

MELANIE ALNWICK ('89) WAS COVERING A ROUTINE ASSIGNMENT WHEN AN ACTIVIST SHE WAS INTERVIEWING GAVE HER "ATTITUDE" AND SAID, "YOU DON'T CARE."



The man, who was pushing for someone to uncover the arsenic contamination in an upscale Washington, D.C., neighborhood found his match in Alnwick, who met with him on her own time and then devoted months of her life to the story. Alnwick, a general assignment reporter for WTTG-Fox 5 News, recently won a national Emmy award for Outstanding Regional News Story - Investigative Reporting, for her work on the story, *Buried Secrets*.

The story that pushed Alnwick to do "more work than I have ever done on a story," exposed the history and present state of a community of million-dollar homes that was built on the former site of a chemical weapons development and testing site used during World War I.

Alnwick, along with Executive Producer Patricia DiCarlo, News Director Katherine Green, and Assistant News Director Holly Gaunt, accepted the award Sept. 3, at a ceremony in New York City. The award was only one of two given for regional news reporting. The National Television Academy presented 32 awards this year for news and documentary work - most going to networks such as PBS, ABC and CBS.

"Melanie's work exposed a tremendous problem in a high-end neighborhood that many people did not want to see exposed," said Green, about what made *Buried Secrets* an Emmy winner.

The neighborhood, Spring Valley, includes more than 1,200 properties with arsenic contamination. Alnwick was the first television reporter to tackle the story.

"It's really such a newspaper piece because there's so much history and background," Alnwick said.

The story that began with a short segment on testing quickly grew as Alnwick delved deeper into the story.

"I'm not an investigative reporter...I like investigative reporting when I have the time and resources to do it right," she said.

Alnwick went to her news directors and asked for the resources to tackle "Buried Secrets," and WTTG gave her the time she needed. In May, the station devoted 12 minutes of airtime to Alnwick's reporting.

"That's unheard of in a local broadcast," Alnwick said. And more time was given in June, July and August.

Pits with buried chemicals continue to be uncovered. The chemical weapons site, used by the Army in the beginning of the 20th Century, was used to create and test a compound more deadly than mustard gas. Scientists developed "lewisite," a "dark, oily liquid containing 36 percent arsenic that irritates the eyes, skin, and lungs, according to the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

The chemical was tested on animals, sprayed on the ground to test how long it would remain lethal and it was even tested on people. Alnwick's reporting included talking to the son of a man who had been used for testing at the site.

Alnwick, who came to Washington, D.C., in 1999 to work for Fox 5, was no stranger to the capital. As part of an Air Force family, Alnwick moved 15 times - once to Washington, D.C. for five years - before coming to live in the city in 1983.

After graduating from JMU in 1989, she spent some time working for a video production company before

going to Channel 9 news in Washington, D.C., as assistant to the news director. In her five years there, she said she was able to "get her foot in the door" and began to do some producing.

"I got to start in a big market," she said, and that provided a "great experience."

However, to be an on-air reporter, she knew she would need to go to a smaller market. She spent 10 months in Harrisburg, Pa., before they dissolved their local news department.

She then served as a news reporter and weekend anchor for NBC-17 in Raleigh, N.C., for two years. There, she specialized in covering U.S. Army and Air Force issues at Fort Bragg, Pope Air Force Base and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. She traveled with the Air Mobility Command to Bosnia and Albania to cover Operation Allied Force and joint Task Force Shining Hope.

Alnwick said 2003 has been a huge year for her, as she got married, bought a house, won an Emmy and was featured in Glamour Magazine. Though, the Glamour article wasn't what she expected. She and eight other television news reporters were flown to New York and spent a day in hair, makeup and photo sessions for what they thought was a story on beauty tips for busy women.

However, when the story appeared, "They switched it around on us, and the story was 'Help for the Nation's Worst Hair.'"

Alnwick was unhappy with the story, but said she was glad she got some good pictures out of the deal.

Going back to New York for the Emmy awards was quite a different experience, which she said was exciting and "nerve-wracking." Alnwick didn't prepare a speech because she said she was a little superstitious and she thought it would be presumptuous to do so.

"We all had the same feeling that we would just be tucked in the back," she laughed. She was right, but that just meant it took a little longer for her to get to the stage when she won.

"I put a few thoughts together in my head," she remembered. "I made joke about how long it took me to get to the stage."

She then thanked her husband, her station and her parents.

"They always taught me to ask a lot of questions," she said.

Those questions keep coming as Alnwick continues to work on the Spring Valley story.

"She has spent hours and hours and hours doing research." Green said, adding that Alnwick has demonstrated "intense perseverance." "She really had to work against a lot of obstacles."

By Donna Dunn