Pictured: Miko Beach (Photo: Ray Nunzi.)

STORIES OF
ATLANTIC CITY

These are the Stories of Atlantic City communities.

fathers.
mothers.
teachers.
residents
students
tenants.
artists.
clergy.

Executive summary

Stories of Atlantic City is a restorative narrative collaborative reporting project that combined a group of community members with the media to tell untold stories. It was the first of its kind in the country, a unique effort that put the power of story selection squarely in the hands of the community.

Why restorative narrative? Atlantic City has been through a spate of high-profile troubles over the last decade, including a steep economic downturn amid a wave of casino closures. Restorative narrative is a journalistic method of going deeper into communities that have experienced such trauma to find stories of resilience and strength.

In that regard, Atlantic City was the perfect candidate for such a project. Additionally, groundwork had already been laid in the city that would ultimately underpin the project's success: Relationships between community members and the media that were spurred in part by the work of Free Press's News Voices program. News Voices is a project to better connect journalists and the community, and it first came to Atlantic City in 2015.

The Stories of Atlantic City project was simple: A group of community members agreed to scour Atlantic City for untold stories of resilience and strength, and a group of media members agreed to tell those stories. This itself is unusual, that journalists agreed to tell the stories selected by the community.

The project began with a restorative narrative workshop in September 2018 and evolved over the course of several conference calls and email strings. The NJ Community News and Information Fund at the Community Foundation of New Jersey, a partnership of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, committed funding to the project. The financial support was instrumental in getting the project off the ground.

After that, Free Press coordinated the group of engaged community members and the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University coordinated the media partners; Stockton University managed most of the budget and brought student journalists to the effort.

Stories of Atlantic City culminated with the publication of eight stories and a community launching party in May 2019. The results were powerful and the creators plan to continue the effort in Atlantic City and take the concept to other communities across the U.S.

Project background

Before jumping into how the Stories of Atlantic City project came to be, it's important to set the scene regarding the news and information landscape of New Jersey.

Information ecosystems are broadly defined as "a loose, dynamic configuration of different sources, flows, producers, consumers, and sharers of information interacting within a defined community or space." (Internews, 2015)

Within information ecosystems, the news industry is being replaced by news ecosystems. The Local News Lab, a project of Democracy Fund, writes that "this new landscape is made up of many players and many ways of meeting the information needs of communities. The ecosystem is strongest when the various pieces work together, interdependent, building on each other's work." (Local News Lab)

The state of New Jersey is singular in that it has one of the most well-developed and intentionally supported news and information ecosystems in the United States. Notably, this has largely been driven by philanthropic investment from the journalism programs of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and Democracy Fund. Those foundations, over the course of the last decade, have combined to support various individuals, news organizations and projects, as well as the state's central news ecosystem infrastructure, the NJ News Commons network. Dozens of journalism organizations and individual journalists are connected through the NJ News Commons, which is a networked infrastructure housed at the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University. The Center, via the NJ News Commons, has provided centralized coaching, training, support, communication, research, project management and sometimes funding for its 280 members since 2012.

One of the other active members of the New Jersey news ecosystem has been the advocacy organization Free Press. Its work in the state has largely been tied to its News Voices program, which was launched by Mike Rispoli in New Jersey in 2015. News Voices is an initiative that seeks to "build power with communities so residents have a stronger voice in how local journalism can be revived, strengthened and transformed." (News Voices) It is most well known for the community forums it organized around the state, events that brought together community members with journalists to talk about local issues and look for opportunities to work together.

One of the first places News Voices began to work alongside community members was Atlantic City. Changing narratives and strengthening local news was appealing to city residents, given how Atlantic City had a national profile and people felt that stories about the community primarily focused on the casino industry, a "bust" local economy, and political corruption.

In December 2015, News Voices held a forum that brought together residents and local journalists to help them build relationships and uncover stories that better represented the people of the city. What came up, time and again, was that despite hardships, people in the city shared a strong bond with one another, were desperate to see more solutions presented in news coverage, and were willing to work together to, as one resident said, "make Atlantic City rise like a phoenix."

"The restorative narrative process begins to open up a whole other perspective in thinking about how you report on communities."
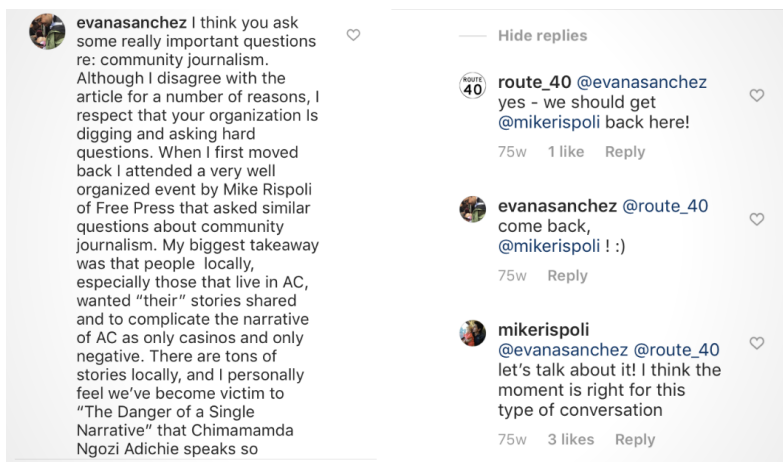
Belinda Manning
Interviewee

After that event, attempts were made by News Voices to get various projects off the ground but nothing stuck. Over the course of two years, Rispoli kept in touch with people in Atlantic City, including Evan Sanchez, a developer and entrepreneur in the city.

In March 2018, the local media outlet Route 40 wrote a story that asked tough questions about a development project and whether it had succeeded in its goals. Some

Evan Sanchez suggests launching a restorative narrative collaboration in Atlantic City in 2015 in the comments of Route 40's Instagram post. (Screenshot.).
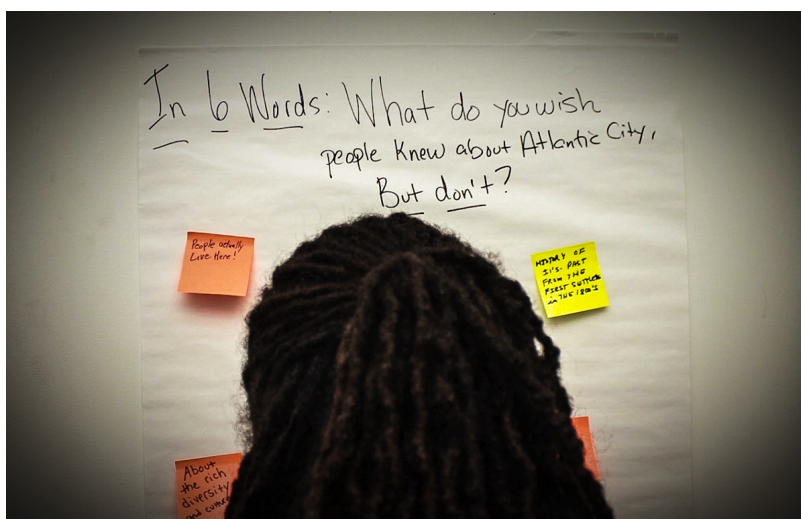
community members felt the story was not supportive of the city, and Route 40 took it as an opportunity to engage people in a conversation about the role of local journalism and what other types of coverage Atlantic City residents wanted to see. Sanchez, citing the News Voices event in 2015, asked Route 40 about bringing Rispoli and Free Press back to the city to have another community discussion about local news coverage of the city.

Rispoli, Sanchez, and Route 40 editor Elinor Comlay connected and began planning a project in the city that would find ways for city residents to better connect with journalists and see themselves reflected in local news coverage. After that conversation, Mike Rispoli reached out to Stefanie Murray and Joe Amditis at the Center for Cooperative Media in the summer of 2018.

Knowing that the Center had strong contacts with media organizations around the state, Rispoli proposed the idea of working together on a workshop,

An attendee at a community listening event answers in six words or less, the question: "What do you wish people knew about Atlantic City, but don't?" (Photo: Ray Nunzi.)

training event, or forum that would bring community members and journalists together in Atlantic City, with the hope that it would lead to some kind of collaborative effort or partnership. Rispoli proposed making restorative narrative a focus of the gathering. The term restorative narrative is a genre of journalism created by Images of Voices & Hope (IVOH) that specifically targets communities experiencing adversity. The idea is to tell the deeper stories of people and their communities by exhibiting their strengths and resilience. This type of storytelling gives a voice to those who are typically overlooked and captures their strength, potential and growth. Additionally, restorative narrative paints a more authentic and holistic picture, rather than only highlighting the broken areas of societies. (Cohen 2018; Damen 2016)

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Atlantic City has certainly been experiencing adversity. The beleaguered city's struggles are well known even outside of New Jersey, as it suffered a severe economic downturn over the last decade as five of its 12 casinos shut down, 11,000 jobs were lost and the state of New Jersey took over its finances.

The restorative narrative workshop was set for Sept. 20, 2018, at the Carnegie Center, part of Stockton University's Atlantic City campus.

Twenty-five people registered for that workshop. Ilsa Flanagan, who was then the executive director of IVOH, flew from Chicago to New Jersey to facilitate the event. In addition to instruction on the background and use of restorative narrative, Flanagan orchestrated ideation among the participants.

In an email exchange with participants after that September workshop, Evan Sanchez proposed the idea that became Stories of Atlantic City:

> *"One of my main takeaways from one of the "breakout" conversations was working collaboratively to create a mini-series of short, restorative narratives ... nothing major in terms of volume – maybe 5-10 stories – all branded under some series name.*
>
> *I spoke with the team at the Leadership Studio that also attended the event, and they would love to host this series meaning interviews could be conducted there, a little "reception" could be held there to announce the series, could help source stories, etc.*
>
> *The idea would be that all of the media organizations included on this string (and possibly others if interested) would be involved in the creation and publication of this restorative narrative-focused content."*

Although everyone who attended the workshop was invited to a follow-up phone call on Oct. 4, 2018, a smaller group participated in that conversation. Sanchez's idea was discussed and a shared working document was created to flesh out the project.

Hypotheses

As the Stories of Atlantic City project began to take shape, it was built around three core hypotheses.

1. That the project would result in a more positive public perception of Atlantic City.
2. That having been introduced to restorative narrative, newsrooms might begin to incorporate it into their workflow.
3. That the project could help build better relationships between local news media and the local community.

"What I liked best about the project was that real life **stories were told** about people who live in **the community.** *The whole story,* and not just the negative side of the story. The specific *part in the process* that stuck with me was how **passionate** everyone involved with the project is about *changing the narrative* of our city and making sure our stories are being told."

Lyntaga Smith
Interviewee

Lyntaga Smith speaks on a panel at the Leadership Studio in June 2019 about her experience with the Stories of Atlantic City project. (Photo: Christian Correa.)

Participants

Partners in this project and their roles include:

- **Authentic City Partners** & **Hayday Coffee**, Evan Sanchez, community partner.
- **Breaking AC**, Lynda Cohen, media partner
- **Center for Cooperative Media**, Stefanie Murray and Joe Amditis, project management and coordination of media partners, report and web design
- **Free Press**, Mike Rispoli, project management and coordination of community partners
- **Images and Voices of Hope (ivoh)**, Ilsa Flanagan, restorative narrative partner
- **Leadership Studio**, Alexandra Nunzi, community partner
- **Press of Atlantic City**, Buzz Keough, media partner
- **Route 40 News**, Elinor Comlay, media partner
- **SJNtv**, Megan Wolf and Michelle Dawn Mooney, media partner
- **Stockton University**, Toby Rosenthal and Erin O'Hanlon, media partner
- **Shannon Joyce, Marissa Luca, Luke Miller, Alexa Taylor, Katelyn Woolford**, Stockton University student media partners

Project and activities

After the Oct. 4 call, the project rapidly began to take shape in the form of a project proposal. It was decided that the Center for Cooperative Media would take a project management role in terms of shepherding the proposal, setting meetings, taking meeting notes and setting follow-ups. The Center would also work directly with media partners that would be engaged with the project. Free Press would work directly with community partners.

In Atlantic City, Evan Sanchez and Alexandra Nunzi, of The Leadership Studio, emerged as two local project leads on behalf of community members. Toby Rosenthal and Erin O'Hanlon stepped forward as additional project leads on behalf of Stockton University.

Meghan Van Dyk, a program officer with the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, had been at the initial gathering in September and told the group that she might be able to help fund the project. The Center and Stockton worked together on a proposal for an $18,500 grant, which Stockton formally applied for from the NJ Community News and Information Fund at the Community Foundation of New Jersey, which is a partnership of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The grant was awarded and was used to support the community partners' outreach work, to give reporting grants to the media partners, to pay for the post-publication celebratory "storytellers" event, and to pay for such operations as purchasing a website domain, maintaining the website and submitting the project for awards.

Additionally, under guidance from Van Dyk, the Center used part of a different NJ Community News and Information Fund at the Community Foundation of New Jersey it had received to pay for video documentation of the project for a "behind the scenes" video, and to help pay videographers to work with each of the media partners.

The Center then began recruiting media partners, starting with those who had attended the September meeting and those who were members of the NJ News Commons. Everyone who

attended the workshop agreed to participate. It should be noted, however, that one of the partners, The AC Times, agreed to join but later did not participate in the project; and that The Philadelphia Inquirer was a late addition, as its Atlantic City reporter considered whether or not to join the effort. The Inquirer had not been, up until that point, approached directly by the Center, since the focus early on was on media based in Atlantic County.

In addition to joining as a project manager and fiscal agent, Stockton University also joined as a media partner.

Stockton recruitment

Adding a local university to the mix made sense for Stockton, given its current participation in the Atlantic City community. Stockton's Communication Studies program had created a mission in the academic year 2017-2018 to include a heightened focus on non-fiction digital storytelling and since then, the program has added more courses and faculty support for journalistic storytelling. The September workshop also coincided with the ribbon-cutting for Stockton's Atlantic City campus.

Stockton was able to identify and recruit five student media partners for the project. For many of the student media partners, though local to the region, this was their first experience working in and producing stories about Atlantic City.

With a full team identified, the group reconvened in January 2018 at The Leadership Studio for a workshop to review the concept of restorative narrative, and for

Belinda Manning attends an event for community partners at the Leadership Studio in the summer of 2019. (Photo: Christian Correa.)

the media partners to tell the community partners about what they look for in stories. The project managers felt it was especially important, as a trust-building moment, to give the media partners a chance to speak directly to the community members who would be collecting potential stories. The media partners gave up a critical measure of control when they agreed to join the project – selecting the stories – and this, understandably, made some of them nervous. It was also an opportunity to talk through any real or perceived conflicts of interest, which was a concern of some media partners.

At that meeting the group also finalized the project timeline. The plan was to gather again in late March or early April at a meeting where the community partners would present and "pitch" their story ideas. Media members would each claim one and to aim for a publication date in May, with a celebratory "storytellers" community event to follow.

"One of the best parts of the project was seeing how truly excited and enthusiastic the students were through the whole process. Seeing them engaged and actually listening and then so excited to tell our story gave me some comfort that they'd tell it correctly."

Zach Katzen
Interviewee

After that, the community partners began to solicit story ideas. With the support of Free Press, Sanchez, Nunzi, and others from The Leadership Studio spent two months on community outreach. They began reaching out through their networks in the city to find story leads and to build relationships with people who could assist in the newsgathering process. The two also walked around the community to speak with people about the project, knocked on doors, and posted flyers throughout the city to solicit ideas.

This intensive outreach phase culminated with a community mixer, where residents nominated people and stories they felt exemplified the strength and resiliency of the city, people who were doing good work but the media wasn't seeing. The mixer brought together more than 50 leaders, artists, teachers, students, professionals, local business owners, and concerned residents, and generated more than 50 story ideas.

A team of community members, led by Sanchez and Nunzi, followed up on the people or stories that came out of the March event. After digging more into these stories and connecting with the people at the center of them, Rispoli worked closely with Sanchez and Nunzi to go through all the story ideas they collected, discuss them, and decide which ones they would present to the media partners.

In early April, the entire project team met at Stockton's new Atlantic City campus for the story pitch meeting. Stefanie Murray kept the media partners updated on the status of the project and prepped them ahead of time on the overall gist of the story ideas that would be presented; she also encouraged them to arrive at the meeting with an open mind, even if they had covered some of the ideas before that were going to be pitched. It should be noted that in all the media partner phone calls and email threads, Erin O'Hanlon and Toby Rosenthal participated in representation of their five student reporters.

At the meeting, Sanchez and Nunzi presented about a dozen different story ideas to the group. In explaining their approach, both expressed that finding stories was harder than they had expected, as was persuading people to share their story publicly. That acknowledgment seemed to relax some of the assembled media partners, as – for a moment – they could relate directly to each other.

Surprisingly, nearly all of the story ideas that Sanchez and Nunzi pitched were ones that none of the media partners had previously published or broadcast stories about, and there was clear enthusiasm for several ideas. It was also apparent that many of the newsrooms would not have been able to connect with the residents highlighted in these stories were it not for Sanchez and Nunzi. The group went around the table and each media outlet discussed the stories that were most interesting to them and why, and there was little overlap. It should be noted that all of the media partners with the exception of one – Route 40 – were present at the meeting.

After the convening, the media partners had just over five weeks to assign and report their stories. The co-publication and broadcast date was agreed to be Tuesday, May 14, with the celebratory "storytellers" party occurring the following week. Murray kept in contact with the media partners over those five weeks to provide any reporting support needed, to make information about restorative narrative available as needed, and to coordinate shared language among the media outlets. At the same time, there was interest from a major broadcast partner

Dozens of Atlantic City residents, activists, artists, and other community members attended a community event at The Leadership Studio in June 2019 to celebrate the success of Stories of Atlantic City.

in joining the project, but given the late stage of the effort, adding them didn't work out. Last, SNJ Today, one of the main media partners, closed during the course of the project but was reborn online as SJN TV and thus continued as a media partner.

During the five weeks between pitch meeting and the launch date, Sanchez and Nunzi began planning the celebratory "storytellers" party, which was also hosted at The Leadership Studio, like the story solicitation event in March.

The four remaining media organizations and the five student reporters finished their stories and all published their stories online in the early morning on Tuesday, May 14, as planned. The Press of Atlantic City also published its story in the corresponding print edition.

The week after the stories were published, dozens of Atlantic City residents, activists, artists, and other community members filed into The Leadership Studio to celebrate the launch of the project and the people featured in the stories. The event had a party-like atmosphere, with live music, buffet and wine bar, and free admission. Sanchez facilitated a discussion with reporters and community members about the impacts of the collaboration, and attendees talked about the need for the project to continue so other stories could be lifted up from Atlantic City.

STORIES OF ATLANTIC CITY

DECEMBER 2018

Project plan finalized with the convening group.
Plan for funding put into place.
Funding proposal submitted to Local News Lab at Dodge Foundation.

JANUARY 2019

Meeting with Leadership Studio (representing community partners) and media partners.
Funds secured, plans put into place for distributing money.
Infrastructure set up for documenting sharing and ongoing conversation.
Logo and common branding created and shared.
Website set up with basic information.

MARCH 2019

Leadership Studio begins planning for April storytellers event.
Outreach begins, and the Leadership Studio works with Free Press and CCM to discuss the potential story sources and compile a strong list of six.
Second meeting between Leadership Studio and media partners to pitch, discuss, and have partners self-assign stories.
Co-publication date in May finalized.
Event date in May finalized.

APRIL 2019

Media partners working on their stories.
Plan put into place for content-sharing and shared language between the news orgs.
Leadership Studio and media partners begin marketing for event.

MAY 2019

Stories are published.
Community event is held at Leadership Studio.
Post-event meeting among all the partners is held to discuss what worked in the project, what didn't, and what they could do together next.

JUNE 2019

Article documenting the project is published.
CCM and Free Press publish replicable toolkit.

"When we speak with people, when we share our truth, when we listen and receive others that's how we grow, that's how we move forward."

Amber Hamlett
Interviewee

Content produced

The reporting partners produced the following stories as part of their participation in this project:

- **Overcoming Mental Health Stigma Through Holistic Healing in Atlantic City**, by Katelyn Woolford (Stockton University)
  - https://storiesofatlanticcity.com/2019/05/14/overcoming-mental-health-stigma-through-holistic-healing-in-atlantic-city/
- **The 'Sea' Glass is Half Full**, by Michelle Dawn Mooney (SJNtv)
  - https://storiesofatlanticcity.com/2019/05/14/the-sea-glass-is-half-full/
- **'Best Barber in the World,'** by Bill Sprouse (Route 40 News)
  - https://rtforty.com/best-barber-in-the-world/
- **Where the American Dreamers Work**, by Elinor Comlay (Route 40 News)
  - https://rtforty.com/where-the-american-dreamers-work/
- **When Baseball was Atlantic City's Pastime**, by Diane Stopyra (The Press of Atlantic City)
  - https://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/news/when-baseball-was-atlantic-city-s-pastime/article_926b13ce-d4cd-5cb6-a809-16b641543465.html
- **Taking Atlantic City Jazz History into the Future Through Music Education**, by Shannon Joyce (Stockton University)
  - https://storiesofatlanticcity.com/2019/05/14/taking-atlantic-city-jazz-history-into-the-future-through-music-education/
- **Growing Success From Atlantic City Roots**, by Lynda Cohen (Breaking AC)
  - https://www.breakingac.com/2019/05/growing-success-from-atlantic-city-roots/
- **After a Decade, 'Back SOV' Skatepark Wheels Hope into Atlantic City**, by Alexa Taylor (Stockton University)
  - https://storiesofatlanticcity.com/2019/05/14/after-decade-back-sov-skatepark-wheels-hope-into-atlantic-city/

Project impact and successes

Overall, one of the key successes of the project was getting a group of local media partners to agree to report and write story ideas selected by community members. The fact that that happened, in itself, should be considered a success.

Securing outside funding was also a critical success. Stories of Atlantic City could possibly have been done without funding, but it likely would have been a smaller project, and one without the two community parties (events that proved to be critical gathering points for those involved).

This initiative got attention in other media, as well. For example, The Lenfest Institute for Journalism's weekly newsletter, Solution Set, shared a write-up about the project.

Stories of Atlantic City also spurred Stockton University to add a restorative narrative class to its fall 2019 course lineup. Additionally, early on in the project, IVOH decided to include Atlantic City in its fellowship program and one of the media partners, Lynda Cohen of Breaking AC, was

named as one of the local fellows.

Most significantly, this initiative brought together community members and local journalists who previously had no relationship to build partnerships and define new community stories, together. The project was successful in laying the groundwork for future collaborations between engaged community members and local media organizations. Shortly after the publication of the stories and the subsequent party, a conversation was in the works about how to continue Stories of Atlantic City.

Community members say that this engagement has changed their perception of and relationship to the media. For example, community members, like Henrietta Wallace-Shelton (from the story "Taking Atlantic City Jazz History Into The Future Through Music Education"), expressed how previously she had struggled to get coverage for any of her positive community events that she felt were newsworthy. Another community member, Deon Davis, said, "Projects like these need to happen to start a dialogue."

The participating journalists also said they had a change in perception as a result of their experience. Overall, the media partners really liked the idea of using the community to source stories and plan on incorporating that for future stories. Content producer Megan Wolf said, "Where the best stories come from is the community—you know you're giving the audience stories they want." Furthermore, it seems that restorative narrative methods have taken root in the newsroom. Winfred Keough, of the Press of AC newsroom, said, "It opened our eyes that there are deeper sources than beat reporters realize."

Project challenges

One of the early concerns with the project was the impartiality of the community members involved in the effort, and mitigating potential or perceived conflicts of interest. Evan Sanchez is a local real estate developer, business owner, and community member who is active in several groups. Alexandra Nunzi is also a business owner and community member who is active in several groups.

Some media partners were worried that the stories they would ultimately select and pitch would be ones that would benefit them or come solely from their circle of allies or friends. That issue was discussed on more than one occasion as the project partners sought to work it out and understand each other. Mike Rispoli worked on a community outreach plan with Sanchez and Nunzi to try to ensure their reach was far beyond their own circles.

There was a challenge with canvassing the community for potential stories in a way that went deep enough to unearth a wide variety of people and ideas. Atlantic City is an extremely diverse town in terms of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The project managers discussed this at length during a couple of their meetings, to help the community partners make decisions about how and from whom to solicit story ideas.

It was also challenging to recruit media partners, and a few came in and out. The focus on media based in Atlantic County proved to be not the best lens through which to recruit partners, as the community relies on several large news organizations that aren't based there for coverage, most

notably a major Philadelphia-based TV station and The Philadelphia Inquirer. The project wasn't able to bring enough local independent journalists or ethnic media into the fold, either.

It was a challenge for Stockton's students to feel like full and equal partners in the project. Recruitment to bring them into Stories of Atlantic City began a few weeks into the spring semester, when many students were already feeling burdened by coursework; if the recruitment timing had been different (maybe over a break or at the beginning of the semester) there would have been more time to on-board students to the project. Then as the semester was coming to a close, the students shared that they were challenged prioritizing this work with other high-stakes projects; for example, two of the student reporters were graduating seniors.

Recommendations

Below is a list of recommendations that would help strengthen future iterations of the Stories of Atlantic City project:

1. **Adapt the timeline to the community's needs.** Stories of Atlantic City was purposefully a six-month project, in part not to lose momentum and to wrap up before the semester was over for participating students and Stockton. This timeline could be amended to allow for more time to solicit community stories, to increase the time that media outlets have to report, or to allow for a longer and successive multi-platform story rollout.
2. **Consider the diversity of the project management team.** In the case of Stories of Atlantic City, the project management team was overwhelmingly white in a community that is predominantly black and Hispanic. Such a dynamic has the potential to produce distrust.
3. **Consider the diversity of the community and media partners.** Same as with the project management team, Stories of Atlantic City would have benefited tremendously from a wider and more diverse representation of community and media partners.
4. **Improve the plan for story distribution.** In this temporary and separate model of collaborative journalism, each media partner produced its own story for its own platform. Although sharing content was discussed, it didn't happen. Additionally, there ended up being no broadcast partner and there was a huge opportunity lost with the lone print partner, the Press of Atlantic City; had the team coordinated with the Press to print a special section that included all the stories, such a product could have been more easily distributed to people in the community without Internet access and it would have given the project a much longer shelf life.
5. **Grow the number of community partners.** There was a lot of pressure on just two community members, Sanchez and Nunzi, to produce a list of compelling stories. Having perhaps a board or committee could help to source more stories, to turn more people in the community into active participants, and to reduce the burden on Sanchez and Nunzi.

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6 Words: What do you wish people knew about Atlantic But don't?

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FROM THE
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Report by
Stefanie Murray, Fabulous Flores,
Toby Rosenthal, and Mike Rispoli

Design by
Joe Amditis

Photography by
Christian Correa and Ray Nunzi

www.storiesofatlanticcity.com