



Elusive Story:
The *Chicago Tribune* Examines “No Child Left Behind”
Epilogue

Towards the end of April 2004, *Chicago Tribune* reporter Stephanie Banchemo was finally able to speak to Yolanda Carwell one-on-one about what would be in the story on her 3rd-grade daughter, Rayola. Together, they went over what Banchemo considered the most important details. Adhering to journalistic norms, Banchemo did not give Carwell a copy of the story, but she did emphasize that she would describe the school transfer and her children’s absence from school. Carwell seemed unconcerned. Reminded that Rayola and her brothers had missed 60 days of school, “[Carwell] was like, ‘Oh yeah, that’s true,’” recalls Banchemo.

Seeing it in print. The first part of Banchemo’s story, titled “One girl’s struggle to find a future,” which focused on Rayola’s time at Stockton, was slated to run on Sunday, July 18, 2004. An early edition of the Sunday paper hit the streets on Saturday, as it always does. That day, Banchemo took that edition to Carwell’s house. Banchemo asked Carwell to look over the story and call her with any concerns. This, Banchemo thought, would give Carwell just enough time to provide feedback before the final Sunday edition. She phoned Carwell later that evening to check, but Carwell was not home, so Banchemo left a message. Banchemo did not hear back from Carwell.

The following day, Monday, July 19, the second chapter, “Falling back,” appeared on Page One. It described a sleepy Rayola struggling to keep up in Judy Fromm’s classroom, as well as the meeting between Carwell and the Stockton principal, when the principal asked why the children had missed so much school.

As her editors had advised, Banchemo portrayed Carwell accurately as overwhelmed. “She has spent 15 years meandering from one low-paying job to the next,” Banchemo wrote. “Carwell learned life lessons the hard way, refusing to listen to those who loved her and picking the paths that she says were—in hindsight—clearly the wrong ones.” She also mentioned that Carwell was evicted from public housing and, despite enrolling in GED classes three times, had yet to complete a full course. “I start something and then can never finish it,” Carwell said in the article. Despite the fact that “she preaches to her children about doing well in school and going to college,”

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Banchero wrote, “Carwell deflects blame for her children's missed schooling. She complains that she gets little help from their fathers and says she is too exhausted after work to fight to get the children in bed.” Though “Falling back” portrayed Carwell’s struggles, it also noted positive characteristics about Carwell—her “soft eyes” and “a warm, easy smile.”¹

Finally, late on Monday afternoon, Carwell called. She sounded upset. She charged that Banchero had printed lies about her, and threatened to sue. “She just went ballistic on me,” Banchero recalls.² Carwell was especially angry at the mention of her inability to complete her GED, and her expulsion from public housing, though Banchero had the documents to prove the eviction. Carwell felt Banchero could have written more “good things” about her. “You were with me for nine months,” she told Banchero. “Didn’t I have any redeeming qualities?” Banchero was sorry Carwell did not feel her positive attributes had come across in the story:

Obviously if you look at her kids, they're respectful, they're well dressed, they're polite, they're loving. How did they get to be that way? I mean, she raised those children. They didn't just become that. She was a very loving mom, there's no question in my mind.

Carwell also asked why Banchero had described her multiple efforts to study for the GED, without mentioning that she had in fact received the equivalency diploma. On this point, Banchero resolved to try again to verify that Carwell had earned her GED. If she could find proof, Banchero would add it to the third chapter of the series. Since there were a couple of hours left before that chapter went to press ahead of Tuesday’s publication, Banchero set out to do just that.

With Papajohn’s encouragement, Banchero frantically called every source she could think of—“rattling trees and cashing in all my chits”—in order to track down proof of Carwell’s GED.³ Finally, Banchero convinced a source in the Illinois state government to look up the information. Carwell, the source said, had not passed the GED exam. The third chapter would have to go to press unchanged.

Banchero called Carwell back to give her a chance to comment. Because the information had come from a confidential source, Banchero could not say outright that she knew Carwell had flunked the exam. Instead, she asked Carwell if she could produce proof of her diploma. If so, Banchero said, she would include it in the third and last chapter of the story. Carwell simply hung up. Banchero never heard from the Carwells again.

Well-received. The story about Rayola Carwell and her experience drew widespread attention. After the series’ publication, Banchero was flooded with over 200 emails and a few

¹ Stephanie Banchero, “Chapter Two: Falling back,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 2004.

² Author’s interview with Stephanie Banchero, November 8, 2008, in Palo Alto, CA. All further quotes from Banchero, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

³ Email from Stephanie Banchero to author, April 7, 2009.

dozen phone calls from readers, education policy researchers, and Chicago Public School and federal officials. The Projects Team editors also received scores of letters and phone calls. The overwhelming majority praised the articles. Some readers wrote in with offers of financial aid to the Carwell family and Attucks Elementary. One reader offered the Carwells a new home.

Banchero's series on Rayola and the difficulties of implementing the NCLB choice provision went on to win several awards. In 2004, Banchero won an award from the Chicago Headline Club for in-depth reporting. The following year, she won first place in special projects from the national Education Writers Association, and a first-place writing award from the Missouri School of Journalism, as well as a Casey Medal honorable mention.