

“I felt like Kermit the Frog on Sesame Street when he plays a reporter, just bopping along.”

Journalist Curtis Lawrence, now 61, was interviewing people in Rock Island, Illinois for a man-on-the street story about the prospect of Martin Luther King Jr’s birthday becoming a national holiday when something unexpected happened. He approached a group of men walking out of a bar. “I wanted to get some white voices in the story, not just talk to black people,” he remembers. “This guy... he went off on me. He was screaming, and drunk, and enraged. I turned around and my photographer was across the street!”

Though there wasn’t a term for it then, he was trying to “cover [his] faultlines.” This is the journalistic practice of reaching out across demographics to get a diversity of stories. It doesn’t always work, but it’s always worth attempting. It’s something that Lawrence, an associate professor at Columbia, tries to instill in his students, whether he’s teaching College Newspaper Workshop or advising the Chronicle.

Lawrence’s own career began at the paper he wrote the King story for. He grew up on the south side of Chicago and attended “predominately white” Augustana College. During his senior year, he was recruited by a political science professor who was looking to hire a black student for an internship at the local paper. He got the internship, and after that was hired at the Rock Island Argus. “Looking back, that totally changed my life,” he said.

Soon after, another opportunity came his way. A friend approached him about writing for the town's black newspaper, the Cash Register. "I would write for the black newspaper under another name," he recalls. The Cash Register covered issues in the black community, "issues that they felt weren't being covered by the mainstream paper." Helping the Argus cross their faultlines, the types of stories he did for the Register were sometimes the same ones he did at the Argus. "I really wanted to write about black people's lives, so as much as I could at the Argus, I wrote about black people too."

Since then, Lawrence has worked in newsrooms across the Midwest but now resides in Chicago. Even when he left the field, working at the Institute for Food and Development Policy the Chicago City Council, he always kept a focus on inclusion.

These days, Lawrence is working on the Antiracism Transformation Team at Columbia as a fellow, a new group which seeks to look at "racist structures" at the school and create antiracist structures in its place. For his part, Lawrence works to make the Chronicle diverse and representative of the student body. "It's not something you ever fix," he says. "I think it's a work in progress, and I think we're doing a good job of addressing it. Not fixing it, but addressing it."