

Rocky road to JOURNALISM

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I was about nine when I started saying I wanted to be a journalist. While I'd love to say this was because of a desire from a very young age to right wrongs and seek justice for the oppressed, it was mostly because I loved to write and tell stories and having a job that required me to write every day seemed ideal.

Also, I'm fairly embarrassed to admit, my love of the profession could also have stemmed from a pre-pubescent crush on John Boy Walton, a fictional, God-fearing, mountain-dwelling, facial mole-sporting character in the long-running Waltons TV show who ran a newspaper out of a shack.

A decade later, a gift of the Great Shark Hunt by Hunter S. Thompson from my brother gave me a new hero, the great gonzo Doctor, who, to put it mildly, led a considerably different lifestyle to good ole John Boy. He made John Boy look like a wuss. I was hooked.

After finishing college in Ireland, I moved to London for the summer and landed a job, entirely by accident, at the business newsletter section of the Financial Times as a production assistant. Sitting there, inputting obituaries and calling companies about new hires, or literally ripping stories about oil wells and coal mines from the Reuters huge tickertape newswire with a metal ruler,

I would seethe with envy as reporters would zip in and out of the office to grab a flight to attend conferences in far flung places and interview big business leaders.

I started researching journalism colleges and courses in England and left the FT to do a National Council for the Training of Journalists course in Harlow, Essex - a "new town" with more roundabouts than Cayman. An intensive year of studying media law, learning shorthand and mastering the art of writing "inverted pyramid" news stories followed, interspersed with work experience on local newspapers.

My first job was for a group of eight weekly papers in West London called the Recorder, now defunct. Like many local weekly papers at the time, budgets were tight and within my first year, the number of reporters fell from six to two. By the time I left, I was writing all the copy for four newspapers - an average of about 12 stories a day. Hard work for a newbie journo, but it very quickly taught me that deadlines are king, to write fast and how to conduct a speedy interview without appearing rude.

Luckily, or I guess unluckily for most, the London boroughs I was covering had fairly high crime rates so my regular visits to the local police stations and crime scenes meant there were plenty of stories to fill the daily expanse of blank pages.

Some stints on other local

papers followed, interspersed with shifts on national papers based in London and freelance work on the side.

After five years of working on papers in Surrey and London, I moved to Hong Kong, which was supposed to be my first stop in a round-the-world trip, but things don't always work out as one expects and I ended up staying there for 13 years. During that time I worked on all three English language newspapers - the Eastern Express, the Hong Kong Standard and the South China Morning Post, before and after the 1997 handover from the UK to China.

Working in a paper in a country where you don't speak the language can be daunting, but pre-handover, English was spoken at most press conferences, it was the official business language, court cases were heard in English and politicians spoke English in the Legislative Council, so as an expat reporter, you never missed a story because you couldn't speak Cantonese. It got a little harder after 1997, often with press conferences entirely in Chinese, where the expat or "gweilo" reporters getting one question in English. My question was usually "Can you say everything you've said in the past hour in English, please?"

However, you could almost always get people to talk to you immediately after the press con, frequently getting an angle that no-one at the press conference got be-

cause you now had a one-on-one interview. It was a balancing act - challenging but fun.

I covered the handover and watched the People's Liberation Army arrive in Hong Kong after midnight on 30 June, 1997; I was there when the runway lights got turned off for the last time at the closure of Kai Tak Airport and the opening next morning of Chek Lap Kok Airport; I went to the Maldives in the aftermath of the tsunami; I watched and reported on riots in Vietnamese refugee detention camps in the New Territories of Hong Kong; I reported on the first Asian MTV Awards in Beijing, where even though the ceremony was being held in the Chinese government's official TV station, I had to put "interior designer" on my entry visa application into mainland China because foreign journalists weren't allowed in; and got pepper sprayed during protests by Korean farmers on the streets of Hong Kong during a WTO meeting.

I mostly worked as a reporter on daily papers, with a sojourn into the dotcom world around 1999 where I was part of a team setting up a TV channel and corresponding website - a project our ambitious boss said would eventually rival AOL. That all came crashing down when the dotcom bubble burst, but by then my boss had bought up Hong Kong's Cable and Wireless, so I found myself inadvertently working for a telecoms com-

pany, fixing "Chinglish" - the mishmash of translated Chinese into English, checking press releases, updating the corporate website and editing annual reports.

Even in the corporate world, skills learned as a journalist come in handy - the importance of meeting deadlines, accuracy, how to get the information you need from people you're talking to and time management. They're skills one can take into any job.

Throughout that whole period I just wanted to get back to reporting though, so I headed back to being a "hack" at the South China Morning Post, where I did the security beat before taking a desk job as news editor of the paper's Sunday edition as well as doing the night shift for the Metro section of the daily paper.

I missed writing though, so when an opportunity to go back to working as a daily news reporter on a vibrant, sunny Caribbean isle with no air pollution and great diving (but, unfortunately, with no decent dim sum), came my way, I figured fate was telling me to hop a plane and wing my way to Cayman.

I packed up my life of 13 years in Hong Kong and crossed the globe. Then, exactly a week to the hour after I landed, my boss said he was selling the newspaper. He went on to sell it to Cayman Free Press where I now report on a variety of daily news, writing every day, just like my nine-year-old self wanted.

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TOP TIP!

Always bring plenty of pens and paper, spare camera batteries and tapes. If you run out during an interview, you won't be able to finish your story. And if you've got a tripod, take it with you to keep the shots steady.



Two lucky winners will have the chance to spend a day at the Caymanian Compass, where they will learn how a newspaper is run, what job roles and opportunities there are, how deadlines are met and what skills are needed to write and publish the news. Plus they will be able to put together a video report and read a news bulletin for the radio.

EACH WINNER WILL RECEIVE A NETBOOK

Students are invited to write a short news story or make a video of them reporting the news. It can be about anything they think is topical - but it must be local news.

One winning news story and one winning video will be selected by the editor and printed in the Caymanian Compass and the video posted online at caycompass.com

DEADLINE FOR ENTRIES IS 23 OCTOBER 2011

Find out more at caycompass.com/beajournalist

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