

The Faces of KR

You don't get a second chance to make a good first impression, so the people who represent our companies play an important part in how others view us. Whether it's the first person a reader sees upon entering the newsroom, a voice on the phone to an advertiser, a security guard at a front desk or a manager overseeing an independent carrier force, they are the faces of Knight Ridder.

Reaching out to the bereaved

With multiple tattoos (all but one covered by her work clothes) and multicolored hair (shades of pink, mostly), Heather Clinton is not your standard newspaper obituary writer.

"When I first came in and met her, I thought ... ohhh-kaaaaaay," said Jim Black,

sales center manager at The Wichita Eagle and Clinton's supervisor. "She's *so* not funeral home. But when I sat down and talked with her, I was very impressed."

Dealing with bereaved families and funeral homes is a delicate business, Black added. "Heather has the ability to adapt to

the situation. She can be a hard-nose with a funeral home one moment and then be a sensitive listener for a grieving family the next."

Clinton is proud of what she does. "I get to write about different people every day, and it's the last thing written about them, so I think that's way important," she said. "It makes me feel good about myself."

Not everything about being an obit writer is a feel-good event. "Babies and kids are hard. And writing obituaries for people that you know is a rough one," said Clinton, who lovingly wrote her grandmother's obit.

Sometimes the job really gets to her. Like the time Clinton and her husband, who are bikers, were on a charity toy run where a 25-year-old man was killed. When the

young man's dad brought in a picture to run with the obit, Clinton told him that she had been there the day his son died, and they cried together. "Later that day, I said, that's it. I can't get personal like that anymore. It's too hard on me. It makes you seem more sympathetic to the family, but it's too hard."

For a short time, Clinton switched to taking classified ads. After six months, she decided it wasn't for her. In classified, she says, you don't get to see lines like this, penned by a Colorado man's survivors: "He lit his cigar and downshifted one last time." Or the piece written by a woman before her own death, in which she decried the fact that obituaries had become "a commercial transaction."

"I went to my boss about that and asked if we should run it," Clinton said. "They said, 'She's paying for it.'"

Writing one's own obit is an idea Clinton approves of. In fact, she recently spoke to the local Rotary club about it at a luncheon. "It's like preplanning your funeral," she said.

Most people, however, prefer not to think about the inevitable, Clinton says. Telling people that she's an obituary writer is a good conversation starter, but "people get totally freaked out by it."

The way she looks at it, however, is that "somebody has to write the obituary, just like someone has to prepare the body for burial. I used to be really afraid of death, but I'm not anymore. I just don't think about it the same way."



MIKE HUTMACHER/The Wichita Eagle

Making friends for the newspaper

Readers who have been on one of Susan Lindeman's tours at the Akron Beacon Journal begin to notice things in their newspapers that they hadn't paid much attention to before. The A, B or C at the top of the page? Thanks to Lindeman, they know it designates the press that a particular copy was printed on. The bulked-up Sunday paper? They have a better understanding of how all those sections, including the ads, come together.

"The one thing I hope the tour accomplishes is that people look at the paper differently the next morning," said Lindeman, preprint advertising coordinator and a 21-year Beacon Journal employee.

Lindeman's experience in the advertising, finance and packaging departments is an asset when she explains the process of publishing a newspaper. "I have seen how the newspaper is put together from beginning to end," Lindeman said. "A lot of the stuff I say on my tours is very natural to me."

Lindeman is one of six employees from various departments who volunteer to lead tours. Spring and summer are the busiest times for visitors, she says, with five or six groups coming through each month.

Speaking points are tailored to the ages of the people on the tour. "With school groups or Scout troops, I stay real basic," Lindeman said. "Kids are often more



LINDSAY SEMPLE/Akron Beacon Journal

mesmerized by how tall the presses are, or the noise in the packaging department. Adults are usually long-time readers, and they remember things such as when John S. Knight died, when President Kennedy died and when the paper came out in the afternoon."

In addition to guiding tours at the paper, Lindeman volunteers at area schools, where she speaks about newspaper careers. "Most kids think that if you work at a newspaper you are a reporter," she said. "I talk about all the other jobs, in security, maintenance, advertising and finance."

Retail Advertising Director Christine McMullen said that Lindeman – a nominee for Knight Ridder's Excellence Award and a

winner of one of the newspaper's own Excellence Awards – is a great ambassador for the Beacon Journal. "She has a very friendly disposition, a lot of energy, is very upbeat and has a beautiful, big, inviting smile. She knows the history of the newspaper and is a proud, passionate employee about working at the Beacon Journal."

Leading tours is a bit like making good friends out of casual acquaintances, Lindeman said.

"It's introducing readers to someone they come in contact with often but have never really gotten to know. The Beacon Journal comes into their house every day, and I think they're interested in seeing how it all happens."

Offering help and a sympathetic ear

Everyone who deals with The (Biloxi) Sun Herald newsroom – caller or visitor – has to first go through Ruby Grace, known to all as Miss Ruby.

And that's lucky for them. As a senior staff assistant and newsroom receptionist since 1989, she always leaves them with a positive impression of the paper.

Miss Ruby has heard just about everything, but one thing callers will never hear from her is a harsh or discouraging word. Some colleagues find her patience excessive, but Miss Ruby takes her time with every caller – even when it turns out that the person commenting on a story didn't read it in The Sun Herald after all, but saw it

on the TV news. "I just give them the number of the TV station," Grace said.

Going beyond the call of duty to look up a phone number is typical of Miss Ruby, but even she can't solve every problem. One caller wanted the newspaper to help get a relative out of jail. "Some of these stories are just so sad," Grace said. "They want us to do an article to help their situation, but we don't have the staff to do that. I just listened and advised them to call an attorney."

The Golden Rule is her guide, she says. "I try to be patient. I think of how I would want people to treat me."

It may seem simple, but multiplied by the scores of calls she receives each day, her

thoughtfulness has made many friends for the newspaper, even if most of her fans know her only as a helpful voice on the other end of the line.

When Executive Editor Stan Tiner joined the paper five years ago, it didn't take him long to find out how folks in the community felt about Miss Ruby. "People would say, 'Tell Ruby we said hi,' and 'Do you know what an asset you have in that woman?'" Tiner said. "At a newspaper, everything we do doesn't satisfy everybody. But we're fortunate that Miss Ruby is often the first contact for people. I'm not going to say that everyone she talks to is transformed into a Sun Herald lover, but she does manage to reduce the



anger level."

Her graciousness and soft-spoken style make Ruby Grace special to colleagues as well. Most of the newspaper's employees showed up for a surprise 65th birthday party, which was delayed while she patiently took yet another call from another customer with a long tale to tell. Someone finally had to beg her to just get the person's number and promise to call back later, so the party could begin.

Though no one can imagine The Sun Herald

without her, Grace almost wasn't hired because she couldn't type. (She has since learned how.) A staff photographer who had known Grace at an earlier job persuaded managers to give her a chance. Soon, everyone saw that Ruby Grace might not have been much with a keyboard, but she had no peer on the telephone.

In addition to the problems she handles at work, Ruby Grace has had her own difficulties: a battle with breast cancer 14 years ago, and the recent death of her husband from heart disease. So many people attended the funeral in a tiny community church that mourners had to stand outside.

But the way Miss Ruby sees it, "This is another one of my blessings – that the Lord moved me to a place where I needed to be. I guess the love that I put out, it came back to me when I really needed it."

Keeping the workplace safe

As the first person most people see when they enter The Charlotte Observer building, security guard Barry Whisnant has to combine friendliness with vigilance.

"Barry recognizes employees by name and face and can readily determine who's a customer in need of assistance," said Safety and Security Supervisor Harvey Outlaw. "He balances the need for security with the need to assist customers."

Helping takes various forms. Part of Whisnant's job is to check the visitors parking area under the building to make sure that employees aren't sneaking into the coveted spaces. He is also trained in first aid and in the use of a defibrillator, though he has never had to use the device.

Safety and security are his first concerns. "There was a big change after 9/11," Whisnant said. "We've gotten a lot more strict about who we let into the building. Now, if someone has a visitor, they have to come down and get them. Job applicants must be escorted upstairs; they used to be able to go up by themselves."

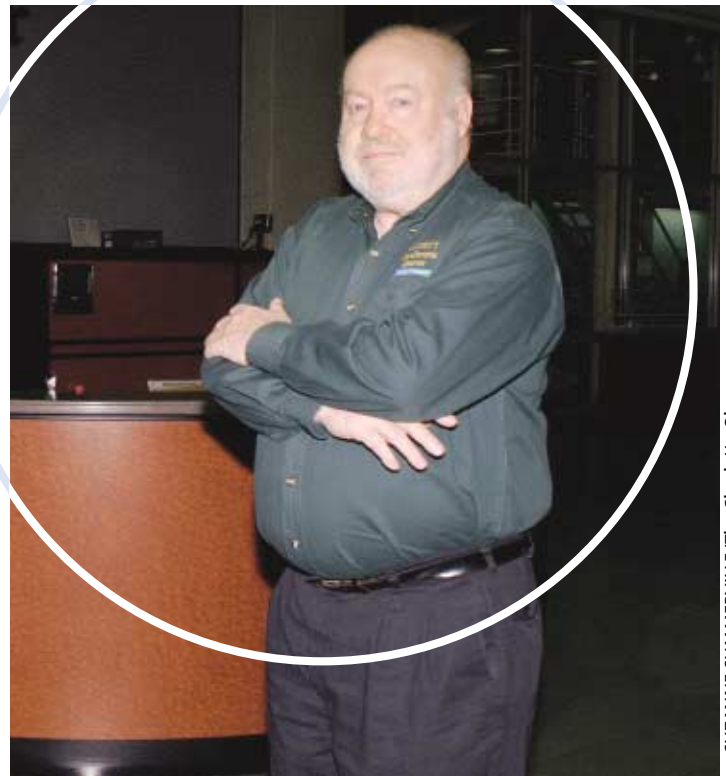
But it's not all high-security. His day has lighter moments, too. "Sometimes, trying to keep a straight face is the hardest part of my job," he said. "We have our daily cast of char-

acters who come in from time to time, homeless people. ... One of our regulars calls himself Inspector Gadget. He comes in and says, 'I'm Inspector Gadget and I'm the reason there's no crime in Charlotte.'"

Whisnant joined The Observer seven years ago. At the time, he was looking for a part-time job to supplement income from his computer sales and repair business. Now a full-time employee, Whisnant says that the patience he gained from working with balky computers comes in handy on occasion when he has to deal with a disgruntled customer – usually someone who is having problems getting the paper delivered. The experience doesn't ruin Whisnant's day – and the visitor usually gets to where he's going in a

better mood.

"I'm pretty easygoing," Whisnant said. "It takes a lot to get me upset. Usually, if I have a chance to talk to people, they get un-upset pretty fast."





Keeping the carriers rolling

For 28 independent contractors who deliver the Belleville News-Democrat, B.J. Jackson is their only contact with the newspaper – a friendly face and encouraging voice whom they first get to know in the wee hours of the morning when he takes them along in a company car to show them how to roll papers, read a route book and deliver their product.

Camille Whitehead recalls when she first took a second job with the paper to earn extra money to pay off some bills. She didn't reckon on getting "the route from hell," which included navigating roads in the dark along bluffs that dropped 150 feet.

"I'll never forget that route," Whitehead said, laughing heartily about it in hindsight. "Every night, something happened. The worst was when I hit a brick wall in a man's driveway. It cost me more than \$200 to have my car repaired. I had a hissy fit."

Whitehead was ready to quit, but Jackson told her that he would find a route that would be better for her. "It took about a week or two, but he called me immediately

when one opened up," she said. "Since then, I have not given up. He's an awesome person."

Jennifer Wilson, another of Jackson's star carriers, has been delivering papers for a year. "It was so complicated when I first started," said the mother of four, who took the early-morning job because she wouldn't have to worry about child care. Thanks to Jackson's training, she has become one of the circulation department's best carriers, going three months without a customer complaint. This year, she was nominated as Carrier of the Year and received a \$365 bonus.

Jackson joined the News-Democrat as a field-service representative in 1995, acting as a liaison between customers and carriers. Today, he's a supervisor, beginning his day at the distribution center at 2:30 a.m. After he has checked on the press run to make sure the papers will be delivered to carriers on time, he talks with his employees about the previous day's activities and any issues that need to be resolved. By 3:45 a.m., he begins

to drive by customers' homes to see if the newspapers have been delivered properly – doing random checks and responding to any complaints.

Although Jackson says he can teach carriers how to do their jobs better, a basic customer-service orientation has to be there first. "If I could tell people any one thing about customer service, it is this: You do not know any of these people personally, so nothing they say should affect how you do your job."

Besides, in his view, carriers have a great occupation. "Being in that car with the radio on, delivering papers, you're in control, you're taking care of it," he said. "It's like that Army commercial: We do more before 5 a.m. than the rest of the world does all day."

Camille Whitehead agrees. Her finances are in much better shape now, and thanks to B.J. Jackson, the News-Democrat won't be looking for a new carrier. "When I get those bills paid off, I'm going to keep my route," she said. "I've got it mastered now."