

Winners of ethnic journalism awards stress the need for cross-cultural collaboration in 500-person D.C. gathering

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Figuring out how to connect their diverse communities so they will be more visible to mainstream America was the key theme as hundreds of ethnic-media journalists gathered for two days this week at a Washington, D.C., hotel. New America Media organized the First National Ethnic Media Awards banquet and training seminars.

The reality is that there are common struggles, said Pilar Marrero, a political columnist with La Opinion, the Los Angeles-based, Spanish-language daily. Latinos and African Americans live side by side. They marry each other, they have kids together. Mainstream media doesn't reflect this.

Marrero, part of a panel Ethnic Media as First-Line Responders, was among 60 winners of investigative-journalism awards from among more than 600 submissions. Marrero, a Venezuelan native who has written for La Opinion for two decades, was cited for her work profiling in human terms the links and similarities among minority communities.

New America Media is a San Francisco-based non-profit group which began two years ago launching what it terms an Associated Press-style wire service for ethnic media. The organization, formerly known as New California Media, and also as Pacific News Service, is focused on spotlighting and expanding coverage of news affecting ethnic groups and youth. New America CEO Sandy Close says her goal in bringing the awards ceremony to Washington was to demonstrate the significance of ethnic media to the nation's political power base.

There were indications of success. U.S. Sen. Hillary R. Clinton, D-N.Y., dropped unannounced into a standing-room only reception on Tuesday night, speaking for a few minutes, and Washington

Post Executive Editor Leonard Downie was among celebrities introducing major award winners during an evening banquet.

This is one of the most encouraging scenes I have seen in this city and in journalism in a long time, Downie commented after some 20 award-winners gathered beside him on the dais for a photo shoot. He said he was encouraged at the quality of the group's work and the relative youthfulness of the practitioners because they would be the source of journalism's inspiration for years. More than 500 people attended Tuesday's awards dinner.

Also, on Nov. 29, Comcast, the cable giant, will begin telecasting New America Now, a weekly video production of Close group, to thousands of California subscribers who have chosen the video-on-demand broadband option. A Comcast spokesman told award-ceremony attendees the service should be gradually available to Comcast cable subscribers nationwide.

Seminar and awards attendees echoed the theme of working together.

When I came here [the United States] in the 1980s, it was such a lonely place to be, said winner Lavina Melawa, of New York's Little India publication. Now it is not.

Added winner Kai Wright, of ColorLines magazine in Oakland, Calif. It makes it feel nothing like being a martyr but like being part of a big and powerful force.

The failure of government and social-service agencies to quickly come to the aid of New Orleans hurricane refugees was a problem of income demographics, not race, observed another winner, Terry Jones, publisher of Data News Weekly, the 20,000-circulation publication for New Orleans' black community pre-Katrina. If it views as an African American problem it will be washed under the rug, he said, saying the Vietnamese community in New Orleans was equally affected.

When hundreds of thousands of mostly Hispanic workers took to Los Angeles streets on March 25, 2006, to protest political moves to tighten U.S. immigration laws, organizers were so overwhelmed by the outpouring that they didn't have time to actively involve other recent-immigrant communities, panelists said.

I think that's why we are here today, responded Vu Thanh Thuy, CEO of Radio Saigon

Houston. Hopefully so we can start some things together. Thuy, a former Vietnam War correspondent and organizer of a humanitarian appeal to help Vietnamese boat people, was another award winner for her station's service to Katrina refugees relocated to Houston.

We are all minorities for whom the bell tolls, said Greg B. Macabenta, publisher of Filipinas Magazine, another panelist and award winner.