

## 25th ISOJ Wendi C. Thomas Keynote

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- Keynote speaker: **Wendi C. Thomas**, founding editor and publisher, **MLK50: Justice through Journalism**
  - Chair: **Emily Ramshaw**, co-founder and CEO, **The 19th**
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Summer Harlow [00:00:01] Our first panel is called "Speak What You Seek Until You See What You've Said: Creating a gutsy vision for local news." This is a keynote and it will be moderated by Emily Ramshaw. Emily is the president and CEO of the 19th, the nation's first independent nonprofit newsroom at the intersection of gender politics and policy. Prior to the 19th, Emily was editor in chief of the Texas Tribune, and she's on the board of the Pulitzer Prize, where she's serving a nine year term.

Emily Ramshaw [00:00:42] Hi, everybody. Good morning. So happy to see you all bright and early. Glad you got here for hours that you made it out ahead of the press forward conversation. So we're glad to see you. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to introduce Wendi Thomas, who's the founder of the nonprofit newsroom MLK 50 Justice Through Journalism. Originally conceived as a one year project in 2017, MLK 50 evolved into a nonprofit newsroom with a focus on addressing critical issues in Memphis, Tennessee. Thomas honored with the 2023 I.F. Stone Medal for Journalistic Independence and the 2022 Freedom of the Press Local Champion Award has been widely recognized for her impactful journalism and contributions to our field, and also just for being a total badass and a great friend. Previously a metro columnist and assistant managing editor at the Commercial Appeal in Memphis, she received the Selden Ring Award for Investigative Reporting in 2020 and was named Journalist of the Year in 2018 by the Journalism and Women's Symposium. Please join me in welcoming Wendi. And Wendy is going to kick us off with a quick presentation here, and then we'll join a conversation.

Wendi C Thomas [00:02:00] Good morning everybody. It's really a pleasure to be with you here today. And congratulations, Rosental. And the entire ISOJ team for 25 years. So I wanna talk for a few minutes, about my journey here to where somebody would ask me to get at a podium and say some things. First, I want to tell you, who this presentation is for and who it's not for. Okay. So were you born with more than your share of confidence? Do you always enter a room like this? Do people say to you? You always seem to know what you're doing. Which to those people, I say, this is not really for you. Those perpetually self-assured people: I love you, I envy you. I sometimes want to push you down the stairs. So for those folks, you have my permission to spend the next few minutes playing Candy Crush or making a grocery list or whatever you feel led to do. But if you've ever felt unsettled in your career and unsure of how to make a switch, this is for you. If you've laid awake at night wondering if you were making a horrible mistake, this is for you. If you've ever been excited about what you thought was a good idea, only to have others tell you that your idea isn't viable, this is for you. If you've ever been gripped with crippling anxiety imposter syndrome, this is for you. Because this was and is sometimes me. And this is my story about how I battled through all those fears to launch MLK 50 justice through journalism. So my dream for what MLK 50 would be really came in, 2008, when I was at

the Daily Paper in Memphis and I was coordinating their coverage of the 50th anniversary of Dr King's assassination. And the research I did during that project was really sobering. And that's when I realized that the only kind of journalism I wanted to do, the only kind of journalism that was important to me, was journalism that centered the people who had been pushed to the margins, but doing that in a legacy newspaper didn't seem possible. A Doctor King quote was my interpretation, but I used to think that legacy newsrooms could be reformed. A little change here, a few more black decision makers there, but I don't think that anymore. I think to do justice through journalism requires you to completely reimagine what a newsroom is and what could be. In 2014, some unfortunate circumstances into my 11 year tenure at the Daily Paper. And by unfortunate, I mean that I wrote columns calling for the Confederate monuments to fall. And in response, some angry white readers threatened my life, and one threat threatened to rape me. Most distressingly, newsroom leadership didn't seem to take my security concerns seriously, and I didn't feel supported. It ended up being one of the most distressing seasons of my professional career. And not coincidentally, coincided with the time I started therapy. But it ended up being one of the best things to ever happen to me. Now is my chance to try to create something that would allow me to do the kind of journalism that I knew Memphis deserved, journalism that would both honor and interrogate what Memphis had done with Dr King's sacrifice. In 2015, I began a Nieman Fellowship for mid-career journalists at Harvard University, and there I incubated what would become MLK 50 Justice Through Journalism. If you haven't seen by now, I'm big into affirmations, so in this vision that I had for MLK 50, we would take our inspiration, of course, from Dr King, who came to Memphis in 1968 to support underpaid, striking black sanitation workers. We would be motivated by his words. There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it. There is no deficit in human resources. The deficit is in human will. We would also take courage from another ancestor, Ida B Wells, one of the nation's first investigative journalists and an anti-lynching crusader. Her work so angered some white Memphians that in 1892 they destroyed her newspaper's office. Ida B Wells, said the people must know before they act and there is no educator to compare to the press. This newsroom I was dreaming of, it would be led by people of color. It was centered around the people traditionally pushed to the margins because of their race or sexual orientation or gender identity or immigration status. We would ensure that the people who would write and make images and edit the content look like the audience that we serve and in Memphis, that's two thirds black and more than half women in the newsroom I would build would focus on the intersection of poverty, power, and policy. It would exist to challenge the status quo. Our team of intrepid journalists would hold the powerful accountable. Or, as one contributor wrote on a post-it during an early planning meeting: we would scare who needed to be scared. Memphis has a rich tradition of movement making, and we would be there to capture it all. And aside from all of that, we would celebrate joy, especially black joy, which is important because a lot of the topics we cover are pretty heavy. We would be the newsroom that I'd always wanted to work in. And because we are named for a man who took workers rights seriously, we would practice what he preached. We would pay all contributors better than market rates, and we would pay them quickly. We would create good, good paying jobs that allowed workers to have a healthy work life balance. With rare exceptions, we would not work nights or weekends. Our benefits and time off policies would be generous. And so that was his bold, gusty, audacious dream that I had. I would be doing something that

had no precedent in Memphis. And then there was the reality. Now at that time, I spent more than 20 years as a reporter, editor or columnist working at four daily newsrooms. I had zero experience as an entrepreneur. Zero. Now our launch date was firm April 4th, 2017, a year before the 50th anniversary of Dr King's death. But I had no money and no family wealth to tap into. I had a lot of list of dream funders, but no connection to any of them. In the spring of 2016, I took a class on social entrepreneurship at Harvard's Kennedy School, and our final project was to come up with a business plan for our idea. You know, the budget, Swot analysis, everything. And I submitted that project, and anxiously awaited my professor's response. My idea, he told me, was not viable. It was like a gut punch. Rattled and teary. I'm sure. Like the heavy tears. Not the cute tears. I rushed to the offices of one of my other professors, Ethan Zuckerman, who was then at MIT. He taught the class Future of Media. I told him what the Harvard professor had told me, and I asked if I was making a mistake. And Ethan told me, not only can you do this, you must do this. And so I did. And here's where I have to be clear on all the advantages that I had that allowed me to do this. You know, I'm not saying that you can positively think your way to success. There's a lot of hard work, but also some luck involved. My advantages. My parents paid for my undergrad degree, so I didn't graduate with any student loans. My first reporting job was at a union paper, so my salary was pretty good. I had steady jobs at bigger papers that salary increases proportionately. And that meant I never struggled to pay my bills on time, which meant I had good credit and a healthy savings account. But none of that is because I'm smart, it's just luck of the draw who you're reporting too. But still, even with those advantages, the road from there to here was tough. So I returned back to Memphis with a mission, but still no money. I managed to raise an initial \$3,000 for two girlfriends and my favorite uncle, and we use that to pay contributors. So for 18 months I lived off my savings and credit cards. As we gradually got the attention of funders. And if you're looking for something to give you insomnia, I suggest remembering at three in the morning that you have \$37,000 in credit card debt. You know, I'm trained as a journalist, but here I found myself doing a lot of things I had no preparation for. I was hiring freelancers and approving invoices and doing fundraising and writing grant applications or networking with funders. I was doing it all. And more than once. Usually, when a funder turned us down, I wondered if my Harvard professor was right. I wondered if I could pull it off. It's hard to be a black woman with a black woman with ambition to shrug off the heaviest doubt, and to steady yourself after someone who has been deemed an expert says your idea won't work. So if you haven't noticed by now, still being on the affirmations. On scrawled notes taped to my computer monitor, homemade signs around my office, bathroom mirror, post-its, and a Pinterest board with nearly 400 posts; I encouraged myself. Sometimes I still wanted to throw in the towel, but I remembered the commitment I'd made to Memphis. The place I've called home for more than half of my life. When we got our first \$100,000 grant. I was over the moon. Money, as any of you who have fundraisers and no money follows money. So surely, slowly, we were producing the kind of journalism I'd hoped for. This was one of one of our first big projects where we asked the 20 areas, 25 largest employers, if they were paying workers enough to live on. Most surprisingly, I wouldn't say, one of our researchers told us that if someone won't tell you how much they pay, it's because they're embarrassed by it. We connected the activists and organizers and wrote some of the first stories about the Byhalia Pipeline that threatened to bisect a largely black low wealth community. We're proud to say that through their activism and in organizing, developers dropped the plan for that pipeline. And then

there was the investigative project I did with ProPublica in 2019, where we investigated the rapacious debt collection practices of a nonprofit hospital there. While the hospital didn't cooperate with the story, they did announce some incredible changes, including raising nearly \$12 million in debt for more than 5300 defendants. We covered movement banking. This is following Tyree Nichols killing and by Memphis police. And we made time for joining the double judge competition. And here's our annual, game night in spades tournament tournament, which is always a lot of fun, great trash talking. And gradually over the last seven years, much of my vision has come to fruition. We went from a ragtag team of freelancers to a staff of ten, and we're hiring for more this year. Our year one budget was embarrassingly low, and this year it's \$2.4 million. And one of my happiest and pettiest moments, on our 55th birthday, I took pride in writing this open letter to the professor who told me MLK 50 isn't viable. My team has really taken my dream to the next level, and I'm excited about what they're going to build as we step into this seventh chapter. But I'll leave you with one last affirmation. Set goals so big, they laugh. Crush them while they watch. Thank you.

Emily Ramshaw [00:16:56] Well, I too want to know what that Harvard professor wrote back to you, but maybe we'll save that one for later. Thank you so much. That was absolutely extraordinary and you really are just such a visionary leader in the work that you've done, and has been a guidepost for so many of us doing this work. I want to ask, you know, you were really ahead of the curve, I would say sort of on the frontier of newsrooms that said it was okay to stand for something, you know, at a time when so many newsrooms were trying to figure out how they walk that line. We at the 19th did this between nonpartisan versus independence, this question of objectivity. You were really rewriting the rules around this sort of "objectivity" in newsrooms. What gave you the confidence to say it's okay to believe in something?

Wendi C Thomas [00:17:39] Yeah. Thank you for that question. I think that newsrooms have been saying what they believe in in various ways since they began. One of the analogies I use is, in Memphis, we've got the Grizzlies. They suck this season, we're going to come back. And the game, the daily paper might have 4 or 5 staffers there, right? But covering K-12 education across, you know, a metro county of more than a million population, they might have one person covering education with that budget decision. You know, Reverend William Barber says that budget decisions are moral documents. The paper was showing you what it really cared about. They care a lot more about sports, and they did about education and even though I'm a big NBA fan, I still would put education first.

Emily Ramshaw [00:18:31] I think, you know, we talked a little bit. You talked about having \$3,000 effectively. You know, when you started this, for anybody who's tried to fundraise for a newsroom like these are terrifying numbers, and it can often feel like you're not going to get off the ground. But of late, you all have really felt like beacons of hope. In January, you received a \$2 million grant from the Ford Foundation, which is unbelievable. You talked about expanding your staff to further expand your accountability journalism. How does it feel finally, you know, seven years into getting this philanthropic buy in. And, you know, you've talked about what it's like for black led newsrooms to have any sort of runway to speak of. What has this sort of evolution been like, and what did it take to get here?

Wendi C Thomas [00:19:12] Yeah, we were on the struggle bus. I mean, it was really, really tough. And we just didn't have any money. And our timeline was really short. You know, any of you that have raised, you know, major foundation money, you know, it takes a while. It's building relationships over months and months, sometimes years, before somebody finally writes a check. I think one of the differences is that, white led organizations get a lot of money, seed money before they start. So they're able to plan and, you know, build that solid foundation. But we didn't have that, but we had a deadline to start, so we started. And it was, you know, I didn't get paid. I wasn't on the full time payroll at MLK 50 until June 2020.

Emily Ramshaw [00:19:59] Three years.

Wendi C Thomas [00:20:01] Three years in. So three years of, you know, Obamacare, which was fine. But, you know, retirement savings, those kinds of things that you would want to have in a job, you sacrifice all of that.

Emily Ramshaw [00:20:14] I mean, speaking of models in the nonprofit news business, you know, we all go to a lot of the same conferences, we talk to the same foundations, and we hear a lot of the same mantras. And one message we hear often is that philanthropy can't be the answer to sustainability. You and I have talked a lot about, you know, the ways that the ballet is supported or the ways that the symphony is supported, but suddenly there's this burden that, you know, news that is critical to our democracy is not worth a pure philanthropic model. I think my favorite line is, you said that for the ballet, you know, they never ask for that in the entire history of the pirouette. I mean, what does your business model look like, and what are your thoughts on the sort of questions about revenue mix from news organizations like yours?

Wendi C Thomas [00:20:54] Yeah, the revenue mix, I think, is different in low wealth communities than it is in higher wealth communities. We can't rely as much on major donors, because there just aren't as many affluent people in that community. And often some of the people who have the money, made the money by maintaining the status quo. And we're here to dismantle it. So, for example, I don't expect Fedex, and I've investigated several workplace fatalities, their foundation is not going to be writing a check anytime soon. And I get it, because if I were them, I wouldn't write a check to investigate. Like, yeah, I get that. So right now, you know, the overwhelming share of our mix, 80% is, big foundations were getting some smaller, more regional ones. But the big ones, we do some events, as you saw there with the spades tournament. Don't really have much advertising, some sponsorship. You know, out when I often hear, you know, philanthropies talk about sustainability. I think they mean where there will be no foundation funding or very little, and I just don't see a path forward. With that model for newsrooms and cities like ours.

Emily Ramshaw [00:22:06] What has your response been to, you know, Press Forward and other initiatives? I mean, that Ford funding is extraordinary, but what is your sort of thinking about what the industry needs, what kind of infusion the industry needs?

Wendi C Thomas [00:22:17] Yeah, I mean, I think there's lots of people who could say lots of critical things about Press Forward, but I'm really glad to see this movement happening, right? I feel like it's going to be a snowball effect. Really excited about the work they're doing to bring in local and regional foundations and do that work for ones that have not typically funded journalism at all, to help them say that this is part of democracy, right? And so if you like a democracy, you know, you want to support the media ecosystem in that community.

Emily Ramshaw [00:22:49] We talked a little bit about revenue mix. Let's talk about audience mix. Let's talk about the ways I mean, you know, we're living in this sort of brave new world where a lot of people have been saying for years, the homepage is dead. Now a lot of people are saying the website is dead. You know, you have to find people through republication through platforms. And we're in this land of endlessly changing algorithms and unpredictability. How do you think about reaching your audiences and what your responsibility is to find them where they are?

Wendi C Thomas [00:23:15] Yeah, that's an excellent question. You know, we are primarily a website. We have very active social media channels, and there are people who will engage with us a lot on social media who we can't get to come to our website, you know, somehow. So that can be a little frustrating when you've come up. Journalism industry, like when you have a product you like, this is your one product. Here's the paper, would you like it? I hope you do. But now you're serving it up everywhere. And it's going to be different forms for different situations. So I think something we are doing is, for example, when we write about a story for the neighborhood, we'll print copies of that story and take it out and distribute it in those areas. We haven't done this, but we're about to send postcards on preventing lead poisoning and children to neighborhoods where lead poisoning has been highest. Right, so I think there's an even more granular kind of on the ground street team approach that you need to get the news out on people whose news is not a priority in their busy days.

Emily Ramshaw [00:24:24] You know, you obviously had to build the sort of goodwill and understanding of the industry, of the, of the funders over time. You also had to make those inroads in your community, and you had local elected officials who were not welcoming to this premise or to this venture. Talk a little bit about what you all have been up against, truly, in the news gathering part of this work?

Wendi C Thomas [00:24:44] Yeah. So, we have a new mayor in Memphis now, and I haven't had any beef with him, but, the prior mayor.

Emily Ramshaw [00:24:52] Yet.

Wendi C Thomas [00:24:53] Yet. You know, these hands are ready for everyone, so you never know what could happen. But the prior mayor, Jim Strickland, just really iced me out really early in his administration. The city had a media email list that was sent alerts to and such. And even though I asked repeatedly they would not add me to the list. Which was kind of ridiculous because it's just emails. So I would have friends that other media outlets would be like, yo,

here's another email they sent out. Did you get it? And be like, no, I didn't get it. So we ended up, with the help of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, suing City Hall, the name plans for the mayor and the chief communications officer. And because those two officials are so amazingly petty, they got rid of the email list and changed it into a Twitter feed. So now they didn't have to add me. So that court was like, oh, the issue is moot. So, that was fun. And I've also been surveilled by Memphis police, which I found out in a federal court case about surveillance, so.

Emily Ramshaw [00:26:04] Yeah, it's I mean, it's wild. You know, you think about the challenges of starting a news organization. And, you know, I think for a lot of newsrooms, it's like, how do we get this off the ground? How do we make the numbers work for you? It's also like, how do we do the job? Are we taken seriously? Are we in danger? I mean, it takes an extraordinary amount of courage. I mean, I think, you know, given that you launched MLK 50, like, truly on a shoestring budget, what do you think when you look at nonprofit newsrooms these days that are getting to start off with \$20 million in the bank or \$40 million in the bank? You know, especially given the way you launched. I mean, you said before that, you know, we sort of romanticize the struggle story, but it's not that romantic.

Wendi C Thomas [00:26:42] No, it's not romantic at all. I mean, I'm grateful for newsrooms and glad for newsrooms that start with that kind of money. I'm also a little jealous. Maybe just a teaspoon of bitterness, but. You know, I think those newsrooms in many ways give back to newsrooms like ours. The partnership that we had with ProPublica, which I think was started by a single donation from a couple, was 10 million in the bank and might be, wrong on the number, might have been five. But to have that kind of runway. Oh my God, that would have just been a dream. But ProPublica also partners with so many local newsrooms. So we're, you know, reaping the benefit of that gift.

Emily Ramshaw [00:27:28] You put my favorite quote up on the screen, which was that the temptation to quit will be greatest just before you're about to succeed. I think about that a lot, about how close we are as news leaders or news entrepreneurs, aspiring news entrepreneurs, how close we come to throwing in the towel, and how real that imposter syndrome is. And like along it, you know, if it ever goes away, how long it takes. You're almost five years in. You've got me beat by about two. How do you stay on this sort of roller coaster of emotional highs and lows?

Wendi C Thomas [00:28:00] Therapy.

Emily Ramshaw [00:28:08] Beyond the founder, I think a lot of us founders, myself, my co-founder, Amanda Zamora. We think a lot about, you know, how do we set this place up to succeed in the long term? What are your thoughts on that? By the way, no one's pushing you out the door. You better stay put.

Wendi C Thomas [00:28:25] I think I'll lose him later. When we talk about sustainability and funding, I think we often leave out sustainability in the people sense and those of us who have,

you know, helped get our organization off the ground and also need to get out of the way and make room for the next generation, coming through. So I think a lot about succession planning. You know, I've been doing this full time for seven years and that's, you know, a long time. And, I think I have value to the organization. And so maybe I'll have some news about succession planning soon.

Emily Ramshaw [00:29:03] That was a cliffhanger for sure. I mean, talk a little bit about the newsrooms that you see out in the world that you are most inspired by. I mean, when you look at so many folks who have used your work as an example, what are the creative projects you're seeing out there? What are the projects that are inspiring you that people and the newsrooms that you think are really leading by example?

Wendi C Thomas [00:29:27] The 19th. It was not a set up, but absolutely. What y'all are doing is. You know, as a woman led newsroom is absolutely inspiring the caliber of the work. And I'm really enjoying Aaron's, 19th, podcast, Aaron Haynes as a podcast, The Amendment. And if you haven't listened to it, you should. It's great. I am in awe of ProPublica. What they've done. It's just incredible. Also, there are others, Outlier Media, and the kind of texting system they use, Sahan Journal in, Twin Cities area where they've done outreach to the immigrant communities that just talk about just deep well of knowledge, documented in New York working, reporting on immigrant communities and in several languages. There were just so many I could go to Mississippi Today, Mississippi Free Press. There is so many folks that have in the last, you know, 5 to 10 years, even some of them longer than that, who are seeing the nonprofit sector is, what journalism will be like in the future.

Emily Ramshaw [00:30:38] Well, we're getting close to me fielding you some audience questions, but I think the last one for me is, you know, there are obviously folks in this room who are trying to get ventures off the ground and who are at the struggle bus portion of the journey. What is your best advice? And I know that sounds obvious and trite, but what is your best advice from getting from, you know, that you had an idea for something that was one year to like that moment where, you know, you can make it happen.

Wendi C Thomas [00:31:03] Yeah. Thank you. Sounds cliché, but you just really have to believe in yourself and encourage yourself when nobody else is doing it, because you will shed tears and you will cry, and you will get on Indeed for a second and see what other jobs are out there. But, if you can just persevere as long as you can work hard at it, at least you know you'll do your best. It's not a guarantee of success, but it definitely ups the odds.

Emily Ramshaw [00:31:32] All right. Thank you all so much for sending in your questions. We have some great ones here. I'll start with this one that came in via Slack. What methods have you found effective for building trust and gaining access to marginalized communities whose stories are often underreported?

Wendi C Thomas [00:31:47] That's a good question about trust. We do think deeply about trust. Last year, I believe it was last year we came up with this tip sheet that says, before you talk to a



journalist, read this. And so it was a way to address the extreme power imbalance between source and reporter. And we wanted people to know what their rights are. You know, you can talk to me now and then decide five minutes before publication. You don't want to be a part of the story. And okay, you know, we'll make that happen. And so I think that's one way. And one example of how we try to build trust is letting people know what their rights are and their power is, and in the situation. We also like what the movement is making work. Our visuals editor, Andre Morales, has been there when people are getting tear gas and the police are, you know, bringing the big shields through and smacking their shields with their sticks. And when you've been out there with people running from the police and that sort of thing, they tend to trust you and the scenes will go on. Where were people in the community? Activist organizers will be like, we're not talking to anybody but MLK 50, all right? And so they know and are confident that they're going to get a fair, fair telling with us.

Emily Ramshaw [00:33:05] Okay, here's another good one. Tell us about a moment where you thought you might fail.

Wendi C Thomas [00:33:11] A moment.

Emily Ramshaw [00:33:14] There are lots of options to choose from.

Wendi C Thomas [00:33:16] Lots of moments. So many times I can't even pick one. You know, on your credit card statements, it'll tell you, like, if you pay this off, it'll be a million years before you pay that off. So seeing that, I just was like, should I go get a job? You know, especially before we had full time employees, because then you would just kind of be letting go a lot of long term freelancers. I was like, I don't know if we can continue to do this. You know, our bank account never got to zero, but, you know, it wasn't the lowest of the five figures. And then I thought, I'll just borrow from my savings, you know. Yeah. I called ahead with a funder where he told us we were too risky and too small and maybe wait 2 or 3 years. And I said, we won't be here in 2 or 3 years if we don't get a significant investment now. Yeah, I cried that day. I was like, this is not going to turn. Yeah.

Emily Ramshaw [00:34:22] It's amazing. It's amazing that you had those insanely dark days and that this is where you are today. Another question about sustainability. Besides philanthropic funds, what mechanisms have you found for sustainability? What has worked best for you to maintain independence while being sustainable? And I'll add to that sort of, you know, financial sustainability. What about the sustainability of your team, the well-being of your team and yourself covering the stories you all cover, living with the financial pressures you've been living under?

Emily Ramshaw [00:34:58] Sustainability. What is beyond the financials.

Wendi C Thomas [00:35:02] You know, beyond the financials. Yeah. Just to be clear on the financials. Almost 80%, maybe 85% is institutional funders. So sending the people, it's like something we really, really take seriously because those of us who came from legacy

newsrooms know what the burnout looks like. And that just is not the newsroom I've ever wanted to work in. So one example would be we have two dark weeks a year, and it's just where everyone works aside from vacation, you're sick time, PTO, the five mental health days you get. Aside from all that. We just take two weeks a year and then we're off once in the spring and once the week before Labor Day. And that's just to acknowledge that people are working hard. We have flexible work hours. People work from home. We're doing an employee survey to see what people feel like they need. We do benefit surveys and say, okay, what do you want more in your 41K? We can't say yes to everything. Do you want, you know, what are the things that would make your job better? Because first people are people and then their other identities. Journalists may not even be third or fourth, right? So we want to respect people in their multiple identities.

Emily Ramshaw [00:36:12] A question about what does MLK 50 look like, you know, at year 25? I mean, when you think about the future of this organization, you think about the work you want to do. What do you hope? What's the five year, ten year dream?

Wendi C Thomas [00:36:28] I will not be at the helm. In five years, I can definitely tell you that. And I'm really excited about what the next corps of leadership will build. You know, like I kind of built the foundation. But sometimes you take it down the stairs and you do something else, right? And so, for it to really be owned by the community, I'm looking forward to seeing how they more closely impact what we do. I don't have any aspirations for us to become a 50/60 person newsroom. I don't think we necessarily need that. But definitely some more reporters, a lot more people on the business side, maybe an events team thinking about revenue. We've got a lovely office with lots of sunlight coming. I mean, I can literally see what it's going to look like hosting community events, and it's just even more of a part of the fabric of Memphis.

Emily Ramshaw [00:37:25] All right, we have time for one more here. And the question is, what are the motivations that have kept MLK 50 going in the most challenging moments?

Wendi C Thomas [00:37:36] You know, I think, you know, in Memphis, the specter of King hangs over everything. And so, I think a lot of us want to honor his sacrifice, right? And we want to help bring to fruition his dreams about workers rights. And that is a motivating factor. And then, you know, we have all the stories from readers who are like, I'm so glad you wrote that. My medical got a raise. I'm so glad you wrote that. The pipeline is not going to come through, you know, my neighborhood. I'm so glad you wrote that. Eviction court judges are being more polite. And that absolutely keeps you going.

Emily Ramshaw [00:38:21] Well, your work is an inspiration and legacy. You all have set powers for all of our work. So thank you so much for joining us, Wendy. And yes, please join me in thanking Wendi for her contributions and this conversation today. Thank you.