

Ben Johnson's NEW BEAT

Story by MARY VERMILION
Photos by JEFF ADAMS

If running a newspaper were like playing poker—and some folks would say journalists and card sharks are both shrewd characters—then Ben Johnson is raising his bet. And it's not a bluff.

"Ben is the only person in a poker game who would raise on the first hand," says Byron Scott, describing the *Columbia Missourian's* new managing editor. "He wants to take the first step."

Scott, the Meredith chair in service journalism, led the search committee that recommended Johnson as one of two finalists for the ME post. Dean James Atwater chose Johnson, and on Oct. 12, he became the first black managing editor in the paper's 79-year history, replacing Brian Brooks, who had been in the slot since 1983. Brooks now coordinates the school's copy editing courses and directs computer development.

With 15 years of journalistic experience and a passion for the job, Johnson is confident of his hand.

He's betting the paper will increase circulation from 6,000 to 10,000. A new design, in the works before he took charge, may help. The *Missourian's* new look includes a more modern masthead to replace the traditional gothic-style banner, and the paper is using spot color and four-color photographs.

He also plans to improve coverage of local events, increase background information on major issues and enhance continuity at the paper. That's not an easy task with a reporting staff that turns over five times a year. Regardless, he wants the student reporters to tackle stories aggressively and not fall behind the competition.

As ME, Johnson, the *St. Louis-Post-Dispatch* distinguished professor, calls the shots. He decides what will make today's headlines. Faculty members serve as beat editors; students are assistant city editors and photo editors. Magazine and news-editorial students pound the pavement for stories.

Johnson praises his reporters' work on the Chief Bill Dye story. When the local police chief, who is black, was fired this fall, hundreds of Columbians demanded to know why. "We were all over that story," he says. "We put our mark on it."

The firing fueled charges of racism. The *Missourian* covered the issue from several angles, giving voice, Johnson says, to a new leadership. "People are standing up to say, 'You can't do that,'" he says. "The paper is writing about issues such as that and will continue to do so as long as I'm here."

That desire to act, not observe, reflects in his career decision. "It sounds corny in these days, but I wanted to make a difference in the world or at least the portion of it that my paper serves," he says. "Journalism is a good way to change the status quo as long as you don't expect to change things overnight. It has to be a commitment that lasts a lifetime."

For Johnson, the commitment to journalism began at an early age. As a child in Louisville, Ky., the avid reader won an essay contest in the sixth grade and continued to reap glowing comments about his writing ability. After leaving the Marines in 1970, he talked his way into a \$75-a-week job at the *Louisville Defender*.

"I was so happy to be working at the paper that I didn't even ask how much I would be paid," he remembers. "I found that out when I got my first paycheck." He moved to a house three blocks away from the *Defender* and was convinced he would stay there, close to the paper, for the rest of his life. His success as a reporter saw him move on to other papers and to

get a degree in journalism.

"I've stumbled and made my mistakes," he says, "but I've never regretted my decision to become a journalist." Through the years, he has learned that perseverance pays off and that no one ever said life is fair. "I thought everything would accrue to you because you had the skills," he says. "But color is a factor." He calls himself a bulldog. And his tenacity has made him a success.

His resume attests to his years as a front-line journalist. He received journalism training as a Marine at Fort Benjamin, Ind., and learned combat correspondence at Camp Pendleton, Calif. He later worked as a reporter, photographer or editor at the *Defender*, Louisville's *Courier-Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and Gary, Ind.'s *Post-Tribune*. Then came a six-year stint as reporter, assistant city editor and assistant to the managing editor at the *Detroit Free Press*.

"Ben cares mightily about what he is doing," says Dave Lawrence, *Free Press* publisher, who was executive editor during Johnson's years there. "He is ethical and a strong reporter who works extremely hard." Lawrence recalls Johnson's dogged pursuit of a story about Charles Jones, a black Michigan resident who was held captive longer than other black prisoners during the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979. The Iranians suspected Jones, a high-ranking security administration official, was a spy.

"No one else could get close to that family, but Ben hung on until he got the story. It was impressive," Lawrence says.

Along with tenacity, Johnson has a potent concern for issues affecting minority people. He is adamant that papers can help improve race relations through sensitive reporting or small changes such as adding a black comic strip to the cartoon page, which he did at the *Missourian*. He and his wife, Esther, a historian, co-wrote *Who's What and Where, a Directory of Minority Journalists in America*.

He has been called overly race sensitive. "I am. I plead guilty," he says. "That's the little extra you get when you hire a non-traditional managing editor. I'm not going to cover just the stereotypical news stories. We'll jump in and cover stories as journalists should—completely and

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

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Ashcroft seeks a tenfold boost in AIDS funding

By BRADY BOKER
The Justice Department is seeking a tenfold increase in federal funding for the fight against AIDS, a move that would bring the program's budget to \$1 billion, according to a report in the Wall Street Journal.

The Justice Department's request is part of a broader effort to increase federal spending on health care. The department is asking for a total of \$1.5 billion for health care programs, including a \$1 billion increase for AIDS.

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154 school children overcome by fumigation

By BRADY BOKER
Fumigation of a school building in St. Louis has left 154 children and teachers with respiratory ailments, according to a report in the Wall Street Journal.

The fumigation was conducted to eliminate a pest infestation. However, the use of fumigants has caused a variety of health problems, including coughing, wheezing, and difficulty breathing.

The school district is now working to identify the children who were affected and provide them with medical care. The incident has raised concerns about the safety of fumigation in schools.



Furniture store to move to Parkade Plaza

Dollar rises; stocks climb

The dollar rose and stocks climbed today, according to a report in the Wall Street Journal.

The dollar's value increased against the yen and the mark. The S&P 500 index rose by 15 points, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average gained 20 points.

The rise in the dollar and stocks is attributed to a combination of factors, including a strong economic outlook and a decline in oil prices.

INSIDE

■ **INSIDE**
A look at the city's new mayor, Johnson, and his plans for the future. Includes a photo of Johnson.

BRIEFLY

■ **BRIEFLY**
Would-be robber picks wrong woman
PTL paid \$363,700 to keep Katin quiet
City deporting 60 annoying deer

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City deporting 60 annoying deer

As ME, Johnson brings new ideas. The *Missourian* has seen other changes, too. Its redesign is shown in this page negative.

objectively. There are a lot of reasons to cover minority issues, but if for no other reason, we should do so to report America as it really is, both its strengths and its weaknesses."

His interest in ensuring that minority groups have a voice in the newsroom brought Johnson to Mizzou in 1986 to direct the School of Journalism's new multicultural management program. The *Detroit Free Press* gave him an open-ended leave of absence to get the program on its feet. [Ester Johnson now serves as interim director of the program until a new director is named.]

Search committee leader Scott was surprised when Johnson withdrew from the committee and added his name to the list of candidates for managing editor. "I assumed he would be returning to Detroit where he had a future in management," Scott says. "But Ben doesn't like to see a problem that isn't being solved. He saw our problem in the initial stages of the search when we couldn't find qualified minority candidates. In the end, we had several, but not in the beginning. Ben solved that problem by calling his own name."

Dean Atwater says the school actively recruited minority applicants for the post because, "We are conscious of the need to get minorities and women into power positions. It does an enormous amount for our diversity as a school and lends different points of view. It also grants visibility to minority faculty members, which encourages role models for our minority students."

Critics claim that Johnson's lack of academic credentials is a mark against him. To that, he says, "I'd like to have a master's, too. But while others were getting their degrees, I was out working." Johnson graduated in 1975 with a bachelor's degree in journalism

from Lincoln University in Jefferson City. "I'm aware of the value of a degree," he says. "But I think the total package makes me the perfect person for the job."

Students will vouch for that. His office door is open to the shouts, telephone rings and general confusion of the newsroom. Students are always welcome.

"He's cooperative and outgoing and leads students to resources," says Diane Boothe, a junior magazine major from Highland Heights, Ky., and a *Missourian* business reporter. "He's a joy as a person and a teacher. He helped me get through the rough stages. No other teacher takes as much time to work with students or pay them compliments as Ben does."

Johnson makes it known that he is reading their stories. He tacks copies of the paper to the newsroom bulletin boards with comments scrawled in black marker. "Good job." "What happened here?"

His goals for his student reporters harken back to his own dreams as a journalist. "I want them to know how to write a good story," he says. "I want them to be able to process information in a way that will impact the community in which they live and work."

He's watching them as they develop. And he's aware that eyes are on him, too. "Alumni are concerned about the *Missourian*. I'm not a traditional managing editor, so it will take some time to trust me," he says. "It's kind of like living life in the fish bowl. That's not fair. But whoever said it would be fair."

"If I do well, there is an extra reward for me knowing that so many people are watching to say, 'Hey, he did OK.'"

This is no bluff, says the *Missourian*'s new ME. "I know I will succeed." □

Endowments underwrite EXCELLENCE

Accepting an endowed chair is akin to stepping into a "warm spotlight," says Byron Scott, who holds the Meredith endowed chair in service journalism. "It's not a form of retirement. Leadership and continued accomplishment are definitely a part of it."

That place in the spotlight brings some extra cash, but padding professors' pocketbooks is not the intent of Mizzou's endowed chairs and professorships.

"The purpose is to recruit or retain eminent quality faculty, not to supplement salaries," says Dr. Gerald Brouder, deputy to the chancellor. "Endowments enrich the intellectual environment of the Campus. The stipends are thought of as incentives."

Former University President James Olson revitalized the endowment program in 1981. In recent years it has become a popular choice of donors.

As of Dec. 18, 1987, there are 58 endowed chairs and professorships at Mizzou. Interest gained from start-up amounts typically pays the stipends, which are added to the recipients' University salaries. In some cases, the endowment pays the entire salary.

To create an endowed chair, \$1.1 million is needed, the interest from which makes available up to \$55,000 as an annual stipend to the faculty member. Distinguished professorships require a \$220,000 commitment, with an \$11,000 yearly stipend. And named professorships need a \$110,000 commitment, with a \$5,000 annual stipend for the faculty member. Distinguished lectureships require \$440,000, providing \$22,000 yearly.

To reach an endowment goal, various sources are solicited, including businesses, industry and estates.

Department chairmen and divisional deans recommend a faculty member for the post. After the provost reviews the recommendation, the chancellor may approve the appointment. "The selection is rigorous," Brouder says. "Often there are only a few faculty members who qualify because of the endowment qualifications." Once an appointment is made, the title may stay in place or a new faculty member may be selected every few years. For example, the managing editor of the *Columbia Missourian* inherits the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* distinguished professorship.

Brouder says the University is increasing its efforts to recruit endowment donations, especially as the University approaches its sesquicentennial in 1989. As the University reviews the past 150 years and considers the future, such endowments are one way to ensure Mizzou's academic excellence.

—Mary Vermillion

Johnson likes to get in the trenches with the reporters. In the newsroom, he posts comments on *Missourian* stories.

