



2011 NFPW Communicator of Achievement

2011 DPA Communicator of Achievement

Beth Miller

Beth Miller, esteemed *News Journal* reporter and DPA's immediate past president, is well known and highly respected by every newsmaker and news follower in Delaware. For outstanding professional accomplishments and also for service to the community and to DPA, Beth was named the 2011 Delaware Press Association Communicator of Achievement.

A graduate of Mount Pleasant High School and Wheaton College, where she earned a degree in political science, Beth immediately joined the staff of *The News Journal*, where she continues today. She is now, thirty years later, a veteran journalist writing breaking news, features and enterprise stories conscientiously and with a singular regard for the truth.

An Illustrious Career

A general-assignment reporter who began an illustrious career covering sports, then education, Beth has been recognized in recent years for insightful coverage of politics, religion, and matters of international interest. She introduced us to fascinating Delawareans in the "Delaware Journal" column she wrote from 1999 to 2003. When the war in Afghanistan began, she went there and wrote about the danger and sacrifices our service people confront. And after the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, she went along on a relief trip and reported on the heroics and compassion of the members of the medical team from Delaware as well as on the aftermath of the disaster.

Almost as well known for her sense of humor as for thorough, balanced reporting and the ability to capture the human side of a story, she sometimes sheds light on how she acquired her journalistic sensibilities by telling hilarious stories on herself. When she was presented with the COA Award – the highest honor DPA bestows on its members – she said:

"As you might expect, I've been wondering if this is some sort of mistake. I'm sure someone on your committee did their homework – at least a Google search of "Beth Miller" and "*News Journal*" – and found that insightful question from a blogger a few years ago: 'Is the *News Journal's* Beth Miller really this dumb?'

"I love free speech!

Beth's Advice: Ask good questions, and listen, listen, listen

"I learned pretty early in my career that what is really dumb for a reporter, for a journalist, is to assume or pretend that you know more than you do and skip over a question. And ask follow-up questions. Just as important: make your questions good ones.

“And listen. Listen. Listen. It’s one of the most important elements of communication.”

Ask and listen. And then write. It may sound simple, but it’s not an easy thing to do. One of our DPA colleagues said: “Beth demonstrates in both her reporting and her writing the kind of compassion and sensitivity that were once highly admired in general-interest media . . . and are still highly appreciated both by news sources and news subjects.” Another DPA member summed up Beth’s fortitude: “In this year of unrelenting demand on the press to cover such a wide and complex range of issues, she has shown a remarkable ability to pull it off – time after time – with intelligence and gentle context.” Beth’s own words best convey the struggle a reporter experiences when asking the hard questions, listening to often-uncomfortable answers or witnessing another’s distress.

“When someone trusts you with their story,” Beth says, “it is a gift. You’ve got to be there. You need to be there – in person.

Encounters that speak of love, life, risk, and struggle – and stick with you forever

“Some encounters speak of love and life and risk and struggle – and stick with you forever,” Beth adds, “like the 60-year-old man who had been abused by a priest hundreds of times when he was a kid. He was one of the first Delaware victims willing to tell his story. I called him in Las Vegas, where he had moved, and he agreed to talk with me if I could get there. We talked for eight hours. His wife stayed with us as he spoke and wept and shook and trembled. He took breaks to get his breath and clear his head. I thought it was too much. But he kept coming back. He wanted to tell his story. Thank God.

“That story required weeks of research and scores of other interviews. It required courage and grit on behalf of the editors at *The News Journal*. It was painful for everyone.

“But he told his story. It checked out. And after it was printed, others came forward. Maybe they, too, would be believed.”

That story, with far-reaching consequences, continues to reverberate. And who wasn’t touched by the series of powerful articles Beth wrote in 2010 when she witnessed first-hand the devastation in Haiti.

“Last January,” Beth says, “as the world watched a tragedy unfold in Haiti, News Journal editors decided we should go with a hastily assembled team of Delaware doctors and nurses as they rushed to help the injured. That decision was risky – and I have great respect for Executive Editor David Ledford, who pushed for it and made it happen.

“The need was crushing – and readers responded with extraordinary compassion.

“The need still is crushing. And I cannot turn away from it. I can hear the screams of a young girl, lying on a cot under a white tent at the shattered hospital in Jacmel. I will never forget her wails as her father held her, and a Delaware doctor cleaned her legs, which had been crushed in falling debris during the January 12 earthquake. Her toes were black with gangrene. The doctor was trying to save her legs, but it was an agonizing effort.

“Her father’s pain must have been as great. And while the girl wailed, a group of Haitians from a nearby church walked through the tents singing and praying for the patients. Their voices swirled in the air with her cries, and the sounds – of agony and hope – made an amazing mix. It was an astounding scene.”

Not just playing around

The Communicator of Achievement Award recognizes not only professional accomplishments and service to DPA and NFPW, but also service to the community. Beth plays the bagpipes as a member of the Pipes & Drums of the Delaware Valley and has, on a number of occasions, played for the deployment and return ceremonies of Delaware National Guard troops.

She also enjoys travel, but especially travel with a mission. She has gone with her church to New Orleans to work on homes in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and to Lima, Peru, to assist in medical clinics and with English classes.

These good works inform Beth's life just as her skillful reporting does.

We need each other's stories

"It's my belief," she says, "that we need each other's stories – that we learn about ourselves and our world and our place in the world as we talk and listen and learn about each other. It's my belief that there's usually a pretty amazing story – maybe good, maybe bad, maybe ugly – wrapped up in every human being.

"To the citizens of Delaware, I can only say thank you for reading. Thank you for caring about journalism and about our community. Thank you for listening.

"And to those who are professional communicators: Keep up your good work. Many of you are storytellers. Some of you are like matchmakers – helping storytellers connect with stories that need to be told. Fight for open government. Ask questions. Listen carefully. Take good notes. Let your heart beat.

"And to all: Take good care of each other."

Note: Beth Miller was named the NFPW National Communicator of Achievement at the National Federation of Press Women's annual Communications Conference in Council Bluffs, Iowa, September 10, 2011.