

Living With Yourself As a Reporter

By Patrice Gaines

The report on the police radio came about midnight. A woman had been shot and taken to a hospital. I was the only reporter available at The Miami News. The editor asked me did I want to check it out. "Why not?" I replied.

Twenty minutes later I was sneaking into the dark lobby of the hospital, past the reception desk where no one sat. The place smelled like a funeral parlor, fragrances of mixed flowers standing in the air.

I was tipping up to the waiting room outside intensive care when a nurse asked, "May I help you?"

"I'm here to see Jackie Smith," I said.

"Are you a relative?" she asked.

"I'm a sister," I lied. I was a new reporter and a bit too gung-ho. Lying, I found out later, only meant trouble down the line.

In the waiting room two middle-aged women and a woman in her mid-20s sat in stiff chairs. I recognized the younger woman as sales clerk from my neighborhood record shop. She was hugging herself with her own arms, a look of befuddlement on her face. I introduced myself and said, "I remember you from the record store." She nodded recognition and said her name was "Marcia."

"I'm also a reporter for the Miami News. We got a call that a woman was shot. Is the woman someone you know?"

She nodded and the tears fell from her eyes into her mouth as she whispered, "Jackie is my sister."

"I don't want to intrude," I said, softly. "But I may want to write about your sister and the shooting. Can we talk a little bit?"

Why she didn't throw me out, I don't know. She introduced me to her mother and her mother's good friend. I explained to them what I wanted to do and they nodded in agreement. I never had to ask a question.

I found out that Jackie was 19 and had been shot by her boyfriend, a 35-year-old man with whom she lived. He had a violent temper and Mrs. Smith and Marcia had warned Jackie to stay away from him.

"She wouldn't listen," Mrs. Smith said, wearily, her face very tired under a scarf that wrapped her head.

"She's in love," said Marcia.

"But how could he accidentally shoot her in the back of her head?" the neighbor asked.

"It was no accident," Marcia whispered. **

The two older women went to the bathroom. Marcia stepped out for a smoke. A nurse came to me and said, "Would you like to see her?"

It took me a second to realize she meant Jackie. I could not believe myself. I said, "Yes."

She opened the door to a small room and I stepped inside. There was a tiny dark-skinned girl, her head bandaged, tubes from her nose and arms. Her arms were so frail, so tiny; so delicate. She was so young. She looked like my daughter, my sister, me 10 years ago. Time stood still. Had I been in there a minute, an hour, a day?

I jumped. The nurse was tapping me on the shoulder. "I thought I would tell you this since you seem a little bit more under control. We don't think she is going to make it. Would you tell the others?"

All the thoughts hit me at once. See what my lie had done. Now I was going to have to tell some strangers that someone they loved was going to die. What could I say? How do you do such a thing?

I had barely stepped into the hall when I ran into Marcia. She looked into my eyes and she said, "She's not going to make it, is she?" I squeaked out a "no" before we fell into each others arms and cried.

I spoke in a class at Howard University several months ago and one particular young man questioned me severely about the job of a reporter. His questions were accusatory, begging an explanation of why reporters pry into other people's lives. When I related the story of how I sneaked into the hospital and sat with Jackie Smith's family, he asked, "Why? Why would anyone want to do something like that?"

Good questions. But I had no succinct answer. The questions sent me inside myself, in search of a way to answer students in the future. What I found was not a justification for prying as much as a look at why I do what I do and how it affects me.

Sometimes I think people forget that behind the screaming headlines and the "bad news" are real people—on both sides—reporting and being reported on. I have to go home and deal with demons and ghosts left over from nightmarish stories. I have to find a place to shelf unspent emotions. It's the price I pay for learning from other people's experiences.

There's no denying that all reporters possess a nearly overwhelming sense of curiosity. For me the thirst to know is not related to world politics or science or math, but in a way to all of these things. I have an intense desire to know people to understand why they do what they do, how they cope and how they feel.

It is not the interviews with presidents and celebrities I remember, or if I remember them it is the mundane, ordinary details of the people that I retain. Mostly, I remember the ordinary people

who did extraordinary things or those people whom I met on a day when they were struggling with grief and tragedy.

During most of my career I have specialized in human-interest stories. That has meant I've spent a lot of time reconstructing the lives of people who have died. Midway through the looking at photographs and the interviewing of friends and family, the pieces of the person's life come together and for a fleeting moment I get a glimpse of a person I never met.

It is a mystical, wondrous experience and I have found myself and my life affected by people I will never really know. I have cried over the children of strangers and prayed for the souls of people I've never met.

I once visited four bereaved families in one day, stopping at a funeral home, a memorial ceremony and two homes. I cried four times and still remember each family. I don't remember names; I remember faces, words and lives.

I remember the younger brother of one dead boy, proclaiming: "Tommy saved his money and was fixing up his truck. I'm going to finish the work. When people ask me why, I'll tell them because it was his."

I can count on one hand the number of times a door has been shut in my face or a harsh word spat at me. Yet I know I have pressed people at the most fragile times of their lives.

I learned early that when people are stripped to raw emotion, when they are lost in the horror of a tragedy, they do not care whether you are rich or poor, black or white. You are allowed to talk to people who may never have spoken to you otherwise. Tragedy becomes the least common denominator.

People talk to you because you are like a wailing wall, a priest to confess to, a person who is listening. You bear witness to their grief and your words will offer evidence that the person who is dead once lived.

I went through a riot in Miami armed with a pad and pencil while everyone else packed guns, rocks and Molotov cocktails. My mood swung from silly, because I felt ridiculous, to extremely depressed because as a black person, I felt like a traitor.

Again, though, I saw the benefits of being a reporter. I learned more than I would have if I had set fire to the neighborhood grocery store. I saw more than the police or the rioters. I was on both sides, yet on neither. To be a reporter is to be able to keep a distance while participating. It is a chance to see both sides and have time to recoil and think.

Reporting is constant educating and re-educating, reminding yourself that no matter how open you think you are to new ideas, your ideas may be outdated and you may have accepted a particular stereotype as real.

I was reminded recently. I was at the wedding of two developmentally disabled people (once known as mentally retarded). I was questioning the couple when someone else called me. When I returned to the couple I couldn't remember my last question.

"You were going to ask him his height," the bride reminded me.

Why was I surprised? I checked myself out, realized that because the bride was developmentally disabled I didn't think she would remember either. I mentally kicked myself, then laughed all the way home at the incident and my ignorance.

I was thankful once again that because of what I do I got to go somewhere where I might never have gone otherwise. I've trampled in the mud with cowboys at a rodeo, been touched by the ritual of a Jewish Seder, and watched Cuban families reunited after years of separation.

A woman who some would call a soothsayer once explained to me how she could hold an item of jewelry belonging to a person and tell everything about that person.

"From everyone you meet, you take something. And bits of those people are on what you wear. How deep the impression depends upon the length of the relationship or the depth of it."

I look at my jewelry now in disbelief. Could hundreds of people from hundreds of stories be buried in my cheap brass bracelet?

I remember quotes that aren't earth-shattering but are insightful at the least. I remember that when I asked a couple that had been married for 50 years if married life was easier after a half century together, they both answered in unison, "No."

I never wrote a story about Jackie Smith but after she died the woman who had sat in the waiting room with Smith's mother walked me to the parking lot. I remember distinctly the last thing she told me: "I had a daughter that died in a car accident. I haven't been able to bake a cake right since."

(A version of this story was published by The Washington Post, July 1984)

**** To help erase domestic abuse, support Men Stopping Violence**
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