

Samira Weinstein

Writing for the Humanities and Arts

Interview Profile

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When Nicole Weinstein started out in journalism, Facebook and Twitter had not been invented -- and the Internet was unheard of.

“It was in the dark ages,” she joked.

Weinstein grew up in Ballston Spa, NY, and first knew she wanted to study journalism when her 11th grade English teacher suggested it and introduced it as a career to her. She researched places she might go to college and found SUNY Morrisville, which at the time was a two-year journalism technology program, starting in 1988.

“I went and did the tour and met the journalism teacher and that clinched it for me,” she said.

We continued with her college career, how the first two years at Morrisville were aimed at getting a journalism technology degree; basically learning how to take photographs, work in a darkroom and learn how to process photographs on paper. She talked about the hands-on development of a newspaper. She learned how to create the

layout using “cut and paste,” where you print your story from a word processor to paper that had sticky stuff on the back of it and then you cut it with what you called an “Exacto knife,” and trimmed them to line up in columns. Then, she said they took a photo of it and the photo created the plate that would become the printed page.

She said she got involved with the school newspaper at the time, while also taking courses, learning how to write news stories, feature stories, sports stories, etc. After Morrisville, she went to SUNY New Paltz and completed a journalism Bachelor’s degree. At New Paltz, Weinstein took part in a six-month internship covering the New York State Legislature. She covered stories on social services, Medicaid, and even met the governor at the time, Mario Cuomo.

During her last few months at college, Weinstein looked for and was lucky enough to get a job in Hudson as an entry-level reporter for the Register-Star newspaper, covering towns and school districts and writing feature stories.

“I learned a lot of stuff on the job because, once you get on the job it is where you start learning the workings of the town, the school district, and how to report it to make it interesting,” she said.

Another job as a reporter was at the Amsterdam Recorder where she would cover city council meetings. While she mostly had to write two or three stories for the afternoon newspaper, she would occasionally get the surprise feature piece.

“One mid-morning right before-deadline, we got the news that someone had been murdered,” Weinstein added. “I had to do a feature piece, interviewing the

family of the deceased. I covered the court case and the court appearances of the accused.”

“So, it was really busy because you are doing your regular work and something comes up and you have to jump out and cover whatever it is,” she explained.

She said that she enjoyed working at every newspaper she worked for because you had to work as a collaborative team to come up with stories. Some of her “war stories” come from covering a high school walkout and communicating with the photographer to get just the right photo for the front page.

Weinstein had mentioned before that she had worked at quite a number of newspapers like the Daily Gazette in Schenectady, the Hudson Register-Star, The Saratogian, the Gloversville Leader-Herald, the Amsterdam Recorder, and the Penn Yan Chronicle Express. Our conversation took an informative tangent, where I asked her to describe the layout of a broadsheet newspaper.

“The main story is above the fold, and the banner is the name of the paper, at the very top and all the subsequent articles below,” she said. “With physical copies of papers, you would fold them in half and they would be delivered that way.”

Some important stories that were above the fold, and one story she remembers vividly is the day John F. Kennedy Jr. died on July 16, 1999.

“You would put the most important stories above the fold,” She said. “I had laid out the page the night of the day that JFK Jr. died. My original story was a feature story that I put on the front page every Sunday morning. When we learned that he had died, I had to re-do the page and he was the lead story instead.”

We then moved to discuss the more modern, online media. Weinstein is a subscriber to the New York Times digital edition. Stories like the recent Derek Chauvin controversy -- the officer who was convicted of killing George Floyd -- and she said the Times was able to put out an editorial and opinion piece right after the verdict came out, and it was related to what was going on at the time. She says that there are a lot more things papers can do online, stating an obvious difference between what happens now and when she was working at a newspaper.

“Obviously, we never had video, so that is a whole different way of presenting the news,” Weinstein commented. “It adds a whole different level.”

We then began to speak about how and when journalism is done well and when journalism isn't done well.

“When it is not done well,” she said, “it's sensationalistic. I think telling the news as a reporter you shouldn't have an opinion, and you shouldn't try to sway opinion. You should just be telling the news.”

Noting the controversies surrounding Governor Andrew Cuomo, she said that as a reporter you need to make sure that you present both sides of the story. She further criticizes that there are a lot of papers that use opinions and call it “news.”

“But you know, that is the nature of the technical beast, I guess,” she added.

Weinstein further criticized by saying there are quite a number of blogs that are sometimes considered news, again saying they should have credible sources and credible facts and that it is not right just to spread misinformation.

This brought up a new topic in the conversation that still has some relevance: the Trump administration. Former President Trump has continuously criticized media outlets, skewing news reporters and facts, and has even been quoted as saying the media is against the people.

Sighing, Weinstein said, “Unfortunately, I think that technology has made it so that people can just put stuff out there and it is taken as fact. When I was a reporter, I really had to have things right -- how to spell people’s names, have all the correct personal information, and be as accurate as you can be as a print reporter.”

“Papers like the New York Post”, she said, “are definitely skewed in the way that they write”. She had seen the rise in sensationalistic writing even when she was writing for newspapers, and that some editors wanted her to write a story a certain way. She then said that it was strange to see that because she did not grow up in the information

age with cell phones and the internet and all the different social media outlets like Facebook.

When she was younger, and even through her journalism career, there were only a few basic tv channels (ABC, NBC, and CBS). When things like CNN came along and USA Today those were considered “big news.” “It was like, well, crap, this whole channel just dedicated to the news,” Weinstein added.

She said when she was in college learning to become a college, USA Today was a huge deal because it had color and graphics.

“I mean, I remember in college we had a subscription to USA TOday because of a professor who thought it was just the most ground-breaking newspaper ever,” She said. “But now you see that everywhere.”

We spoke a lot about the evolution of journalism and the eventual birth of her children. She said it was hard to work at a newspaper and manage children.

“It was really hard because you wanted to work; I was a workaholic; I loved what I did,

She added. “But that’s why I got the state job (in public information) where I am able to work regular hours and be with my kids.”

Since she was on maternity leave when 9-11 happened, we spoke on hypotheticals of what she might have done if she had worked during that time, such as trying to localize such a big story that affected virtually everyone.

In 2006, she was forced to quit her job as a journalist and got a job working for the state. And while she doesn't write for a paper, writing is still a very prominent aspect of her work.

"I do feature a lot of features with what I do, but I do a lot of different things; it's just different writing. I write speeches now or I write press releases every night. Um, but I do a lot of employee news, so I'll be interviewing employees about interesting things they've done. Like, I just did a story about a guy who works for us last year. One of my last stories before the pandemic was, um, how he's a beekeeper and his spare time, you know, it was an employee story, but an interesting thing that this employee does."

We spoke about the difficulties of living through a pandemic and having to work two jobs. However, my mother always considers writing feature stories from the people she meets and sending them into papers. Working at Stewarts, an upstate convenience store chain, she met a nurse who came in one night, saying that at St. Peters [Hospital], she delivered 10 babies. In her reporter mindset, she wrote to The Times Union with an idea for a feature piece on what she calls, "COVID babies", the exponential rise in births in the community during the pandemic. Jokingly, she said, "Well, what else are you going to do during the pandemic? Get busy, I guess".

Our discussion had an interesting but bittersweet end, as Weinstein noted that news really isn't the same and that quite a few of the papers she worked for either were bought out by bigger companies or went out of service entirely. The Amsterdam Recorder doesn't exist, she said. However, she has said, even before this interview, that she wouldn't mind doing journalism as a freelance job or as a part-time job.

“A lot of writers, they make their way writing for different publications or different things or online stuff. Yeah. It's just a different way. Journalism has a way to remake itself [and] keep going”.

So, while she's happy working for the state, and about 12 years away from retirement, she can still reminisce on her experiences as a reporter.

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