

DANIELA FRANCO
EDITOR, FEATURES

HOW DID YOU GET INTO JOURNALISM?

I moved from Colombia when I was 15 to a town outside of Boston and went to high school in the U.S. for three years. I went from speaking Spanish 24-7 to speaking English, but I was fortunate enough that I took English my entire life so it wasn't that bad of a transition. ... I ended up going to New York University and I had the mentality that I was going to be a teacher because I had so many interactions with people in high school where they were like, 'Did you come here on a boat?' 'Are you the daughter of a drug lord?' ... Colombia was so driven by news – so much was happening – we were in the middle of a civil war when I was born. I remember growing up with this mentality of education through news. When I came to the U.S., I realized that people didn't have that mentality, and I was shocked at the fact that people were making uneducated comments about my culture. So, I thought, "I'm going to school everyone. I am going to learn everything there is to know about Latin America and I'm going to become a teacher and I'm going to teach everyone." ... Then, I took a journalism class with a friend. ... After that first class, I realized that journalism is a tool to educate people and also stay current.

NOT

IN FEBRUARY, PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP DESCRIBED THE "FAKE NEWS MEDIA"

THE

AS "THE ENEMY OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE." WE DISAGREE.

ENEMY

HERE, DESERT SUN STAFF SHARE ABOUT THE COST AND VALUE OF JOURNALISM.

INTERVIEWS BY KRISTIN SCHARKEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAY CALDERON

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF JOURNALISM?

What I argued in my [college] thesis was that journalists have a duty to the audience to inform them, and it's the struggle of staying unbiased, the struggle of giving people the information to educate them and letting them have their own opinions. ... In the end, it's a matter of giving people a lens as completely clear as we can because as human beings we're obviously going to have opinions. But giving people information, I realize that's the goal for journalism.

HOW DOES THAT FUNCTION WITHIN YOUR IDENTITY AS A LATINA?

In Colombia, we were all equals. You weren't defined as Latina or Colombian. You were all from different neighborhoods, you went to sports together, you did things together but you weren't different. When I came here, we moved to a town that was primarily white. ... I was put into a box. This was the first time where I had to fill out paperwork where they asked you, "Are you Hispanic/Latina?" I had never before in my life had to do that. And I had people using that identity to define me.

SO THEN HOW DOES JOURNALISM FIT INTO THAT BOX?

You can fight the stereotypes. You can fight them, take them apart. ... As a journalist, I have the ability to take stories that are out of the norm, that are different, and I'm able to say, "This is the real face of Latinos. This is what's really happening."

HOW ARE YOU DOING THAT NOW?

When I got here, I was told, "We don't have the Spanish audience. We've tried translating articles but we can't really reach them." ... I thought of creating a weekly digital newsletter where I translate a quick four- to five-sentence summary of each story in Spanish and link to the site – having the top five stories of the week, ... whether it's something local or something like the immigration executive order. Including national news that affects the Latino community. It's not going to just be "Modernism Week is happening, Coachella is happening." It's going to be things that they need to know, that they need to learn, things that they need to be informed on. I don't want it to just be random. I want them to know that this is going to be curated by me – and [that I'm] really thinking about what I as a Latino would want to know.

... I think that giving information will also bridge the idea of fear. There's so much fear that has been instigated right now. I think that knowing a little bit, knowing what does the executive order mean? What are all these different things that people are saying mean? And what can you do? Learn more. I want to give them a little bit of a pathway. I know the newsletter will not be the solution. It's just a stepping stone. I can't expect everyone to read it. I also can't expect everyone to actually click on it. But I think having that in their inbox, having five top news [stories] that they can scroll through and then be like, "Whoa, that happened?" it will start a conversation.

XOCHITL PENA COLUMNIST, VIBE & STYLE

WHAT DREW YOU TO JOURNALISM?

It's all about the storytelling. I love to tell stories, whether it be the more investigative, hard news, city government stories or the fun features. In both styles, I'm able to keep people aware of things and tell them what I think they need to know to lead a life, basically. To bring enjoyment to their lives (in what I'm doing now), but then also to keep them updated on what they should know about what's going on in their city government.

WHY DO IT?

For our country right now, it's [shining] a light on what is really going on – letting people know what the truth is, what the facts are, what they need to know to make informed decisions to go on with their daily lives. When I was covering city government, it was basically keeping people aware of important things that affected them, city decisions that affected them in so many different ways that they might not be aware of if not for us telling them. ... If it wasn't for at least one story that I wrote, there would be people out there probably taking advantage of people.

WHICH STORY?

[It ran in 2008]: Grant writer Jean Cross basically forged signatures [on a grant for the Indio Youth Task Force]. She was going to make a couple million dollars off a school grant. We uncovered this and the DA picked up on our reporting, went to court and she got convicted. But it all had to do with our journalism, our reporting letting people know she basically took advantage of one of our local school districts, all these youth organizations.

WHAT'S YOUR CURRENT MINDSET COVERING VIBE AND STYLE?

I walk in and I'm like, "OK, so how am I going to make people happy or smile or be entertained?" A lot of things right now aren't super rosy, so hopefully what I write will bring a smile to their face, will make them feel better about their lot in life and what's going on around them.

ANY RECENT STORY ACCOMPLISH THAT?

I really liked my drag queens story, because I was able to profile these fun, colorful people who really just love to entertain, and

share with the world a little bit about them and where they come from and why they do this. Hopefully, a story like that might bring a smile to someone's face.

OR, ALLOW READERS TO SEE THE WORLD THROUGH ANOTHER'S EYES?

Yeah, [shine] some light on a subject that they entirely might not know anything about. And for some people, maybe it's inspirational. Maybe they've always thought about doing something like this and until they read someone else's journey, then they can maybe do the same.





WILL DEAN
EDITOR, DESERT OUTLOOK

WHY DID YOU GET INTO JOURNALISM?

I had always wanted to be a writer. I was a high school newspaper reporter and that was always my passion. It's just that I grew up in a community and in a family that didn't really see that as a viable career option. So, I went to study business because it felt safer and the thing to do. But I always had this gnawing urge and need to write. And not just write but try to use that skill in a way that it helped people. So that's what I did. I was working for this construction company in the office doing bookkeeping, and I just decided one day I'm going to go to a local newspaper and pitch some stories. The editor was like, "Do it," and I started from there.

WHAT DO YOU WISH READERS KNEW?

I wish I could tell people that every journalist that I've met, and not to say that everyone is perfect or everyone has the right motivation, but everyone I've met has been very altruistic. They got into it because they wanted to make a difference or they wanted to tell people's stories. You don't get into it for money, that's reality. You don't get into it for fame, even. I feel like a lot of people don't even notice bylines unless they become regular readers. It's not about that. It's really about sharing stories that you hope are going to inform people to help them make better decisions about their own lives.

HOW IS THAT ACHIEVED IN THE DESERT SUN'S LGBT MAGAZINE DESERT OUTLOOK?

We address issues, and we have a political writer that I'm really excited about. Especially in this day and age, we talk about issues that really affect people's lives. Their real lives.

IS YOUR EDITORIAL APPROACH DIFFERENT THAN OTHER LGBT PUBLICATIONS?

Throughout my career, I've always looked at LGBT magazines and – this might sound arrogant – but I've always thought, "It could be better." We're part of every aspect of the community but you didn't really see that reflected. ... There weren't a lot of publications that I saw that addressed, not even issues, but just profiles of people in the community doing interesting things. That LGBT looks like this, too.

... [Also], when I looked at LGBT magazines in the past, they've always been directed toward gay men or this one is for women. [One of the challenges for me was to] really try to create and produce a publication that is L-G-B-T, all of that. I'm often, when I'm curating, trying to balance and think of, "I don't want to leave men out of this issue. I don't want to leave women out." We started a trans life column last year to include that because it feels like the trans community is where the L and the G were maybe 10, 20 years ago. To try and bring that into the fold, it's so important.

IS THERE A COST TO DO YOUR WORK?

When personal freedoms are at stake, I do feel voiceless at times because I can't really be out there participating. That's been really difficult. To be African American and gay, and to feel voiceless at times is challenging. But, at the same time, I try to be inclusive of different people in telling stories and sharing stories.

IS IT WORTH IT?

To be honest, I do wrestle with that sometimes. Ultimately, I think it is worth it because I have that experience and I have that in mind when I'm pitched stories. To really think about, "Is this a story that hasn't been told?" which I try to tell. So maybe, yeah, if I didn't have my career and I was out there being able to speak and participate in different things, I would be sharing my own personal truth in that way. But, I wouldn't be sharing so many other people's stories.



HOW DO YOU, AS A JOURNALIST, COMBAT AN EROSION OF PUBLIC TRUST?

I think showing your work is important. It's easy to make statements that you know to be true in stories but if people aren't going to believe them, I think you can also say, "OK, but here's how I know this thing. Here's a reminder [that] x percentage of scientific studies say this or here are three experts who have looked at this." ... I think a lot of digital publications like Vox and The Atlantic do a really good job with stuff like this in really just breaking down, "Here's how we know what we know." I think traditional newspapers could do a better job of that, rather than just trusting that when they speak the truth that people will know it to be the truth.

HAVE WE LOST SIGHT OF ANYTHING IN THIS DEBATE OVER TRUTH?

There's been a lot of focus on the existence of facts recently. ... Obviously, it's important to defend the objective reality that there is truth and there are lies and that's being eroded and we have to fight back against it, but I do think it's also important to not lose sight of the fact that that's not all journalism is. That journalists have really powerful roles to play not only in holding power accountable but in championing the causes of people who are suffering, spotlighting injustice so that there's action taken to address that injustice, whether that's humanitarian or social or environmental or health or whatever it may be. So, I am a little worried that in all of the focus on "Journalists have the facts" and "We have to make sure people know they're stating the facts," that journalism remembers that's not its only role. Certainly, it's not about being activists, per say, but that journalism, at least for me, is cause-driven.

HOW DO YOU APPLY THAT TO YOUR OWN WORK?

As a journalist, I need to be comfortable saying, "Hey, this is a serious issue and some kind of action needs to be taken, and it's not my job to tell you what kind of action I think should be taken." But I think that the work I do would be much less meaningful if it wasn't informed by that idea of, "Hey, something needs to happen, and let's talk about what to do about this." Let's figure it out together.

IS THERE ANOTHER NOUN YOU'D REPLACE THE WORD 'ENEMY' WITH?

I like 'servants.' I feel like it's a public service and that's the most important thing to keep in mind. If we're being told we're an enemy of the public, to me the response is, "No, we're serving the public." They're better off because of us but we're doing it for them, not for any abstract principle but to serve those people.

SAMMY ROTH
REPORTER, ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

YOU COVER ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES - WHY JOURNALISM AND NOT ACTIVISM?

I think there are a lot of very good activists. ... I think there are fewer good journalists pressing the issues from a straightforward, nonbiased, fact-based perspective than there are people who are really good at advocating for their causes. The other thing is, I think as an activist or an advocate, you lose a certain measure of credibility. There are people who will like your cause who will believe everything you tell them and that's nice for you but you really lose credibility with the majority of the population that isn't already aligned with your point of view. So as a journalist, I like that in theory you can be a trusted source of information for everyone.



IAN JAMES
REPORTER, WATER & ENVIRONMENT

WHEN DID YOU GET INTO JOURNALISM?

I didn't know initially in college that I wanted to be a reporter but arrived at that conclusion. ... I was especially interested in the role that I had seen news coverage playing in helping to reveal problems that might otherwise not get the attention that they deserved. I majored in public policy studies and my thesis focused on news coverage of the practice of finning sharks and how that led to an Atlantic Coast management plan for sharks, or how it helped raise awareness about this problem that might otherwise just have not received as wide of attention and not led to those changes in Washington.

WHAT DO YOU COVER NOW?

In the past several years, I've been really focusing on reporting on water, drought and climate change, issues that I think are important to have a robust public discussion about. Hopefully, our coverage can contribute to those discussions.

HAS IT?

After our 2013 series focusing on the Coachella Valley's aquifer and the issue of long-term groundwater depletion, we held a water summit where some of the leading voices on water in this area and other parts of California came together to talk about potential solutions. Last year, we held another forum on the effects of climate change and what are some of the potential solutions.

HOW DO YOU REPORT ON CLIMATE CHANGE UNDER AN ADMINISTRATION THAT SAYS IT'S A HOAX?

I think we all have a lot of work to do. The problems of climate change are not going away. Those of us who are reporting on this whole area of news, I think we have an important obligation to investigate what it will mean if there is a general rollback of environmental programs and of programs that are focused on combatting climate change.

DOES IT CHANGE YOUR APPROACH TO COVERAGE?

No, I don't think so. I think it's the same role that I see us playing as journalists. We have an important role to play as watchdogs, guides and problem solvers, and in holding government officials accountable for their decisions and actions. And in investigating the activities of government agencies and business practices, to reveal either when there are important problems that demand attention or where people or institutions are abusing the public trust.

ARE THERE ANY MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT JOURNALISM YOU'D WANT TO REFUTE?

If there's mistrust of the press among some Americans, there are clearly reasons why people may feel that way, but I think quality journalism has never been as important as it is right now. Even in this polarized political situation, I hope people will see the value of an independent press and investigative journalism. ... I think both in this newsroom and really across the country, journalists are super dedicated people who are focused on telling important stories and playing a positive role in society. Part of that comes through the important, difficult work of investigative journalism, muckraking. It's a role that only the press can play. 🍌