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## WHITE HOUSE NEWS PHOTOGRAPHERS ASSOCIATION LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD DOUG WILKES

Thirty-five years ago, I was a college senior at Allegheny College with no idea what I'd do with my English degree. My swim team coach — I was a diver — informed me I was half a credit shy of being a full-time student, making me ineligible to compete. I landed an internship with the news department at WSEE-TV in Erie, Pa., to earn that last half-credit.

The day my internship started, my questions about my future ended. The television news bug bit me hard — and it gnaws at me still.

I spent my first year after graduation working in radio. In 1980, I was hired by WSEE-TV to be a reporter. Having no photographers, the station had reporters either shoot each other's stories or, in most cases, shoot our own. And you thought backpack journalism was a brand-new, "thinking outside the box" concept.

It didn't take long until the camera felt better in my hand than the microphone. After a year or so, I moved to Buffalo, N.Y., to continue my career as a photojournalist for WGR-TV. A year after that, in 1983, I returned home to Washington, D.C., to shoot for WTTG-TV.

For over three decades, I've enjoyed a front-row seat at events others watch on TV when they get home from their jobs. Not everything I cover is thrilling, but all of it matters to someone.

I'm often asked, "What's the most interesting story you ever covered?" I really hate that question because it's impossible to answer. The most memorable part of covering a Super Bowl in Miami was the free concert outside the stadium by Kansas. (I've always loved that band.)



PHOTO BY MIKE HORAN

My memories of the time I spent in Haiti covering the return of Jean-Bertrand Aristide return are dominated by images of the extreme poverty there — the open sewers and young children fighting over food scraps in a dump used by the U.S. military.

I've been to the Middle East three times. The soldiers and Marines I covered in Saudi Arabia and Iraq were inspiring, but more so were the wounded vets I've covered

fighting the real fight — re-learning to live their lives.

The most intense story I've covered is the sniper shootings in Washington. It frightened everyone in the area, including the news people covering it.

I've covered hurricanes, floods and blizzards. Interesting events, but not as interesting as seeing people come together to help each other in their time of need.

My job takes me to interesting places, but covering news in my own community is just as meaningful and rewarding. And it's usually the people I meet who leave the lasting impressions — people at their best and worst.

I really enjoy the people with whom I work, those from my own station and shooters from the other stations and papers. I can spend the whole day standing in freezing sleet, waiting to chase someone out of a courthouse. When that day is shared with a group of photogs swapping stories and jokes, I consider it a great day.

I think often of that fateful afternoon when my coach told me to add another class to my schedule and how it changed my life. Whether it was fate or dumb luck, it led to the most satisfying career I could ever imagine. And while this looks like a retirement statement, be assured I don't plan to write that for a very long time.