

## **TESTIMONIAL FROM BLAIR THOMPSON**

FROM: DAIRY FARMERS OF WASHINGTON  
TO: Washington News Council  
TITLE: Statement of support  
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DATE: January 17, 2009

A free press is one of the great strengths of our nation. I wouldn't change that for the world. But the unique position enjoyed by the news media in our culture has encouraged at least some of them to become comfortable with a double standard. The media readily arrogate to themselves the freedom – indeed, the right – to hold everyone in our society accountable to their scrutiny. And most of the time, that's a really good thing! Unfortunately, what many media are reluctant to do is to allow themselves to be held accountable for *their* actions.

The Washington News Council is one of a small number of similar organizations that have bravely stepped forward to address this double standard. And the benefits of the Council's presence and process accrue to more than just aggrieved subjects of news reporting. A news media that consistently strives to live up to its own traditional high standards of accuracy, honesty and fairness contributes to the proper functioning of our democratic way of life. This benefits *everyone* in our culture.

The disinclination of most media to be held accountable can express itself in hostility to anyone who tries, and this has included the Washington News Council. Faced with an attitude of disparagement on the one hand and disdain on the other, it would be easy for any supporter of the Council to wonder whether any of this is worthwhile. Are we having any impact? Are we doing any good?

As someone who appeared before the Washington News Council as a complainant, and experienced the consequences first-hand, I can answer that question. There is no doubt in my mind whatsoever that the Washington News Council is not only a positive influence in our community, but also an absolutely necessary presence in our culture.

As our complaint process with the Council proceeded, we discovered the benefits of that process in ways that often surprised us. For one thing, we

found that just because most media won't mention your organization's name, it doesn't mean they're not very aware of your presence. After the filing of our complaint became known, I received phone calls from reporters and editors across the state – and only a couple of them were interested in doing a story on the complaint. Most of them just wanted to talk about a process they obviously found fascinating; and some of them wanted to tell me that they were on my side. Unspoken in what they said was an understanding of the Council and its role, and a recognition of its validity.

These exchanges highlight what I believe to be the greatest benefit we derived from the News Council process. When we filed our complaint against KIRO-TV, we knew that we would never change that organization's approach to the news. We didn't do what we did for them. We did it for *the rest* of Washington's news media. We did it to put down a marker, to demonstrate that there were limits to our toleration of their freedom to shape the news. The greatest single benefit we derived from the Council process was that those other media got the message. Their own words told us that they got the message. More than a few of the journalists I spoke with told me that media all across the state were watching our case closely. And they drew the right conclusions from what they saw. With the exception of one rather recent situation, we have enjoyed positive relations with Washington's news media ever since. The benefits of the News Council process have endured over time.

Another surprise: far from condemning us to pariah status, the News Council process raised the visibility and stature of our organization among Washington's media. Reporters who had never heard of us before started calling us routinely for information and commentary on all things dairy. In certain ways, picking a fight with those who buy their ink by the gallon turned out to be one of the smartest strategies for positioning ourselves as a news source that we ever had.

These few examples of the benefits we derived from the News Council process underline a point that I want Council members to take to heart. Just because the news media won't publicly cede you any credibility, it doesn't mean they don't inwardly acknowledge that credibility. How can they not? Your motives are beyond reproach. Your process is transparent and fair. Your remedies are temperate and constructive. Instead of marginalizing the News Council, one wonders why the news media aren't counting their blessings. Think about it: if you're in the media, would you

rather adjudicate a dispute before a News Council hearing – or before a judge and jury?

Holding others accountable is often a thankless task, and certainly one that wins few friends – except, of course, among those of us who have felt the power of the news media in its worst moments. We remain grateful for your commitment to improving American journalism and thankful for the refuge you provide to those who sometimes find themselves at large in a dangerous world.

### **TESTIMONIAL FROM SHERIFF SUE RAHR**

**In an October 2006 statement after the News Council upheld her complaint against the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, King County Sheriff Sue Rahr said:**

“I want to thank the Washington News Council members for their time and careful deliberation of this very complex and lengthy case. This body is vital to ensuring the press is providing accurate and balanced information to the public, not only about their government, but other issues that affect their lives. The public has a right to fair, accurate and balanced information. You’re doing a great service to the community by taking action that will improve the practice of journalism. I hope other people can take advantage of this process. I also want to thank every member of the Sheriff’s Office who have held their heads high and continued to serve the public with honor and integrity while under the cloud of this series of stories.”

### **TESTIMONIALS FROM OTHER COMPLAINANTS**

“I am 100% convinced that *The Seattle Times* would have done absolutely nothing were it not for the existence of the Washington News Council and had I not chosen to stand up for myself by filing a complaint.... Let me thank you for your invaluable service. I am profoundly grateful.”

- Glenn Ledbetter, Mercer Island Realtor, whose complaint against *The Seattle Times* was resolved with the WNC's help in 2000.

"You are performing a valuable service by helping raise the stature of the media among the public. Keep up the good work."

- Edward Shaffer, Bellingham retiree, whose complaint against *The Bellingham Herald* was resolved with the WNC's help in 2001.

"We applaud the Council's admirable – but challenging – goal as a fair-minded mediator of finding a 'middle ground' that will satisfy both sides.... And our thanks to the Washington News Council for its constructive and professional role in this dispute."

- Ralph Nichols, Associate Editor, *Highline Times*, in a column that helped resolve a complaint against him from the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce in 2002.

"The Council provides an important and constructive service to all Washingtonians by encouraging greater accuracy and relevance in news media reporting.... We look forward to working with you in the furtherance of the Council's mission."

- Blair Thompson, Consumer Communications Manager, Washington Dairy Products Commission, whose complaint against KIRO-TV was upheld in 2003.

"The Washington News Council helped resolve the differences between the *Puget Sound Business Journal* and WFNN. We have complete resolution. No more action needs to follow. Without the Washington News Council, this resolution would not have happened. Thank you, WNC."

- Joseph de Beauchamp, President, World Financial News Network (WFNN), whose complaint against the *Puget Sound Business Journal* was resolved in 2004.

## **TESTIMONIALS FROM JOURNALISTS**

“I applaud you and your associates for what you’re doing – or trying to do – with the Washington News Council”

■ Al Neuharth, Founder, *USA Today*

“I was pleased to hear about the Washington News Council....If even lawyers recognize the value of ethics committees, surely we journalists can tolerate a news council to keep us on our toes.”

■ Bill Moyers, Public Affairs Television

“The experience of the Minnesota News Council argues forcefully for further experimentation in other states as a way of increasing media openness and credibility.”

■ Gene Roberts, Former Managing Editor, *The New York Times*

“What has worked so well in Minnesota for 30 years can and should be applied to other states and regions.”

■ Hodding Carter, Former President, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

“How can we not be a part of something that can serve as a public antidote to media arrogance? These days, journalists can use all the help we can get.”

■ Walker Lundy, Former Editor, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*

“We can ill afford to pass up any decent opportunity to hold ourselves accountable, and to help the public understand all that we do to uphold our principles and to get our facts straight.”

■ Geneva Overholser, Former Ombudsman, *The Washington Post*

**JIM LEHRER ON NEWS COUNCILS**  
**(KCTS Lunch, Harbor Club, Seattle, Oct. 2, 2002)**

**Question from John Hamer:**

Jim, I'm John Hamer from the Washington News Council....We are now one of two states in the nation to have an active and functioning News Council. Minnesota has had one for 30 years; we're almost 4 years old now. We're an independent group of citizens, half journalists and half from other professions. What do you think of the idea of having state or local news councils to hold the media publicly accountable in much the same way they hold other institutions in our society publicly accountable?

**Highlights of answer from Jim Lehrer:**

It's a great idea. I fully support what you're doing. News Councils can help the profession of journalism. I don't know what journalists are afraid of. They hide behind the First Amendment and say no one can criticize their work. That's nonsense. That's not what the First Amendment says.

Journalists want to criticize what everybody else does, but when someone wants to criticize them they object. That's hypocritical. We all need constructive criticism.

I support News Councils on one condition: That they don't have any enforcement powers. They shouldn't be able to order the media to do anything. But to hold the media up to public discussion and hold them accountable is fine. That's healthy.

The public exposure and feedback are good for journalism. Journalists should welcome this. They are free to report the results of a Council decision, but say they disagree with it and stand by their story. That's fine.

Let me tell you a story: When I was a young newspaper reporter, right out of school, I once wrote an obituary in which I got the name of the deceased and the name of the funeral home reversed. I wrote that the service for Lamar Smith would be at the Bill Campbell Funeral Home, when it was the Bill Campbell service at the Lamar Smith Funeral Home. When this ran in the paper, the family was horrified, and so was the funeral director. I went to my editor and said we've got to run a correction on this. He said we don't run corrections. He said if we ran corrections, then people would think that other things in the paper were not accurate!

Well, that was the old days. Most papers do run corrections now. But the same attitude still persists among many journalists. They don't like to admit mistakes.

The media may not like News Councils, but they should be more willing to admit mistakes, make corrections and explain themselves. That's where a News Council like yours can help. I strongly support what you're doing.

### **TESTIMONIAL FROM BERNIE FRIEDMAN, NOV. 26, 2000**

"I am very grateful to the Washington News Council. In the fall of 1999, I was a candidate for Olympia City Council. During the campaign, *The Olympian* published an editorial about me that was factually inaccurate and woefully misleading concerning an incident involving me that had happened two months prior to the editorial at an Olympia City Council meeting. That incident was so insignificant the reporter for *The Olympian*, who was at the meeting, and her editor, did not see fit to print a news story about it. Yet the subsequent editorial purported to describe the incident, described it inaccurately, and concluded from it I lacked the 'civic deportment' to qualify me for office. As the election transpired, a swing of 700 votes would have won it for me. It seems likely the unfair editorial could have accounted for that many votes.

"I learned about the Washington News Council shortly after the election by watching on TVW a dinner event the News Council held honoring one of my friends, Mike Layton. I contacted the News Council and initiated a complaint against *The Olympian* based mostly on the paper's violation of its own ethical rules set forth by its parent, Gannett Newspaper Division. The members of the News Council courteously traveled to Olympia for a hearing on my complaint in February, 2000, and I prevailed by a 9-6 vote.

"That outcome quite literally enabled me to gain back the dignity and respect I had lost in the community as a result of the unfair editorial. Nothing other than such a judgment by a peer institution like the Washington News Council could have achieved that result.

"I consider the Washington News Council to be among the most valuable organizations in our state. The various news media are the only occupation that conducts business in our state entirely free of government regulation and oversight. There are no licensing regulations establishing even the most minimal requirements for someone to be a reporter. There are absolutely no sanctions for incompetent, unfair, malicious, reprehensible, corrupt, or self-serving editorials and news reporting. The American people have granted the news media these privileges and exceptions by the First Amendment.

"Thus, if not for the Washington News Council, there would be no one to call into account bad news reporting. In a country that prizes due process and fundamental fairness above all other values, the Washington News Council serves a most valuable public function. Those who volunteer their time to the News Council, and those who provide financial support to it, are deserving of the highest honors."