



Chester Harris' Clean Record

In a critically assailed story about a school custodian, KIRO-TV perpetuates a negative stereotype.

By Nina Shapiro

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Last month, KIRO-TV aired an "investigation" that purported to expose alleged bullying by a Leschi Elementary custodian. The piece touted a video it had obtained, via hidden camera, of Chester Harris "grabbing a child on the schoolyard"—which was a strange way to characterize the footage. Stranger yet was what the custodian's angry defenders, who filed complaints with the nonprofit Washington News Council, claim he was actually doing.

According to the mother of the boy supposedly grabbed, Harris was breaking up a fight. And she thanked him for it, according to a follow-up piece KIRO ran two days later, after the station started getting complaints. "Had my son hit that boy, he would have got into trouble," Michelle Ruiz told KIRO.

What's more, in a letter to the station, the International Union of Operating Engineers, to which Harris belongs, claims that Ruiz had informed KIRO of these circumstances before it ran its original story. (To the station's credit, it published the union's letter and put Ruiz on camera.) Asked for comment, KIRO's outgoing news director, Todd Mokhtari, said only that the station "stands by its stories."

Regardless of the circumstances, the video clip makes for a poor gotcha. As Ruiz told the station, Harris "wasn't rough, wasn't grabbing my son." He actually appears pretty gentle as he's trying to calm a boy who seems steamed about something.

A packet of material obtained from the News Council—a sort of Better Business Bureau for local media—reveals a litany of other complaints from the union, the school district, Leschi parents, and school staff, dozens of whom signed a petition decrying the KIRO piece and lauding Harris. Among the claims: KIRO downplayed separate school and police investigations that found no wrongdoing in regard to two other allegations of bullying made by students' family members; the station neglected to mention that those allegations came from members of the same extended family; and the report brought up criminal charges that Harris had faced but not been convicted of.

"KIRO is perpetuating the idea that African-American men are criminals," laments parent Victoria Summerquist in her News Council complaint. "When my 8-year-old boy was in kindergarten, Mr. Harris would let me know if he was getting into trouble on the playground. In first grade, he let me know my son was throwing away full lunches I was making him. I have been deeply moved by the attentiveness and care Mr. Harris has exhibited."

In all, the News Council says it received more complaints about the KIRO piece—15—than it has about any other story in its 14-year history, and has scheduled a hearing on the matter for June 16.