

Interview with Laura Castaneda: 4/29/09

**My first question is how you got into your field?**

How did I get into my field? Well, I went to the University of Illinois, and at the time I was at the University of Illinois urbana, I really wasn't sure which direction in the field of communications I wanted to go I knew that I was not a mathematician, I didn't like science, I knew I wanted to do something involving communications but I really didn't know, like most students I really didn't know which direction I was headed. So I tried my hand in a few different things. I wrote for the..a couple article freelance for the newspaper, I tried to do a little bit production and I found that production is kind of where I passion was heading so by the time I kind of figured thing out I probably would have had to stay at least another year, if not a year and a half to actually get my degree in broadcast journalism so I opted to stay and go ahead to get my degree in English because I had enough coursework to finish that and then I thought that I would just try to do what I could on my own so that's what I ended up doing I got my degree actually in English but I started early on I started attending a lot of workshops and organizations and just trying to connect with the people I thought were the broadcasting field that I wanted to do. So it worked out for me.

**After broadcasting..?**

Well after I got my degree from Illinois I was very very fortunate I got my first job as a production assistant at the ABC station in Chicago which was home for me so it was a very entry level position it wasn't very much money but it really gave me a lot of exposure to what broadcast journalism was all about and working in a number two market with a lot of people who had wonderful resumes and experience so it was really like grad school because it was on the job training a lot of the duties and tasks that I was being able to do that I was asked to do I didn't have any training but I learned on the job. And then the second thing was again just the exposure the fast passed marked it was a lot of on the job training and once I kind of figured out there once I started shadowing people and I realized what a producer does what a reporter really does, whats an assignment editor, once I figured out all the different job descriptions and what was involved I decided that reporting was the path I was going to follow so I knew I couldn't start in Chicago so I started working on my demo reel and that led me to Tucson, Arizona. So I got my first reporting on air reporting job in Tucson Arizona and I had the experience of being a news writer from Chicago and the news judgment but I hadn't actually been on camera yet so that was a whole different craft to learn and I spent time along the border I was covering a lot of border issues I was covering a lot of drugs I was covering thing I never covered in Chicago so it was again a lot of learning on the job and then it threw in another dynamic with covering a lot of stories in Mexico and having to translate a lot of my work from Spanish to English and having to do really double to work because you still the border to cross into Mexico was about 40 miles from Tucson so not only did I have to deal with the travel and the finding the interviews and doing everything else that everyone else had to do but I had to do the translating and rush back to make a deadline so it really was another learning curve and a learning process so from there I ended up naturally wanting to stick with the border again and I ended up in San Diego at channel 10.

**The documentary you made “The Devils Breath” was your first documentary?**

That was my first documentary. I didn't plan on doing that documentary what happened what that when I began teaching at city college I also kept my hands in the mix as a freelance journalist and so in 2004 when we had the wildfires I worked as a freelancer covering the fires but in 2007 myself like many people living in San Diego I kind of found myself watching out for my home because it was kind of sort of on the border of the danger area so I didn't work the fires but a couple weeks after everything was starting to unfold I realized that that was a story that wasn't being covered in the media. And by that I mean the undocumented people from Mexico that died in the fire. Seven out of 11 people that died were from Mexico and I didn't think that story was really covered. So it was a spur of the moment thing and I got 2 colleagues that I knew would take that journey with me without money because we had no money we didn't know where it was going to air where it was going to screen if it would ever have an audience but we kept working on it and working on it and this is the result.

**I know especially when we saw it in my class it never occurred to any of us about migrant issues with the fire. What was your main goal of making the documentary?**

My main goal was really to educate people and to foster discussion that this is a border city where you know we have those fire dangers it's going to happen again if it's when and I think the 911 calls kind of bring up the fact that the emergency system here in San Diego is not set up the way it should be to handle that type of emergency or any other kind of emergency for Spanish speakers and so I didn't set out to like find all these problems but as your doing a documentary you come across information you research it look into it and then you expose what it out there and so you know I again it was something that was kind of going by I grabbed onto it I worked on it for 6 or 7 months I was blessed to get funding from UCSD TV who ended up streaming it on their web site and airing it repeatedly for about 4 months. So it did have it ended up with an audience and more importantly I think its educating people about the fact that it happened

**And you made an extended version of the documentary?**

I made an extended version because after I did the original version 29 minute version for television one of the families that I had been trying to talk to for a year finally agreed to talk to me and they were in orange county so I wanted to add that information in there and in addition to that when you do a television piece your you have to meet a certain time frame for television...either 26 minutes, or 29:30, and with a film version that would be submitted into film festivals it doesn't matter how long it is. So we had the luxury of adding a little bit more material and being able to tell another side of the story that wasn't told.

**Now do you have the desire to do another documentary after this one?**

Of course I do but I just don't have any money. You know I think there a misperception out there when someone has a great for a documentary that there's a market for them, people are looking for great documentaries, and that they will screen and they will air. And they will in the film festival circuit if they're good, but there's no guarantee. And for people who are uneducated about documentaries with

the technology that is available to us now almost everyone now has the luxury of going to buy an inexpensive camera you can get the editing software you know you can do that. But you still want to make sure that it's done correctly that your audio is good that your video is white balanced, that you know the technical aspect of it is still gonna be what it should be I think that is something I'm a little bit worried about as an instructor in radio/TV that now cell phone video can become acceptable and it's not good and I think that that's, it was worrisome to me but I think people need to understand that there's a ton of research that goes into it, making a documentary, a ton of time you put your heart, your soul, and a lot of passion into it but there are a lot of great stories that need to be told. And if somebody has that desire it is possible to do it, even with very little funding, but you go into it with a big mystery not knowing if it's ever going to have a nice pretty dvd cover and if people will ever see it.

**Do you still see some of the same dangers and issues with crossing the border now than during the fires?**

Yes very much so. And I think, again, as I said, going into the documentary I didn't seek out to find the problems in San Diego but in doing the research, stumbling upon those 911 calls, it was clear that there was a problem. And there was a lot of, I wasn't in the 911 call center I can only imagine what it was like to be an operator, a 911 operator, having to deal with all those emergency calls, but from what I was able to gather in my research and what I heard, the system still has glitches that need to be worked out and if we don't get those settled now it's going to affect people again and the other thing that people may not be aware of that while we are doing this interview right now there's no question in my mind that there are men, women, and children crossing the border illegally right now and you can look at it from both ends. You can say they have no business crossing the border this is, you know, whatever happens to them is their fault or you can look at it from the other side and say, supply and demand. As long as there is a better life on this side and more opportunity people are going to continue to do it and put their life at risk. And those are our borders and that we have national security issues and now health issues so there is a lot of different reasons why, you know, this should not be happening the way it is.

**How do you think the US immigration policy affects migrants? Do you think it needs to be changed, amended?**

Absolutely, positively, changed amended and dealt with as soon as possible because there is no question that both countries are looking the other way, they have been for a long time, um, Mexico is probably happy about all the money that gets poured back into the country but is not realizing the danger, or if they do realize the danger nothing is being pressed about it I'm not saying that the other issues in that are in the news media right now are not important, like the drugs, the drug cartels and the killings and all that horrible stuff that's going on, I'm not saying that shouldn't be addressed because it's an emergency situation but so is this, this has been going on for so long that it just seems, its unbelievable that two parties have not sat down to find a way to make it better.

**But do you think that President Obama's visit to Mexico o this month, do you think that will lead to a change, or have you seen any reaction among the Mexico people to his visit?**

Well in the days that he was in Mexico visiting the images in mainstream broadcast journalism were all about drugs and violence and they were showing soldiers on top of tanks with AK-47s, that was the issue that was being discussed the word immigration I don't know if it came up but it certainly wasn't shown in the media. So is there hope that they will get together again and talk about it? I guess so, I guess with every president we've always had hope that the issues will be discussed, but, you know, I guess we'll have to wait and see again.

**In your opinion, what should be happening along the border? What should Mexico be doing on their side and what should the U.S. be doing on our side?**

I am a believer that if you don't have solutions pinpointed that you shouldn't complain, and I don't have all the solutions figured out, so it's kind of a tough question for me to answer. All I can say is that, again, I think that this is an issue that has been ignored for a long time. When Operation Gatekeeper was put into effect in the 90s, you know lets infiltrate the border with a lot of agents and hire extra people and build a second wall and see if that will help...it hasn't helped. Because what it did is push migrants east towards this exact area where all of these people had died in the fires went. So I know that is not the answer. What is the answer? I don't have it. But I think that both parties need to take it seriously, you know, the last time there were marches in this country it turned out there were somewhere in the ballpark of 12 million undocumented Mexicans alone in this country not to mention others, other nationalities, so I think that, you know if that doesn't send a message in itself I don't know what else will. I just think that it's time for both countries to turn the other, to close their eyes and turn the other way and pretend like this doesn't happen, it's just...

**Do you think the best thing to do would be have both countries work together to find a solution?**

Obviously, but only if both parties work together. And it doesn't seem to be coming up as important conversation just yet. I would be surprised if the Obama Administration doesn't tackle this issue because that was briefly talked about in the campaign. I think if the Obama Administration does not make a move on the U.S. side to make things a little bit better than what they are now I don't think it will go unnoticed.

**How do you think the coverage of migrants and the drug war affects people's perception in San Diego, not in the whole country, but local news?**

Well, you know, in San Diego, as far as the news media is concerned, and I can say this because I was part of that system for so long, there is a distinct invisible line drawn along interstate 8, and by that I mean that anything south of interstate 8 is almost always illegal, drug activity, or illegal immigration. That's what sells, that's what gets covered. It's very hard to sell a news editor or a manager on something positive along the U.S.-Mexico border. And the other misperception is that you're only going to find Latinos or border issues along the border. There are border issues in North County. There's a huge Mexican immigrant population in North County and they are all but ignored in the mainstream media. So, you know, it's not, I've always seen kind of again an invisible, verbal, oh if its involving immigrant communities, it's for that media, meaning Spanish language media, and that's not the case.

**So it does create a sort of bias?**

Yes, absolutely.

**Have you seen, in any of your recent research, how the current economic recession is affecting migration?**

Well you know maybe unofficially and maybe in a nonscientific poll just from conversation and my own sources I would say that, um, the flow has probably stopped. Somewhat of male migrants looking for work in the United States who have now heard that it's at a complete standstill and a halt so I don't know I haven't checked with, I haven't checked with anybody to see if the numbers are actually down from people, you know, apprehensions or anything like that or if there are any distinct connection, but I think the word is out there, that the economic crisis has hit the United States, you know, health crisis hitting the United States, I would imagine that it's going to have a really big impact.

**Anything keeping undocumented workers in the states and not going back to their home countries as much...**

You know what, I don't know, maybe it's the other way around, maybe its people who were thinking about coming, um, it doesn't seem like the dangers of coming has ever stopped anybody, but it seems like money would. They know there's no money to be made and the American dream is no longer the way it was, then maybe that in itself would be a safety net for people to not risk their lives to come.

**What is your opinion on the drug war, and I know a lot of people are afraid in San Diego, that it's spilling over across the border.**

I think the drug war has long been in the United States already, it just wasn't talked about as much, and when it really started hitting mainstream English language media I think it was brought to light that the drug cartels from Mexico and Columbia and everywhere else are infiltrating street gang members as we know them in the U.S. and little clusters in cities like, you know, Iowa and Michigan and North Carolina and Tennessee, places where I don't think anybody would have ever imagined that there was drug business going on, at least not from foreign drug cartels, so I think that kind of opened some eyes, I think that along the border we are always going to kind of get hit the hardest with the stereotypes because I think people are afraid I think there a big fear factor and the other thing that we have here along the border is that we have a lot of dual families, people that live in Tijuana but also visit the U.S. quite frequently and vice versa, and along with that has to be the dangers of, you know, is East Lake safe anymore?, because you have wealthier Mexicans that live in East Lake so does that mean that there's going to be more kidnappings over there, is it leading over the border, probably. It's just probably not talked about as much.

**My last question would be how you think the media your experience in broadcast journalism, how they could reform, and bring more awareness to migrants**

There are two ways, and this kind of goes back to diversity in the newsroom. There's, the numbers of managers in broadcast journalism roles are very few that are Latinos and understand what are some of

the major issues are and how to avoid the stereotypes. I know that the national association of Hispanic journalists has what is called a parody project, where they actually try to engage managers with communities where there have been problems in print and broadcast stations who clearly don't understand the cultural side of things and they have tried to bring the two sides together to try and educate, really, hold like little town hall meetings if you will, and I think that needs to happen more often, because, you know, with the economic crisis affecting all businesses including the newspapers and broadcast stations, you know people are getting sliced and diced and some of those people are the few and only reporters or people who really know what's going outside. And so if you are relying on a manager who has never set foot along the border but they are going to be responsible of what coverage is being shown, you are going to have a problem.

**Did you ever feel pressure in the news room to cover certain stories?**

No, it was pretty much opposite. I would bring a lot of stories to them and say 'we should be covering this.' There were some vague things that come to mind, I remember really vaguely I couldn't tell you what year but there was flooding in Rosarito and a number of people had died and we didn't cover it and I said wait a minute! You know, how could we not cover Rosaritos which is like 20 minutes from the us border, how could we not cover that. Given the fact that so many people here have relatives over there, and they said it wasn't important to the audience here. So those kinds of things, bringing issues to the table and saying how come we are not covering this, this is definitely part of the border region, definitely part of our coverage that people should know about here staying away from only covering the shootings and the negative and the drugs and the illegal immigration and people crawling over the fence, but showing that there is another side of life

**Well thank you so much.**