



Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient JONI MAZER FIELD

I always wanted to be a storyteller. Societal pressure—and some family friends—told me I should choose a “safe career.” When I interviewed for a program in dental hygiene, I was asked what I would do if I wasn’t accepted. Enthusiastically I replied, “I would pursue my real passion for film, radio and TV.” Shocking to no one, I did not get accepted, but I then had the freedom to become a journalist.



I wanted an adventure and I found it through editing. In my 45 years in journalism, I covered history in and out of my edit bay. I traveled the world, witnessed history in war zones, covered Princess Diana and collected stacks and stacks of press badges. I am proud to have lived my career as a part of the Fourth Estate.

In June 1980, Jimmy Carter was president and five people worked in the BBC’s Washington bureau. A fresh-faced Baltimore native in way over her head, I started as a freelance videotape editor. “We work in a visual medium,” I was told. “Let the pictures speak first”—a mantra that served me well.

The art of storytelling through the strength of the pictures meant editing sequences before getting any script or narration. The words were to enhance the images, not repeat what was already seen. Whether the correspondent was Czech, Swiss, French, Russian, Israeli, Arabic or British, the pictures were the constant even as the track changed.

Each chance I took moved me further up the path and I learned something new on every trip and assignment. I knew I would only regret what I did not do, and each experience paid off in spades.

In 1982 I traveled to Buenos Aires for the Falklands war and ended up staying in Argentina for two months. Returning in 1983 we covered the first democratic election of Raul Alfonsin. We also reported on the “dirty war,” told emotionally by the “mothers of the disappeared” during the military junta rule.

Shaking hands with the royals Charles and Diana soon after they married, aboard their yacht before their Canadian provinces tour, was a thrill, especially when the prince commented on the warmth of my hands. Meeting their mum and dad in Barbados in 1989 was akin to joining a family vacay. In a room full of foreigners QEII liked seeing the familiar faces in our team. As a Yank I did not have to curtsy.

Being a part of the WHNPA family since the early ‘90s added dimension to my career and life. Talented members inspire creativity and one can “borrow” editing techniques to be used for the next video contest. Personal highlights after winning awards were meeting President Clinton in 1994 and President Obama in 2009 in the Oval Office.

The violence in El Salvador and Nicaragua were of great interest during those early years. The humanity and heroism of individuals gave hope for a better future. In Santiago during a Pinochet protest I was tear gassed and separated from our team. A Chilean family pulled me into their home and later delivered me back to the press hotel.

On Jan. 28, 1986, after the space shuttle Challenger explosion, we raced to Florida straight from the office. (I bought a toothbrush and t-shirt at the airport.) We were back at Cape Canaveral in 1988 for the launch of Discovery and NASA’s return to space.

The fascination with three gray whales trapped in Barrow, Alaska, in 1988 spawned Operation Breakthrough, a U.S.-Soviet effort to free the mammals and a mammoth ratings hike with our viewers. In 1991 I was part of a team in Russia caught up in the failed coup attempt to overthrow Mikhail Gorbachev. I crossed in front of tanks to get to the feed point to transmit our story.

Coverage of Sept. 11 changed the way I perceived my role in journalism. A correspondent’s track suggested the Pentagon had been demolished, but I pointed out that the Pentagon had kept operating. He changed his track. Words matter, and I was the last line of defense before the audience hears and sees our output.

Technology is the driving force and challenge to the job and has changed the way we edit. I started editing on ¾-inch bulky tape machines. Going through airports with the gear was like traveling with a rock band. On my first trip I wore a pink suit, which was not conducive to carrying the gear. Today the kit is smaller, but the changing formats are now part of the process.

One constant has been the high caliber of journalists who passed through the Washington bureau. Every person truly added to the richness and depth of my career. We lean and depend on each other in a close-knit bond of friendship and professionalism. I will miss greeting the newbies arriving and the tearful farewells when their tour is over.

Bearing witness to world events is the job description. “Alternative facts” and “misinformation” are obstacles to the integrity of our work. Those words defy the definition of our profession. The magnitude and importance of our occupation is as important now as ever.

I share this lifetime achievement award with you, my journalism colleagues. It is an honor I will cherish and hold dear to my heart. I’m grateful to you all—and forever grateful I was not accepted into the dental hygiene program.