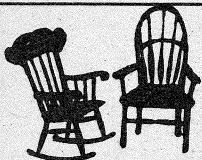


'I Thought I Could Give A Different View – The "Upbeat" View'

Gaddi Ben Dan, born in Chicago in 1946, graduated from Crane High School and attended the University of Illinois at Chicago. In newspaper work since age 22, he was managing editor of the Chicago Chronicle, a weekly community newspaper, from 1968 to 1972. After that paper's demise, he



Listening In with George Vukelich

founded his own advocacy newspaper, *Chronicles*, and ran it from 1973 to 1979. Simultaneously, he headed a program for mentally disabled people and directed a community center. Since April 1983, he has published Madison's *Wisconsin Free Press* every two weeks; he prints 17,000 copies for free distribution at sites as far west as Gammon Road and as far east as the Appliance Mart on East Washington.

"I was living in Madison for a year before I started the *Wisconsin Free Press*. Though there are several newspapers here, I thought I could give a different view—the 'upbeat' view, so to speak, the humanitarian view. I didn't see that view so much in the papers.

"You know, when I came here, I even sent my resume to a couple of the newspapers. If they had answered me, I probably wouldn't be publishing a paper now. When

they didn't answer me, that gave me courage.

"Some people say that the *Wisconsin Free Press* is a 'black' paper, but it's not. It's not a 'white' paper. It's a news paper.

"I just happen to be a black person, and most of my contacts are black, and from that you might say that the newspaper has a predominantly black flavor.

"But I'm a realist, and a black newspaper in Madison is not going to make it because there is no black community in Madison. It's mixed. Sure, there's a concentration of blacks in south Madison, but there are whites in there, too.

"In Chicago, Gage Park is black because no whites live there. Cicero, that's a white community because no blacks live there. In Madison, blacks and whites live in close proximity, and how do you carve a black community out of that? So, I see us as a community newspaper; south Madison is part of it, but the community goes beyond that. I don't see us in competition with the other papers. I see us doing a totally different kind of thing.

"There are a lot of struggling programs here in Madison. Social programs, support programs, whatever—all the various programs that are trying to survive and should survive. If publishing their stories in *Wisconsin Free Press* can give them a boost, hey, we'll do it.

"As far as the politics of the paper goes, well, we won't endorse anyone for any office, ever. My ear is attuned to what's going on, but here's the way I present it. People call and say, 'Why don't you publish *this* about *that*?' And I say, 'Wait a minute. It's *your issue*. Why don't you write

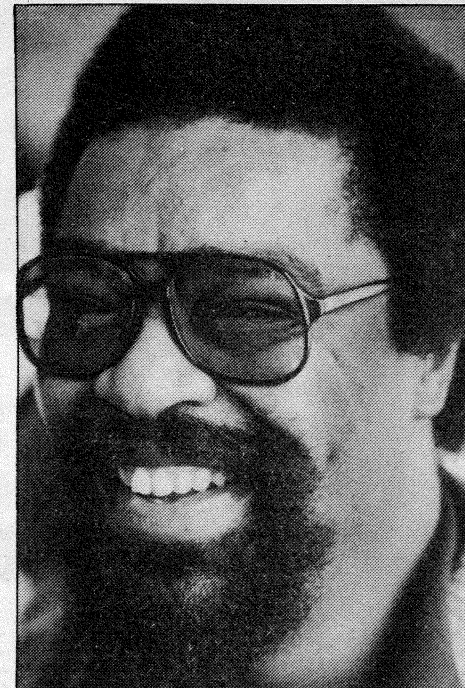
it and we'll publish it?' You see what I'm saying? It's interesting because a lot of them won't do it, because they don't want their name on it. But I'm not doing it, because I'm not experienced enough, knowledgeable enough, about the subject to do it. But if someone knowledgeable writes it, we'll print it. We'll print anything that isn't libelous. You write it, I'll publish it.

"We published a two-part interview with Peter Bear on cocaine, and the paper really took off with those issues. It was a solid story and the community picked up on it. It gave us credibility.

"Credibility is what a newspaper has to have to survive. Credibility and advertising. When I first started the *Wisconsin Free Press* I didn't have any money, so I went out and sold advertising. I sold a concept. When I had the advertising sold, then I published the paper.

"I think originally, the advertisers figured it was a one-shot deal: What's this guy gonna do? We know he's not gonna last. I think that's what they admire: Hey, this guy has lasted. That's the intrigue of it. So they extend their advertisements. They're getting some results, and each time the paper is getting better. I think they're willing to support that.

"One of the pioneer supporters of *Wisconsin Free Press* is Mr. George Holmes of George Holmes Tire, and on March 2 at the Holiday Inn we're going to honor him with a 'Roastie-Toastie.' We're going to roast him, then we'll toast him. Some people are coming in to help us: the mayor and Mrs. Sensenbrenner, the attorney general and Mrs. La Follette, the secretary of state. It's a fund-raiser for the newspaper, sure. We're



Gaddi Ben Dan. Photo by Brent Nicastro

still operating in the red, and we have to keep going.

"True, we don't pay our writers. They are all volunteer: Lucile Miller who writes her column 'Conversations with Ludie,' Delores and Jim Greene—all of them. I have a very beautiful staff, and without them there would be no *Wisconsin Free Press*.

"But we do have continuing costs with the paper: paste-up, typesetting, printing. It's a constant hassle even with so many people volunteering their talents. Incidentally, I think that when you do volunteer, you aren't really doing it for nothing. I think you're always getting something out of it. When you help someone out, you get to keep something for yourself in return."