



2019 Lifetime Achievement Award Winner MARGARET THOMAS

Some may call it Karma. I call it Grace, or at least an example of harmonic convergence.

After contentious debates, the Civil Rights Act of 1964—the landmark civil rights and labor law that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin—was enacted on July 2 of that year.

In December 1965, seven months after receiving my MFA in photography from Ohio University, I was granted an interview with Dick Darcy, the new photo editor of *The Washington Post*. Looking to be proactive because of the new law, he was seeking a female photographer. I presented a portfolio filled with picture stories, and was hired on Jan. 3, 1966. More than 30 years later I discovered, after speaking with Darcy, that the older male photographers had pleaded with him not to hire me.

I had to work for six months as a news aide to let the men get used to a woman in the department. During that time I was given a few assignments to shoot photos for the paper's *Potomac Magazine*, so I was at times in the darkroom area processing and printing images. At last, in June 1966, I became an official member of the photo staff.

On one of my early assignments I found myself toward the back of a large group of male shooters. Remembering a vignette from Margaret Bourke White's book *Portrait of Myself*, I dropped to my knees and wiggled my way through a sea of legs until I reached the front of the scrum and shot my photos from a lower perspective. I kept that technique in my bag of tricks for the duration of my career.

When the riots of April 1968 engulfed DC, I was sent to the White House rather than the streets. I was not at all happy, especially when the photo editors forgot I was there.

Although most of my work has featured local news plus Congress and the White House, my assignments for the *Post* have also taken me around the United States and to Haiti, Panama, Germany, the Geneva Summit and Sarajevo during the Bosnian war. Oh, and there's the time, while covering a dress rehearsal for a White House musical evening, Robert Goulet serenaded my knee-high winter boots.

I have experienced chauvinism both covert and overt, but two incidents stand out in my memory. The first happened at a photo op on the South Lawn when President and Mrs. Reagan welcomed Prince Charles and Princess Diana. To gain access to the outside press area, photographers had to run for an opening in a hedge that would allow only one person through at a time. A British photographer repeatedly tried elbowing past me. Carrying my



ladder in front, I blocked each effort until I cleared the hedge. Trailing behind me the bloody Brit pushed me to the ground, but on the way down I whacked him smartly with my ladder.

The second episode occurred while I covered the Geneva Summit between Presidents Ronald Reagan and Michael Gorbachev. The White House press office had arranged a photo op of the Reagans strolling through a formal garden. I was working on the edge of an upper riser when a male European photographer tried pushing me off onto the ground several feet down. Seeing my

dilemma Tim Murphy, a WHNPA photojournalist, opened my ladder, enabling me to step off the riser and continue working safely. Here's a shout-out to WHNPA camaraderie.

A favorite compliment: When I covered my first presidential convention, my film was handed over to Toby Massey, the AP editor for the event. After handling a steady stream of my film Toby asked, "Are there two Margaret Thomases, or is she riding a motorcycle?"

Yearning to grow my visual and intellectual experience, I took a leave of absence from the *Post* in 1995 to begin a doctoral program in journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. Studying the History of Photography, American Studies, Women's Studies, Journalism Methods and Theories, and Photojournalism Independent Studies built the research on which I wrote my dissertation on female newspaper photojournalists in the 20th century.

Returning to the *Post*, I was assigned to the Prince William Extra bureau. Friends warned that I was being sent into exile, but I felt like Brer Rabbit being thrown into the briar patch. And what a productive eight years I had. With the encouragement of my editor, I researched, photographed and wrote text for twice-weekly two-page picture stories. During that time, using a \$15,000 stipend from the University of Texas, I took occasional weekend trips across the country collecting oral histories from women. One had carried camera gear for Margaret Bourke-White and some of the others were members of WHNPA or NPPA.

Retiring from the *Post* in 2006 was a true gift. I was able to finish my dissertation and receive, in 2007, my doctoral degree. The gown has been gifted to a friend just beginning her academic career, but my hood and tam are tucked safely into my desk drawer.

My archive, which is housed at UT's Briscoe Center for American History, will include not only my work, but the stories of the women who graciously allowed me into their lives. Thanks to you all!