By Matt DeYoung/Grand Haven Tribune
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A newspaper editor, a television reporter and a longtime journalism teacher gathered to discuss racism and the media during a virtual town hall meeting earlier this week.

Monday’s event was the second in a series of forums hosted by the Anti-Racism Task Force and The Momentum Center in Grand Haven.

C.E. Sikkenga, who teaches journalism and heads up the Bucs’ Blade student newspaper staff at Grand Haven High School, said he’s seen a change in student perspectives in the nearly 30 years he’s been teaching.

“When I started, I don’t know the exact statistics, but I believe Grand Haven High School was 95 percent or higher white,” he said. “That number is considerably different now. Kids in their day-to-day lives are experiencing much more diversity and much more curiosity, and it’s been very positive. I’ve been involved in Grand Haven High School most of my life, and not to say racism isn’t a persistent problem in the school and the community, but I think kids today are definitely more curious, more tolerant and more interested.”

Sikkenga said that as he looked back over the in-depth projects his staff has worked on over the years, none dealt directly with race and racism.
He added that some of the in-depth features his staff works on could take up to five months to complete. One example was a project focusing on refugee students in the school.

Kylie Ambu, a news anchor for WZZM-TV, is part of that station’s Diversity and Inclusion Task Force. She talked about the three areas that are considered in the task force: representation, relationship and response.

Ambu, an Asian American, said news outlets need to be cognizant of the image they portray when they cover various communities.

“We have to ask ourselves – are we only going to this community when negative things happen?” she said. “We need to be really mindful that when we cover negativity in communities of color, those judgments last for years. What we need to be doing is creating a balancing act. Yes, something negative may have happened in that community, but there’s a family that’s adopting, a foster family of six – we need to tell that great story. There’s a backpack drive for kids – we need to tell that great story.”

Ambu said it’s difficult forging relationships in communities that feel they’ve been misrepresented by the media over the years.

“There’s such a distrust right now between the media and the public right now,” she said. “When you go into communities who have long felt misrepresented by the media, it really is on us as journalists to mend those relationships – to reach out our hands and say, ‘You can trust me, and I’ll prove it. I’ll share your story.’”

Sarah Leach is the executive editor of The Holland Sentinel and the Ionia Sentinel-Standard. She moved to West Michigan about 20 years ago.

“I grew up on the east side of the state in a community with a broad wealth of diversity,” she said. “When I moved here 20 years ago, it struck me as nice and quaint, it’s beautiful. But it does not have a lot of diversity, and watching that struggle over the time I’ve spent here – especially working in media – has been challenging. One of the things that newspapers find themselves in the middle of is trying to reconcile a community’s struggle with itself.”
“We have seen this summer a lot of issues surrounding racism and BLM movements, and not always what you think they might be,” she said. “There are people who really do not want this to happen. They don’t want to think about it, don’t want to talk about it and they don’t want to read about it.

“We find ourselves in this position where we have an obligation to bring this information to the readership, to tell them what’s going on in our community because ultimately that is our purpose,” she added. “But then you have to figure out how to engage that community because they’re also your readers.”

Leach said she and her staff spend a lot of time considering the list of eight news values – impact, weight, timeliness, prominence, proximity, the conflict, novelty and usefulness.

“When we’re looking at stories, we ask: How many people does it effect? How close is it to the area we serve? And whether or not it’s unique,” she explained. “Those are all things we look at when evaluating things to cover. We don’t pick and choose something in particular about race unless we feel it’s something … that people will find interesting and will resonate with people.”

Barbara VanHorssen, director of The Momentum Center, said the November town hall on racism will focus on ethnic intimidation. More information on that event can be found online at www.momentumcenter.org.

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