

Goodby, Judy Miller.....Hello, Jerry Mitchell

Keynote speech by Betty Medsger at the 15th anniversary of the founding of the Center for the Integration and Improvement of Journalism at San Francisco State University. Medsger founded the Center when she was chair of the Department of Journalism at the University. (February 1, 2006, at San Francisco State University)

It's wonderful to be here

.....to celebrate the Center

.....to be with former students and colleagues, old friends

.....to think about journalism today

.....to talk about Judy Miller and Jerry Mitchell

First, I want to acknowledge and celebrate the leadership of CIJ.....

Three of the four people who have been directors of the Center are with us tonight. The first director, Jon Funabiki, who has come from New York, where he is deputy director of the Media, Arts and Culture Division at the Ford Foundation; Eva Martinez, who was director of the Center from 1999 to 2002, and who worked at the Center almost from the beginning, first as assistant to Jon. Today she is executive director of Accion Latina. And the current director, Cristina Azocar, who has been director since 2002.

These three directors and Ivan Roman, who was director of the center from 1995 to 1999, have provided excellent leadership. They guided the Center in new directions – expanding its outreach to the profession and helping other journalism educators increase the diversity of their programs. They did all of this while continuing to strengthen the Center's original primary mission: to increase the recruitment, retention and placement of students of color in journalism, and to

help newsrooms increase their ethnic and racial diversity and diversify their coverage.

We were very smart and very lucky in our decision to hire Jon as the founding director. What a solid foundation he gave the Center. Jon was masterful at building a new organization. He took our vision and gave it shape, substance and action immediately. In the years since then he has continued to be a person of great vision from a very different position, making grants that have contributed to the improvement of journalism in his work at the Ford Foundation.

I am delighted that that two of the people who were absolutely essential to the existence of the Center are here. If Jerry Sass and Larry Jinks had not believed in us and helped convince their respective foundations, Gannett and Knight, that we could do what we said we would do, there's no question in my mind that the Center might never have gotten off the ground. How wonderful that all these years later they care enough to come here to celebrate with us tonight. When we were first raising money to start the Center, Jerry was a top official at the former Gannett Foundation, and Larry was on the journalism advisory committee of the Knight Foundation.

I have many good memories of the work of the Center. My best memories are of the success of some students who, prior to our offering coaching and mentoring through the Center might have dropped out of journalism in discouragement -- not because they were not bright enough but because, often through no fault of their own, they needed more skills and confidence than their previous education had provided. It was wonderful to see those students who had once struggled soon learn to soar. Those are great memories -- seeing students learning to soar and then seeing them become interns and journalists.

There also are memories of learning about the impact some of our graduates had in their newsrooms. I remember a student who got a job on a medium size paper

and came back to visit several months later. “You won’t believe this, but there’s an Indian reservation outside the town, and they’ve never covered it!” he told me. He had drawn this to his editors’ attention – one of those discoveries I think of as the “hidden obvious.” By the time he was telling me this, he had pretty much created a beat of covering Native American issues in a community where the Native Americans in the community had been largely invisible to journalists and, therefore, probably to most people in the community.

To celebrate the Center, we should also celebrate the department faculty. Creating the Center was our way of carrying out a formal commitment we made: to help diversify newsrooms in response to the Kerner Commission’s then still true 1969 conclusion: that the nation’s newsrooms were composed nearly exclusively of white journalists looking into communities through their eyes and not seeing the parts of that world that were not white. It was a problem that had created enduring stereotypes and caused many stories to be missed for years.

There is another group of people who always have been essential to the Center -- the Bay Area journalists, dozens and dozens of them, who helped accomplish the Center’s main purpose: helping students improve their skills. These reporters, editors, photographers from news organizations volunteered to mentor and coach students on a weekly basis. Hundreds of students have benefited from their talent and generosity. The value of their mentoring and coaching cannot be overestimated. Their teaching, their advice about internships and jobs, their letters of reference and, in many cases, their eventual friendship with students helped build solid skills and confidence. Of all the people who have been part of the Center, these volunteer coaches and mentors deserve the biggest thanks.

Thinking about journalism today

Given the numerous tremors in our profession in the last couple years, I imagine many people who teach, coach, mentor, who find pleasure in preparing students

to become journalists may have scratched their heads once in awhile and wondered “What in the world am I doing?”

Journalism students may wonder: What kind of a profession am I entering? A profession where you now wonder who the plagiarist of the month will be. A profession where the salaries for beginning reporters and photographers are the lowest of any occupation that calls itself a profession.

And we keep hearing the death notices....newspapers are dying....journalism is dying.

It is a profession being squeezed from the inside by owners who want to wring more and more profit from their products, which happen to be journalism, a process that has been made even worse by sharp declines in advertising income and the incredibly difficult challenge – even for owners who care about public service and profits – of finding new economic models for journalism. And then from the outside, we have a new era of press criticism. Remember when we used to lament the fact that there was so little press criticism? What a quaint idea. Everyone’s a press critic these days. And they have easy, and constant, access to journalists and the public if they wish. That’s good, of course. We need criticism.

In thinking about the sad state of journalism affairs, it is important to think about the *truly* sad recent developments in journalism. We have sustained a lot of tragedy in recent months. There are all of those journalists who braved Katrina to report the most amazing news stories and then, because of the depth of damage and the continuing aftermath, they stuck with the unfolding developments and became investigative journalists and the tellers of incredibly powerful human stories. Now, months later, many of those local Mississippi and Louisiana journalists, right along with the people they are writing about, still don’t have homes and are dealing with the loss of loved ones.

Another tragic fact this year is that by less than three years into the Iraq war, as many journalists have been killed in the Iraq war as were killed in the entire more-than-decade-long Vietnam war -- 61 journalists. That includes 14 journalists who were killed by American troops. In addition, 23 people who were journalists' support workers, such as drivers and interpreters, have been killed. In all of World War II, 68 journalists were killed. For journalists, the Iraq war has become the bloodiest war ever. There have been other serious hazards. Thirty-seven journalists have been kidnapped in Iraq. Several have been taken into custody, not charged and not permitted to see an attorney. At this time, at least two journalists are in custody in connection with the war -- one journalist is in custody in Iraq and another is in custody in Guantanamo. Several were released recently, without explanation of why they were in custody, some for several months.

There's an ethnic element to this tragic story.....Because western journalists are considered automatic targets in Iraq, western news organizations increasingly have hired Iraqi journalists.....But, as the numbers show, those Iraqi journalists also are targets. The majority of the 61 journalists and support workers who have been killed were Iraqis.

Thinking about Judy Miller and Jerry Mitchell

Let's think about Judy Miller and Jerry Mitchell. I will talk about them as individuals, but mostly I want to think of them as metaphors for what I hope the future will be.....and not be.....Goodby, Judy.....Hello, Jerry.

I don't want to talk about Judy Miller very much. She brings out the worst in me. I've thought a lot about what she's done -- to the New York Times, to discussion about a coming war, to what it means to protect a confidential source, to the reputation of journalism. Because of the strange blend of things she has done,

and the strange way her editors dealt with her, our reaction to her ended up being very complex, almost a conundrum. Surely she -- and her journalism colleagues' reactions to her -- have created a very confusing set of circumstances. We were angry at her for her stenographic rather than investigative reporting, as Maureen Dowd accurately described it, during the run-up to the war in Iraq. Then, she took a seemingly principled stand and went to jail for more than 80 days in order to protect a confidential source. Then, when this tough rather mean person was down, her colleagues inside and outside The Times finally went for her. It was a little like watching kids in a school yard finally jump on the tough guy they don't like. They were afraid of him, so they stayed away from him until he tripped and fell. And then they pounced on him. Sounds a little cowardly. I'm still not sure if that's what we did, but I sometimes wonder.

I find myself occasionally thinking about how strange all of that was and how strange it must seem to people outside of journalism. I even allowed myself to have some pity for Judy Miller. Not much, but some. Then I heard her being interviewed in November by Bob Garfield on NPR's On the Media. As she had since right before going to jail, she admitted that she got it wrong big time when she reported before the war that the government had evidence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. In the interview with Garfield, she tried to minimize that "mistake." "At times," she said to Garfield, "every reporter is going to get things wrong. I've already said I got WMD wrong." She laughed heartily and then said, "I've never said I'm a perfect reporter."

Garfield, apparently a bit perplexed at her ability to make all stories seem equivalent rather than seeing the ones that made the case for war as perhaps a little more important than other stories, tried to get her to reflect. He said: "But under the circumstances, considering how critical the New York Times reporting on this subject was to the Administration's case for war, have you looked inward, amid all of this controversy, and said 'not only did I make mistakes, but I made egregious mistakes and this is really hard to live with?'"

And Judy Miller responded: “No, I have not.” Then she attacked the intelligence community – her sources -- for getting it wrong.

I have not been able to muster any pity for Judy Miller since that day.

In the face of her actions, I have thought repeatedly of the three very good but not well known journalists in the Knight Ridder Washington Bureau, and also of a few journalists at the Washington Post – but especially those three at the Knight Ridder Bureau – who decided in early September 2002 to examine very carefully the administration’s reasons for going to war. What a reasonable idea -- to try to report thoroughly on why the leaders of a nation are planning to go to war. We should know their names..... bureau chief John Walcott and reporters Jonathan Landay and Warren Strobel.

You probably recall that Judy Miller claimed the intelligence community got it all wrong and, therefore, she got it all wrong. That’s strange because these Knight-Ridder reporters asked sources in the intelligence community about the administration’s claims, and they found there was a great division of opinion among those closest to the war plans. They learned from sources in the military, the intelligence community and the State Department that there was not only a difference of opinion about whether there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. There also were accusations from some of their sources -- some of whom were directly engaged in gathering and analyzing the relevant evidence -- that they and people in high positions in the administration “were deeply troubled by what they regarded as the administration’s deliberate misrepresentation of intelligence, ranging from overstating the case to outright fabrication.”

On October 8, 2002, they wrote “While President Bush marshals congressional and international support for invading Iraq, a growing number of military officers, intelligence professionals and diplomats in his own government privately have

deep misgivings about the administration's double-time march toward war." These officials, the story continued, "charge that administration hawks have exaggerated evidence of the threat that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein poses – including distorting his links to the al-Qaida terrorist network....They charge that the administration squelches dissenting views and that intelligence analysts are under intense pressure to produce reports supporting the White House arguments that Saddam poses such an immediate threat to the United States that pre-emptive military action is necessary." You would think that Judy Miller or her editors would have read those stories. Had they done so, it certainly would have been evident that they needed to ask more questions, find more sources.

I do feel like celebrating tonight. So, I'd like to say goodbye to Judy Miller. But we can't dismiss her easily. We need to realize that she symbolizes a lot of challenges we must overcome, including the fact that a lot of people don't like us and, more serious, a lot of people don't believe us. While we aren't in a popularity contest, we also should not be blasé about these real problems.

A lot of problems have hit us at the same time. Some are of our own making, many not of our own making. It is important at a time like this to remind ourselves that even with all of our present problems, we remain the only institution, the only profession dedicated to trying to finding out, independent of any interests other than the public interest, what is happening and why it is happening so citizens can, if they are moved to do so, become informed and take action -- vote, debate, demand, recall, impeach. In other words, so they can actually *be* citizens.

In the present atmosphere, given all of the failings in journalism, it has become difficult for many people to realize what it is that journalists do. Journalists have become blended in that vast field of media....the spin machines that spin us and the public.... fake news produced, not only by Jon Stewart, but by the government and given to local television stations and run as real news; fake

news about how well the war is going, written by the military, given to the Lincoln Group, a private consulting firm hired by the Pentagon to bribe Iraqi news organizations to run the stories. It's all media. It's all journalism. Isn't it all the same? That's what a lot of people think.

Fortunately, this contemporary picture of journalism has a very different side, a side that is true to the best values of journalism and one that despite the misperceptions about journalism – and our own occasional depression about the state of journalism – is becoming stronger and stronger. The changing ownership and advertising patterns negatively affect this positive change, but still it persists.

That's where Jerry Mitchell comes in.

How many of you know who Jerry Mitchell is? (*Note: in an audience of 160 people, nearly all journalists, only three hands were raised.*) I am embarrassed to say that I didn't know who Jerry Mitchell was when I received an invitation inviting me to a November 29 event where he would receive the John Chancellor Award for Excellence in Journalism at Columbia University. We should all know who Jerry Mitchell is. I wish the public knew as much about him as it knows about Judy Miller.

If you don't know his name, I bet you know some of the names now associated with him.....Andrew Goodman, James Chaney and Michael Schwener... civil rights workers savagely murdered in Mississippi in 1964 during the campaign to register voters.....Medgar Evers, the NAACP field secretary who was killed instantly the night of June 12, 1963, as he walked from his car up his driveway to his Jackson, Mississippi, house and was fatally shot in the back by a man with a high-powered rifle. And you know about those four little African American girls who were killed on a Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, when a bomb ripped through the 16th Street Baptist Church – Addie May Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley and Denise McNair.

You've probably heard of those people, know the names of most of them. Just last June Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman's names were prominent after all these years. Edgar Ray Killen was found guilty in June for orchestrating their murder in 1964.

Convictions have been obtained in the last decade in each of these cases just mentioned. They were old, cold cases. Law enforcement officials were so entwined with the murderers at the time the crimes occurred that there was no hope then that anyone would be brought to justice. But over the last 15 years, trials have been held and people have been convicted after all hope had been lost that the truth ever would emerge and that justice would be done in these awful cases.

I had no idea until last November that those cases had been tried, and convictions gained, because newspaper stories had been written that provided new evidence in each case. Those stories were so well documented in each instance that it was impossible for prosecutors to avoid reopening the cases.

One journalist, Jerry Mitchell, an unassuming reporter in his 40's at the Clarion Ledger in Jackson, Mississippi, wrote the stories that led to every one of those convictions. For 15 years, he has worked fulltime on solving the murders of civil rights workers that took place in the South in the early 1960s.

His work started with a leak and with the movie Mississippi Burning in 1989. Jerry saw the movie and thought something should happen to the people who had done those crimes. He recently told Terry Gross on NPR's Fresh Air: "I realized that these things were going on when I was a kid, and that I had no idea they were going on. I realized that if we are not paying attention to what is going on we can be misled and be totally in the dark." He decided that as a journalist he

would try to make it impossible for other people to be in the dark about that awful part of history.

He started by trying to get documents from the archived files of the Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, but they were sealed. The commission had been established as a reaction to Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, to defend Mississippi against any efforts to integrate schools or any other aspect of Mississippi life. It was created by the legislature and run by successive governors to maintain a police state atmosphere. It worked hand in hand with law enforcement agencies, with White Citizen Councils and the Klu Klux Klan. All of its records were secret, even after the Commission ceased to exist in the 1970's. Confidential sources started to leak commission documents to Mitchell. They contained explosive secrets that led Mitchell to some of the murderers.

In addition to his formidable skills as an investigative reporter, Jerry Mitchell's white skin has been a great advantage. When Terry Gross expressed surprise on Fresh Air at the amazing things that these killers have told Mitchell, at first he said, "I don't know why they talk to me." Then he suggested that it was because "I am the opposite of Mike Wallace. I don't come on very aggressive at people. .You know, everyone wants to tell their story, even Klansmen." Reflecting more about why they talk to him, even though each successive one has known that talking to Mitchell could lead to being charged with murder, he said, "I pass their test. I'm white, I'm Southern and I'm a Christian. They think that means I agree with them."

He has documented their lies, permanently punctured alibis that could have been punctured 40 years ago, but no journalist and no lawyer had asked the right questions -- for years because they didn't want to, then, for many more years because no one thought of doing so. Malignant neglect over the years seemed to turn to benign neglect. Mitchell has sat and listened to their hateful, racist stories, knowing his endurance might pay off.

Long ago, Mitchell and his wife came to expect the death threats that have been directed at them and their children. “That just goes with the territory when you do this kind of work,” he says. He’s usually been willing to meet these unusual sources wherever they want to meet, but he drew the line when Byron de la Beckwith, who later was convicted of murdering Medgar Evers, said sure, he’d meet with Mitchell. He asked Mitchell to meet him at de la Beckwith’s home at night. Instead, Mitchell took him for a catfish lunch in a restaurant in broad daylight. As Mitchell was leaving him that day, de la Beckwith warned him that if he wrote negative stories about white Christians, God would punish him and, if God didn’t punish him, there were white Christians around who would punish him.

Mitchell continues to work fulltime on these unsolved civil rights murders. He’s worried that time is running out as the perpetrators become older. When he was honored with the John Chancellor award in November, key people were present to express their gratitude to this extraordinary journalist: Myrlie Evers, the widow of Medgar Evers; Carolyn Goodman, mother of Andrew Goodman, and siblings of James Chaney. In the formal presentation, he was described as someone who “shows courage, integrity, curiosity and intelligence and epitomizes the role of journalism in a free society.” That seemed to be putting it mildly.

Few journalists can match the great accomplishments of Jerry Mitchell, but many people are doing remarkable journalism today, shedding light on very important information the public needs and often appreciates.

Many of you are engaged in good journalism yourselves. I understand good journalism and the spirit of good journalism were very much in evidence last week at the New California Media – about to become New America Media -- annual awards gathering. If only we could clone NCM’s Sandy Close, the woman of one good idea after another about what to do next to improve journalism. She

has done so much – created outlets and forums for ethnic news media, connected ethnic news media to each other, opened the eyes of mainstream journalists to the importance of ethnic news media.

In the past year I've found much journalism worth celebrating. After looking at some aspects of journalism fairly closely in recent months, I've concluded there is probably more great investigative journalism taking place now than at any previous time. It's also true in documentary film. If Edward R. Murrow could drop in today, I think he would be amazed by not only the high quality but also the large quantity of excellent documentary work being done – not by the networks, but by a growing community of independent documentary makers whose films are shown on cable, in theaters and soon will be shown on the internet. Some of it is being done here by the Center for Investigative Reporting, which has developed unique multimedia skills in telling stories for all forms of delivery. Much of the documentary work being done today is better than anything Murrow, our idol, ever imagined doing. There's no reason to act as though everything good happened in the good old days. Much of the good journalism being done today exceeds in quality and impact the journalism of any previous generation. It's deeper journalism, and it is published in a much wider array of outlets.

Much of the best journalism done today is about issues that probably all of in this room would consider extremely important. The stories are about justice issues, often ones that involve race and ethnicity. Here are a few examples:

- Reporters in Baltimore discovered, as the result of extensive research, and wrote eloquently about the injustices and poverty experienced by more than 2,000 children in Baltimore who are pretty much raising themselves in the poorest sections of that city.

- Reporters in Daytona Beach, FL, documented copiously and carefully the much greater levels of punishment applied to African American young people than are applied to white young people for same actions.
- Rick Tulsy last week at the San Jose Mercury News wrote a series that revealed serious errors in the criminal justice system that worked against defendants in Santa Clara County. The project involved reviewing the records of each of the 727 cases that were appealed in the California 6th District Court of Appeal. There was an immediate large public response. Someone had to be assigned to transcribe the hundreds of callers' messages, many of them about problems they had with the criminal justice system.
- Michael Moss, who studied journalism in this department and is an investigative reporter at the New York Times, has written one story after another detailing the failure of the military to provide body armor for the troops in Iraq, as well as the failure to provide rather simple, sturdy armor for their vehicles. One story began: "The war in Iraq was hardly a month old in April 2003 when an Army general threw the brakes on buying bulletproof vests." That was the minimum armor they needed. Michael stayed with this important story, watch dogging the twists and turns in how the richest country on earth made bureaucratic mistake after mistake in responding to what should have been regarded as an emergency that required immediate attention. At one point he found that the contract for manufacturing body armor was given to a former Army researcher who had never mass-produced anything. Not surprisingly, the man was unable to do so. By the time that became clear, several months and many lives were lost. At one point, U.S. allies from other countries asked the Pentagon for body armor for their troops. Upon being told they would have to wait until all American soldiers had been supplied, these European Allies by-passed the Pentagon and found a company in Michigan that

made and delivered the armor to the Allied soldiers in 12 days. The results of this mindless bureaucratic handling of these orders were predictable. Michael acquired the documentary evidence of the key result a month ago and reported it: A secret Pentagon study found that as many as 80 percent of the Marines who have been killed in Iraq from wounds to the upper body could have survived if they had had the proper body armor. "Such armor has been available since 2003," Michael wrote in that story a month ago, but the Pentagon has largely declined to supply it to troops despite calls from the field for additional protection, according to military officials." Finally, on January 21, he was able to report: "Under pressure to speed the delivery of armor to troops in Iraq, the United States Army has awarded an emergency contract for ceramic plates to protect the sides of soldiers' torsos from insurgents' attacks, military officials said yesterday." In 2006, three years after the war started.

Other examples of the fine journalism being done today:

- Reporters in Chicago documented the shocking fact that in that city African Americans who make \$90,000 a year are less likely to get mortgages than white buyers who make \$30,000 a year. That story was done by young journalists of color who work at the Chicago Reporter, a publication and website founded more than 30 years ago by a community wide religious organization specifically to teach and use the skills of investigative reporting to report poverty and race stories not being reported by the mainstream news media in Chicago. Throughout its history, the Chicago Reporter has done fine reporting and served as a friendly alert system to the Chicago mainstream news media about what's missing in its coverage. This small operation also continuously teaches new interns, nearly all of whom are students of color, the skills of investigative reporting.

- The Chicago Tribune, while being squeezed mercilessly by economic problems, has done some of the greatest reporting ever done about the criminal justice system. Since 1999, a team of investigative reporters there has written series after series about the death penalty. They absorbed massive volumes of records and created databases in order to do comparative analysis of the records of the cases of every one of the 285 prisoners on Illinois' death row. They discovered that some of the people on death row were wrongly charged and these people were released. In some of this research, they were assisted by journalism students at Northwestern University. Their multiple series eventually led to a moratorium on executions in the state, a change in public attitude in Illinois regarding the death penalty and, the investigative reporters believe, a more questioning and less accepting attitude among journalists as they cover criminal justice on a daily basis.

It's impossible to celebrate new developments in journalism today without celebrating some organizations that work effectively to increase the skills and maintain public service values of journalism. I think IRE, Investigative Reporters and Editors, tops the list. It's been around since 1975, so long that it is almost taken for granted. But it has matured way beyond what it used to be. It's always served good purposes. But there was a widespread perception that a lot of investigative reporters in those early years of IRE were a little too interested in gotcha journalism without a lot of regard for the importance of the wrongdoing they had found, or without placing the wrongdoing in a context that explained why it was important.

Without much fanfare or money, IRE has been changing and, as a result, so has investigative journalism. Driven by the values of its 5,000 members, IRE has helped expand the concept of investigative reporting to be primarily reporting about injustice and conducting research in ways that evaluate whole systems. For instance, without the document and database search skills taught by IRE,

racial profiling stories probably would not have been written. Racial profiling, now recognized as an important issue in many parts of the country, would have continued to be perceived as a figment of the “too sensitive” imaginations of people of color rather than the widespread reality it is now widely known to be.

Before reporters had the ability to search and create databases – and use the FOIA effectively – reporters could gather powerful human stories about injustice from sources and write emotionally compelling stories. But people in charge of the organizations or systems they investigated often could get away with saying, “You were unfair. Somebody told you about our five worst cases. There’s no real problem. You are being sensationalist.” Now a reporter can use database reporting followed by extensive depth interviews with people affected by the problems revealed in the data and write stories that are very difficult, if not impossible, to refute. This kind of journalism, which IRE now helps develop throughout the world, provides the evidence that can give affected people information they can use to seek justice.....to become active citizens. IRE is ready to expand. Some bloggers, for instance, want IRE to help them learn the skills of investigative research and transition from opinion journalism to verification journalism. IRE also would like to work with ethnic news organizations.

There *is* much to lament. We do need to rebuild our damaged reputation. New stable economic models are critically needed in news organizations, but they may not emerge quickly in the present rather chaotic shifts taking place in journalism organizations.

Nevertheless, as many fine journalists, including Jerry Mitchell, have shown, great journalism that serves the public interest is alive and well. We need to do everything we can to keep it alive and well -- serving the public interest, helping people become informed and active citizens.

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For text of Jerry Mitchell's speech accepting The John Chancellor Award for Excellence in Journalism, November 29, 2005, at the Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University, New York, NY:

www.jrn.columbia.edu/events/chancellor/media/2005-speech-mitchell.asp