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Trio of journalists headline Gaines Family lecture series

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Apr 10, 2023



Rochelle Ritchie

This year's John B. Gaines Family Lecture Series is bringing three women journalists of color to Western Kentucky University to examine the impact of representation in media.



Mará Rose Williams

The three speakers are Mará Rose Williams, the Kansas City Star's assistant managing editor for race and equity issues; Kyndell Harkness, a member of the 2021 Pulitzer-winning team that covered George Floyd's killing and subsequent shockwaves; and Rochelle Ritchie, a graduate of WKU's broadcasting program and political analyst who has appeared on Fox News, MSNBC and CNN.



Kyndell Harkness

The event will begin at 7 p.m. on Wednesday April 12 in the Jody Richards Hall Auditorium.

Ritchie worked as the director of communications for the Baltimore City State's Attorney Office, acting as media liaison during the 2015 case of Freddie Gray.

Gray, a Black man, was arrested and put in a police wagon where, according to the Department of Justice' factual summary, he sustained a fatal neck and spinal injury "in a manner that is largely unknown." He passed away due to his injuries.

Ritchie had only been working with the office since February after leaving television news. State Attorney Marilyn Mosby was newly elected, and no one expected a case of that magnitude so quickly.

"As you can imagine, eight weeks on the job and you're thrown into one of the biggest police brutality cases in the country that is now getting international attention – it was a very challenging time for everyone in that office," Ritchie said.

A challenge Ritchie faced was communicating information to press outlets without violating a gag order. The entire office was receiving death threats and Ritchie had to tell that story.

“I had to find a way to tell that story without violating the gag order, so I collected all of the emails, different recordings that we had of some of these threatening messages and I gave them to the press,” she said. “The next time (Mosby) was in court, people were there in full support.”

Working “behind the scenes” as a communications director, rather than a reporter in the field, opened Ritchie’s eyes to all kinds of stories that weren’t being told by the press. It also sharpened her reporting skills.

“(If) I go into these different organizations, I’ll be a better reporter now than I probably was,” Ritchie said. “Now I know where the story is, I know where all the bodies are buried, now I know the process of writing a press release, the process of putting out a statement. I get what’s happening.”

She hopes students walk away from her talk with the understanding that people are what make for a good story.

“It’s not enough to talk about immigration and asylum seekers if you aren’t talking to people who have immigrated,” she said. “You can’t talk about crime in a city if you don’t talk to people impacted by the crime.”

Following the killing of Floyd, it was clear to Harkness up in Minnesota that the Minneapolis Star Tribune needed to revamp its hiring process, reflect on how it treats journalists of color and examine its coverage of minority communities.

“Journalism is no different than any other industry that’s more than 100 years old. The very foundation is built with the bricks of systemic racism just as we know water, sand and rock makes up the Mississippi River,” she wrote in 2021.

Thus, the assistant managing editor of diversity and community position was created. Harkness, a visual

journalist with over 20 years of experience at the Tribune, took on the role.



“In some ways our news organization had been eating with the wrong end of the fork for 155 years,” Harkness wrote. “What was encouraging was the palpable desire for change among so many people. We knew we had to dismantle old behaviors and build foundations around new ones.”

Also affected by Floyd’s killing, Williams came up with the Kansas City Star’s “Truth in Black and White” project. It examined the paper’s past coverage of Black communities and found that it had amplified negative portrayals of persons of color while not acknowledging their successes in the same magnitude.

She recalls meeting with members of marginalized communities who would sometimes tell her that they do not read the newspaper because they don't see themselves in it.

"They'd tell me we don't read the mainstream media or newspaper because we don't trust you. We don't see ourselves in the paper, and when you do write about us you don't tell the truth about us," she said.

This icy reception made Williams want to examine the Star's history. She only had to go back to 1977 to find an egregious wrongdoing.

"It was alarming, really," she said. "I did not have to go back very far."

A deadly flood hit the city in '77, killing 25 residents, eight of them Black. The paper dubbed it the "Plaza Flood" for part of the area it damaged.

"Brush Creek runs right down the middle of Kansas City's Black community. Those homes and people were devastated, and yet when we wrote about it we focused on the plaza," Williams said.

Revelations like this led the Star to run a front-page apology for its uneven coverage, telling the story of a “powerful local business that has done wrong” – in this case, the newspaper itself.

“We were saying that we didn’t do this well. We failed. That’s really what we were saying,” Williams said. “We failed in a big way and we’re sorry for that. For the most part the response from the community was really positive.”

Williams became the Star’s assistant managing editor for race and equity issues in January. She now serves as the bridge between the paper and the city’s marginalized communities, including Black, Hispanic, Asian and LGBTQ populations.

She said if a newspaper’s readership has never known, worked or lived with Black people, the only thing they know about Black people is what you are telling them – “and what you are telling them is false.”

Williams' message to attendees is that a journalist can't write stories people will care about if they aren't leaving their desk and mingling with local communities.

"There is no substitute to person-to-person, face-to-face conversation with the people in the communities you cover," she said.

The John B. Gaines Family Lecture Series, named after the Daily News' previous owners, brings leaders in national and international journalism to WKU. It began in 2004 to commemorate 150 years of the Gaines' ownership of the Bowling Green Daily News.

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