

## Errors in Seattle Times Contest Entry February 8, 2019

To Whom it May Concern,

As you consider the 2019 Pulitzer Prize nominees, I'd like to bring to your attention serious reporting problems with one of the stories in the Seattle Times' series titled "The Reckoning." I have no way of knowing whether this series, or any part of it, was entered for Pulitzer consideration this year, but when it was published it had all the earmarks of a series intended and designed for journalism contests.

The series included an installment labeled "Shouting It From The Rooftops" by reporter Susan Kelleher. It focused on accounts of women who said their alleged harassment, decades ago, was ignored by their employers, authorities, and society in general. Now, the reporter wrote, these women felt empowered by the #MeToo movement to finally speak out.

I'd like to tell you about one of these "Shouting It From The Rooftops" profiles which failed the most important tenets of professional journalism.

The target of this story, published online in 2018 on March 23 and in print on March 26, was my friend Sherry Harris, who served a single term on Seattle City Council in the 1990s. In its story, the Seattle Times, through published errors, innuendo, "reconstructed" uncorroborated quotes, and out-of-context paraphrases, falsely and publicly accused Harris of sexual harassment and forcible rape. Her accuser was a former part-time intern named Dorinda Henry.

Kelleher explicitly states her mission: "... Henry's story shows how those fears were realized, and the harsh retribution that followed. Now Henry is willing to risk telling again, this time publicly, hoping that, like other women who have shared their experiences, she will free herself of its power over her at a time when sexual abuses in the workplace are being re-examined."

Henry worked in Seattle City Hall for about three months and was fired in January 1995 for lying.

After her firing, Henry brought a formal complaint of sexual harassment against Harris to the city's independent Ethics and Elections Commission. The commission investigated and found no factual basis to the accusation. The Seattle Times reported this on Feb. 17, 1995.

Yet Kelleher chose not to include this reporting by her own newspaper from the time of the events.

Kelleher incorrectly reported that Henry's sexual harassment complaint preceded her firing. The truth contradicts the premise of Kelleher's story, in which Henry claims she was retaliated against and suffered a devastating blow to a future career in politics. Kelleher quotes Henry saying she would have been the first black president had she not been treated so unjustly.

City records still available from the time show Henry's sexual harassment complaint also was referred by the EEC to the Seattle Office of Human Rights, which conducted its own investigation and determined there were no violations. Kelleher's reporting should have uncovered this record, though it was not included in her story.

It's also noteworthy that the Seattle Times on Feb. 17, 1995 also reported that Henry was fired from her previous job at Seattle Municipal Court. She responded, the newspaper wrote, by filing a racial and sexual discrimination complaint against Seattle Municipal Court judges and other officials. That

complaint was also investigated and found to be without merit. And a Seattle Post Intelligencer story from the time quotes Henry telling the reporter she was going to file a harassment complaint against him just for calling her at home to seek her response to the EEC investigation's conclusion. Basic reporting should have uncovered this clip; I found it in just a few minutes at the library.

Kelleher's report did not include this relevant history of Henry's pattern of accusations in her story, which would certainly have served transparency by providing fuller context. It would also have raised reasonable questions for readers to consider about whether Henry was being truthful this time, or once again making baseless accusations.

Note that Henry's 1994 complaint against Harris was for alleged sexual harassment, and was correctly reported as such at the time.

Kelleher's story, however, evolves that unsubstantiated accusation to now include "sexual abuse" and a fresh account by Henry of forcible rape. Kelleher unquestioningly reports Henry saying that Harris entered her room during a business trip, pinned her down and raped her. Did she fight back? That question is unanswered in Kelleher's story. In fact, Henry was in her 20s and recently out of the U.S. Army, and by her own account was capable of overpowering Harris, who is shorter, smaller and older. In Kelleher's credulous acceptance of Henry's story, she seems not to have considered how a weaker rapist could do anything with both of her arms occupied pinning down a stronger victim.

Henry in 1994 did not report a rape to police. And she said nothing about rape to city investigators as they probed her sexual harassment claim. If she had done so, a police report would have been filed and a criminal investigation would have commenced. Considering that Henry quickly brought accusations against Municipal Court judges she claimed had wronged her, it is hard to believe that she would have been reluctant to report rape. This evolution of Henry's story, after 25 years, is not credible. But are readers provided even a pinch of salt to doubt Henry? Kelleher's story brings no professional skepticism to Henry's spurious claim. This omission is glaring.

This story fell far short of the best in journalism. The reporter's advocacy for Henry's story is abundantly evident, at the expense of both accuracy and fairness, and readers suffer from the lack of corroborating evidence or even some healthy skepticism that's vital when someone presents a fiery personal narrative from decades ago. Especially troubling is that Kelleher's story omitted or ignored information from the Times' own archives which clearly contradicts Henry's account. Accuracy requires rigorous adherence to facts; honest reporting includes knowing when *to not* put something in print that you cannot verify. People can be irreparably harmed by anything less than a commitment to delivering the truth — and this Times story conceals crucial facts and context in order to tell a salacious fabrication that fit their project's narrative.