

# COMMONWEALTH TIMES

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

817 WEST BROAD STREET

RICHMOND, VIRGINIA 23220

Vol. 60—SPECIAL

April 24, 2019

Tel. (804) 828-1058





# After 50 years, The CT honors its history

By Georgia Geen  
*Executive Editor*

A few months ago, Ryan Rich, the design editor, and I were clicking through the archives of The Commonwealth Times when we happened upon a cover that caught our attention. The first issue of The CT featured a young woman in late '60s garb holding a sign. The design work, the dress collar, the entire image felt like a relic.

The date on the publication was Sept. 10, 1969. It didn't take long to realize the significance of the upcoming calendar year. "Let's put out a special issue for the 50th anniversary," Ryan said, or something to that effect. He mocked up a front page mimicking the design of The CT's inaugural publication, and the concept was born.

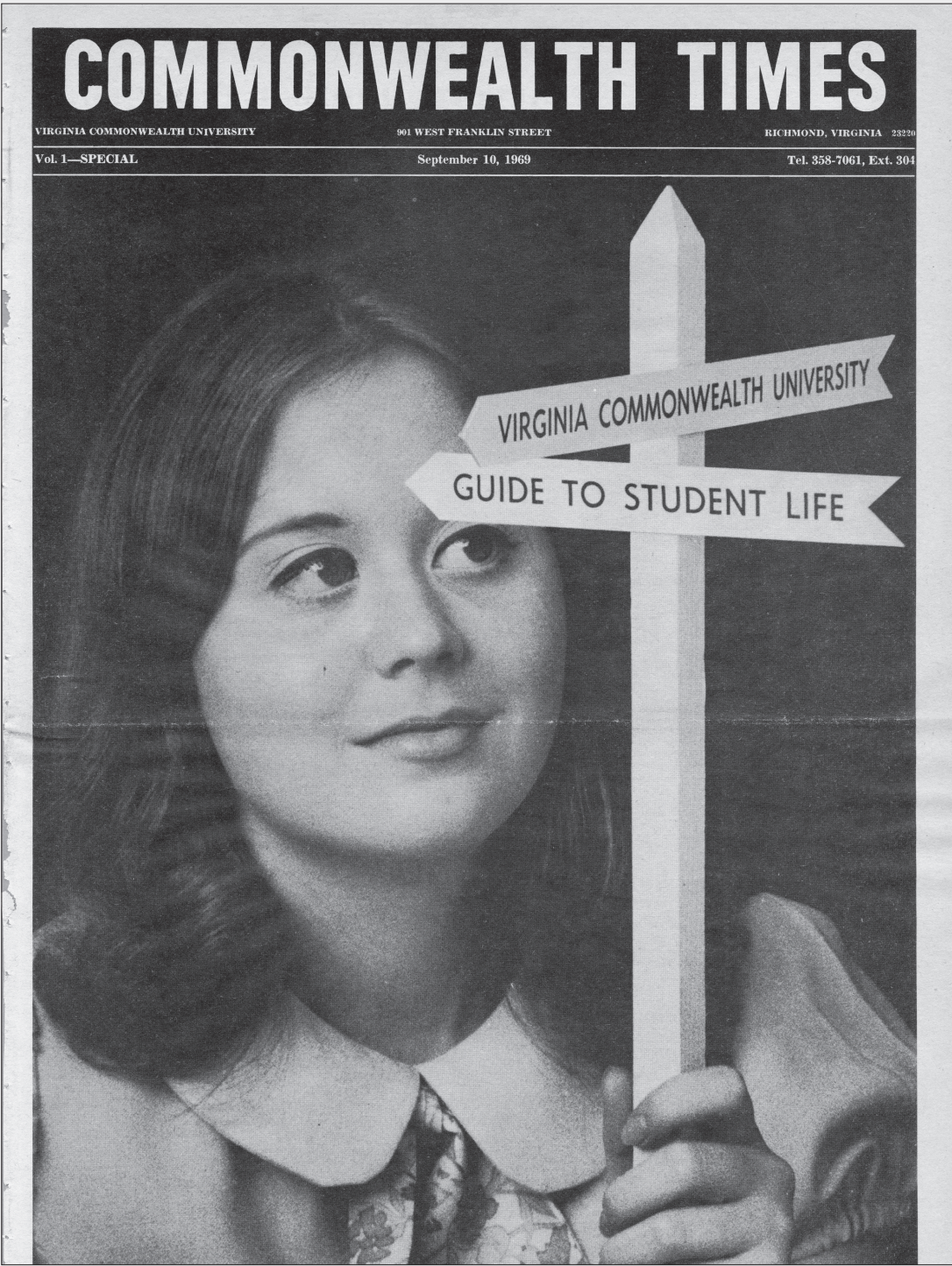
This special section aims to recreate the design of the first issue of The Commonwealth Times, — as closely as possible when our tools involve almost exclusively the Adobe Suite — and showcase some highlights of our history. It's far from comprehensive; 50 years can't be condensed into eight pages. What I hope we've achieved is an eclectic mix that gives a taste of all The CT has been: a "rag-tag" community of students, a player in the underground scene and a hub for award-winning journalism.

The issue's design is born out of a reverence for the work of the people who had fewer tools than we do. It combines

different elements from the paper's design over the years to indicate the range of processes and aesthetics.

Five decades have brought changes to the staff and our content. Gone are cheeky house ads for recruiting new staffers — which discouraged "narcs" and anyone "ugly," "too busy" or "over 7 mos. pregnant" from applying in 1971. Our only hand-drawn artwork is a few thrown-together, ironically bad comics published out of necessity. Glancing over past mastheads indicates the staff used to be male-dominated — with the exception of a few semesters, the opposite has been true for most of the paper's recent history. And while our racial diversity, especially among higher-up positions, isn't always commendable, it's better than it used to be.

But at its core, not much has changed about the paper. Our office has moved many times, but it's still a medley of a hangout spot, a high-stress and somewhat dramatic newsroom and, occasionally, an overnight residency for the sentimental editor or staffer in need of housing. We still get together for a drink — or 10. The Commonwealth Times was, is and will always be a magnet for talented, hardworking journalists with varying levels of dedication to punctuality. It's an honor to follow the legacy established by my predecessors and to have played a role in bringing our history to light.



CT archives

The very first cover of The Commonwealth Times featured Jeri Cutler-Voltz, who started the School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community, or SPARC, in 1981.

## Commonwealth Times

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CT archives

The CT's back page had a "call to action" for students to join the paper by contributing their writing, photos and illustrations.

### Cover image

Illustration by  
Sammy Newman

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# CT History

## A CT editor challenged a pre-Roe v. Wade abortion law

By Fadel Allassan  
News Editor

Bill Royall was no bystander as the United States underwent a decade packed with social changes.

The former CT executive editor was something of a maverick, and the newspaper he led in 1971-72 was a reflection of that. With nude photography and ads for vibrators, the CT spreads were a monument to the remnants of the counterculture of the 1960s that prevailed into the following decade.

The newspaper, which was in its first year as an entity independent from VCU, was also a testament to the First Amendment — a cornerstone of journalism. Royall believed so firmly in the press freedoms enshrined in one of the nation's founding documents that he nearly paid a big price for it.

Royall took the risk when he approved an advertisement for an abortion service in Washington D.C., where abortion was legal, in the school newspaper. Campus papers around the country ran ads funded by Planned Parenthood. But at that time in Virginia, state law made it illegal to encourage abortions via lectures, advertisements or any other manner.

"I had a feeling that that law wouldn't stand up in court," Royall said decades later.

The ad ran. So did an editorial written by Royall on behalf of his staff, explaining they did not believe the law aligned with the First Amendment.

"In this week's issue of The Commonwealth Times, we have found it necessary to knowingly break the law," the article read. "The only quick way to get rid of this unfair law is to bring it to court. We trust that a fair state court and almost any federal court would find this law unconstitutional and strike it down."

Royall said the newspaper became the talk of the town when it came out on Jan. 6, 1972. The staff of The CT did not hide from what they published, either. Staff members went to the state Capitol and passed out copies.

Royall said the Commonwealth's Attorney in Richmond at the time said he had broken the law and that he should expect to be arrested soon. Royall immediately lawyered up, hiring an lawyer intent on protecting people's civil liberties.

The Student Media Board called Royall for questioning and gave the editor the reprimand he expected. Members of the board feared running the ad could affect VCU's allocation of state funds by the state legislature at a time when the university was particularly cash-strapped. The board eventually decided to not punish Royall.

Royall said The Commonwealth Times' faculty advisor, George Crutchfield, was fully supportive. So were members of The CT staff, who remained unfazed throughout the ordeal.

"It was the usual laughing and joking about it the entire time," Royall said. "People were asking

me what I was going to eat in jail."

In a letter to the editor in February, Sharon Naiman, a member of the D.C. chapter of Women's National Abortion Action Coalition, called the effort "praiseworthy" and said it "stands as an example for the news media as a whole."

"While I would support your right to print these advertisements, I would question whether you are doing a service to your readers by so doing," wrote Robert Duvall in the same issue. "I would question whether these agencies are providing a legitimate service, or in fact, whether they are trying to make a quick profit from women in difficult circumstances."

Royall said he has never had a stance on whether abortion should be legal, despite it being one of the most controversial issues of the time.

"It wasn't that I was pro or anti-abortion," Royall said. "We thought that students needed to know this information. We also wanted to test the law."

"I was ready to go to jail for it."

Bill Royall

It was an activist endeavor on Royall's part. He saw what he viewed as an unjust law and decided to challenge it.

"I was ready to go to jail for it," Royall said. "I had already been to army basic training at that point so nothing could scare me."

lost a home game since Dec. as the giant from Nashville,

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CT archives

This abortion services ad, which ran in The CT, was similar to those published across the country in 1972.

The Commonwealth's Attorney never sent anyone to arrest Royall, and he was never taken to court. Royall said the General Assembly revised the legislation in question months later, changing it to make only promoting or encouraging "illegal" abortions a crime. It was "absolutely" because of The CT's abortion ad, Royall said.

Royall went on to work for the Republican National Committee,

working with the 1972 re-election campaign of Richard Nixon, which he said "didn't fit the profile" of someone who had advocated for loosening speech laws surrounding abortion.

"There were some people who were smarter than me," Royall said, "but there was no one better prepared for the job because what I learned at The Commonwealth Times and VCU."

## 1992 CT staff writer wanted by the FBI after disappearance

By Hannah Eason  
Contributing Writer

It was June 1992 when CT Sports Editor John Medeiros rushed home from work to catch the Stanley Cup Finals on TV.

While his other roommates sat in the living room, he went into his roommate Keith Lennon's bedroom to watch the game. Lennon was a CT staff writer.

It wasn't until Medeiros sat down that he realized there was no television, and the entire room was empty. All that was left was the bed and dresser.

"He was only there that morning," Medeiros said. "There was nothing that we knew of him that made us give it a second thought."

So, he watched the Stanley Cup on a different TV.

Days passed, and Lennon's roommates were pushed to a point of worry and curiosity. Medeiros and his other roommate, Jeff, went to the Richmond airport to see if Lennon's car was there.

They found it — with the keys inside — and drove it back to their house. Only a few days later they received a letter from Lennon from Hope, Arkansas.

"It was his goodbye to us," Medeiros said.

Medeiros said they learned from Lennon's mother he stole more than \$250,000. A CT article from Aug. 30, 1993 states Lennon pleaded guilty to embezzling almost a quarter million dollars from a Seattle hospital where he worked. When Lennon's roommates thought he was going back to Seattle to visit his sister, the 29-year-old was



CT archives

FBI fugitive Keith Lennon was never found after he disappeared in 1993.

actually making court appearances on the West Coast.

Lennon was declared a fugitive by the FBI after failing to appear in court for his sentencing,

where he faced 35 years in prison. Richmond FBI agents interrogated Medeiros and his fellow roommates on Lennon's whereabouts.

"He just plain disappeared," Medeiros said. "He's never been found as of this day."

While Medeiros contributed to the coverage of Lennon's disappearance during the early '90s, he also contributed the name "Spectrum" when the paper was renaming the arts and entertainment section.

The section was originally coined "Folio," but the name lacked the vibrancy that art brought to VCU through community theater, dance shows, authors and artists. Medeiros caught the new idea from his favorite hockey team, the Philadelphia Flyers, and their new arena at the time, the Spectrum.

"Think of it this way — it's the different colors of the rainbow, and it could represent different things that you cover, arts and entertainment," Medeiros remembered pitching in a meeting.

As the sports editor, Medeiros filmed the 1992 NCAA Field Hockey Final Four hosted by VCU at Cary Street Field. The tape was distributed to other college sports stations and broadcasted on television. Medeiros also witnessed VCU's entrance into the Metro Belt Conference, which opened the doors to compete against bigger athletic schools across the nation.

"I think we had more impact than we really knew," Medeiros said. "You don't really realize it when you're there."



# The evolution of CT flags

By Ryan Rich  
*Design Editor*

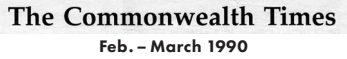
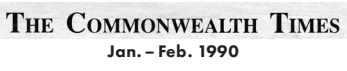
Over the past 50 years, The CT has revamped its visual identity numerous times to adapt to new design trends and technologies. These changes are most noticeable in the paper’s flag, or nameplate, on the front page.

A flag can transcend a simple logotype to embody a mission or reflect the paper’s ethos. Minute changes in color and arrangement aside, The CT has had 30 distinct flags, as of 2019.

Certain CT flags truly encapsulate an era in time. For example, consider the flags in the right-

hand column. With the advent of desktop publishing in the early ‘90s, it became easy to stretch and skew type, as well as to add effects like drop shadows and gradients. CT designers during this time might have benefited from the mantra: “Just because you can doesn’t mean you should.”

In the grand scheme of things, it’s rare for a CT flag to last more than a few years. But considering the rapid turnaround of convicted young journalists, that makes sense. As the staff turns over, so will the visual identity of the paper and the emblem that represents it: the flag.



## Alumni recount CT memories

**Stephen Hicks, reporter, 2005–2007:** I always enjoyed being able to go to the office. It would usually be at night pretty late when people are editing stories and trying to make sure that everything is good. I've always felt like The CT was like a really great collection simply of smart people. I've always considered myself to be somewhat of a cool nerd, and The CT had the right amount of nerdom, but along with coolness where you felt as if you were informed, you were engaged.

“The Commonwealth Times is forever going to be stamped in my memory.”

Stephen Hicks

I'm super appreciative of that. I'm just thankful — I think The Commonwealth Times is forever going to be stamped in my memory as a place that afforded me a lot of opportunities and trusted me enough to execute [them].

**Christian Finkbeiner, staff writer, co-news editor, executive editor, 1998–2000:** We had to paste [the paper] up on flats, all the pages, put it in a shed in an alley somewhere. Our printer was the Hopewell News. They would pick it up by 6 a.m. and print it.

That driver came up to that shed in the alley at 6 a.m., and if they weren't in there, he left. There were times we missed the deadline, so I had to take the flats and drive down to Hopewell, which is not a brief drive.

Another time, I was young and didn't know that a tabloid paper, the pages have to be in multiples of four. I sent them 14 pages — you can't have a 14-page tabloid. I got a call at 6-something in the morning. “There's no such thing as a 14-page tabloid.” So I had to drive from my house in Southside, go into the production room, put together another flat, put public service announcements on it and drive it down to Hopewell.

It was an interesting time, but we were in there. And for me, I felt, actually for the first time, like a real journalist. I had found something I had a passion for, but it was always an adventure. It was a great time. That's what really got me to love newspapers and journalism.

**Melanie Seiler, copy editor, co-news editor, executive editor 1993–1996:** We worked hard and played hard. We were a tight-knit group who spent most of our waking hours together. Many takeout dinners eaten over the light tables in the layout room. Trips downtown to see Pat McGee.



Gessler Santos-Lopez

**Dale Brumfield, The CT's art director from 1979–1981,** climbs the stairs inside Milheiser House, the building where the newspaper used to operate.

Cramming for tests because we'd skipped all of the classes before then to get the paper out.

**Jim Meisner Jr., writer, associate editorial editor, 1991–1993:** We had a couple of years there where we were kind of on our own when there was very little oversight. What happened when I was there — let me say it right now, I was against it — they published an April Fool's front page edition that made fun of the president and the sport's manager, the athletic director, and I think there were allusions to prostitutes. Because it was so, so close to libel, we had to take the cover off [every copy] and replace it. The whole front page was one big parody, then you turn the front page and the real cover is on the inside.

**Gail O'Hara, staff writer, calendar editor, folio editor, 1986–1988:** It was a lot of fun. It was a strange group of people, probably not as diverse as it is now. I looked at The Commonwealth Times' website, and it looks like there's a little more diversity happening now, which is good. But we did have an interesting crew, and I had a lot of fun writing. It was just like any other place where you're not paying people for their content ... whatever comes in.

**Sharon Richardson, staff writer, folio editor, 1980–1981:** I loved Milheiser House, because by the time I started working with them we were in Milheiser. I just loved the fact that here we were the student newspaper in this gorgeous historic building. The CT had its moments of silliness, but for the most part it was hard-hitting journalism, and I loved that. There was a lot of camaraderie, especially in those early years for me. It just was this really great collaborative and creative process.

One of the things that struck me almost right away, The CT was almost entirely male. But it was collaborative, you didn't have to fight to be heard. If you wanted to pitch a story idea, you weren't

dismissed because you were a woman.

I think I was the lone [black editor]. I do remember having to constantly fight, remind them to sort of broaden the outlook a little bit. When there's not diversity on a news staff, you are missing important stories or different perspectives on a story because that's not your reality, so you don't even know to consider.

**Dale Brumfield, art director, 1979–1981:** We didn't consider ourselves a campus paper. We considered ourselves a community paper. We were picked up by a lot of non-students, which is great.

Probably one of the most controversial stories we did while I was there on a punk rock band called Dickey Degrusting and the Degenerate Blind Boys. It turns out, Dickey is basically a male prostitute during the day. So that's what we say in the story. The story was full of f-bombs and vulgar language. The story comes out called “I'm Nasty and They Don't Like It.” That story hit like a nuclear bomb on campus. [President Edmund] Ackell sees it and goes crazy, saying it would ruin the reputation of the university. Then he did something he never should have done; he threatened to pull funding from The Commonwealth Times. The president of the university threatened to pull the newspaper's funding because of a story he didn't like. That, to us, was the worst form of censorship that you could do.

**Bill Royall, staff writer, executive editor, 1971–1972:** The camaraderie of the staff — the laughs. Back then, we had to set type and run it through a glue machine. So we were there until two or three in the morning writing headlines and trying to make them fit. Where the provost's office is now, we used to be on the third floor of that building. The balcony that overlooks Shafer Court, we'd sit on that balcony and talk about stories. It was a great experience.



# Former CT staff emphasize importance of student media

**Stephen Hicks, reporter, 2005-2007:** I think first it gives the student the opportunity to get involved and have some knowledge of the inner workings of putting together a publication.

It gives a platform for students and faculty and everyone else to have a hub of information that's not coming from the university, that's not being filtered through the university's PR department. It provides a community for young writers who want to be able to connect with the world and also connect with their people at a school or in the city.

**Christian Finkbeiner, staff writer, co-news editor, executive editor, 1998-2000:** Especially when you're dealing with academia, there's a lot of egos and, excuse my language, but ass-covering. You have an independent student press to go out there and find what's really happening — otherwise, when you get news, from my experience, from the administration, all it is is spinning good news. It's important to have someone to go out there and beat the bushes and find out what's really going on.

**"It's important to have someone to go out there and beat the bushes and find out what's really going on.."**

**Christian Finkbeiner**

**Melanie Seiler, copy editor, co-news editor, executive editor 1993-1996:** Working at The CT informed my career trajectory. The CT was my first foray into managing a team and building successful structures. My work as executive editor solidified my desire to work professionally in newspapers. I aimed to become



Bobby Miller

a managing editor of a major daily. Today, I manage a team of 34, and many of my challenges are the same as during my CT days. Plus, my current VCU team would tell you that I'm still an extra tough editor and a guardian of AP Style — % versus percent is KILLING ME.

**Jim Meisner Jr., writer, associate editorial editor, 1991-1993:** The level of professionalism, we just learned it from the people before us. The people before us taught us, then we taught the next people, and they taught the next ones. The level of professionalism ended up with a really good product that we were all really proud of.

**Sharon Richardson, staff writer, folio editor, 1980-1981:** It covers issues happening on that campus that the local media may or may not pick up on, they may not be aware of it. It covers the issues that matter to, particularly the students on that campus, but also

the faculty and staff. The other thing is, I think it gives student writers, artists and editors an outlet — a creative outlet to learn how to be citizen journalists. It's people learning how to look around their community, whatever that community is, take note of issues or things that need to be brought to people's attention and then present the information.

**Bill Royall, staff writer, executive editor, 1971-1972:** The experience you get, it's similar to an internship. Especially as executive editor. I learned a lot, and I think a lot of other people did too. The people who were on The CT during that time by in large turned out to be very successful in life.

**"It's people learning how to look around their community, whatever that community is."**

**Bill Royall**

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## Notable CT hate

Compiled by Georgia Geen,  
Executive Editor

**"It was a clubhouse atmosphere where they made quite clear who they favored and who they did not, and most of the ones they didn't eventually stopped just trying ... The 'C' also stands for 'circle-jerk.'" — 2016 blog post from former opinions writer Sean Korsgaard**

**"The Commonwealth Times is a sorry excuse for a paper ... Simply put, the Commonwealth Times sucks (present tense and, most likely, future)." — Alexander Fogle in a Feb. 26 1991 letter to the editor to The CT**

**"I did not like the quality of writing in The Times. Every place I've been we've always had a very active student newspaper that I've enjoyed, except this place. It's no secret." — former VCU President Dr. Edmund Ackell in an interview with The CT published Sept. 21, 1981**

**"[The CT is] a defensive little group of kids that think they have this wonderful mandate from students for existing." — anonymous VCU journalism student in Dec. 7, 1980 letter to the editor to Richmond Times-Dispatch**

**"I feel I really don't need to cite any more examples of how worthless the Commonwealth Times is, because the paper speaks for itself. Besides, no matter what I say here, it would not influence any half intelligent person because they most likely have already formed a similar opinion of the Times." — Roy Manuel, urban studies student, in an April 22, 1980 letter to the editor to The CT**

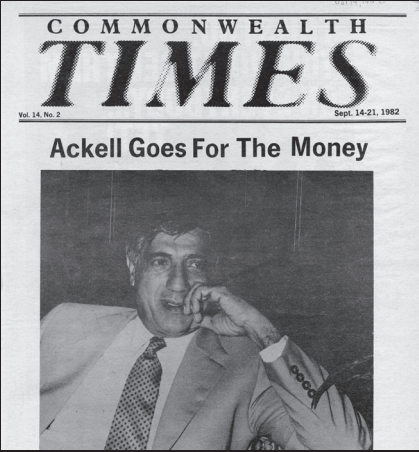
**"The 'C' also stands for 'circle-jerk.'"**

Sean Korsgaard

**"I see you stooped to a new low ... I'm speaking of the bare ass you so proudly bannered on your 'center-spread' in last week's issue. What do you think you're doing? ... (Mind you at this point that I'm not making any reference at all to the disgusting copy accompanying the photos, stuff about barber poles on some fellow's wong; for example).**

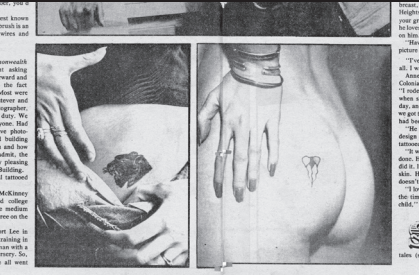
**... Good God I say. Clean your act up. Larry Flynt one day, and for God's sake, I hope it will be Jim Jennings the next!!**

**Hoping you roast in Hell, I close sincerely yours." — Oscar Willis Le Guereye, human sexuality and juvenile justice, in Feb. 28, 1977 letter to the editor to The CT**



CT archives

**ABOVE:** The CT ran this cover in the issue that featured an interview with the VCU president.  
**BELOW:** A letter to the editor complained of The CT's publication of this image.



CT archives



# CT Coverage highlights

## *Reliving the magical run to the Final Four*

By Noah Fleischman  
*Sports Editor*

Men's Basketball has a tradition of making the NCAA Tournament, playing in the Big Dance eight of the last nine years.

The streak dates back to 2011, when the Rams made their magical run from the First Four to the Final Four — the first team to accomplish the feat.

The bid to the tournament in 2011 was something few people on campus thought would come to fruition, as the Rams were on the bubble to get in. There was so much uncertainty that coach Shaka Smart did not even hold a viewing party with the team, a common trend today.

When Adam Stern, the sports editor of The CT, found out the Rams were in the tournament, he was driving on the highway headed home from Richmond.

"I remember when I was on my way home, I was on the interstate, and I was driving up and my buddy was just updating," Stern said. "And all the sudden he said we made it. We weren't even watching the live [broadcast],

and I remember just flipping out."

The Rams were selected to face the University of Southern California in the First Four days after Selection Sunday. So, Stern and two others were sent to Dayton, Ohio, by the Student Media Center to cover the game.

VCU ended up cruising past USC and was slated to face Georgetown in the First Round in Chicago, so just like the team jetted to the next location, Stern and company followed days later.

The Rams trounced Georgetown just like USC, and CT staff started to realize the run was becoming something historic.

"We went to Chicago," Stern said. "I think we beat Southern California by like 10 to 15 points and sure enough again, we blew out Georgetown. That's when we started realizing it was something special going on."

The CT trio trekked through the entire tournament covering the Rams run, traveling from Chicago to San Antonio, Texas, where the Rams faced Florida State in the Sweet 16.

"We had basically won three blowout games in a row. Finally,



CT archives

Men's Basketball won the Southwest Region Championship and advanced to the Final Four after beating Kansas 71-61.

Florida State gives us a tough game, and we end up winning on a basically a buzzer-beater by Richmond native and legend Bradford Burgess," Stern said. "Next thing you know, we're in the Elite Eight."

Burgess' buzzer-beating shot put the Rams in the Elite Eight against Kansas. Stern said that he thought the run was going to come to an end facing the No. 1-seeded Jayhawks.

"I thought we might win because we were playing incredible. But in the back of my mind I was like, OK, like you're being unrealistic. Today's when you go home," Stern said.

After the Rams beat Kansas and clinched a spot in the Final Four, Broad Street was flooded with VCU students and fans celebrating the win. Stern said during the postgame press conference, the players watched

videos of the party in the street.

With the Rams playing on the national stage, Stern rubbed shoulders with many sports writers and personalities he read and saw on television every day.

"Walking in the media center, you're walking next to guys like that who have been covering college basketball for like 20, 30 years," Stern said. "Greg Doyle at that time, who is now with the Indianapolis Star, he was a big CBS sports writer and I got to meet him."

Stern and company also had an interesting encounter in a restaurant at the Elite Eight in San Antonio, Texas.

Pat Forde, a sports writer for Yahoo, bought the CT trio a round of drinks at the restaurant.

"We went out to a bar and literally Pat Forde, the Yahoo writer, was there," Stern said. "One way or another he ended up realizing that this table of us were VCU fans, and literally like Pat Forde just bought us a round."

The experience was a lasting memory and one Stern said he will never forget — including when Forde bought them drinks.

## How The CT covered major school shootings when 'nothing like this had happened before'

By Georgia Geen  
*Executive Editor*

When Pat Kane first heard about the shooting at Virginia Tech, he thought it might be a cover story — they'd look for a local angle and watch out for a vigil. But then the number of fatalities started to climb.

"Another former editor called me and just said, 'I mean, you got to get going,' because once that number hit you know, 20," Kane said, "it was clear it was one of the worst mass shootings of all time."

Kane, the executive editor, grabbed three reporters, and the group made the hours-long drive to Blacksburg after that phone call on April 16, 2007. That day, a student at Virginia Tech shot and killed 32 people before shooting and killing himself inside the school's Norris Hall.

The Commonwealth Times won the national Society of Professional Journalists Mark of Excellence award for its breaking news coverage of the shooting. The print edition published three days afterward was filled almost exclusively with related

stories — on the main events, the vigils, campus safety and the role of Facebook following the shooting. Kane wrote in a Style Weekly piece that the staff finished production at 4:38 a.m. the day of publication.

"There are some mixed feelings about winning an award for one of the worst tragedies in American history," Kane said.

Despite those emotions, Kane said the staff could have made choices that wouldn't have led to the quality of coverage it produced. It was the end of the semester, after all, with only a few issues left and graduation looming.

"I could have said, 'No we're not going to Tech.' We could have said, 'You know, it's the end of the semester, everyone's stressed out,'" Kane said. "But I think we did kind of dig deep and decide to put in the work."

Kane, who was previously photo editor, took photos, and the group found itself among national media — Katie Couric, who was then with CBS, took Kane's seat at a press conference.

When going about for man-on-the-street interviews, Kane



CT archives

Executive Editor Pat Kane took photos at Virginia Tech following the shooting.

said they were often mistaken for Virginia Tech students. They had to "constantly" tell other journalists, "Sorry, we're not [Virginia Tech] students, we're reporters too."

Adding to the confusion was the fact that reporter Stephen Hicks' letterman jacket — which was actually from his cousin's high school — had colors similar to Tech's. Students there initially thought he was representing their university's paper, not The Commonwealth Times, until he introduced himself and indicated otherwise.

"Students seemed to gravitate toward me," Hicks said.

For Hicks, it was important for him to "step his game up" when covering the shooting. He said he was "floored" when Kane called him months later to tell him about the Mark of Excellence award.

"It was a really great feeling," Hicks said. "I was able to respond to Pat's phone call and I was able to make myself available to be

a part of a team effort to cover such an important moment."

Virginia Tech wasn't the first school shooting in the 2007 staff's memory. The Columbine shooting, which The CT covered by sending a photographer and a reporter to Littleton, Colorado, had occurred eight years previously when Hicks was in middle school.

A journalism professor at the Robertson School of Media and Culture, Wilma Wirt, urged the executive editor at the time, Christian Finkbeiner, to send someone to cover it. She footed the bill for the plane tickets, Finkbeiner remembers.

"I thought, 'What? Why would we do that, we're a student newspaper,'" Finkbeiner said. "If she hadn't gotten the plane ticket, we obviously wouldn't have done it. Once she said this is something we should do, we jumped on it."

High school wasn't that far in the distance for most staffers,

which Finkbeiner said influenced the coverage. That made their perspectives different from those of journalists working in national media. But the shock was universal.

"It was an aberration, it wasn't like today where it's an issue," Finkbeiner said. "This was an isolated event, nothing like this had happened before."

Hicks was a teenager when Columbine happened, right as members of his generation were "coming into ourselves." The proximity of the Virginia Tech shooting, and the fact that many VCU students were peers of the victims, "colored" The CT's reporting, he said.

"I was in middle school when Columbine happened, but I was an adult and I was reporting when Virginia Tech was happening," Hicks said. "A lot of these folks were my peers ... I could have easily been in that room."





Before Richmond's own heavy metal band grew into the mainstream, members of Gwar were interviewed by two staff writers from The CT.

CT archives

## Gwar was in The CT before it was cool

By Andrew Ringle  
Spectrum Editor

On Halloween in 1986, Shafer Court became the bloodied landing pad for a team of alien rock stars. Their Friday night setlist included songs like “U Ain’t Shit” and “AEIOU.” The concert was photographed by Bob Hedler of The Commonwealth Times, and images of the costumed musicians appeared in the newspaper five days later.

Gwar is a heavy metal band that started in Richmond during the 1980s, and its core membership, although frequently rotating, often included VCU students. Their performances are notoriously grotesque, often portraying intense onstage violence while spilling fake blood, semen and urine onto the audience.

“Gwar is what you might call an anti-pretension, performance art, speed metal thrash experience,” read a 1987 Folio article in The CT. The section is now known as Spectrum. “It’s a pro-

duction, a parody, a bloody, violent as hell show. Gwar wants to ‘flood the world with blood.’”

Since their first concerts in Richmond, the band has grown into expanded media, like trading cards, comic books, signature beers and — as of 2015 — a restaurant in Jackson Ward. The band keeps a close relationship with its hometown, which lead singer Dave Brockie called, “a cultural oasis in a world of mediocrity.”

Each band member portrays a character, and together, the cast assembles into a group of interplanetary warriors sent to Earth after causing problems in their homeworld. They have made several televised in-character appearances, including interviews with Joan Rivers and Jerry Springer.

During the 1980s, The CT called Gwar, “a cross between Kiss and Blowfly and the Circle Jerks and Spinal Tap from hell.”

Gwar was founded in 1984 by Canadian singer Dave Brockie who sang and played bass for a

punk band named Death Piggy. Brockie met VCU students Hunter Jackson and Chuck Varga at the Richmond Dairy, an abandoned milk-bottling factory in Jackson Ward that was refurbished into an apartment complex. In ruins, the space was illicitly rented out to artists and musicians.

Jackson and Varga were making an amateur science fiction movie in the Richmond Dairy while Death Piggy was using the space for rehearsals. After meeting the two, Brockie wanted to use Jackson’s movie costumes to stage a fake opening performance for his band.

Clad in homemade alien armor, Gwar — then called “Gwaaarrggghlllgh” to allude to the parody group’s only catchphrase — had their earliest performance. What started as a joke eventually developed into Death Piggy’s replacement.

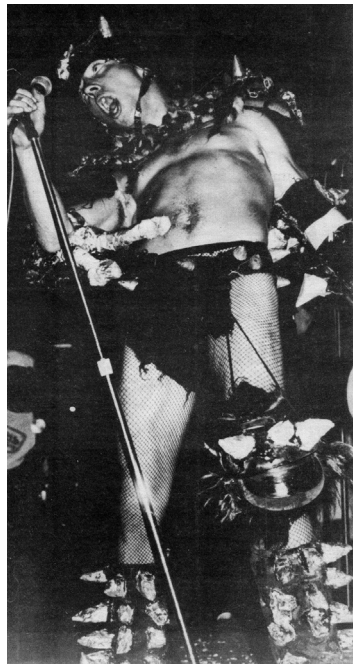
In a 1987 issue of The CT, Gwar members Brockie, Russ Bahorsky, Sean Summer and

Steve Douglas were interviewed by staff writers Frances B. Tartan and Gail O’Hara.

“Death Piggy is the whole reason Gwar came into existence except for the genius of Hunter Jackson, who is a bizarre man working in the bowels of the Richmond Dairy,” Brockie said in the interview. “Death Piggy met Hunter and we saw these costumes and we knew that they needed to be draped on our bodies, that they needed to be alive.”

When O’Hara was the editor of the Folio section in 1988, Gwar made it onto the front page of the paper. At the time, O’Hara said, the band embodied an artistic movement of the decade.

“It was some kind of like cartoonish cover and it was a little bit silly and raunchy,” O’Hara said about the coverage 31 years later. “But it felt like a fun thing to do at the time, even though it probably was the most juvenile, silly thing that I ever saw go into The CT while I was there.”



CT archives

The Commonwealth Times covered Gwar’s Halloween performance at Shafer Court 33 years ago.

The band received mainstream attention during a brief part of the ‘90s, and today they’ve sold more than 800,000 records. Since Brockie’s death in 2014, none of the original members remain.

## Alum reflects on early CT coverage of the gay liberation movement

By Walter Chidozie Anyanwu  
Contributing Writer

The Stonewall riots of the late ‘60s ushered in an era of inquiry into what it meant to be a member of the LGBTQ community in the U.S. At that time, many other groups of people were struggling for acceptance in the country, but the least visible of them were people who identified with the gay liberation movement.

For many whom Stonewall might’ve affected, it was a time for change: change not just in the way the country treated gay people, but in the way they were seen as well.

In December 1971, a few years after Stonewall, The CT ran a story on the progression of gay liberation efforts in Richmond.

Mike Whitlow was one of two reporters who went out to conduct interviews with VCU students.

“We thought it would be an interesting story to cover,” Whitlow said. “I was totally naive [to the issue]. It was a very personal confrontation of my own naivete

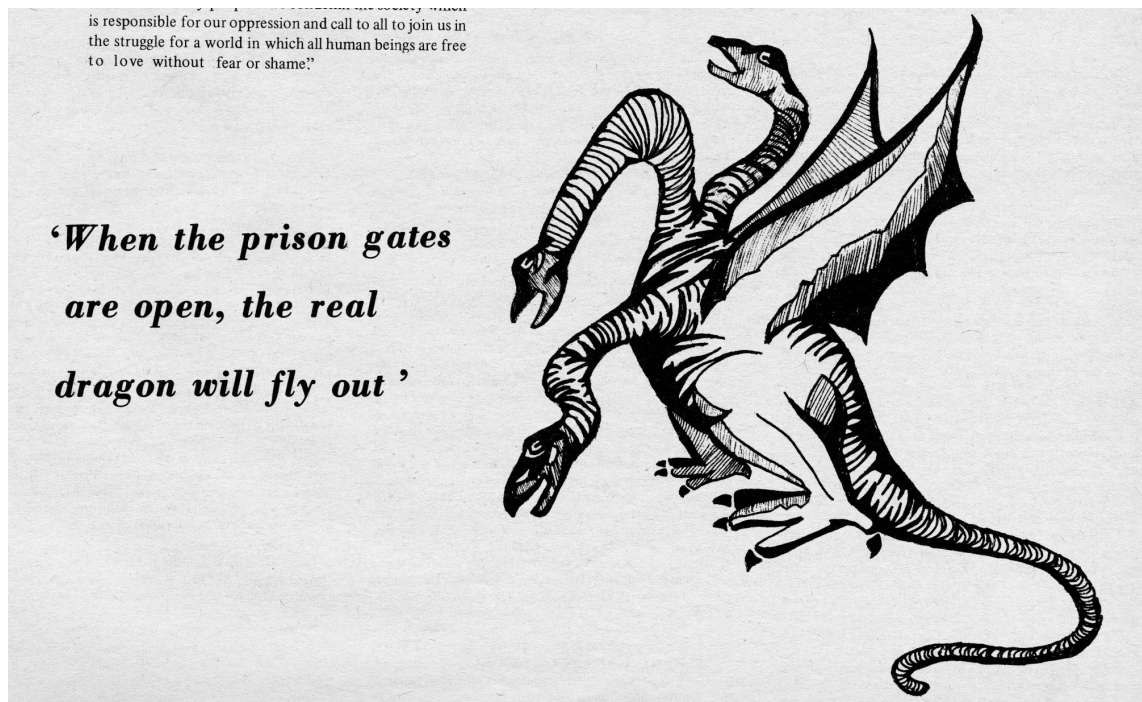
about such things.”

Whitlow said covering this story gave him the opportunity to both change personally and also understand the importance of the movement, especially to those who would’ve been directly affected by identity bias.

Richmond was a bit moderate at the time, but still far from what it is today in terms of acceptance of sexual identities. A lot of what used to be considered non-normative behavior was frowned upon, so members of the LGBTQ+ community often found themselves in hostile situations.

The members of Richmond’s Gay Liberation Front met with Whitlow and his colleagues in an apartment on Grove Avenue. The meeting yielded one singular theme: They just wanted to be who they were, Whitlow said.

The reporters were drawn to the story because of the relative invisibility of the movement in Richmond, mostly because it was dwarfed by the progressive public’s preoccupation with civil



CT archives

A 1971 CT article featured an illustration of a hydra with a Ho Chi Minh quote widely used by revolutionaries.

rights and women’s rights.

“We were at the front end of a little story,” Whitlow said. “We wanted to ask, ‘What’s going on? Why can’t these people be themselves?’”

It has been more than 40 years since the story came out, and Richmond has grown more and more progressive. Whitlow believes it has something to do with VCU’s presence. The university, he said, became an incubator for all sorts of ideas and points of view.

The ‘70s and ‘80s were periods of radical social reform, with victories claimed on many fronts by minority groups, but it hasn’t been more than a decade since the LGBTQ+ community saw big changes such as the legalization of same-sex marriage.

“Are we at the right place yet? I don’t know, I don’t have a really good insight,” Whitlow said. “But to me, the benefit of that story [was that] it contributed to that gumbo that was VCU at the time.”

While his story did not receive any significant public backlash, Whitlow believes it had something to do with the conversation around sexuality being brought to the forefront of social discourse in Richmond.

“I hope that that little article had an influence on [peoples’] worldview,” Whitlow said.



# CT Reflections

## Stop paying lip service to inclusivity

By Brianna Scott  
Opinions Editor

As we reflect on the past 50 years as a student newspaper, I want to reflect on and critique the lack of inclusivity at this newspaper that holds a weird place in my heart.

This newspaper has given me a platform that allows me to express my opinions on issues that I'm passionate about. This newspaper has no shortage of coverage on issues related to diversity. This newspaper holds VCU and its population accountable to our school's commitment to diversity.

However, inside the newsroom, that platform is no longer present. Inside the newsroom, diversity appears to be about aesthetics rather than taking actions to make sure our newsroom not only reflects the population of our student body, but that we are valuing and learning from the minority voices who contribute to The CT. Inside the newsroom, we don't hold ourselves accountable to implement diverse and inclusive efforts.

Based on data from the 2018-2019 school year, 13% of students

at VCU are Asian, 17.3% are black and 8.3% are Hispanic or Latino. Just under half of students are white.

In terms of gender, which doesn't specifically include non-binary and transgender representation, VCU is over 60% female versus nearly 40% male. There is no demographic data based on this report of LGBTQIA+ students.

Taking a peek at the SMC professional staff page, there are currently no people of color, and that is painfully present when you walk into the SMC on Broad Street. Before the current SMC Director Allison Dyche joined, professional staff was strictly comprised of white men.

The CT's staff has evolved over the past 50 years in terms of diversity. We originally were a publication that was run predominantly by men and little to no people of color or queer staff members. The staff has always been small, so it isn't possible to have representatives of every background.

Looking at our current masthead, not including contributing staff, about half of our staff is

white, almost a third is Asian and the remainder is black. Currently, women dominate our staff. When it comes to our LGBTQ+ staff, the numbers are even smaller.

It's refreshing to see, but it's not what it could be.

I'm the only black woman on staff this year. I'm not the first black woman on staff; I'm not even the first black opinions editor. But it's hard feeling like I'm alone in this.

Often, I feel left out of conversations about how we operate as an organization because I've only been on staff for a semester and because a lot of the time, I'm the only person questioning the environment that seems to be set in stone — an environment that is quite neglectful of students of marginalized backgrounds.

We are the Student Media Center. We produce content that is a means of communication to the student population. But we really don't reflect our students who go here. We have the power, as an independent student media organization, to foster an environment that is conscious of diversity and not afraid of handling conflict. We have the power to

not tolerate bias or discrimination in our newsroom, as well as set guidelines and a code of conduct. We have the power to be more rigorous in recruiting students of varying backgrounds in terms of race, gender, sexuality and religion — and not just writers, but also designers, illustrators and photographers. In that recruitment, we would not just do it for numbers and looks. We recruit because we want to be a well-rounded newspaper.

This is what I would like to see in the future.

When I became opinions editor, it just so happened that my entire team evolved to be mainly black women. This wasn't intentional. Is my team diverse in terms of race? No. But we are diverse in terms of ideas, and that's a key element of diversity.

It can't just be about what people are, it's who people are.

Now when it comes to the inclusive effort, it's not enough to give everyone a seat at the table. You have to listen to those at the table. That's the first step.

Having discussions about bias and discrimination is uncomfortable. We are being confronted

with the fact that we are all biased, prejudiced or discriminatory in some manner. Again, we have the power to confront that and unlearn problematic behaviors and thoughts.

We can't be the best newspaper that I absolutely know we can be, and will be, if we don't make more of a genuine effort to be inclusive rather than just paying lip service to it. You can say you want to be inclusive all you want, use a few minorities on staff as props and call it a day.

It means nothing if you don't actually support the minorities you have on staff already and find better ways to uplift them.

I've made it my mission to be the loudest voice in the room, the biggest elephant in the room, that angry black woman who has a right to be angry because I refuse to tolerate something as minuscule but hurtful as a micro-aggression, to something as overt as acts of discrimination.

At The CT, as students, we have the ability to truly make a difference in the white, male-dominated realm of media. Let's start today.



Lindsay Hart

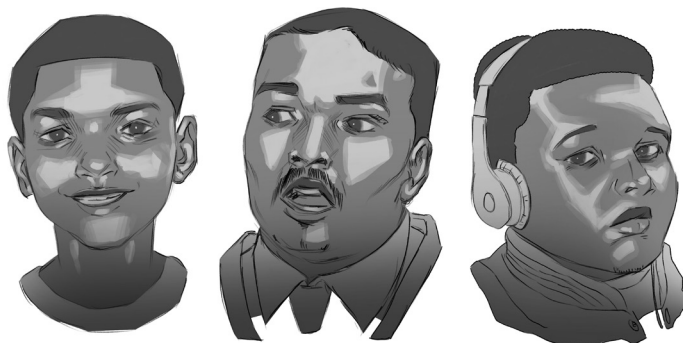
## Police brutality: 50 years later

By Alexia Holloway  
Contributing Writer

As she mourned the brutal death of her only son, Emmett Till, Mamie Till-Mobley garnered the strength to utilize the media to bring attention to the disrespect of black Americans everywhere. Throughout the civil rights movement, the powerful activists of the time employed media coverage to further their mission to bring equality to black Americans.

Photos of black people being sprayed with fire hoses and attacked by police dogs surfaced, broadcasting to the world the inhumane treatment of the black community. This atrocious display to the country, and the world, forced Americans to come out of their ignorance and ask themselves: How can this country treat its own citizens with so much hate?

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King was brutally beaten by a group of Los Angeles police officers, suffering more than 11 fractures. The video shows officers tasing and beating King on



Emely Pascual

California State Route 210. It is brutal and disturbingly violent.

Despite the assault being caught on tape, the four officers shown in the video were not convicted: three were acquitted of using excessive force on King and the fourth received no conviction due to a hung jury. The verdict sparked outrage and widespread damage to Los Angeles in the infamous 1992 LA Riots.

While I understand that it is impossible for a relatively local and small publication like The Commonwealth Times to cover every world event, the lack of Rodney King and the LA Riots coverage by the CT was disappointing. The only pieces I could find that remotely covered this

story were editorial pieces by staff writer Jim Meisner and editorial editor Rick Withers. Nevertheless, neither of the pieces name the Rodney King incident specifically.

Meisner writes about his typical apathetic reaction to many police brutality cases, which changed when he saw the frustration and pain in the LA riots. But because there were no specific stories about King or the riots, readers were most likely unaware of the extent of the situation. While I do not always agree with media's emotionally manipulative tactics, showing raw factual images can cause change. Presenting images of black people being abused

during the civil rights movement caused citizens to hold the U.S. accountable.

If reports of the incident had circulated around the campus, students could have begun having the tough conversation that comes with talking about how racism has emotionally and physically impacted black Americans. If The CT had covered the attack of Rodney King, it could have helped VCU students and Richmond citizens hold their local police officers accountable.

Nowadays, I do commend The CT for its coverage of race-related issues. The murder of Marcus-David Peters, a VCU alum, was an important story for The CT. Peters was a black man undergoing a mental health crisis who was shot and killed by black Richmond police officer Michael Nyantakyi.

This happened right here in Richmond, in our backyard, right on Interstate 95.

A video surfaced of Nyantakyi using his taser on Peters and after the taser failed to go off, he shot Peters twice.

The CT successfully spread the word of the murder in both the News and Opinions sections. Writers also contributed their

views on the video and urged others to watch it.

The CT has covered the murders of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, both instances of police brutality that catapulted the Black Lives Matter movement. The paper also covered the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile.

The Commonwealth Times serves as the voice of a university that prides itself on diversity and inclusivity. Much of The CT's reporting reflects a common consensus in our community, publishing stories that emphasize the evolving nature of our society. The CT's cold silence concerning Rodney King shows a campus that perhaps was unaffected by the incident in the early '90s.

However, The CT's consistent coverage of race issues, including those that occur on campus, reflects a socially aware campus that is willing to take the necessary steps to create a less racially charged community.

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