boulevard, which was just a few blocks away. Standing south of the flagpoles looking north toward Century, sometimes the planes would appear to fly into the flagpoles, which I thought was evocative of the planes that flew into the Twin Towers.

But the shot turned out to be tricky. Sometimes the planes flew too high or too low, and snapping the picture at the exact moment a plane intersected with the flagpole took lightning reflexes and a little luck. I had the students take turns trying for about 20 minutes until they got bored and we moved on.

Unbeknownst to me, sometime later Blackjack and Venus went back out to the flagpoles with a tripod and spent the better part of an afternoon trying to get the shot. It got to be dusk and Blackjack was down to his last frame, but he nailed it. The composition couldn't have been better. Both flags were billowing at about a 45-degree angle to the east as the westbound airplane crossed where the stars met the stripes, with half the plane to the left of the pole and half to the right. The picture was grainy, but sharp enough that even on newsprint you could see the front landing gear. When Blackjack presented me with the print, I teared up, grateful not only for how perfectly they had captured the image that had been in my mind's eye, but that they'd done it on their own initiative.

Using the picture required a tactful caption so it wouldn't appear cutesy, while letting readers know what they were looking at. We finally came up with wording that allowed readers to make their own connections: "Southland's flags are back at full staff and planes are landing again at LAX, but the world changed on Sept. 11, and will never be the same."

It had taken half the semester, but under the most trying of circumstances the students had done their best work. Alas, the skies

continued to darken. For one thing, Jasper was trying to parlay his campaign against me into a run for president of the Black Student Union against June, who had become head of the BSU after losing the ASO election to Willie. And he had added another weapon to his arsenal — a page-and-a-half diatribe he'd written, copied and distributed on campus. Dean Anderson kept up the pressure, and then there was the call I received from the President's Office. Dr. Lewis wanted to see me. "Why?" I asked her secretary. "I don't know," she said. But we both had a pretty good idea.

I was actually one of the first to read Jasper's rant — he'd given one of the first copies to our mutual friend Blackjack, who passed it on to me. The title said it all: "There's A Fungus Among Us."

"Explorer Newspaper Faculty Adviser, Hal Koplowitz said, 'Stealing is a part of Black Culture' ... and Black people know how to work the system and 'get over' by lying and stealing," his polemic began. "Koplowitz also said, 'Blacks use the victimization excuse for everything, when they really haven't been through more than any other race' ... After being confronted by Jasper, Black Student Union Presidential Candidate, and Willie, Associated Students Organization President, about his remarks and his apathetic and racist approach in dealing with the students and the Explorer Newspaper, Koplowitz said he is only here because he couldn't find a teaching job anywhere except at Southland College."

Jasper dredged up the "slumming" incident and claimed I was putting a different "spin" on his stories. "He's also part of the mainstream media because he works for a news service on the weekends," he noted. "We get enough manipulation through mainstream media, we do not need that type of biased reporting on our only source of dissemination of information on this campus. Jasper has since disassociated his self from The Explorer Newspaper."

He said my statements and actions showed I had no respect "for the African-American students on campus, the surrounding community, or African-American culture in general," and that someone with my "views and private agenda should not be the advisor of a newspaper on an 80% African-American College campus." And he said the Black Student Union and Associated Students Organization were "prepared to ask Koplowitz to step down as faculty advisor," and that

petitions would be circulated on campus to "apply pressure."

He concluded with a call to arms. "If you agree that Koplowitz should not be the faculty advisor for the Explorer, please sign the petitions and go express your concerns to Dean Anderson and President Lewis. We need to control our own newspaper and we need an adviser who understands the community, respects the community and is in touch with the needs of the community. Let's rid Southland College of this fungus among us."

Crude but effective. I had to give Jasper his props, as they say. "Fungus among us" made me chuckle, if uneasily, and his maze of half-truths, fabrications and exaggerations might be grossly inaccurate, but like the tabloids, not without some basis in fact. I had said nothing he said I said in the classroom. But I did say "black culture," and at other times in other situations I had said things similar to some of the things he'd said I'd said. Trying to untangle it all would have been like swimming through oatmeal, so once again I decided not to respond, to not dignify his rant with a rebuttal.

But having complained to the two main student organizations, to my boss the English chair, and her boss, the dean of Academic Affairs, Jasper had now taken his beef to the school president. He was really starting to annoy me, but I was impressed that the budding community organizer was touching all the bases.

I prepared for my meeting with the president like it was a class lecture, outlining what I planned to say. I needn't have bothered. It wasn't an interrogation so much as a stroke session.

When I walked into the president's office, Dr. Lewis wasn't alone — the previous interim president, Don Williams, was also sitting in. "You look nervous," Lewis deadpanned as I found a seat. "Relax, this isn't a lynching."

The politically incorrect joke between two black administrators and a white teacher should have been a tip-off that they were friendlies, but I was too tense to appreciate the humor. I said I knew what the topic of discussion was to be, but that I didn't understand why I was there. Lewis said she had been seeing a lot of "paper" lately, and I noticed that on her desk she had three copies of "Fungus Among Us." She said she wasn't sure where she got them (a lie, since Jasper

had already met with her), but that she wanted to resolve the situation so I could continue to teach without the pressure.

My wariness became cynicism when she and Williams said they didn't know the student. I knew that was bullshit because Williams had been school president when Jasper had raised a ruckus before the board of trustees over the student election with only one candidate. But I didn't call them on it — if that was how they wanted to play it, I'd play along.

Over the next 45 minutes I did most of the talking, recounting the incident in the classroom and other run-ins I'd had with Jasper, his harassment campaign, Dean Anderson's meddling, the low enrollment in journalism classes and our efforts to recruit via *The Wave*.

Lewis said she heard the ASO wanted to publish its own paper, but that couldn't happen without her approval, which, she said, she was not going to give. She also made a show of rifling through the college handbook, saying she would look into what harassment policies might apply in my case and other ways to protect me. The closest she came to reprimanding me was saying I should have brought the harassment to her attention sooner so she could have done something sooner.

Toward the end of the meeting she asked me what I wanted. I took the opportunity not to go after Jasper or Dean Anderson, but to note that what the journalism program needed most was a full-time journalism teacher — me. Lewis looked surprised and said she hadn't realized I was only part-time. She shot a glance at Williams, and I realized I'd just snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

No matter who was right and who was wrong, as president of the school, her primary goal was finding the easiest way to make this messy distraction go away. Full-time faculty members have more clout than students, even lifers. But part-time instructors present fewer complications — they don't have to be fired, just not rehired at the start of the next semester. So if Jasper continued to push, I figured the path of least resistance for the administration would be to give me the shove.

At the end of the meeting I said the little speech I'd rehearsed — that when I started teaching at Southland, I'd been having fun, and that I'd felt not just tolerated, but accepted, by the entire college

community. Until now.

"Let's see if we can make it fun again," she said. As I got up to leave, she said that everyone, including herself, sometimes says something in jest they wished they hadn't. But isn't it ironic how the people who take offense often respond with just the kind of racism they are accusing the person of.

Quite a stroke job, but short of a job offer.

As fate would have it, the next day the ASO held a student assembly in the Little Theatre with President Lewis and district Chancellor Stan Casey, and Jasper did it again. My name didn't come up during the question-and-answer session, but I found out he gave the chancellor a copy of "Fungus Among Us." I was livid, and it occurred to me to sue Jasper for libel and slander.

It was a slam dunk case. As a teacher I was a private figure. His accusations against me were false and defamatory, malicious and with forethought, and he'd published and distributed them to students, faculty and administrators, threatening not just my reputation but my livelihood. The only problem with suing Jasper was that his pockets weren't exactly deep, and he'd probably revel in the attention.

I emailed Marc and his reply spurred me on: "You're right about Jasper's libel of you, of course, as well as the futility of suing him, but he should not be permitted to libel you on campus. You should request another meeting with Lewis and insist that disciplinary action be taken against him. It is outrageous that students would be permitted to behave toward instructors this way without the college taking action, even without the instructor requesting it."

So I wrote another memo, addressed to President Lewis and cc'd to the English chair, noting that at the assembly, Jasper attempted to give the chancellor a copy of his diatribe in which, "Among numerous falsehoods, slanders and threats, he calls me a racist, accuses me of making racist statements I did not make and having racist opinions I do not hold, calls for me to be fired and urges other students to put 'pressure' on me."

I said Jasper "should be disciplined in a way that sends an appropriate message to all students and faculty that this kind of faculty

harassment by students will not be tolerated," and urged that he be suspended or expelled. I also noted that Jasper used campus facilities to copy and distribute his rant, so if I decided to sue him, the school would be liable as well.

The next day I gave my memo to Suze — she said she could see Marc's fingerprints all over it — and I was halfway down the hall of the fourth floor of the Cox Building to give it to the president when I ran into Winston, my union rep. I showed him my memo and he frowned. Bad idea, he said. In his opinion, I'd been doing the right thing to remain above the fray. Asking for the student to be disciplined, he said, would be lowering myself to Jasper's level.

Besides, he added, he'd just come out of a meeting with the president about my situation and the fix was in. Jasper had filed his student grievance and Lewis had instructed the ombudsman, who was supposed to investigate and rule on the grievance, to open a case "for legal reasons," and then to rule that the student's complaint was unfounded.

While I was relieved, the president telling the ombudsman what to do with a student grievance made a mockery of the concept of shared governance and due process, and it sounded like a story to me. But it was the only time I didn't pass along a news tip to my students.

Besides, I wasn't spoiling for a fight with a budding community activist, much less a Blood, so I let Winston talk me out of delivering my memo to the president. It was just a bluff anyway. Jasper's harassment, while annoying, wasn't nearly the threat to my job as was the chronic low enrollment in my classes. So I decided to wait and see if denying the student grievance did anything more than spur Jasper on to more creative ways of harassing me.

And the hits just kept on coming.

Over the weekend, someone stole the iMac computer out of the newspaper office, the same someone or someones who had been harvesting electronics throughout the campus over the past couple of weeks. A few days before the computer got snatched, streetwise Blackjack noticed the door to the newspaper office had been left unlocked overnight, and warned me that the office was being cased. We tried to get a lock-down installed on the computer, but not in

time. Blackjack suspected the (predominantly Hispanic) night janitorial crew because they had keys to all the rooms. I suspected Blackjack, especially after I found out he'd surreptitiously copied my key, and sometimes spent the night in the office, sleeping on the floor or conducting other extracurricular activities. Then I crossed him off the list, figuring he wouldn't foul his own nest.

I wasn't the only teacher Blackjack was cozy with, and he sweet-talked the head of the Center for Retention and Transfer to dip into her equipment budget to buy another iMac, which she loaned to the newspaper. It arrived about a week later, and when I went to Plant Facilities to pick it up, I discovered that two other iMacs I had ordered more than a year ago had been sitting in the warehouse for months and never delivered to the classroom, about a hundred yards away, because a minor accessory that would have completed the order never arrived. It was so close to the end of the semester that I left them in the warehouse, where they were relatively safe. They're probably still there.

Even though Dean Anderson had cut me out of the loop on the *Wave* internship, I continued working with Louella on setting up a journalism workshop with the newspaper. She invited students from local high schools, while I lobbied other teachers to encourage their students to attend. *The Wave*, for its part, rounded up about a half dozen presenters from their circulation, advertising and public relations departments, along with representatives from black and Latino journalist associations.

I was due for a teaching evaluation, which meant the English chair would observe one of my classes. To make it look like I had enough students to justify my continued employment, on the day of the evaluation I made sure as many students as possible showed up, including several who weren't enrolled in the class. For the evaluation I decided to teach the students how to make a flier, from content to layout, to publicize the *Wav*e workshop.

I talked about how news stories are supposed to be factual, while editorials and press releases are persuasive messages that should appeal to the wants and needs of targeted audiences. In this case we wanted to motivate students to attend the workshop and get involved with the school newspaper. I suggested some emotional appeals —

the need to get a job, the desire to become famous or be of service to the community — but the students felt an appeal to a more basic need would be more effective: Food.

The students all agreed that no matter what we said the workshop was about, the only way to attract a student audience would be to offer food, and the only way to hold the audience would be to withhold the food until the end of the event. The students also felt we shouldn't call the workshop a workshop. Even "Career Day," which was what *The Wave* wanted to call it, was a turn-off, they said. Thus the headline for the leaflet became, "Lunch with African-American & Latino Journalists."

Impressed by the students' insights, Suze gave me a positive evaluation.

Several days before the event, *The Wave* sent me a letter outlining their plans for "Career Day," which included me being the moderator who would open and close the program. As I prepared my opening remarks, I considered whether I should refer to my situation, perhaps making a joke of it by starting out, "Hi, my name is Hal Koplowitz, although some of you may simply know me as Fungus Amongus." While that might work for those who already knew about the controversy, for those who didn't, I'd be obliged to explain how I'd gotten that moniker. And as the audience included area high school students, along with *Wave* executives and representatives from other minority news organizations, it did not seem like a bright idea.

So as I wrote what in retrospect were dreadfully dry notes — "To explain about careers in journalism, we have a panel of working journalists from the community here today" — in my head I kept fiddling with Plan B, which was to tear up my notes and address Fungus Amongus.

When the day of the workshop rolled around, I showed up for the assembly feeling uncomfortable in a sport coat and tie, rather than my usual jeans and open-collar shirt. Lunch had lured some 50 students, and Louella had gotten another dozen or so from area high schools, enough to fill the auditorium-style classroom. As I mingled with the presenters on the low stage, I noticed Jasper was also there. He was talking with a male student in the third row. Then he pointed at me with a malevolent smirk on his face.

My heart sank. Suze also saw Jasper and scrawled a quick note to me not to let the assembly get off track, and fled the room. Moments later she returned with the school's vice president, Joanne Burly. And then the assembly began. I was on.

Going with Plan A, I stepped up to the lectern and said, "Welcome, my name is Hal Koplowitz. I am a journalism instructor and faculty adviser for *The Explorer* student newspaper."

The student Jasper had been talking to raised his hand. I knew I should ignore him, but part of me wanted an excuse to go to Plan B.

"How many newspapers are supposed to come out each semester?" the student asked.

"We usually try to get out three," I said, blanching because I was embarrassed to admit in front of the other presenters that we were barely a monthly publication.

"How many have come out this semester?" the student asked.

"One, so far," I said, "but we're about to get a second one out."

"Why is that?" he asked.

I began to stammer as I organized my thoughts. "Well, for one thing, the office computer got stolen," I blurted out.

I'm not sure what I might have said next, because a voice from my right broke in. "This assembly is not to air internal student grievances." It was Suze, putting an end to the exchange.

That was all that happened, but again I could feel the room tilt. One last time I considered Plan B, but Suze was right. This wasn't the time or place to make my stand. There were a lot of things I could have said, but unless I got it just right, I'd only make it worse.

So I resolutely mouthed the words of my boring prepared remarks — "The community at Southland College is a microcosm, a smaller version of the world at large. Instead of covering President Bush, the student newspaper covers the president of the college and student government" — once again feeling like my pants were down. I introduced a *Wave* executive, who introduced the rest of the presenters as I slunk to the side of the stage, where I was studiously ignored by the other panelists.

Toward the end of the program a *Wave* editor, who I happened to be standing beside, gave me a nudge. He was holding a copy of "Fungus Among Us."

"What do you think about this student?" he asked me. "Do you think he might make a good columnist?"

Steam blew out my ears. "You realize the teacher he's talking about is me," I hissed.

"Yeah," the editor shrugged. "But he writes pretty good. I might be able to work with that."

I felt like giving the editor a quick refresher course in libel, then caught myself. Bad-mouthing a student, even Jasper, would have appeared mean-spirited. The fact was, Jasper wasn't a bad writer. He may have wanted to become the next Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton, albeit at my expense, but there were certainly worse career paths out of the hood than writing sniping, one-sided editorials for a community newspaper. Still, I just couldn't bring myself to recommend him. "If he'd ever show up for class," I finally whispered.

The editor shrugged again. "Well, that's not good," he said.

At the end of the presentation I was supposed to close the program, but the *Wave* executive had no intention of recognizing me again. I got his attention anyway and said I had a question for the panel. I could see the panic in his eyes as he let me ask my question.

"How many of you started out by working on your college newspaper?" I asked. Everyone on the stage raised their hand.

"Well there you go," he said, but the students were already rushing out for the free food. And so ended Career Day.

Shrugging off my latest humiliation, I finished putting together what figured to be the last newspaper under my tutelage at the college. The biggest local story of the semester was the death of the college's founder, Odessa Cox, 79, who passed away Oct. 27, 2001, at her home in South-Central.

Venus wrote a page two story about another of Jasper's capers. In his effort to get me replaced, he'd gotten student government to proclaim old Jake teacher of the year, an honor that had not previously existed on the campus. Jake was unaware of the reason he was being honored, and Venus' story did nothing to disillusion him, noting that he had been at Southland since 1977 and served as faculty adviser for *The Explorer* for 10 years.

"I was immensely proud to have been given an award by the

students," he said. "It is much more significant than from the administration. It lets you know that you are appreciated."

Willie the student body president said Jake "deserves to be recognized for his many years. He has earned his respect. He has also always been very approachable."

And then there was a very California type story — Willie was being recalled from office by a group of students, including a lifer named Edgerin, who alleged irregularities in the election for homecoming queen (won by the student body president's alleged girlfriend). Edgerin also said Willie threatened him when he complained.

Venus usually did her stories with resolve, if not enthusiasm, but she jumped all over this one, having the complaining students come to the newspaper office for a group interview. I reminded her that she'd have to get both sides, which meant interviewing Willie, and Venus was more than up for the task.

According to Venus' story, Edgerin claimed he wasn't allowed to vote for homecoming queen, and that when he complained, Willie "came bolting towards him in a threatening manner." He said the ASO president then challenged him to meet in the parking lot across the street where they could "handle the situation like men."

"If you want to be a student leader, the truth need not be defended in that way," said Edgerin. "They even revoked my ASO membership."

When Venus interviewed Willie at his ASO office, he told her he had taken a "hands-off approach" to the homecoming election, and denied challenging Edgerin to fight. He said that when Edgerin began complaining, he told him that if he wanted to talk about ASO business he should attend the next ASO meeting, and that if it was a personal matter it should be addressed off campus. As regards Edgerin's ASO membership being revoked, Willie said Edgerin had earlier requested a refund of his ASO membership fee.

I was pleased with Venus' fair and balanced reporting, but ran the story on page three. For the top of page one I chose Venus' story on the annual "International Day" on campus, mainly on the strength of the picture she'd taken of festive African dancers and drummers.

Sandy did a story on the assembly with the chancellor and president, noting that "noisy hallways, no cafeteria, disaster plans and

ATM machines were among the issues on the minds of students."

Blackjack and Venus did some investigative reporting on the electronics thefts on campus. Acting on Blackjack's theory that the culprits were the night cleaning crew, they went to Plant Services and asked to see employee work schedules, hoping to match up the times that certain employees were on duty to the approximate times of the thefts. When they were denied access to the personnel records they sneaked a peek at the timecards. But when they weren't able to crack the case, they were left with a simple crime story.

As I was putting the paper to bed, I noticed another potential embarrassment. But after realizing what I'd accidentally done, I decided to leave it. If this was to be my last hurrah, I might as well enjoy one last inadvertent ebonic double entendre. Across the red stripe atop the front page, which I'd previously left gray and blank to memorialize Sept. 11, I'd written, "Happy Holidays! Ho Ho Ho!"

The newspaper finally got published during finals week. I condensed my two classes — there were only a few students left in either of them — into one final exam, which was for the students to proofread the newspaper to find typos and other errors. The finals for the two classes were scheduled for Tuesday and Thursday, but I held them together on Wednesday.

The students helped me clean up the newspaper lab before leaving for what I assumed would be my last time. I made sure there was no porn, music, memos or anything else incriminating left on the computers and checked my phone messages. There was one from Dean Anderson asking to see me. Figuring I would never be back, I blew her off. We gathered up some obsolete computer gear and stacked it in the outer office for Plant Services to take away. I locked the door to the inner office but left the outer door unlocked so the workers could remove the scrap metal, and then I left.

Part III:
Redemption

Chapter 9
Spring Semester, 2002

I'd gotten through the semester without cracking under Jasper's pressure, but felt frustrated that I hadn't stood up for myself. I didn't like leaving the school under a cloud, and no matter how uncomfortable things had become, I wanted a chance at redemption.

But when I got my class rosters two weeks before the start of the spring semester, my penultimate fear was realized — only one student had signed up for my classes. I didn't know whether it was because the students were boycotting my classes or a continuation of the declining enrollment in the newspaper labs that had started before the uproar, or both.

In the past I would have gotten a call from the English chair warning me to get enrollment up and I'd start playing let's make a deal with students like Jasper. But the state budget deficit was metastasizing, sending the college's funding into a death spiral, and the school president had put out the word that all classes that didn't have enough students in them would be canceled. Mine weren't even close. Whether or not the students thought I was a racist, the bottom line was that only one student had signed up for my classes.

But just when I thought Southland College wouldn't have me to kick around anymore, I got a call from Suze. Jake's health had slipped and they needed a sub to take over his public relations and media history classes for the first month of the semester. Was I interested? I said yes.

I called Jake, who asked me to come to his home to pick up his syllabus and find out how he wanted me to handle things while he was recuperating. As I drove to his house in the San Fernando Valley, I marveled at how he'd been able to navigate the freeway from the valley, through downtown and into South-Central day after day, year after year. I also marveled at how he'd managed to cling to his job until, because of budget cuts and low enrollment, it would not be filled if he ever did retire.

Jake was weak but alert when I arrived at his home, and concerned that his classes not get canceled like mine had. He warned

me to touch bases with a friendly admissions counselor who always funneled some students his way, and I assured him I would. I also listened to his advice for an hour and took a bundle of class materials, even though we both knew I'd never use most of it.

No longer gone from the school, I hadn't been forgotten, either. Over the Christmas break there'd been another flurry of memos between Dean Anderson and the English chair, *et al*. It seems that during finals week the dean had gone to my classroom on the scheduled time of my final exam on Tuesday, seen nobody there, and when she returned at the time of my second scheduled final, or Thursday, she discovered the door to the outside office propped open and the outdated computer gear stacked up, still waiting to be taken away by Plant Services.

It didn't take her long to fire off a memo to the vice president of Academic Affairs and the English chair saying she was "astounded by the fact that the door was wide open and no one to be found anywhere in the area," and that she'd alerted the English chair and campus police.

Since I hadn't told Suze about consolidating my final exams on Wednesday — or about scrapping the broken and outdated computer gear — she didn't know what to make of the dean's memo. Deflecting, she went on the offensive:

"I will of course speak to Mr. Koplowitz about his students' location at the time of the final exam. However, I'm wondering why Mr. Koplowitz is being targeted for class visitations. Does this action on your part have something to do with Jasper's repeated public, personal attacks on Mr. Koplowitz?" On my copy of the memo (which I didn't receive until I returned to the campus a month later) she stapled a handwritten note: "Hal, where *were* your students?"

A few days later, Dean Anderson sprayed another memo to Suze, the president, vice president and union rep, and this time she really nailed me.

She said I wasn't being targeted for anything, but that after I ignored her phone calls, she decided to track me down by showing up for my scheduled final exam. She noted that under school policy, every course must have a final exam, and any change in the time of the exam must be approved by the Office of Academic Affairs. She

went on to suggest ways to "reinvigorate Journalism as an instructional program that enhances learning experiences for more than one student," and "encourage the production of an excellent newspaper where the learning experience is for the students, not experts who already have careers."

When I returned to the campus, I told Suze I'd consolidated the final exams because of so few students, and that the computer gear was junk, and that seemed to end it.

Jake's classes were on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. There were 19 students signed up for mass media and 24 in public relations, both well over the cut-off limit of 15. It had been a long time since I'd taught a morning class, and I was looking forward to having a full classroom again. Except for my uncertainty about how many students thought I was a bigot.

For a first class, in addition to giving an overview of the course, teachers usually tell a little about themselves. I would often introduce myself by saying the students were lucky I was their teacher because rather than being from academia I was a working journalist who didn't take the paper chase all that seriously, and that I would teach them about journalism in the real world. This time I also had to explain that although they had signed up for classes that were supposed to be taught by last year's Teacher of the Year, for the first month or so, their instructor would instead be Fungus Amongus.

But once again I decided not to defend myself — rather than pleading my case, the students could judge me by my classroom performance. So when I introduced myself in front of the two classes, which were held one after the other, I simply said "rather than Teacher of the Year, you'll be getting ... me," with a melodramatic pause that earned a wary laugh.

As usual, there were three kinds of students in the classes — jocks who had heard Jake ran a slack ship, those who just needed a class, and a sprinkling of people considering a career in journalism or public relations. One of them was Elicia, a bright young grandmother I began grooming to become the next editor of *The Explorer*, if there was to be a newspaper the next semester. About a quarter of the students were Hispanic and there was a nice mix of ages and backgrounds.

I knew at least one of the students had heard I was a racist, and that would be June, the lifer with the beret who'd been elected student body president, re-elected after the first election was overturned because Hispanics hadn't gotten to vote, had her re-re-election delayed when she was the only one on the ballot, then apparently lost to Jasper's friend Willie, although the Office of Student Services wouldn't release the election results. She then became head of the Black Student Union and presided over the BSU meeting at which Jasper had called me a racist and talked about ways to get rid of me. And when Willie got recalled as the head of the ASO, guess who got elected student body president again. Believe it or not, June also ended up with the internship at *The Wave*.

June had never been in one of my classes before and I didn't know how she felt about me, although I assumed the worst. I later heard the *Wave* internship had sparked her interest in journalism, which may have been why she had enrolled in the history of media class. At the time, however, I couldn't help wondering if her presence in my classroom was more than coincidence. But since it was my last semester, I was determined not to let a possible spy cramp my style.

Both classes were well over the minimum, so I never got around to reminding the friendly academic adviser to steer more students my way. Big mistake. The administration was cutting courses like crazy and gunning for Jake, if not me. On the first day, when a monitor looked in on the mass media class, only 14 of the 19 students enrolled were in the room at the time, and they canceled it, with no appeal. I felt terrible about letting Jake down and tried to cushion the blow by telling him that a lighter load for one semester would be less stressful for him when he came back. But he still equated his job with his life and hated to see any of it slip away.

In fact, Jake may have called the friendly academic adviser, because the next day the adviser showed up with some students for the one class I had left and apologized for not bringing more earlier. It was only then that I realized how simple it would have been for me to have gotten journalism enrollment up semesters ago. Instead of trying to convince students to take journalism, all along I should have been wooing the academic counselors, like Jake had successfully done for a quarter century.

The students in the canceled class, including June, were also disappointed, and some — but not June — switched to public relations. More showed up from other classes that had been canceled, and soon enrollment swelled to near 40, which meant nearly 30 students in attendance at most classes. Somewhat unwieldy, but I was excited about teaching a full class again. I stuck to Jake's class plans and focused on "self-promotion," such as how to apply for a job and write a resume, and I spiced things up by having the students write essays analyzing current events from a public relations perspective.

When I taught Journalism 101 I'd begin classes by asking "what's news?" as in "what's the latest news?" and have them critique the media for how they were covering current events. Now I changed it to "Who has a public relations problem?" and we'd discuss, say, Osama bin Laden, and how 9/11 had affected his image, or rapper R. Kelly, who'd been accused of having sex with underage girls, and how to fix his image problem — if he had one, as some students pointed out that the negative publicity had enhanced his image with his target market.

Having once worked in P.R. as a publicist for a state agency that funded services to handicapped people (although we could never call ourselves publicists or them handicapped), I had a particular loathing for the tricks of the trade, and told the students that the textbook had a lot of good information, but that the authors were doing a P.R. job on P.R. — that they were telling how public relations ought to be, while I'd tell them how P.R. actually works.

The textbook had 10 "basic principles" for good P.R. practitioners, starting with "public relations deals with reality, not false fronts" and puts "the public interest in the forefront." Other principles were that P.R. should not be for personal reward, that P.R. practitioners should never lie to the news media, and that "a public relations practitioner should be measured by only one standard: ethical performance."

The principles made for good theory, I said, but in practice, just the opposite is often the case. I gave the students examples of how the textbook's principles were routinely violated by top P.R. professionals, from dirty tricks in politics to selling cigarettes, and that the bottom line was winning, whether that meant making money or

getting someone elected. That as in love and war, anything goes in public relations.

I couldn't resist relating stories from my own days in P.R., telling them that as a so-called public information officer at a state agency, violating the textbook's basic principles of P.R. was part of my job description. I would have gotten fired unless my first priority was making the governor look good, followed by the director of my department and then the head of my division. At the bottom of the food chain came the public interest.

Another time I brought in a brochure I'd been assigned to write for the agency. Called "Handicapping Language: A Guide for Journalists and the Public," it included six rules for writing about people with disabilities and a glossary of "outdated expressions and recommended alternatives."

I said that in the disability community, words like "handicapped" and "retarded" are like the "n-word" in the black community. And that like blacks, who have gone from Negro to colored to black to Afro-American to African-American, handicapped people have gone through name changes as a public relations effort to improve their status in society. In the words of the brochure, "The language people and news organizations use can reinforce negative stereotypes and misconceptions. Or, they can help change attitudes toward people with disabilities by describing them and their conditions accurately."

Of course, that's the same kind of public relations that produced "differently abled," "mentally challenged" and "special." Well intentioned as P.R. practitioners may be, I said, every time they change a word, it gets longer, hyphenated and less descriptive, like "handicapped" to "people with disabilities," "retarded" to "developmentally disabled," "midget" to "short-statured," and most absurd of all, "normal" to "non-disabled."

The solution, I said, would be to let the people being labeled choose their own labels — to call them what they call each other. "For example, people with disabilities call each other gimps, as in gimpy," I said. "People who use wheelchairs call each other wheelies, those on crutches call themselves crips, and some people with developmental disabilities call themselves tards. If I ran the zoo, gays, lesbians and transsexuals could become queers again, Mexi-

can Americans could go back to being Chicanos, and white people could stop being Caucasians. As for African-Americans ... let's not go there."

It got a laugh.

The month went by quickly, and except for having to walk by a scowling Jasper occasionally, I was enjoying teaching again. Venus and Blackjack were still on campus, and we'd hang out in the vacant newsroom, where both Blackjack and I still had keys.

As I was winding things down, I got another call from the English chair. Jake had suffered a setback in his recovery; would I be willing to finish out the semester? Of course. I called Jake to let him know I'd take care of his class and to wish him a get well soon. He said his weak ticker had caused his diabetes to kick up, and the doctors were telling him he was losing circulation in his extremities.

"That's not good," I said insensitively. "Next thing you know they'll be snipping off your toes."

He managed an uneasy laugh. "Let's hope not," he said. "They're giving me blood-thinning drugs."

A couple weeks later he called again, to tell me he was retiring. Lightly, I reminded him it was hardly the first time he'd said he was quitting. But he said my little joke had come true and that they'd removed part of his foot. He was, as we're not supposed to say, wheelchair-bound. And he had one last favor to ask of me. Would I clean out his office?

I went to his cluttered office and sorted through 25 years of papers and mementos — stories and plays he'd written, lesson plans, tests, papers, magazines, books, student rosters, personal items and souvenirs of unknown provenance — trying to figure out what meant something to him and what should be tossed. Sifting through his stuff, I could tell Jake had lived a full life as a travel writer in Europe, news reporter for a wire service, playwright and novelist, in addition to teacher. And I was glad that Jasper had created an award for him, even if it was to show me up, because it turned out to be the only recognition he got from the school for his many years of service. When I called to make arrangements to drop off the couple of boxes of items I'd selected, Jake's wife said he wasn't up to receiving visitors, so I had the boxes shipped. I never heard from him again.

Chapter 10
Final Project

I felt sorry for Jake, but free from my caretaker role, I considered other options for the class. To get students involved in the school newspaper, I thought about having them put out another "good news" edition, which could be considered a public relations project, and in addition, I'd be teaching students basic research and writing skills they could use in other classes.

After calling roll I told them about Jake having a relapse and how I'd be teaching the rest of the semester. By this point we had bonded enough so no one seemed particularly perturbed. But when I pitched the idea of publishing a newspaper, the students rebelled. Especially upset was Desiree. Young, thin and intense in a buzz cut and narrow tinted glasses, she said she couldn't find anything about putting out a newspaper in the class syllabus. When Elicia, the student I'd hoped to make editor of the newspaper, said she was in Ikechukwu's Journalism 101 class, and that he had also decided to produce a newspaper, which she was editing, I relented, sort of.

I checked with Ikechukwu, and he told me he hadn't meant to step on my turf — that he was publishing a newsletter, not a newspaper. I said either way it was more appropriate for the 101 class to be doing it than the public relations class, and that I'd have my students do something else.

So instead, as a public service and recruiting tool, I assigned the students stories on campus services and facilities for a student handbook or "Survival Guide for Southland College." Desiree was still upset, but when I asked why, my paranoia that she didn't want the campus racist publishing newspapers turned out to be unfounded. She had thought public relations was a speech class and she wouldn't have to write anything.

I divvied up assignments and had them read brochures, interview teachers and write stories on campus programs. Very informative and profoundly boring. After grading their rough drafts, I decided to chuck the handbook and get back to a more conventional curriculum.

Then I got a more audacious idea. It started with me oversleep-

ing. I awoke just minutes before class was supposed to start, so I called the English chair and made up a story about car trouble. As I lingered in bed, half asleep, with an extra few days to prepare for class, I cast about for a topic that might capture the students' interest more than a student handbook.

It was April 2002, and what was capturing my interest was the second Palestinian intifada. Sparked by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat walking out on peace talks at Camp David, or then-Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon taking a walk at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, take your pick, Palestinians were rioting, lobbing missiles and blowing themselves up in Israeli buses, discos and malls, killing scores of civilians.

It was called the second intifada because of the first intifada, which was a massive Palestinian uprising between 1987 and 1993. The first intifada included strikes, boycotts and other forms of civil disobedience, but its most memorable feature was defenseless Palestinian youths throwing stones — sometimes using slingshots, like David vs. Goliath — at heavily equipped Israeli Defense Forces, who responded with tear gas, clubs and rubber bullets.

Stone-throwing youths were back for the second intifada, but its most prominent feature was the horrifying onslaught of suicide bombers. When Sharon, a hard-liner, was elected Israel's prime minister, he responded by reoccupying the West Bank and putting Palestinian cities under curfews and martial law.

I wondered what Southland students thought about the Middle East, and why minorities and immigrants in this country weren't strapping explosives onto themselves to kill white people. I figured blacks and Hispanics would sympathize with the Palestinians as oppressed peoples and view the Israelis as "the man." What coping mechanisms did they use to deal with the daily indignities and overall oppressiveness of white America that the Palestinians seemed to lack in the Holy Land?

Bam. And then it hit me. What could be more in the public interest than a public relations campaign to bring peace to the Middle East? And what better group of public relations practitioners to design such a campaign than those who have had to cope with oppression in their own lives?

Needless to say, taking the class in that direction was risky. Before the students could do their P.R. campaign, I would need to give them some background on the history of the people, cultures, religions, governments and factions in the Middle East, which would be taking the class far afield from learning how to write a resume. And if Fungus Amongus appeared to be proselytizing for the Zionist cause, that would not be good. There was also the risk of offending a student while trying to draw analogies between different cultures. Worst of all, there was the distinct possibility that the Middle East would hold even less interest for the students than a handbook of campus services and facilities.

I tested the waters by assigning a case study from the textbook about international public relations — BMW holding a photojournalism contest in the Middle East to promote the car company's image in countries like Saudi Arabia. I had the students do market research by having them use an encyclopedia to answer basic demographic questions about the countries in the region. Then I broke them into groups to create P.R. projects.

I was encouraged when one group suggested the best P.R. would be for BMW to build a factory in the Middle East that would create jobs so more people could afford to buy BMWs. I was still nervous about committing to a class project on such a prickly subject, but had become obsessed with the idea and was spending all my time boning up on Middle East history, so in the end I decided to go for it.

At the start of the next class I told the students it would be an exciting day — for their final project they were going to bring peace to the Middle East. Like the class exercise to create a public relations campaign for BMW, they would break into four work groups, only instead of a car company, they would be working for either the Israeli government or the Palestinian Authority, and their target market would be either the Palestinian people or the Israeli people. And instead of selling cars, they would create a public relations campaign to get Jews and Arabs to trust each other.

I paused and there was an air of expectancy. At least I had their attention. Next I did my mea culpa.

"As most of you probably know, I'm Jewish. Not a super reli-

gious Jew, not even a slightly religious Jew, but as comedian Chris Rock might say, Jew-*ish*. So consider me biased on the side of Israel, the so-called Jewish homeland. For example, I'm all for land for peace, only I think it ought to be Arab land for Israeli peace. I also believe the Palestinians should have their own country. It's called Jordan, which is where most of them lived when Israel became a state."

Stone silence.

"Palestinians," I said, "have more in common with other Arabs than with European Jews, so it only makes sense — to me, anyway — that when the Arabs lost wars against Israel in 1948 and 1967, that other Arab countries should have taken in their Palestinian brothers and sisters and let them assimilate and become citizens, just like America has taken in war refugees from all over the world. Instead, more than a million Palestinians still live in some 60 U.N.-run refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and the West Bank. And except in Jordan, they aren't allowed to become citizens of other Arab countries."

I said no matter how much the Arabs say they care about the Palestinians, they've never considered any other way to improve their quality of life except to destroy the Jewish homeland and replace it with a Palestinian homeland. "It's kind of like during the early stages of the civil rights movement," I said. "Whites said they wanted to help blacks — they just didn't want them moving into their neighborhoods."

Uneasy laughter.

"Like I said, I'm not the most objective source of information on the Middle East," I cautioned again. "So instead of pretending to be objective, I'm going to try to tell both sides of the story as best I can, and you can decide for yourself what to believe. I'm not trying to get you to pick a side, but to look for things Israelis and Palestinians have in common, things that can be used in a public relations campaign to get them to trust each other."

I then tried to explain the difference between Palestine and Israel by saying Palestine is the name of a region in the Middle East that is also known as the Holy Land, while Israel is the name of a country in Palestine that was created by and for victims of anti-Semitism.

"Not anti-Semitism like we think of it today," I said. "When somebody says 'you Jewed me," that's just being obnoxious. I mean real anti-Semitism, like pogroms, which were organized massacres of Jews in Czarist Russia, or the Holocaust, which was an organized extermination of Jews by Nazi Germany."

Then I said Palestine is also the name of a proposed country for the victims of the victims of anti-Semitism. I said the old school Zionists who first sought to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine a century ago had a saying, "a land without a people for a people without a land," but that was inaccurate. Although there has never been a country called Palestine, Arabs had been living there for eons, and many of them were displaced during the creation of Israel.

"So one thing Israelis and Palestinians have in common is a sense of victimhood," I said. "Jews were victims of the Holocaust, while Palestinians were victims of what they call the *Nakba*, or catastrophe — a mass exodus of more than 700,000 Arabs during Israel's War of Independence in 1948. Some were massacred, some were terrorized and some fled in a panic, which some would call ethnic cleansing. But I must add that a similar number of Jews were expelled or fled from Arab countries to Israel in the years after the *Nakba*."

I said Jews everywhere have what is known as the "right of return" to Israel, even though most of them have never lived there, and that Palestinians also want the right to return to their homeland, where, again, most of them have never lived, but their parents or grandparents did.

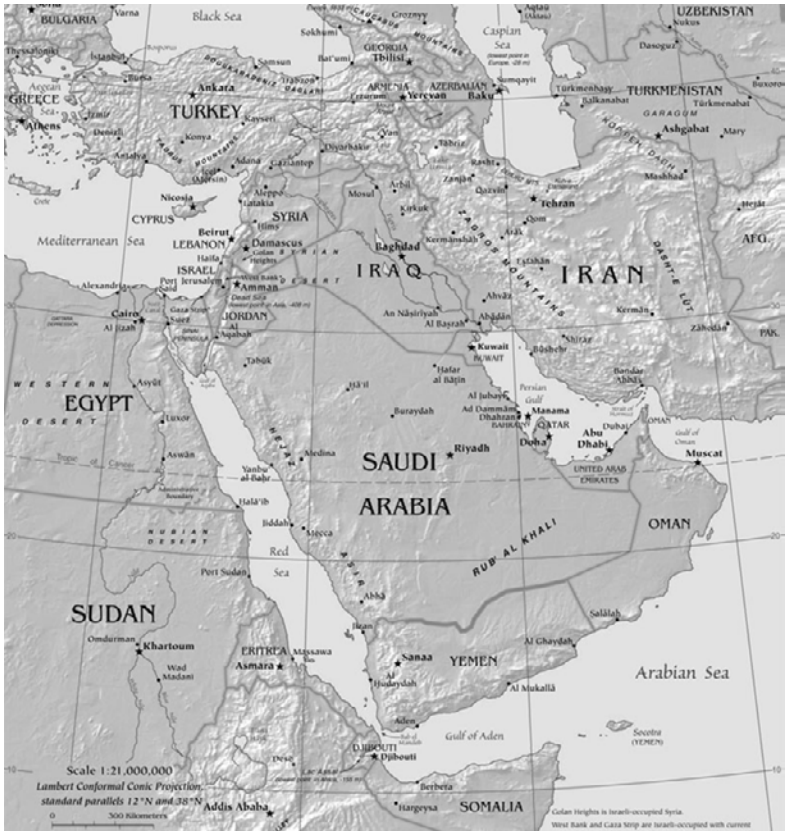
"Palestinians had nothing to do with the Holocaust, so it's unfair that their land should have been used to create a Jewish state," I said. "But it's one thing to commit genocide, as the Nazis did, and quite another to take people's land, as the Zionists did. Yet the Palestinians have decided that statehood is the only solution to their problems as well. I don't see the necessity myself, but if they want it, I think Israel is willing to let them have their own country, if they'd just stop blowing things up."

Short of annihilating one or both entities, two solutions have been suggested to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I said. Under the one-state solution, Israelis and Palestinians would become citizens of the same state; under the two-state solution, they would each have

their own state next to each other. The problem is that the Palestinians have never been willing to accept a two-state solution, if one of the states is a Jewish homeland, while the Jews have never been willing to accept a single state, where they would be a minority again.

"Many in our country are also concerned that immigrants, especially from south of the border, will become the majority," I said. "The difference is that most immigrants to this country don't hate America. Until the Arabs, and especially the Palestinians, can accept a Jewish homeland, not just on paper but in their hearts, it seems suicidal for Israel to allow four million angry Arabs into their country."

In 1947, the U.N. voted to "split the baby" and create two states, I said. The Jews accepted the compromise, but the Arabs rejected it and went to war with Israel, which won. So Israel became a country while Palestine did not. And since then, more wars have resulted in Israel occupying more territory, while Jewish settlers have continued to encroach on land that could be used for a Palestinian state.



Israel is but a speck on the map of the Middle East.

With a public domain CIA map I'd downloaded off the Internet, I showed them what a speck Israel is compared to the rest of the Middle East. The two dozen or so Arab/Islamic countries in the region cover 5 million square miles, which is one-and-a-half times the size of the continental United States. That's more than 600 times the size of Israel, which, including the occupied territories, is about 10,000 square miles — the size of New Jersey, or Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties combined. There are 325 million Arabs in the Middle East, compared to about 6.5 million Israelis, many of them descendants of European and Russian Jews who moved to Palestine over the past century, but also more than a million Palestinian Arabs who never left and became Israeli citizens.

Proposed Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank.

Using a second CIA map, I showed how the proposed Palestinian state included two disconnected areas. The West Bank is 2,000 square miles of hilly terrain west of the Jordan River, including Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other sites sacred to three religions. There are more than 2 million Palestinians and a few hundred thousand Israeli settlers in the West Bank, which used to be part of Jordan, and in

biblical times was the heartland of the Hebrew kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

Gaza, which used to be part of Egypt — and in biblical times was ruled by the Philistines — is a 140-square-mile strip along the Mediterranean Sea. Gaza is one of the most densely populated places on Earth, with 1.3 million Palestinians and (at the time) 7,000 Israeli settlers.

I said everyone blames the Jews for the plight of the Palestinians, since obviously they took their land and continue to settle in the West Bank. But there are also other factors, including Islamic fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden, who want to turn back the clock to the Middle Ages, and pan-Arabists like Saddam Hussein, who prefer socialist dictatorships.

"Sadly, meddling by outside powers like Europe and the United States is another factor in the plight of the Palestinians," I said. "Throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds, and much of the rest of the world, Israel is seen as a nation of infidels who kicked a million people out of their homes as part of an imperialist plot by the West to take over the Middle East, steal its oil and replace its culture with McDonald's and *Baywatch*."

I said that whether or not I thought the Palestinians needed their own country, or where I thought it ought to be, I believed they deserved better lives, and that Israel and the international community should help them.

"But so should the Arabs," I added, "Instead, they've mostly used the Palestinians as pawns in a military and public relations campaign against Israel — the more the Palestinians suffer, the worse Israel looks. The oil-rich Arab states haven't allowed Palestinians to assimilate and become citizens of their countries, and they've contributed less money than America and Israel to the U.N. agencies that oversee the refugee camps and resettlement efforts.

"But I believe there's still another reason for the plight of the Palestinians, and that is the Palestinians themselves. Many Palestinians don't *want* to assimilate. The Israelis have a saying: 'Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.' They have for decades turned down peace proposals and stirred up civil wars in the countries that did let them in, like Jordan and Lebanon, set-

ting up guerrilla bases and provoking Israel to retaliate. Because at the core of the Palestinian national identity is the desire to return to their homeland. So instead of building new lives for themselves somewhere else, many Palestinians have chosen to remain refugees and endure incredible hardships until they can go back to where their ancestors lived.

"Not that I think Israel is perfect, or that the Palestinians haven't gotten screwed. But despite its faults, I think Israel deserves to exist, mainly because of the Holocaust. Throughout history, Jews have been persecuted all over the world, but the Nazis took anti-Semitism to a whole new level. They systematically whacked six million Jews, while other countries, including the United States, wouldn't take them in. As a result, after World War II, the U.N. voted to let the Jews have their own country, so the next time some madman decided to wipe them out, they'd have someplace to go. Kind of like a wildlife refuge or protected area for an endangered species."

As I talked, I felt like most of the students were agreeing with me, which I wasn't expecting. Whether they felt some kinship with the Jews because of Sunday school stories about slaves in Egypt, had a post-9/11 appreciation for what the Israelis were going through with the suicide bombers, or just hadn't been exposed to the Palestinian side of the story, I perceived little sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Then again, all I had to go on was their grim-faced silence, because they weren't asking questions, blurting out opinions or making wisecracks like they usually did. They were listening and they were judging how they felt about the Middle East, and, I began to realize, me.

I then launched into a lengthy history of the Middle East, from the biblical birth of Abraham in Ur to the births of Jesus in Bethlehem and Muhammad in Mecca, the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabian Muslims, Christian Crusaders, Ottoman Turks, England and France, Hitler, Zionists, Nasser, Arafat, superpowers and intifadas. The students were captivated by the narrative I was spinning, but after two days I was stalling out badly and losing focus on a P.R. campaign for peace in the Middle East. So I tried to simplify matters.

"Now that you have some background on the history of the

Middle East, forget about religion and politics and just think of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a neighborhood zoning dispute," I said on the third day. "Like in the 1950s, when Los Angeles decided to build a baseball stadium at Chavez Ravine, a Mexican-American community in East L.A. There was a lot of local opposition to the idea, and when some of the Chicanos wouldn't sell their land, the city took it by eminent domain. And when some still wouldn't move, the city forcibly evicted them and tore down their houses.

"One difference is that instead of bringing the Brooklyn Dodgers to Los Angeles, Zionists brought Jews fleeing persecution to Palestine. Another difference is that instead of going away, the Palestinians are still trying to get their land back. It's like the former residents of Chavez Ravine still squatting outside Dodger Stadium, 50 years later, demanding to return to their barrio in the outfield. You'd think at some point they'd say, 'hey, there's a big stadium here, what do you say we move to South-Central?' But nooooo!"

One of the Hispanic students, José, raised his hand. "That was wrong what they did to those people," he said, referring to the Mexican Americans who used to live in Chavez Ravine. "It was illegal."

"That's right, José," I said. "It *was* unfair to the people who lived in Chavez Ravine, and a lot of people are still pissed off about it. But you don't see anyone trying to blow up Dodger Stadium, do you?"

José shrugged.

"For a two-state solution to work, those of you appealing to a Palestinian audience must convince them to recognize the existence of Dodger Stadium and stop trying to knock it down," I said. "And those trying to sway an Israeli audience must convince them to stop building settlements on Palestinian territory — to not erect a basketball arena next to the baseball stadium, where the Palestinians want to put up a soccer stadium."

Then I turned up the heat. "Another way to look at the Middle East problem," I said, "is to imagine the Hispanics of Chavez Ravine are Jews, and the blacks in South-Central are Palestinians. The city, which is Hitler, gets rid of the Hispanics by building a baseball stadium, and they flee to South-Central, where they speak a different language and have a different culture from the blacks who already live there. And then they drive out half the blacks and set up their

own country.

"Of course blacks aren't real happy about this, so they kill a few Hispanics, who kill a few blacks, and next thing you know there's riots and a full-fledged gang war. In this scenario, to promote a two-state solution, Hispanics would have to be convinced to give back some of South-Central, while blacks would have to accept the existence of a foreign country where they used to live. Talk about a hard sell.

"Now imagine that America is the Middle East, and blacks are Jews," I continued. "Fleeing poverty, discrimination and extermination, blacks take over part of Southern California, from L.A. to the Mexican border, where they create their own country, called Blackland, with Southland College their Jerusalem, or capital. Blackland is the only state in America where blacks are a majority, and imagine there is no Africa, so Blackland is the only black homeland on the planet.

"Further, imagine Blackland is surrounded by white people who want to drive the blacks into the Pacific Ocean. They support the cause of a group of whites called Palestinians, many of whose relatives were killed or fled during Blackland's war for independence. Only instead of settling somewhere else, they remain in refugee camps. Blackland has offered them reparations, but they want to return to where they once lived, which would put blacks in the minority again. And lately, white terrorists have been blowing up shopping malls, nightclubs, churches and buses all over Blackland.

"For the Israelis, allowing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza would be like taking Blackland and carving out a chunk of South-Central L.A., including half of Southland College, and letting whites have their own country there. Whiteland would also include Surf City. Only instead of laid-back beach communities in Orange County, it's a seething slum of refugee camps crammed with vengeful descendants of whites who had been driven out of Blackland. And like the West Bank, it's full of gangs, with names like Hamas and Fatah.

"At least that's how Israelis might view the situation," I said. "But now imagine that the Arabs are Native Americans, and the Pal-

estinians are a tribe that lived in a territory called Brownland, which, like Blackland, stretched from Los Angeles to the Mexican border. In 1492, Columbus discovers America, but there is no mass migration of white people or black slaves. Instead, the French and English break up North America into a couple dozen separate Native American countries, except for Brownland, where a bunch of European Jews move in and establish their own country, called Whiteland.

"Browns who stayed are allowed to become second-class citizens of Whiteland, while those who fled live on reservations in other Native American states, where they form gangs of *pachucos* to reclaim their turf. Browns are allowed to enter Whiteland to work as domestics or farm laborers, but they live under Whiteland military occupation, with curfews, checkpoints, identity checks, racial profiling and other daily humiliations.

"Not to mention Whiteland security forces, who fire missiles at cars suspected of carrying freedom fighters, and bulldoze the homes of suicide bombers' families. Even those browns who don't believe in violence oppose the oppressive rule of the Whitelanders, and strikes, angry protests and riots are another aspect of their liberation movement. Whites have offered browns a nation in South-Central and Surf City, but browns are skeptical of any paleface treaty."

I paused, and silence again filled the room. As I had laid out the scenarios, a few of the students had kind of rooted for Blackland or Brownland. But now they were mostly staring at their feet, uncomfortable with how gnarly race relations can be.

Finally, Desiree broke the ice. "Why can't they all just get along?" she asked.

Paraphrasing Rodney King had become a cliche, but everyone welcomed the excuse to laugh, as did I.

"Actually, that's a good question," I said after the room quieted down. "In a more perfect world, Jews and Palestinians would blend into a single country with a secular government and multiethnic society — call it Israelstine, Palisrael, or perhaps New Canaan. It's politically incorrect to say it now, but Palestinians were once known as the Jews of the Arab world because they had similar reputations for brains and business. Together, Jews and Palestinians could make a combined state into an economic powerhouse and a

beacon of democracy, tolerance and integration in the Middle East. But the level of hatred, fear and mistrust between Israelis and Palestinians has become so great that anyone who suggests they try living together is either laughed at or killed.

"It's not exactly a public relations campaign, but what if Palestinians allowed Jewish settlers to live in their biblical homeland on the West Bank, as long as they agreed to become citizens of Palestine? Call it amnesty. And for every Israeli family that moved to the West Bank, Israel would allow a Palestinian family the right to return to Israel.

"In terms of building trust, a Palestine with Jews would be less threatening to Israel, just as an Israel with more Arabs would be less threatening to Palestine. And as the two states came to resemble each other demographically, who knows? If they could learn to live next to each other peacefully, down the road they might merge and unite their countries. Stranger things have happened — look at South Africa.

"Confused yet?" I moved on. "Well, it gets worse. You'll notice I've barely mentioned religion, and there are many other issues complicating any two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"One is deciding where the borders should be. The Palestinians want all of Israel, but short of that, they want all of the West Bank and Gaza, which means relocating hundreds of thousands of Jewish settlers, many of whom are Jewish fundamentalists who believe God promised the land to them in the Bible.

"Another problem is that both sides want to make Jerusalem — Southland College — their capital. Throughout history, one of the most hotly contested scraps of real estate on the planet is a hill in Jerusalem, let's make that the Rec Building, which Jews call the Temple Mount and Muslims call the Noble Sanctuary. It's the biblical location of Solomon's Temple and contains Judaism's holiest shrine, the so-called Wailing Wall, which is literally beneath the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third-holiest site.

"And then there's the millions of descendants of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who fled in 1948 during Israel's War for Independence. To protect its security and national character, Israel won't let them come back. But the right of return is central to the Palestinian identity."

José had another question. In his halting, shy English, he softly asked, "What makes Palestinians so different from other Arabs that they need their own country?"

Oh my God, I've turned them into stark raving Zionists, I thought to myself. "That's another good question, José," I said, playing for time. "Arab families had been living in Palestine for centuries. In fact, the original Jews and Palestinians may have all been Canaanites. They share a regional culture and sense of community, and have strong ties to the land. But Palestinians didn't view themselves as a nation until the Jews began moving in a hundred years ago. If it weren't for Jewish nationalism there might not be Palestinian nationalism today, just as if it weren't for Nazi Germany, there might never have been an Israel.

"As for what makes Palestinians different, or what defines a distinct Palestinian culture, I hate to say this and I know it sounds totally biased, but whatever the accomplishments of individual Palestinians, the one thing they have become famous for, worldwide, is terrorism. From 1972, when they killed the Israeli athletes they'd taken hostage at the Munich Olympics, until 9/11, over a span of nearly 30 years, the Palestinians were the undisputed world champs of terrorism. In fact, when the new kings of terrorism, Osama bin Laden and his crew, took down the World Trade Center, they were combining two techniques perfected by Palestinians — skyjackings and suicide bombers. And those al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan were patterned after camps set up by Palestinians to train terrorists from Ireland to Japan how to make bombs, take hostages and kill people.

When no one spoke up for the Palestinians, I became concerned. The students had never been shy about expressing their opinions, even when I was on much firmer ground. So why weren't they jumping in? Maybe they were just stunned that I was skating so close to the edge. So as long as I was there, I decided to do some pirouettes.

"I don't mean to stereotype Palestinians — few are actually terrorists. But over several generations, what has been called a culture of death has taken hold of Palestinian society. From the streets to the mosques and schools, their music, art, literature, mass media and pop culture glorify martyrs and murderers. And it's not just a religious

thing. Not all Palestinians are Muslims, and even fewer are Islamic fundamentalists. Some are Christians. They are motivated less by religion than by hopelessness and desperation. And for Palestinians not to support their sons, daughters, friends and neighbors who have thrown rocks in the intifada, or made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom by becoming suicide bombers, would be like us not supporting our troops in Afghanistan.

"There's different explanations for why the Palestinians have embraced a culture of death," I said. "And Palestinians would say — well, first of all, they'd say I was full of crap — but secondly, they'd say the oppressive Israeli occupation is what has turned them into terrorists. They'd also say that since they don't have tanks, fighter jets and American weaponry like Israel does, they fight with the most effective weapons they can find. Or as a Palestinian student once said to me, 'If you can't hit above the belt then you hit below the belt.'

"But the main reason Palestinians have used terrorism is because it works. The fact is, few Americans ever heard of the Palestinians until they started hijacking airplanes, taking athletes hostage, blowing themselves up and staging riots that go on not for days or even weeks but for years. It may not have won them their homeland, but it's been one heck of an effective P.R. campaign.

"Hopefully, you can come up with more peaceful strategies in your P.R. plans," I segued. "Those of you trying to convince an Israeli audience must get them to believe the Palestinians don't just want to drive them into the sea, and that they deserve their own homeland. Those of you appealing to a Palestinian audience must convince them that the Jews deserve a homeland, and that making peace with Israel is better than perpetual violence. You need to give them something to live for instead of to die for."

I paused, but still there were no questions, so I took the final plunge. "Rather than a battle of good and evil, think of the history of the Middle East as one big gang war," I said. "Instead of Jews and Arabs, think Crips and Sureños. And instead of religion and nationalism, think drugs and prostitution. And bling. Except over there it's called oil."

I said that whether it's the Jews and the Palestinians fighting over the Holy Land, or during the Cold War, the United States and Soviet

Union fighting over the planet, gangs appear, grow, fight, affiliate, die out or merge with other gangs. They have their own rituals and languages and their primary fight is over land — turf — sometimes against each other and sometimes against a common enemy. And whether they are street, religious or nationalist gangs, they give people, especially oppressed people, a sense of belonging, unity, protection and pride.

I said that before Israel became a state, some Zionists formed terrorist gangs that fought the British as well as the Arabs — one was even known as the Stern Gang. I noted that some of those gang members later became heads of Israel, including its prime minister, Ariel Sharon, just as the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was a terrorist as well as a political leader.

I added that America, with its history of slavery and Indian genocide, is no different — George Washington conducted a guerrilla war against the British and became our first president. Another thing Israelis and Palestinians have in common, I said, is that a lot of them have been refugees. Many of Israel's refugees were middle-class European Jews who fled Hitler's gang of Nazis, while a lot of the Palestinian refugees were middle-class Arabs who fled from Israeli gangs.

Then I threw in one more twist.

"There's another war going on, but it's not among the gangs of the Middle East, and it's not among races, religions or nations. It's what Muslims call the greatest jihad — the struggle within each person to resist temptation and do the right thing. Should you join a gang or find another way to deal with the situation? Follow leaders who want you to die for their cause, or become one of those boring everyday people who just want to go to school, get a job, find love, raise a family and enjoy life?

"Depending on the circumstances, the decision to join a gang, or which gang to join, isn't always a choice," I added, wading ever deeper into the murky analogy. "And getting the Palestinians and the Israelis to stop killing each other is kind of like trying to convince teenagers that joining a gang isn't cool, when obviously gangs are cool or gangsta rap wouldn't be so popular."

Heads nodded.

"Anyway, to fix the gang problem in the Middle East, everyone — the U.N., America, Europe, some Arab countries, even Israel and supposedly the Palestinians — have agreed in principle on a so-called framework for peace that calls for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. In my biased opinion, it's a bad idea. But your job as P.R. practitioners isn't to make the policy, but to make the policy work — to get the Israelis and Palestinians to trust each other enough to stop the violence and accept each other's country."

Needless to say, it was an impossible assignment, but the students' came up with some interesting ideas all the same. The group working for the Israeli government trying to convince Palestinians to trust them recycled the factory idea, having Israel build a factory that employed Palestinians. Gloria, one of the older students, made the presentation, and said increasing the standard of living for Palestinians was the best way to get them interested in something other than revolution.

In critiquing their proposal, I pointed out that Israelis have already done that — that from the beginning, Jews employed Palestinians to build factories, hospitals, schools, roads and sewers that improved the quality of life for everyone, including the Arabs. But Palestinians resented the Jews taking over and still do today. The group modified their proposal to have the Israelis finance a factory run by Palestinians, but I said that would turn the Jews into money lenders, which the Palestinians might also resent. So they changed their proposal again, to have Jews and Palestinians both own the company and have them work alongside each other in the board room and on the factory floor.

"If they're both so good at business, they should be able to make a go of it," Gloria concluded.

The group working for the Israeli government to convince Jews to trust Palestinians suggested a multiethnic cultural festival of art, music, food and dance, like International Day on campus. I said Palestinian poster art of martyrs to the cause and protest songs about killing Zionists might not go over so well, but their presenter, Alejandro, said expressing feelings through art was better than using guns and bombs, and that both sides might discover what they have in common through their music and poetry.

The group working for the Palestinian Authority and trying to convince Jews to trust them came up with a modified version of the "cops vs. crooks" softball games that have been tried in some communities, where teams of police and gang members play each other to promote better relations. Their suggestion was a soccer match between Israeli security forces and Palestinian teenagers active in the intifada. I noted that soccer games can get pretty rowdy, and that any kind of sports competition might remind Israelis of when Palestinians killed their Olympic athletes. The group huddled and came back with another idea — put Palestinians and Israelis on the same Olympic team.

"Nice work if you can get it," I said.

The most intriguing concept came from the group representing the Palestinian Authority trying to convince Jews to trust them. They suggested a blood drive to provide Palestinian blood for Israeli victims of suicide bombers, and Jewish blood for Palestinian victims of Israeli security forces. "We all bleed the same color" was their slogan.

I gave them all A's.

The semester was winding down, and all that was left was the final exam. Rapper R. Kelly had gotten into some more trouble, so I decided the final would be ripped from the day's headlines.

I handed out the exam and began reading the instructions aloud: "You work for Ackerman P.R. in Knoxville, Tennessee. One of Ackerman's clients is rap artist R. Kelly, who has a P.R. problem."

As I began reading, who should open the door but Dean Anderson, probably checking to see if Fungus Amongus was holding his final exam at the correct time. I was, and in fact, there were still about 30 students who had stuck around the entire semester.

The dean just stood there at the door, so I stopped reading and said, "may I help you?" She shook her head but continued to stand there. I looked down at the final exam instructions and thought to myself, oy vey.

After an uncomfortable pause I continued reading: "Tapes alleging to show Kelly having sex with an underage girl got on the Internet, and twice his lawyers settled civil suits from women who

claimed he had sex with them when they were underage."

I paused again, only this time it was because I was getting the giggles. Composing myself, I continued. "To change the 32-year-old rapper's image as a seducer of under-aged girls, he has been on a 'charm offensive' and is about to release a CD called 'Soldier's Heart,' a patriotic theme song 'for all the soldiers gettin' it done for our country around the world.' The proceeds will be donated to R. Kelly's 'I Believe I Can Fly' charitable foundation.

"But now, a third woman is alleging Kelly had a sexual relationship with her when she was 16 and forced her to have an abortion. His lawyers call the allegations 'a collection of half-truths, distortions and outright lies that we intend to fight and beat.' You have been brought in to provide damage control. Your mission is to create a special event to publicize R. Kelly's CD and show your client in a positive light."

The dean stood there for an extra beat. She didn't roll her eyes, but did it with her heels as she pivoted out the door.

I must have looked deflated, because after the dean left, Elicia, the young grandmother I'd hoped would become the next *Explorer* editor, raised her hand.

"Mr. K.," she said when I called on her. "When we started the semester, we all heard you were a racist."

My heart skipped a beat. When I didn't say anything, she continued. "Well, I've been here for just about every class, and I gotta say ... I don't see it ... we don't see it."

Nobody stood on their desk, like in *Dead Poets Society*, and I certainly didn't say "thank you, boys," like Robin Williams did in the movie. I just shrugged, like what she'd said was no big deal to me. But it was.

Epilogue

That class was the last I would ever teach at Southland College. By the fall 2002 semester, the state was facing a massive budget deficit and could no longer afford to fund journalism classes without students. I was gone, but so was the student newspaper, and the journalism curriculum was stripped down to two classes, as the news business itself went through a similar contraction.

With more seniority than the other part-time journalism instructor, I could have "bumped" him and taught the remaining classes, but I decided to quit while I was more or less even. Whether or not I was a racist, it was time to let someone else try to get Southland students interested in journalism, because in that regard I had failed mightily. I had built it but they hadn't come.

A year after Proposition A passed, voters approved Prop. AA, which provided another $1 billion for the community college district. At Southland, the first bond money was spent on repairs to the Cox Building auditorium and fourth-floor administrative offices. They finally got a decent football stadium, student services building and parking structure, but still no cafeteria. Last time I checked, the Roach Coach was still there.

Because of the state's budget problems, Gov. Gray Davis raised community college tuition (called fees in California) from $11 per credit hour to $18, and after Davis was recalled and replaced by former bodybuilder and movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger, tuition was pumped up again, to $26 an hour. To save money, schools were asked to limit enrollment, more classes were canceled and more teachers, especially part-timers, lost their jobs.

And that was before the Great Recession of 2008. Thirty years after he served as governor in the 1970s, a former Los Angeles Community College District trustee named Jerry Brown was elected in 2011 to succeed Schwartzenegger, and community college fees were beamed up to $36 an hour — still among the lowest in-state tuitions in the country.

I was no longer at the college, but neither was Jasper. Someone said he got expelled and someone else said he got shot, but I can't say

for sure. Sylvester the aspiring music producer's half a lung gave out and he died. Before the year was out, so did old Jake.

June, the student body president, became a field representative for Rep. Waters. Willie, the other student president, began running halfway houses. Damon and his crew joined the class-action lawsuit against Six Flags. Without accepting blame, in 2004 the theme park agreed to pay $5.6 million to 6,000 people who claimed its security guards had racially profiled them — about $1,000 per plaintiff.

Tashena got into dental school at USC and became a dental hygienist. Holden dropped out of school and began working construction. He also got married and had a kid, not necessarily in that order. So did Mars, who became a security guard and tried to open a studio specializing in boudoir photography.

Tyrone is probably looking at porn, wherever he is. Venus graduated and got a job with the Department of Motor Vehicles. She still lives with her mom and extended family in South-Central, only you're not supposed to call it South-Central anymore.

In April 2003, the L.A. City Council voted to officially change the name "South-Central" to the less stigmatic "South Los Angeles." The vote was unanimous and the change quickly caught on, especially in the media, since the new name was shorter than the old one. But the community was split. Some felt it was good public relations to get rid of a term that had become synonymous with race riots, gang violence and poverty. Others felt South-Central was synonymous with black culture, and that changing it was like changing the name of Harlem.

Then again, South L.A. is no longer mostly black. Southwest is still a predominantly black college, but black enrollment has dropped from 80 percent to 60 percent, while Hispanic enrollment has doubled, from 15 percent to 30 percent.

Antonio Villaraigosa ran for mayor of Los Angeles again, and in 2005 he became the city's first Hispanic mayor in 133 years. Just as the election of Los Angeles' first black mayor, Tom Bradley in 1973, had been a source of pride in the African-American community, Villaraigosa's victory was shared by many of the city's Latinos. In his victory night speech he promised to bring L.A. together, then began speaking in Spanish.

In 2006, a half-million legal and illegal immigrants, mostly Hispanics, ditched work to participate in a mass "Day Without Immigrants" march and rally in downtown L.A. Similar rallies were held around the country, and the event had as many meanings as the people who were there. But ultimately it was an expression of immigrant pride as well as power, like the Million Man March for blacks, or Woodstock for hippies.

Immigration reform remains a divisive political issue, but the battle for racial purity may already be over. Blacks, Hispanics and other minorities already make up more than a third of the population, and whites are expected to become a minority around 2040. Hawaii, Texas and New Mexico, as well as California and Washington, D.C., already have minority populations that together exceed 50 percent, and in 2011, the Census Bureau reported that for the first time, more than half the children born in the country over the previous 12 months had a nonwhite parent.

Soon after I left the college, the war on terrorists in Afghanistan morphed into a war on Iraq, which began to look like Vietnam. Even so, Bush was re-elected and drove the economy into the deepest rut since the Great Depression. Although his crusade to bring democracy to the Middle East was about as effective as the Crusades of old, neocons boasted that the Bush Doctrine of preemptive war helped incite the Arab Spring that began in 2010. Others credited Facebook and Twitter. Either way, Bush's war destabilitzed the entire region, enabling an offshoot of al Qaeda that called itself the Islamic State to declare a caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and to dethrone al Qaeda as the kings of terrorism.

In response to all the suicide bombers, Israel built a wall along the West Bank that further incensed the Palestinians but seemed to cut down the attacks. In 2004, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat died. His democratically elected successor, Mahmoud Abbas, a relative moderate, called for a temporary ceasefire with Israel, and in exchange, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon freed hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

Defying his own instincts and Jewish fundamentalists, Sharon also unilaterally "disengaged" from Gaza, forcing 8,500 Israeli settlers to leave, and planned to do the same in the West Bank. In 2006,

Sharon was felled by a stroke, and his successor, former Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, tried to continue the policy.

But never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity, in 2006, the Palestinians held another election and voted in the Islamic party Hamas, which has never recognized Israel's right to exist. Hamas and Abbas' Fatah party began shooting at each other, and Hamas seized control of Gaza, which it used to fire unguided missiles into Israel, while Fatah clung to the West Bank.

Between 2006 and 2014, Israel invaded Gaza three times in retaliation for upticks in missile attacks, kidnappings and other provocations. In what cynics called "mowing the lawn," Israel's periodic aerial bombardments and ground incursions were meant to degrade Hamas' terrorist infrastructure, but they also destroyed homes, schools and hospitals and killed thousands of Palestinian innocents, winning the battle but losing the P.R. war.

In 2009, Israelis chose Benjamin Netanyahu to be their prime minister again. Netanyahu does not support the concept of a Palestinian state. Outside of prisoner exchanges, there have been few blood drives or other public relations efforts at getting Palestinians and Israelis to trust each other.

In September 2005, African Americans got a mass case of honkyphobia when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, filling TV screens with jarring images of black "refugees" huddling in the Super Dome. But in expressing their displeasure with how white America reacted to a natural disaster that affected mostly black people, black leaders framed the issue as one of "class and race," rather than "racism," perhaps showing a growing sensitivity to using the "victimization excuse."

Or, a public relations attempt to say the same thing a different way. Despite all the legal, social and cultural strides that blacks and Hispanics have made since the 1950s, the fact remains that in America, "class and race" is largely redundant. Whites on average make 40 percent more money than blacks. Asians make about the same as whites, while Hispanics earn 12 percent less than blacks — about half what whites make.

Then came Obama. In 2008, Barack Hussein Obama was elected the first black president of the United States. The new chief execu-

tive was half white, but that wasn't the half that made his presidency historic. Blacks, 95 percent of whom had voted for Obama, were ecstatic. Latinos and other immigrants got a vicarious thrill, and a goodly number of whites felt like they'd done the right thing, as did much of the rest of the world. I voted for him, too, even though he was once a community organizer.

As president, Obama tried to split the difference between coming across as an angry black man or an Uncle Tom. He appointed the first black attorney general and gave several modulated speeches on the subject of race, but he didn't make a major effort to reform the nation's immigration policies or control the flow of handguns. Instead, he pushed through Congress an affordable healthcare program that became known as Obamacare, which provided access to health insurance for millions of Americans. He also got the country out of two unwinnable wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and didn't blunder into any new wars anywhere else. He saved the banking, housing and auto industries and appointed two moderate female Supreme Court justices, one of them a Latina. And oh by the way, he killed Osama bin Laden. He also expanded drone attacks on foreign soil and increased unwarranted surveillance of Americans, but nobody's perfect.

Obama's election was not such a warm and fuzzy moment for straight, white, male, rural, fundamentalist, anti-abortion, gun-loving, evolution-scoffing, global-warming deniers — in other words, nearly half the country — who felt victimized by affirmative action, multiculturalism, gay rights and other aspects of modernity. They organized the Tea Party movement, which infected the Republican Party and Congress, and challenged the very notion that government is supposed to help those who can't help themselves.

When Obama ran for a second term in 2012, a noxious mix of Tea Partiers, anti-union industrialists, neocons, GOP fixers and conservative media hucksters congealed around the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, who aspired to become the first Mormon president. Romney portrayed himself as a savvy businessman and defender of American exceptionalism, but during a private dinner with fat cat donors in Boca Raton, he was surreptitiously recorded talking about the culture of victimization, and he got in a lot more trouble than I

did.

"There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what … who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims," he said. "These are people who pay no income tax … and so my job is not to worry about those people. I'll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives."

He also joked that he'd have an easier path to victory if his father, who was born in Mexico, was actually Hispanic. Despite — and perhaps because — of a Republican effort to suppress the minority vote through "voter fraud" laws, blacks, Latinos and poor people weathered long lines outside polling places, playing a crucial role in re-electing the president.

At the same time California's blacks voted for Obama in 2008, a majority of them — and a goodly number of whites and Latinos — also voted for Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriages in the state. But public opinion, especially among the young, shifted in favor of marriage equality for gay couples, and in a 5-4 vote in 2015, the Supreme Court decided to legalize same-sex marriages nationwide.

Meantime, former Olympian and Kardashian patriarch Bruce Jenner announced he was a she, bringing transgender rights to the fore. And then there was the curious case of Rachel Dolezal, a transracial white woman who was caught passing as black. While Jenner was lionized for bringing attention to transgender issues, Dolezal was treated like a black woman caught trying to pass as white — branded a scam artist and liar and shunned by both races. Dolezal was outed by her white parents, given the gotcha treatment by the media, lost her teaching job and resigned as an NAACP chapter head. But she maintained that whether or not her parents were African American, she "identified" as black. She also said she empathized with Caitlyn Jenner, raising intriguing questions regarding sexual as well as racial identities.

Just as Jenner couldn't biologically become female, but wanted to live life as a woman, Dolezal couldn't change her parents, but wanted to live as a black person, without being ridiculed or discriminated against. Indeed, except as a cultural convention consisting of

stereotypical generalizations, shared histories and a few superficial physical traits, like skin pigment or eye shape, there are few genetic differences between so-called races. Conceptually, changing one's race is not much different from switching religions. In other words, the only real race is the human race.

But any hopes that a black president might signal a post-racial society were dashed in 2012, when self-proclaimed neighborhood watcher George Zimmerman gunned down unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in Florida. Zimmerman beat the rap, which many saw as a sign that America's criminal justice system was racist. When police killed unarmed blacks in various cities, including Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, and Baltimore in 2015, unrest turned into uprisings, further fraying race relations. Blacks and liberals wallowed in self-righteous indignation and victimhood, while conservatives blamed the victims for not taking personal responsibility — for broken families, political apathy and choosing welfare instead of work.

The riots also forced a national conversation on race and criminal justice. Since the war on crime and drugs began in the 1980s, such tactics as mandatory minimum prison sentences, three-strike laws and zero tolerance policing have caused the number of Americans behind bars, especially African Americans, to skyrocket, from about a half-million in the 1980s to nearly 2.5 million today, mostly for nonviolent drug offenses. Over the same period, violent crime dropped by nearly 40 percent, but at what cost? The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with a staggering one out of every hundred citizens behind bars. And statistics bear out what has long been known in the hood — although more whites than blacks use illegal drugs or commit other crimes, blacks are far more likely to get busted and imprisoned.

In 2010, whites made up 64 percent of the general population and 39 percent of the prison population. Hispanics were 16 percent of the population and 19 percent of inmates, while blacks were 13 percent of the population and a whopping 40 percent of the prison population. Sending so many young black males to jail instead of to college might contribute to another stark statistic: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 67 percent of black

children grow up in single-parent families, compared to 42 percent of Hispanic children and 25 percent of white children.

William Bratton, who after being the police chief in Los Angeles again became the top cop for New York City, was once asked why he didn't hire more black officers. He said so many blacks have criminal records that it's hard to find qualified African-American candidates. The same is true in other professions. If broken families, unemployment and political disenfranchisement are partly to blame for the plight of blacks, it hardly makes sense to have a criminal justice system that perpetuates the problem.

On June 17, 2015, nine blacks, including pastor and state Sen. Clementa Pinckney, were gunned down during a Bible study class at the historic Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. The killer, an unaffiliated white supremacist named Dylann Roof, represented a whole new generation of racists — he was just 21 years old. Roof's Facebook page had pictures of him posing with the Confederate battle flag, and he told acquaintances that he wanted to start a race war.

But Roof did not achieve his goal. Rather than taking to the streets, the grieving congregation forgave Roof, and President Obama attended a memorial service for the victims, where he gave a eulogy and surprised the crowd and TV viewers nationwide by singing a soulful, a cappella rendition of "Amazing Grace." Even more surprising, a bi-partisan effort took hold to remove the Confederate flag from government facilities across the South, including the Statehouse grounds in South Carolina, while Walmart, Amazon and other retailers stopped selling the controversial symbol of heritage, hate and slavery. Although the change was mostly cosmetic, it brought about a sliver of racial healing.

Obama's presidency certainly didn't signal the end of racism in America, but in some ways he represents the end of race itself. He's more Tiger Woods than Jackie Robinson. When the Obamas moved into the White House, reporters asked them which breed of first dog they wanted. Obama quipped that, "our preference would be to get a shelter dog, but, obviously, a lot of shelter dogs are mutts like me." The president took heat for his comment from some in the burgeoning biracial community, who pointed out how insulting it would be if

a white person had called Obama a mutt.

Well, get used to it. As America continues to evolve through immigration, integration and intermarriage, we'll have to find a new way to define ourselves and a new way to hate. Black, white, brown and yellow races and cultures are becoming hybrids — blackspanic, halfrican, whiteno and Amerasian — and as America continues to look more like Obama, distinctly black or Hispanic identities, and places like Southland College, will become ever more precious and perishable.

Sticking with his goal of becoming a rehab therapist, Blackjack Loco got into a state university that had a master's program in rehab, where he was exposed to a different majority culture — "chopsticks," as he put it. When he was in danger of missing a deadline for enrolling in the upstate school, I drove him there myself, if only to make sure he got out of town. Actually, we turned it into a leisurely cruise up the Pacific Coast Highway, stopping to take pictures along the way, and he did most of the driving.

At one of the breathtaking vistas overlooking Big Sur, I realized it might be the last time I'd ever see Blackjack, and decided to ask him something I'd always wondered about. Being guys, I couldn't put my question straight up, so instead, I asked why he signed up for my photography class after taking that riotous Journalism 101 class with the football players.

He paused, not sure if he wanted to address my real question, and finally said, "Photography's fun, and I figured I wouldn't have to write anything." Then he paused again before continuing. "I don't know, you were, fearless."

I looked at him in disbelief. He shrugged and added, "Sometimes."

Me? I don't know. Maybe the experience made me less Afrophobic, and more sensitive to stereotyping in general. But it also reinforced my view that no one's perfect, because in the final analysis, we're all just human.

It wasn't the last time I saw Blackjack. A few months later he came down to visit and said he was seeing a mental health counselor.

Why, I wanted to know.

Blackjack said that one night his roommate came home drunk and crawled into bed with him, and that he didn't clock him because

he was afraid he'd be sent back to prison. He kept thinking about throwing his roommate in front of a train and making it look like a suicide. Instead, he went through channels and reported the sexual harassment to the school. He said the student was no longer his roommate, but that he went to a counselor to deal with his frustration at not retaliating more forcefully.

I said he was becoming whiter all the time, going into counseling. He said I was the first person to tease him about that. His other friends, he said, dissed him for not whacking the nigger.

Getting molested and getting called a racist are hardly the same. But I could relate to the frustration Blackjack felt at not having fought back harder. Blackjack went to counseling and maybe I wrote this book, in part, to work through my own frustration. But when I look back now, it's not the hassles I remember but the people I met and the fun we had. I hope I was able to teach my students half as much as they taught me, and that this doesn't read like a settling of scores, because I miss the college and everyone there. Even Jasper.

Sometimes things aren't black and white.

The End

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Blackspanic College

Part memoir, part history and part reflections on race, *Blackspanic College* chronicles the author's experiences teaching journalism and overseeing the student newspaper at a community college in South-Central Los Angeles before, during and after 9/11.

Misadventures in Journalism

Misadventures in Journalism explores the oxymoron of journalism ethics in an anthology of "stories behind the stories" the author covered as a journalist, including the 1976 GOP Convention in Kansas City, the 1995 O.J. Simpson "trial of the century," and the 2007 incarceration of celebutante Paris Hilton in Los Angeles.

Carbondale After Dark

From panty raids to riots, *Carbondale After Dark* is an illustrated anthology about a sleepy little college town in the Midwest that was invaded by hippies, activists and partiers in the 1960s and '70s.

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