



Editor of the Year 2004: Being Julia, In Atlanta

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Growing up in Rock Island, Ill., Julia Wallace liked newspapers well enough. She read them, kept up on the news. But it was numbers that really stirred her. She was going to be an accountant. Then, one day, they showed a film at school titled something like, *The Exciting Life of an Accountant*. As she watched it, she thought, "I'm not going to be an accountant." The school that unwittingly crushed one ambition, however, soon launched another career by way of a book she borrowed from the school library. She can't remember its title or author, but the advice stuck with her: Young people who are "interested in everything," it said, should go into journalism.

An accountant's mindset too often seems a newsroom requirement in this era of newspapers with resources and readership that shrink more often than they grow. And while she doesn't wear a green visor, Wallace's early appreciation for numbers is reflected at a major newspaper that created a databank to track editorial errors, that researches its readership relentlessly, and that split the managing editor's job into two different positions: one for news, and one for operations.

But it's her work in the far messier discipline of journalism that accounts for most of the reasons Julia Wallace, editor of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, is E&P's Editor of the Year.

Wallace, 48, follows in a storied line of editors at the 397,097-circulation *Journal-Constitution*, the flagship newspaper of the \$10 billion Cox Enterprise media and auto-auction business. They include Ralph McGill, who angered many in the segregationist South for his stance on civil rights, and Bill Kovach, who resigned after a blow-up with a Cox corporate executive shortly after the paper won a pair of Pulitzer Prizes.

Her predecessor, Ron Martin, was also Wallace's mentor from her decade at *USA Today*. He says she is "the perfect editor to lead newspapers into the 21st century: great vision, wide experience, forceful and clear leadership, excitement about the role of newspapers, and good instincts about the way the paper and the Web site need to work together to extend the audience."

Constant innovations

In sprawling, inchoate Atlanta, Wallace is using a combination of old-fashioned watchdog journalism, newfangled packaging and design, and a think-global-write-Atlanta philosophy. Her goal: to construct a newspaper that can prevail in a market roiled by the economic and demographic upheaval that is likely to be the future for many other big-city dailies.

"The tough things that are hitting or will hit the newspaper industry hit here, but earlier," says Director of Innovations Stacy Lynch, whom Wallace lured away from the Readership Institute. Sunday circulation began running out of steam in Atlanta well before the phenomenon hit the rest of the industry. With more than 60% of households wired for high-speed Internet, Atlantans are far more comfortable with the Web than the average American.

Like other editors around the country, Wallace is busy launching new products and redesigning sections. But she takes a somewhat different approach to prototypes. Rather than create an elite team that develops all the new product, she assigns different teams for each idea, mixing veterans and hot shots. "She doesn't want people to get married to a prototype," Lynch says. "She believes in involving people who will be responsible for operating it in the future, and also people who may have a different point of view."

Wallace is changing the paper's zoning philosophy as well. After years of zoning by county with only fitful results, the Journal-Constitution took a new direction under her watch. The paper created a zone that took in parts of four counties, drawing boundaries based on the real-life work and play destinations that readers have in common. "We've been zoning by county for 20 years. This was an effort to look at how to zone by lifestyle," says James Mallory, managing editor of operations and initiative.

Her own modest office looks over a drab underdeveloped cluster of streets near the heart of downtown Atlanta, the kind of lots that in cities like Chicago and Cleveland are being eagerly snapped up for condos and residential lots. But Atlanta's metropolitan area — now sprawling over 20 counties — is growing out, not up. To chase that growth, she has been among the most aggressive editors in the nation in redefining suburban coverage.

In September the paper launched what is essentially a separate paper with its own main sheet for growing Gwinnett County. "The age-old idea of taking the rookies and putting them out in the bureaus has been turned on its head," says Gwinnett Bureau Chief Tom Oliver, a 24-year Journal-Constitution veteran. The bureau is not Elba: The veterans include a former assistant managing editor for

sports, a former assistant M.E. for design, and others. "When people come out here, they can turn around and see that the best reporters and photographers are out in the suburbs," Oliver says.

Under Wallace, the newspaper is even returning to the classic newspaper task of creating a community in a place every bit as unformed as the Old West. "We're fighting the Balkanization of the market," says Lynch. The Journal-Constitution, for example, has dubbed one part of the market "North Side."

The paper has even renamed itself internally. On a recent visit, a visitor found that every employee spoke breezily of the "AJC," and none uttered the words "the Journal-Constitution."

There are some early indications the suburban initiatives might be working. For instance, the paper reversed a daily circulation slide with a strong performance in the most recent Audit Bureau of Circulations FAS-FAX, increasing its Monday-Friday circulation 3.8%. The next step, Mallory says, is to fix the Sunday paper, which continued its decline in the most recent FAS-FAX by slumping 2.5% to 606,246.

The AJC has taken on local institutions unaccustomed to critical attention, such as the University of Georgia and Delta Airlines. During the furor over the Bowl Championship Series this college football season, an AJC sportswriter turned to that most basic of investigative reporting tools, the Freedom of Information (FOI) request, to learn how individual coaches had voted.

"Watchdog journalism is a responsibility, it's fun — and it really does drive readership," Wallace says. "It hits on all cylinders."

The Journal-Constitution is out in the big world, too. It won national acclaim — and some controversy among the war's supporters — last year for its clear-eyed Iraq coverage by embed Ron Martz, the paper's military affairs reporter. And the newspaper's "Atlanta & The World" section, which covers international developments through the eyes of Atlantans, has attracted a new audience of sophisticated, foreign-born readers who once never saw themselves in the newspaper of their adopted city, says Raman Narayanan, the national news assistant editor who created the section.

Mission and commitment

In an industry that rarely even bothers paying lip service to training, Wallace is unrolling an ever-growing series of on- and off-site seminars, on everything from narrative writing and FOI issues to understanding the Atlanta community. This

year, every newsroom employee will undergo at least 20 hours of internal training, and every editor must take 30 hours.

"The commitment to training here is exceptional," says Deputy Managing Editor Shawn McIntosh. "It's actually not new, but Julia strengthened it, and made sure our training aligns with the goals of the newspaper." The goal: Spreading the culture that the newsroom is a team with clear ideas of what each story is trying to get across and what storytelling form to employ.

Wallace said she was struck by how limited newspaper training is when she heard a talk by Bob Nardelli, the CEO of The Home Depot. "He said that they require managers to take 80 hours of training a year," she said. It occurred to her that by comparison, the newspaper industry's lack of training was "pretty embarrassing."

While Atlanta has always been a destination for journalists, Wallace has recruited an unusually accomplished group. But it isn't just the top people getting new attention. For the first time in any staffer's memory, the AJC has formal written tests for newsroom job candidates.

"We have all the elements of greatness here, and the No. 1 thing that can make it or screw it up is an editor," says Hank Klibanoff, the managing editor who came from The Philadelphia Inquirer. "She is making it work, and showing us what great leadership can do."

The editor's journey

Just as the young Wallace did not start out to be a journalist, the young journalist did not begin with ambitions to be a top editor. While studying at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism in the first flush of the post-Watergate years, she caught the reporting bug. Later, she used a Greyhound bus pass to travel the South, knocking on newspapers' doors before finally landing a job at the old Norfolk (Va.) Ledger-Star. Wallace, a veteran of Atlanta's Journal, Ledger-Star, and the Dallas Times-Herald, jokes, "I've closed many PMs."

Her first editor at Norfolk, Sandra Mims Rowe, says, "She was a star even back then." Rowe, now editor of The Oregonian in Portland, says Wallace always had a sense of what readers want, and put her in charge of a zoned tab. "I think Julia in many ways is about the complete package as an editor," Rowe says. In a changing media landscape, she adds, Wallace is fearless: "She's very change-oriented. She's able to see the evolving needs of the market without giving up on the values of journalism. So many people don't have the market eye and the hard-news sense at the same time."

Her years at the launch of USA Today convinced Wallace to become an editor. She was one of the few journalists from outside Gannett recruited to launch what many in the industry disparaged as Al Neuharth's Folly. "I later asked the woman who hired me what she had seen in me," Wallace recalls. "She said, 'We were desperate; we needed bodies.'"

On the night shift, she would track the work of some of the era's best editors: John Quinn, Ron Martin, Neuharth. "At some point, I decided that editing was much more interesting than reporting," she says.

Her next stop was about as different from a Gannett property as you could get in 1992: the Chicago Sun-Times. "I asked Ron Martin about going there, and he said, 'You've got to assume it will be great, you'll learn a lot, and it will end badly — and he was right on all counts,'" she says. The paper was sold to Hollinger International in 1995. She went back to Gannett as executive editor of the Statesman Journal in Salem, Ore., and as managing editor and vice president of the Arizona Republic in Phoenix.

The well-traveled Wallace has been editor of the Journal-Constitution for just two-and-a-half years. Yet her influence on the paper started nearly from the moment she returned to 72 Marietta Street as managing editor in January 2001, 24 years after working as an intern at the then-separate Atlanta Journal.

Editorial Page Editor Cynthia Tucker, a Pulitzer Prize finalist last year, recalls their first meetings in 2001: "It occurred to me that she was in this business for the same reason that I was, because [she's] genuinely excited about news." It was a time of big news locally. The paper had uncovered growing evidence of alleged corruption in the administration of Atlanta's then-Mayor Bill Campbell — and the mayor responded by singling out Tucker, who is also a regular columnist, with personal attacks. Staffers are reluctant to criticize Ron Martin, who was editor during the most tumultuous days of the investigation, but they say the paper didn't really showcase its investigative pieces until Wallace came along.

"For whatever reason, you just couldn't get your stories on A1," says Alan Judd, one of the key reporters in the investigation. "Julia got here and we started putting that stuff on the front page almost every day. I think one time a story got bumped because we invaded Afghanistan — and that's what it took to bump you."

That doesn't surprise Chuck Neubauer, the investigative reporter now working out of the Los Angeles Times Washington bureau. When Wallace came to the Chicago Sun-Times as managing editor in 1992, Neubauer and two other reporters were beginning to report on misdeeds that would eventually send to jail

Dan Rostenkowski, the Chicago Democrat who then chaired the powerful House Ways and Means Committee. It wasn't that top editors didn't back the investigation, Neubauer says, it's just that Wallace brought critical enthusiasm, especially at a time when paper's resources were so strained that she herself often copyedited the stories.

"She realized how important it was, and she let us work on it," Neubauer says. "She does have this kind of sense of what people will be interested in. You wouldn't necessarily want to go to Julia with a complicated thing about the economy."

Even as managing editor, Wallace says she worked to change the AJC newsroom culture: "When I got here my feeling was this was a good paper, but considering all that it had, and all that it had around it, it should be a whole lot better." She instituted a "Better AJC" campaign of lunch meetings with the staff to identify shortcomings and potential.

With the head count essentially frozen, Wallace also embarked on a reorganization of the newsroom. Editing these days, she notes, is more about realigning resources than getting more resources: "We said, here are the jobs we need, and some jobs went away." The paper expanded its national desk, and staffed up its statehouse corps for the first time in years. The features section got its first lifestyle reporters. Some 20 new beats were created, while the number of editing jobs was trimmed back by 25 or 30.

Of course, there are limits to planning. Says Wallace: "Five days after the reorganization was done, we had 9/11 — and changed everything."

Shadow of Big 'D'

It's too much to suggest that Julia Wallace is haunted by Dallas, but the city pops up regularly in a long conversation. Atlanta, she says, reminds her of Dallas, where she worked as a reporter during the oil boom of the early 1980s. It should: There's the same plowing up of far-flung fields to build starter homes and McMansions, as well as the same extravagant trophy projects — like the \$200-million aquarium under construction. There's the same rootlessness of a community assembled from strangers attracted only by the lure of commerce. But Wallace drew a deeper lesson from Dallas than observations about the flux of business and demographics. She also learned the difference a good editor can make.

She arrived at the Dallas Times-Herald at a crucial moment in what would become one of America's classic newspaper wars. The old Times Mirror Co.

paper had assembled the best newsroom in Texas and taken the circulation lead from the grayer, slower Dallas Morning News.

Then Burl Osborne came to town. "And even though we were doing better journalism, and we had a better staff ... we lost that war," Wallace said. Under Osborne, the Morning News focused on its goals for a year down the line, five years down the line, 10 years down the line. It worked to understand the Dallas market, and then acted on what it discovered. By contrast, over at the Times-Herald, "We were going to be 'the best regional paper in America,'" she says. Maybe that's a good ambition, she allows in a voice that betrays skepticism. A few years after Wallace left, Times Mirror sold the paper. It folded in 1991. For Hank Klibanoff, Atlanta and the Journal-Constitution recall another city and newspaper, the Philadelphia Inquirer, where he served many years under the legendary editor Gene Roberts. He was happily working as deputy managing editor at the Inquirer when Wallace called him out of the blue.

He didn't know who she was, or even what paper she was calling from. "Frankly, I wasn't sure if she was talking about Atlanta or Albuquerque," Klibanoff says. But he liked what she said about making aggressive watchdog journalism the driver to take the AJC to a new plane.

Klibanoff signed on to become managing editor/news, and says Wallace's mission to dramatically improve the paper is starting to pay off. "I feel like I know what [a great newsroom] looks like, and I feel like I am damn lucky to have experienced it not just once, but at two papers," he says.

Ronnie Ramos was drawn by Wallace's passion for journalism, too. He would seem perhaps an odd choice for sports editor. Until May he was editor of The Times in Shreveport, La., and in a 21-year newspaper career he had spent a total of four years on sports beats. "The reason I came here was her mission and commitment to creating a great sports section," says Ramos. Wallace and Ramos are looking for ways to present sports in a new way — something between magazines and the current daily paper. "ESPN created a new model for TV sports, and we need to create a new model for daily newspaper sports," he says.

But Wallace, who was an editor on the scene at the 1996 Olympics during her 10 years with USA Today, says Ramos was exactly the kind of editor the AJC's sports section needs: "I was particularly interested in increasing the news sensibilities in the section, and Ronnie deep down is a news guy."

Always on the floor

The Journal-Constitution designed its building so that the editor sits in an office one floor above the newsroom. In the past, that architectural quirk reflected the paper's management style. Not with Wallace.

"Julia is still very much engaged as an editor," says military affairs reporter Martz, who can't quite recall if she's the fifth or sixth top editor during his 23 years at the paper. "Unlike some editors we've had, she is always in the newsroom, always wandering around, and there's never the sense you have with some editors, you know, [that] when you saw them in the newsroom, you'd say, 'Oh, hell, what have I done now?'"

Journal-Constitution staffers in the past had become used to editors who were rather Sphinx-like about what they wanted to see from the newsroom. That's not a problem anymore, they say. "Julia is much clearer about what she wants," says investigative reporter Judd. "She does set directions for us."

Sometimes, though, that direction can be: Do what you want. That's exactly what she said to Raman Narayanan when he was hired to launch the "Atlanta & The World" section. A prototype had already been created, and an editorial direction essentially locked in. Then Narayanan told Wallace he didn't think they would work. "So she basically told me to experiment with it," he says, laughing at the recollection. "I mean, that's a little extreme, isn't it? A boss telling you to do whatever you want?"

Twice since joining the Journal-Constitution in 1981, Bert Roughton was fired when he tangled with editors. But despite what he calls "some blood-curdling fights" with Wallace, the current metro editor is a fan of her management style. "She recognizes the value of having people around who will tell her when she's crazy," he says.

That's not to say anything goes with this editor, he adds quickly: "She will punish you if she feels she's given you enough rope and you've hung yourself with it." Wallace can be tough, notes Editorial Page Editor Tucker. Soon after becoming editor, Wallace determined there were simply too many columnists. "As you know, there are few things more unpopular that an editor can do than take away a column," Tucker says. "But she did it, and I think it was the right move." Staffers say that one-on-one Wallace is like the afternoon news meetings over which she presides: loose, rambling affairs with plenty of wisecracks. Always looking to push sports, at a meeting the day after the last college football bowl game she suggests a front-page tease for a story about the probable top 25 teams for next season. She's quickly hooted down.

In Atlanta, Wallace is wrapped up in her work and her husband Don Campbell, a journalism teacher and writer, and their two daughters, Emaline, 13, and Eden, 10. "I'm boring," she protests in an interview.

She's also a typical Atlantan, as a relatively new transplant. And Wallace may be the best sort of editor to carry out the charge she's been given by Publisher John Mellott. "She is trying," he says, "to craft a paper that captures the essence of what it means to be in Atlanta in 2005."