

(01:55:39) Geri: Alright, can I have your first and last name and please spell it?

(01:55:42) Sherri: Okay, it's Sherri Muzher. S-H-E-double R-I, last name is M as in Mary, U-Z, Z as in zebra, H-E-R, and I'm the director of the Michigan Media Watch. Where should I be looking?

(01:55:57) Geri: At me.

(01:55:59) Sherri: Okay, good. Okay.

(01:56:01) Geri: Tell us about Michigan Media Watch.

(01:56:03) Sherri: Michigan Media Watch was formed in April of 2004 for two reasons. They both have to do with empowerment, we wanted empowerment of the recipients of our message because there is so much misinformation out there, so we felt to build bridges between East and West we really need to tell our narrative. The second thing is we wanted to empower the Arab-American community and let them know there are tools at their disposal by working through the media to dispel those stereotypes. And we're doing it. Every journey starts with a small step, and we're doing that.

(01:56:47) Geri: So, can you talk about how you monitor the media?

(01:56:51) Sherri: Sure. Every morning, I go through all the newspapers, and I monitor—especially the editorial sections—to see if there is anything that we need to give our side, our perspective on and we issue action alerts at that point. But not just action alerts that are negative, we issue action alerts when there is positive news to let the newspapers know that we are happy, “Thank you for informing and dispelling stereotypes.” We had a story a couple weeks ago where there was a gentleman that was profiled and he is a Palestinian-American rapper and he tries to bring peace by rapping. So it was a really positive story and we did issue an action alert on that.

(01:57:42) Geri: Where was that printed?

(01:57:43) Sherri: That was in the Detroit Free Press. And we had two letters that were subsequently published.

(01:57:54) Bob: What is an action alert?

(01:57:56) Sherri: Okay, an action alert is—basically, what we do is we let our members know, “Hey, here is an editorial or here is an article. You might want to send your letters of support or letters that are elaborating on this point from our perspective,” to sort of correct the misinformation that can be there, often times because there is simply not enough information on the part of the editorial boards or the reporter who is issuing that, and we do our part to give our narrative and to give the truth.

(01:58:36) Geri: How many members do you have?

(01:58:38) Sherri: We have about 70 at this point.

(01:58:41) Geri: And how did you find them?

(01:58:44) Sherri: The Internet is a wonderful thing. We are essentially a Yahoo! Group. And we are all over Michigan, mostly concentrated in metro Detroit. But for example, I'm in Mason, Michigan. And basically we communicate through the Internet and through Yahoo! or whatever their communications services are. So it's worked out really well.

(01:59:13) Geri: How many newspapers do you monitor?

(01:59:18) Sherri: Morning-wise, probably about a dozen or so. Eleven or twelve every morning, and then there are certain times of the week where you'll have other papers that might come out on a weekly basis and so I'll check those out as well. So it's not really a set number, but generally it's about 11 or 12 every morning but then there are more throughout the week depending on how often they come out.

(01:59:47) Geri: Do you have the names of the newspapers listed on your web site?

(01:59:51) Sherri: Yes.

(01:59:52) Bob: Can I ask one more question? I'm sorry.

(01:59:54) Geri: No, please do.

(01:59:56) Bob: Could you re-answer that question once more, and paraphrase the question in the answer?

(2:00:03) Sherri: Okay, you asked me about monitoring the papers and how many we monitor and I monitor about 11 or 12 every morning throughout the state of Michigan and then we all—but there are more papers throughout the week that I monitor simply because they will come out maybe on a bi-weekly basis, or you know once a week and so there are more papers throughout the week that we do monitor, article-wise and editorial-wise.

(2:00:32) Geri: And television stations?

(2:00:34) Sherri: Yes.

(2:00:35) Geri: And how do you monitor the television stations?

(2:00:37) Sherri: The television stations generally, if you go to their web sites, they will have either video footage or they will have actual articles that are based on their video segments.

(2:00:53) Geri: And how many television stations, which cities?

(2:00:57) Sherri: Gosh, we have about four in Detroit area, and we have about three in the Lansing area. Those are the main ones. Once in a while we'll check out Grand Rapids, WOOD-TV, but those are the main ones. Primarily we do focus when it comes to the Arab-American community, we will focus on Metro Detroit, because they really do a better job in terms of monitoring—in terms of focusing their stories for human-interest stories, for political stories. Yeah.

(2:01:32) Geri: What kinds of patterns have you seen since 2004?

(2:01:36) Sherri: Since 2004, I'm going to give you statistics in terms of what we've had published. Since 9/11, and really before then, there has always been a discrepancy between who we actually are and what the media actually portrays us with all the stereotypes. After 9/11, you know after a few years, we formed this group to dispel the stereotypes, increase awareness, empower the community, empower the recipients of our message. In 2004 we didn't really monitor what we were actually putting out, but in 2005, for example, we had 300 letters to the editor around the state published. 2006, we had 200 letters, and between those two years we've had about 30 commentaries, we've had meetings with journalists and editorial boards. Yeah, we really believe in being pro-active and establishing a strong media relationship with newspapers, with broadcast stations, with directors, that's really important. I mean, you've got to work on enhancing media relations, and I think we've been doing that. It's important to have that one-on-one contact.

(2:03:00) Geri: Now have you seen patterns in coverage? Say, newspapers, are they—are certain newspapers more apt to stereotype Arab-Americans than other newspapers or TV stations...?

(2:03:13) Sherri: There are some newspapers, I won't mention them by name, but yeah, that we've had more problems with than others. But all in all they are very receptive when they do receive, you know, critical information because it's all meant to help them with a strong population of Metro Detroit Arabs. I would think they definitely would want to take that into account for business reasons, for subscription reasons, for a lot of reasons and I think most of all the job of newspapers and broadcast stations is to inform and you want to be able to inform people truthfully.

(2:03:55) Geri: You gave an example of a human-interest story where they focused a rapper—

(2:04:00) Sherri: Right.

(2:04:00) Geri: --of Palestinian descent. Could you focus on a not-so-positive story, a more negative story?

(2:04:09) Sherri: Well I'll give you an example. Last year we had an editorial that was published. It was published on Super Bowl—Super Bowl day in Detroit, and it was very critical of Palestinians, but, you know, that's not the problem of being critical. It was dehumanizing them, and saying things like, "They have a unique nature against self-interest," Palestinians do. And it was a very, very negative editorial that was not based on fact, but it was based more on a personal, you know, it was on a personal level. You know, that kind of thing doesn't help anybody really, doesn't help the newspaper, certainly doesn't help our community, it doesn't help the reader to understand really this community. What is--you know there are a lot of blowhards right now that are taking advantage of the ignorance that's out there and it's very unfortunate. Rather than people using their pulpits to promote understanding, what you're seeing is people build on that negativity, that negative climate of misinformation. They're building on that, and I think that's really unfortunate that people do that.

(2:05:27) Geri: And this wasn't a column, this was an editorial?

(2:05:30) Sherri: This was, this was—It was a column, but this person who did it is pretty high up. I mean, he's head of the editorial department of one of the major newspapers. So we were really caught off guard by that. You know, to say that Palestinians have a unique interest—they have a unique nature against self-interest. Criticism is fine, I don't think anyone has any right to—I mean, editorial boards have every right to be critical as they want. When you are dehumanizing people and you are generically classifying the entire group of people as terrorists or they are unique, they have a strange nature, that is really crossing the line.

(2:06:16) Geri: And what was Media Watch's response to that?

(2:06:19) Sherri: Our response to that was to issue letters, and to contact the publisher and we tried to work with the system. It doesn't do any good not to use the tools at our disposal. We went and we talked. I did a one-on-one interview and an expose on this person. And I think it helped. I do think it always helps to have that one-on-one contact so that there is understanding between people. When you know somebody that is of that culture that you really find abhorrent, it does make a change I think in that person because then that person becomes real. It's not just this stereotype that you can build on with negativity.

(2:07:10) Geri: Did the newspaper publish a response from you on this issue?

(2:07:14) Sherri: They published a lot of our letters. Yeah, they did.

(2:07:18) Geri: As a result of this?

(2:07:21) Sherri: Yeah. We definitely met with the publisher. Yeah, I'd like to think we made a difference. But these are the types of things we do is that contact and letters and talking and that's the main thing, it's communication.

(2:07:42) Geri: Did the author of that editorial apologize?

(2:07:45) Sherri: No, that's the—that's—no. But that's all right, I mean he's entitled to his opinion. But dehumanizing people, that is not acceptable. The hope is after that, after all of that, all of the contacts that we all had, he will not do that again.

(2:08:06) Geri: Okay, that was my next question.

(2:08:09) Sherri: Yeah, it has not happened since then.

(2:08:11) Geri: I think I know who you're talking about. Nolan Finley

(2:08:14) Sherri: Yeah.

(2:08:15) Geri: Anything?

(2:08:20) Bob: Yeah, what was that meeting like? Can you describe the meeting with the publisher?

(2:08:22) Sherri: Yeah, the meeting—you know, we had a positive meeting before that. Yes, I'm sorry. We had a positive meeting with a publisher weeks before that happened, and I think that's what made it really disappointing that something like that would happen just a few weeks later because you know you do try to build those relationships. Afterwards, then there was the meeting, I'm sorry, there was a meeting an, well, even the publisher was not apologetic. I mean he justified it that, "This is our editorial board and we allow them autonomy to say what they want, and there's nothing we can do about that." So I don't think it was a very fruitful meeting, but the fact that it has not happened again, we think that obviously, maybe there were things behind the scenes, maybe not. Again, it could have been the one-on-one contact afterwards as I mentioned, when you meet somebody or when you talk to somebody and that person becomes real instead of just a stereotype it does makes a difference.

(2:09:34) Bob: Can you give us another positive example and perhaps another example of stereotyping from the electronic media?

(2:09:45) Sherri: From the electronic media? You know what, I will have to think because... Let me think. I will have to think on that. I apologize, I can't. Newspapers I can definitely get back to you on like immediately, right now. But the electronic media that's a little bit different.

(2:10:07) Bob: You know what would help us, would be—what we will probably do is—it would be nice to have you describe what you're—I mean, take us through what you do when you begin your day with—we didn't do this already, did we? No, no we didn't. With me—I had a senior moment there. What's your day like, and how do you begin it with Media Watch and how does it play out?

(2:10:37) Geri: You mean getting b-roll of this?

(2:10:40) Bob: Well we'll do that later and we'll ask her to talk as she does it. But it would be good to have this in interview form and then we can use it as voiceover.

(2:10:47) Geri: Okay, because she did mention that she goes through the newspapers.

(2:10:52) Bob: Oh, so we did do it.

(2:10:54) Sherri: Can I make one suggestion, and I know we're talking about Nolan Finley. I don't want to bring him up. I don't. In fact, I have informed my group we are never going to issue another action alert because sometimes people do things to incite, and I don't want to give that kind of attention anymore. I'm just happy that it hasn't happened again, but there was another article on a different community, on a different Arab community where he did that and it really upset a lot of people. So I just don't want to go there anymore. I don't want to give him more attention, and I need to at this point because we dedicated way too much energy last year. I want to again say that it turned out positive I believe just because we haven't seen a repeat of that but you know we have so many different things to focus on I can't focus all our energy on one person, but it is funny that you guessed that.

(2:11:56) Bob: Do you mind if we use what you said?

(2:11:59) Sherri: It depends.

(2:12:00) Bob: Without naming?

(2:12:01) Sherri: Without naming? Yeah, you can, you can. I think so, yeah. Yeah, because more than anything, I want people to know—I want people to know they should feel empowered that we can make a difference. If there is something really negative they can count on us to counter that as best as we as can. One of the best quotations in my mind, and I think it is so applicable to the times we live in today, is a quotation by Stephen Hawking who is a British

physicist, and he said “The greatest danger to knowledge is not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge. There are a lot of illusions today.”

(2:12:50) Bob: What we would tend to do with what you said is to get the editorial, maybe quote from it without attributing it. Is that okay?

(2:13:02) Sherri: Yeah, in fact I can give you the actual magazine that I did the expose on and including the interview where I asked him questions. You might not want to use the interview, but I have excerpts, “You said this on such-and-such a date,” and it was an interesting interview. I think people were kind of stunned, “Sherri, you did that?”, but it brought me back to the days of journalism and you know, stuff like that when someone publishes that on Super Bowl day in Detroit? I mean, clearly he was trying to get as many people as he could.

(2:13:38) Bob: So it’s okay with you if we use it but just don’t attribute it?

(2:13:41) Sherri: Yeah, because I don’t want to give him more attention than he deserves. But yeah, okay.

(2:13:51) Bob: Can you talk about the rapper?

(2:13:54) Sherri: Will Yeomens, his name is Will Yeomens. He’s a Palestinian-American rapper. He also is a lawyer. But he dedicates his time, he’s known as the Iron Shiek. And this article was such a great article because it focused on his ability to use rap to bring people closer together, to build bridges between East and West and to really promote peace and understanding. It’s a very artistic way of doing that and Will has been doing a great job.

(2:14:27) Bob: You know what? He’s going to be at Diwan’s.

(2:14:29) Geri: Yeah.

(2:14:30) Sherri: Really?

(2:14:31) Bob: That’s perfect. I’m so glad you said what you just said.

(2:14:34) Sherri: He’s a good guy. He’s a really good guy.

(2:14:38) Geri: Maybe he can rap for us.

(2:14:40) Bob: Yeah.

(2:14:41) Sherri: Oh my god, totally. The Iron Shiek, that’s what his name is.

(2:14:49) Bob: Are there any other good examples that pop into the front of your consciousness? Of either side?

(2:14:58) Sherri: Oh yeah. You mean like—there was another story recent based on Axis of Evil comedy show which had just aired on Comedy Central, I believe it was about two weekends ago, and it was really good because it was another way of promoting understanding by having Arab American comedians. I think there are a few things in this world that unite us more than humor and they did that and it was a wonderful story and the Free Press covered that and that was positive to see.

(2:15:35) Geri: It’s sounding like the Detroit Free Press from what I’ve read has really increased its coverage of the Arab American community. Would you agree with that?

(2:15:47) Sherri: Probably, but you know even the Detroit News. You know, setting aside the editorial division, Gregg Krupa, phenomenal reporter and he has done so much. He’s done a lot of personal stories. We had a gentleman last year, it was either last year or the year before, whose family has really been affected by the Israeli wall. And so Mike lives right here in Michigan and Gregg did a personal story about him. Those are the kinds of things we try to do. If we know about a story we will promote that to a journalist. Gregg Krupa is one of them. Nuraj Zuwaraku [spelling?] is another one. And it’s wonderful because it puts a face with the story. You know, instead of hearing a wall, you’re hearing how it’s actually affecting people, human beings, and that’s the kind of thing I think that really resonates with people. It’s those

human-interest stories. Again, it becomes real. It becomes more real when you know that this is actually affecting people. It's not just a concept you hear on the news. And that is something we try to do is to humanize our population because for so long they have not been really portrayed in a positive light.

(2:17:14) Geri: Now, do other members also help monitor?

(2:17:18) Sherri: We have some but I do the primary monitoring.

(2:17:24) Geri: How long does that take you?

(2:17:26) Sherri: It depends. There were some days where it might take a couple of hours, some days where it just takes an hour, it really depends. I was telling Bob earlier that right now at this current time I'm on somewhat of a mini-sabbatical, the group is, because I'm working on another project. So the twelve to sixteen hours a day that I might put in, I'm just—I'm not able to at this time. But we'll get back into it in a few months.

(2:17:57) Bob: We had Osama, what's his last name?

(2:18:00) Geri: Siblani.

(2:18:01) Bob: Siblani, and he talked about the coverage of the demonstration that occurred last summer during the Lebanese-Israeli conflict in a fairly negative way. Was there a response on the part of Media Watch to that?

(2:18:21) Sherri: There was, in fact and during the six weeks, I believe, six weeks that it happened in the end of July through the month of August there was a lot of coverage on that particular horrible tragedy. But, yeah—we had a lot of letters to give our side in terms of the demonstration that Osama Siblani is referring to. Yeah, I mean, definitely. Reporters took that out of context. There's a lot of anger there understandably in the Arab community but what people need to understand is a lot of us have relatives that live overseas so it's very real for us. So if there's anger that should be understandable to a lot of people. Unfortunately, people misconstrue that passion and they will, you know, say, "You're this," "You're that," and it's really unfortunate because anybody else in that same situation would be just as upset and so what you saw is—especially the main town in Lebanon that was bombed was Bintij Bail. And many people from Bintij Bail live in Dearborn. So that really hit home for them. So you saw a lot of that anger but it was very understandable.

(2:19:40) Geri: I feel like I should have asked this earlier, but can you tell us a bit about your background?

(2:19:45) Sherri: I am of Palestinian descent. My parents are both from the West Bank. And I was almost born there though. So yeah, it's—my heritage is very dear to me because throughout my life I've always grown up seeing the stereotypes on TV, even right now on the news. It's very sad but it's also our responsibility to give our narrative. I would hope that the other side would also want to listen, but we need to speak out more and tell people what our narrative is and to try to bring about reality not rhetoric, which by the way is our motto at Michigan Media Watch, "Reality not Rhetoric."

(2:20:42) Geri: Okay, cool. Cool.

(2:20:46) Bob: You're good.

(2:20:47) Sherri: Was that alright?

(2:20:47) Bob: It's good.

(2:20:48) Sherri: I got nervous a couple of times, I had to swallow.

(2:20:51) Bob: It's quite natural. The camera's staring you in the face, three strangers, and a big old light.