Louisiana Advocate wins first Pulitzer Prize for local reporting on non-unanimous juries

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The Advocate, a Louisiana newspaper, won the Pulitzer Prize for their “Tilting the Scales” series, which covered a now repealed state law that allowed for non-unanimous jury verdicts.

Louisiana law previously stated that a criminal could be convicted if nine of the 12 jurors found the defendant to be guilty. This put African Americans at a disadvantage because, according to the Advocate, only 130,000 African Americans were registered to vote in Louisiana at the time. Later the law was changed to require 10 jurors to agree to a verdict.

The Advocate was one of the first news sources to start educating the public about the law. On Nov. 6, citizens of Louisiana voted to repeal the 120-year-old law in a landslide victory. 61 out of 64 parishes voted in favor of repealing the long-standing law.

“That’s as it should be. It’s how it should have been in the first place,” Blair Williams, a sophomore informatics major at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, said. “It sucks that it was there in the first place and that it’s been around for this long.”

Oregon is now the only state in the U.S with non-unanimous jury verdicts.

“It’s a testament to the work we’ve been doing. I feel like we’ve raised our game in the last few years in terms of ambitious work and I think this is partly a reflection of that,” Gordon Russell, managing editor for investigations and lead investigator on the “Tilting the Scales” series, said.

Russell said he believes the community’s strong response and decision to change the law is what won the Pulitzer Prize for the newspaper.

“I think that’s what won us the Pulitzer Prize. The judges like to see work that they think has impact,” he said.

According to the Advocate, the racist implications of the law were intentional. The Official Journal of the Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of Louisiana says, “Our mission was, in the first place, to establish the supremacy of the white race in this State to the extent to which it could be legally and constitutionally done.”

Russell added he believes the general public’s initial lack of knowledge about the law and its origin is what lead to the series to resonate with so many people.

Join us as we say farewell to The Vermilion’s Editor-In-Chief

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Well, we’re finally here. It’s been four years with The Vermilion, and I’ll have to admit, I’m both relieved and totally unprepared to let this paper and my staff go. It’s been a wild ride and we’ve had lots of sleepless nights, lots of laughs and, for me (and hopefully you guys too), lots of memories.

When I started off as a news writer under Devin Cochran (shoutout to my first editor), I never thought I would stay for so long or love this job so much. He knew, though. Didn’t you Devin? He sat me down one evening, maybe a couple of weeks into my writing for him and said with the biggest smile, “You’ll run this one day. I know it.” (I still have that award somewhere, Dev!)

And here I am. I’ve run it and done it and I’m ready to see the people I’ve grown with take it into their own hands and make it their own. So here is where it gets cheesy, but bear with me. I have a lot of people to say thank you to.

To Devin, I want to say thanks for being the first to believe in me and push me to love journalism the way I do. I started as a pretty shy writer, but I like to think I’ve

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“It was a like rock no one had ever looked under. A lot of people didn’t even know we had this law,” he said. “I was a little surprised honestly that no law students or someone like that had ever really studied it.”

Russell said gathering the data for the series was much harder than he expected with data gathering for the stories taking about a year-and-a-half.

“There’s not an easy way to get a list of cases that were tried,” he said. “We wanted to get records of every jury trial that we could basically from every parish in the state but that turned out to be difficult just because there is no central clearing house for any of that stuff, so you have to go court by court and parish by parish.”

He added that some district attorney’s offices claimed they did not have a list and were not willing to create one. This included Lafayette’s District Attorney Keith Stutes’ office.

Kristin Askelson, the managing editor of The Acadiana Advocate, said the data The Advocate managed to collect played a key role in the series’ success.

“They were able to dig up so much data that so clearly painted a picture of injustice,” Askelson said. “We anecdotally talk about injustice all the time, but to actually be able to see the numbers and show how our jury system disproportionately affected people of color was really powerful.”

She said while she didn’t work on the series herself, she was impressed and proud that the paper she works for was able to make such an important change for the state.

“The fact that their reporting was so powerful and so persuasive that we got such an institutional thing changed in Louisiana is really amazing.”