

## **Remarks to College Presidents and Provosts**

**Jon Sawyer**

**Executive Director, Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting**

**The Bonner Program's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Program**

**Berea College, Berea, Kentucky**

**June 2, 2010**

It's such an honor to be here. When I look around the room, and the list of colleges that are part of the Bonner Foundation family, so many associations come to mind:

Four of my aunts and uncles attended Mars Hill; three of them began their teaching careers there.

My brother, niece and nephew are all graduates of Davidson – and Tom Ross became Davidson's president after heading the Smith Reynolds Foundation in Winston-Salem, my hometown

And, not least, Pfeiffer College is near New London, NC, where my great grandmother held court until well in her 90s.

When I started my career at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, my wife and I several times stopped at the Boone Tavern Inn en route to North Carolina – partly because my family had always claimed kinship with Daniel Boone, partly because this is a great hotel, but mostly because my wife and I so admired Berea for its abolitionist roots and its continuing commitment to education and opportunity for the people of Appalachia, and beyond.

My present association with Bonner colleges is thanks to Bill Bush, a member of Bonner's board and also a member of the Pulitzer Center's board of directors. It was Bill who encouraged me to visit Bonner's office in Princeton – and that's where, a couple of years ago, I first met Wayne Meisel – in a pair of cut-off jeans, working with a couple dozen students from Lindsay Wilson College who were painting the picket fence that goes all around that magnificent old house on Mercer Street. It was a Tom Sawyer moment for sure, and an accurate introduction to the Wayne Meisel and Bobby Hackett magic.

We've been blessed since by multiplying Bonner ties. Last summer we had our first Bonner intern, Joy Kazadi of Emory and Henry.

We've sent Pulitzer Center journalists to Bonner campuses – among them Bill Wheeler who is with us tonight and will be leading one of the workshops tomorrow. He and his partner Anna Katarina Gravgaard went to Lynchburg College to talk about their reporting on water and climate change in South Asia. Last year Michael Kavanagh spoke about his reporting in eastern Congo at Hamilton College and I spoke at Davidson about our work on HIV-AIDS in the Caribbean.

The great thing about getting out to Bonner campuses is that it always leads to something more. Brian Wilcox of Lynchburg College has just joined us as the Bonner intern for this summer and we now have TWO interns from Davidson, Felix Fabiny and Peter Sawyer – who is also my nephew and has taken the lead on coordinating outreach for our water projects. He's also here this week, helping with the workshops tomorrow.

My third Pulitzer colleague here this week, Maura Youngman, came from Hamline University in Minnesota, a non-Bonner school. But she has a Bonner connection through another astute uncle – Wayne Meisel. She has been with us since September and has been invaluable, taking the lead with our Bonner student liaisons and our university program overall.

The collaborations we've undertaken with Bonner college students, and that we hope to build on through the Leadership Institute and our conversations here, are at the very core of the Pulitzer Center's mission: making sure that we have the informed, engaged citizens we need if our democracy is to survive.

You need look no further than the headlines this week – from the Gulf of Mexico to Japan, from North Korea to Iran and the Gaza Strip – to know that what happens here has global repercussions, and that events far away touch us immediately, here at home. As a planet we are more closely knit, more mutually vulnerable, than at any time in history. Never has reliable, timely information and authoritative analysis been more important. And yet the system for providing that information and analysis, the commercial news-media model on which we have relied for over a century is now largely broken. The great newspapers and broadcast networks that for decades appeared to mint dollars have lost the Midas touch; they are today shadows of what they were, with fewer journalists and less cash and not much appetite for the watchdog, public interest and international reporting that used to be the glory of the craft. The audience is gone as well – or just as good as gone, shattered into a thousand niches, each of us tethered to Ipods and laptops that give us unlimited ways to pursue our individual passions -- but not much in the way of a common conversation on information that we collectively, as a community and nation, need to know.

Four years ago we created the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting in hopes of responding to these trends. The goal was to fill the increasing gaps in coverage of big systemic issues around the world – and to make use of the extraordinary tools the internet has given us, from multimedia storytelling to social media, to engage the broadest possible public. On the supply side, filling those gaps, we've done a lot – nearly 150 projects over those four years, on topics as varied as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to health and safety issues

in Chinese factories, from food insecurity and climate change to water and sanitation. We've had great success in using traditional news-media outlets to get under-reported stories on these topics out to a mass audience – partnering with *The Washington Post* in our coverage of Sudan, for example, or with *PBS NewsHour*, *National Geographic* and dozens of other print and broadcast outlets in our reporting on water. We have also built strong partnerships on the new-media side, most especially in our role as journalism partner in YouTube's Project:Report, a video contest we judged that gave aspiring journalists the chance to compete in telling local stories with global impact. In the round we just completed we had over 150 strong entries; the videos associated with the contest were featured on YouTube's home page and were seen over 3 million times. Each of the five winners received a \$10,000 fellowship to work with the Pulitzer Center on an international reporting project. One of the five is Mark Jeevaratnam, a graduate this spring of Davidson College, whose winning entry was a searching examination of the issues of drug addiction and mountaintop mining – and what they have meant for the community of Harlan County, Kentucky.

Yet in terms of the Pulitzer Center mission that is ultimately most important – the informed, engaged citizenry on which our future depends – all of what I've just described are just means to an end. What matters more is the work you know so well, educating young people to care about these issues and giving them the tools to make them informed news consumers. More and more of our energy at the Pulitzer Center is devoted to what we think of as the “demand” side of the challenge, developing platforms and modes of presentations that high school and college students will respect, value, and use.

The Pulitzer Center is an unusual hybrid organization, to my mind unlike most of the new journalism organizations that have been built on the ashes of old media's collapse. We are a significant funder/producer of original journalism content, to be sure, but we are more than that. At one level we serve as agent for our journalist/grantees, matching them with outlets willing to pay for their stories; we also work with them to expose their work as broadly as possible, not just on various news-media outlets but via appearances at schools and universities and through the interactive portals we have built for distribution on the web. This spring three of our journalists and two of my staff colleagues have been in St. Louis, speaking about Haiti and Afghanistan at a dozen schools and three universities. Three journalists we funded in Afghanistan took the results of their reporting up and down the east coast, from George Washington and Columbia to Yale, Harvard and Wellesley. Others were at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, Ohio University, Kent State and Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, as part of the Campus Consortium program that brings Pulitzer Center journalists on campus twice a year and that gives students at participating universities the chance to compete for Pulitzer Center travel reporting fellowships. We are working hard to make our Gateway web portals a continuing presence at any school, anywhere, giving students the opportunity to engage the issues via top-grade journalism, to interact online with journalists and with other students, and to post their own take on the issues through our YouTube and Google maps-based Share Your Stories.

We think there is a huge potential in this room, among the extraordinary colleges you represent and the cadre of student leaders you have developed through your association with the Bonner Foundation. Our hope is that student liaisons at every Bonner school will work with the Pulitzer Center to make use of our journalism resources, building issue awareness and advocacy campaigns of their own design but in the context of journalism of the highest standard. We would like to see more Bonner colleges follow the lead of Lynchburg, Hamilton and Davidson, helping us to finance visits by our journalists fresh from the field and eager to share what they've learned. We're now scheduling nearly 100 of these campus and school visits each year; I know first hand what it means for young people to encounter journalists like Bill Wheeler, to hear direct from him what it is like to report from the melting glaciers of Nepal, the slums of New Delhi, and the Indus River fault line between India and Pakistan. For many students it is a life-changing experience, awakening them to issues not previously considered and career directions never imagined. Almost every college funds a public speakers program. I hope you'll consider making Pulitzer Center journalists part of the mix. It's cost effective by design, and even more so if we arrange visits to clusters of Bonner schools that are geographically close to each other.

Even more important to us, however, is what we can learn from you. We are journalists by training, not educators, and we need your help – and that of your students – to insure that our presentations, curricular material and web tools are as engaging as possible. In web portals like *Downstream*, our presentation on global water issues, you'll see dozens of reports for print and broadcast outlets from around the world. But you'll also find hundreds of comments, questions and independently produced "Share Your Stories" videos, from students the *Downstream* platform to engage with these issues themselves. We anticipate that this portal will get richer still in the months to come, with fresh reporting from the field and more opportunities for engagement. It would be wonderful if Bonner schools could join with us in making water a focus for this coming year, drawing on your academic expertise and student feedback to improve the portals. We welcome similar collaboration on the other Gateway portals we've produced, from maternal mortality and climate change to fragile states and women and children in crisis. I am absolutely certain that if we make this work for your students we will have something of great value for students everywhere, in America and beyond.

Thanks so much for letting me be a part of this celebration. Your collaboration through Bonner has touched thousands of lives, and inspired so many. You've certainly inspired me. I very much look forward to working together in the years to come.