



Assignment America

CBS News' Jim Acosta ('93) joins Dan Rather on the set for blackout story

Story by Liz Cerami Taylor ('92)

THE LIGHTS WERE OUT ON BROADWAY; AND LIKE MANY NEW YORKERS, JIM ACOSTA ('93) WAS NOT SURE WHY. BUT A PHONE CALL TO HIS OFFICE, CBS NEWS, WOULD ANSWER THAT QUESTION AND PUT THE SPOTLIGHT BRIGHTLY ON HIM.

It was August 2003, and Acosta and his cameraman were returning to CBS after covering another story. They noticed the power was out for several blocks, so Acosta called CBS.

"I said, 'Do you guys know why the lights are out?' The bureau chief said, 'Get out of the car and shoot everything.'" Acosta headed to an unlit Times Square and interviewed people on the street. Arriving back at CBS, he quickly found a tie and then joined veteran news anchor Dan Rather on the set to talk about the blackout as the video rolled. "There's a first time for everything," he recalls, laughing.

That memorable experience was one of many Acosta has enjoyed since joining CBS News in February 2003. The job is a dream come true for Acosta, whose big break came following a year as a correspondent for CBS Newspath, a news service for CBS affiliates.

Acosta's career began to take off while still at JMU. He volunteered at the student-run radio station, WXJM and was also hired as a news reporter by local radio station WSVA. This early exposure to news reporting, along with what he learned in the classroom, became the foundation of his career. "You really need that -- that boot camp I guess you could call it -- to make your mistakes and learn how you want to communicate and how you want to present information," he recalls.

He has fond memories of one class and one professor in particular: Mass Communication Law taught by Roger Soenksen. "That class has always stayed with me -- it taught me how not to get in trouble," Acosta says with a laugh.

His experiences at JMU helped him secure an internship and a job with Washington's WMAL-AM. After a year with WMAL, Acosta moved across the street to WTTG and worked as a desk assistant. "It was my first job in television, and I was making minimum wage with no health benefits," Acosta recalls. "They would send me out with the photographers to drive-by shooting scenes to interview the police about what happened. This was the first time I'd ever seen a dead person."

After a year, WTTG hired him as a writer and field producer for its morning news show. From there, he went to Knoxville's WBIR and started working in front of the camera. "That is where I learned to be a reporter. I really consider my news director there to have been my first mentor in this business," says Acosta. "She taught me how to be a reporter and how to dig things up at city hall. I learned a lot there."

After three years in Knoxville, Acosta moved to Dallas for a job at KTVT. While there, he covered a press conference by presidential candidate George W. Bush. He tried unsuccessfully to get Bush to answer two questions regarding rumors of his possible drug use. "He said, 'You want to ask it a third time?' I did, and then he moved on," Acosta recalls. Afterward, Bush and an aide jokingly said they were going to get him fired.

His reporting in Dallas got the attention of WBBM-TV, Chicago's CBS affiliate. In June 2000, Acosta joined the station as it debuted a newscast that focused less on crime and violence and more on community issues such as education and city government. The newscast was anchored by Carol Marin, who had recently gained attention for quitting Chicago's NBC affiliate in protest over its hiring of Jerry Springer.

"I jumped at the chance because I thought, 'Here's this opportunity to work with this legendary broadcaster who took a stand and said 'I'm going to stand up for quality news,''" says Acosta. "That really affected me personally, being involved in that process."

The show was cancelled four months later, and the setback became a turning point in Acosta's

career. "When it didn't work out, it really convinced me that to do that type of news you have to be with a network news operation," he says.

In October 2001, Acosta signed on as a CBS Newspath correspondent based in Dallas. The job gave him the opportunity to travel the country covering national news stories. His bags were always packed so that he could quickly head to the airport at the beep of his pager. Acosta was one of eight correspondents at CBS Newspath, and collectively they supplied more than 200 CBS stations and affiliates with live shots and news coverage that added a national perspective to their newscasts.

Although he was at CBS Newspath for more than a year, memories of his first week on the job remain etched in his mind. His assignment was to cover the one-month anniversary of the September 11 attacks in New York City. "I will never forget going to Ground Zero. It was just catastrophic," he says. "For a moment, you weren't a journalist anymore. You were just an American feeling the anguish that was just everywhere."

While the war on terrorism dominated both national and local news in the months that followed, other stories soon made headlines. One of them was the case of Andrea Yates in Houston. The mother of five was on trial for the drowning deaths of her children; and although initially reluctant to cover the story, Acosta soon changed his mind.

"When I first went down there, I thought that this was an exercise in voyeurism," says Acosta. "I started off thinking, 'Why are we paying so much attention to this with everything that's going on in the world?' And then by the end of it, I thought, 'This is extremely important because mental illness is still such a taboo subject in this country.'"

The move from CBS Newspath to the network has been a continuation of Acosta's quest to bring the important stories of the day to television viewers in a way that is responsible and engaging. "We know that if [the viewers] see too much of the 'flash and trash' then everything else is called into question," Acosta says. "My focus is doing the right thing in the right amount and making it as compelling as possible so people pay attention."

Today Acosta and his wife, Sharon Stow ('94), along with their new baby, live in Manhattan, although Acosta is often on the road covering stories. "There are lots of sacrifices you have to make, but so far I think we've been able to maintain a healthy balance and enjoy it along the way."