

By Jennifer Karchmer

My week as guest-editor of the *Mirror*

I am 16 000 km from my home in Seattle, USA and all because of an email I received.

About a year ago, Anton van Zyl, the owner and publisher of the *Limpopo Mirror*, invited senior journalists to serve as guest editor and share tricks of the trade with fellow reporters in a "news exchange."

As members of the ISWNE (International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors), we shared conversations with hundreds of other journalists on a group listserv discussing the ethics of newspapers, how to publish letters to the editor, how reporters should cover protests and crime and anything else related to community journalism.

From my home in Bellingham, Washington state, about 145 km north of Seattle, I logged onto my computer and read his email. I was serving as a college professor teaching journalism and communication at Western Washington University. Also, I was a correspondent with Reporters Without Borders, the NGO based in Paris that helps protect and defend journalists who work in dangerous regions. Freedom of the press was my passion and my beat. In fact, in 2012, I spent six weeks in Reykjavik, Iceland interviewing journalists and studying their media outlets.

Now, I thought, what an opportunity to do the same type of research in South Africa? I had some free time coming up, but flights from Seattle to Johannesburg were very expensive, running about \$2,500 (R30,650) so I dismissed the idea and forgot about it for a year.

Small town roots

Originally from Poughkeepsie, New York, a small town about 145 miles north of New York City, I grew up writing and asking questions – a perfect recipe for becoming a reporter. I studied broadcast journalism at Ithaca (NY) College and earned a bachelor's degree in 1991, moving into news radio as the start to my career. Covering school board meetings, town and zoning board meetings, local politics and elections, crime, car accidents, arts and sports was a wonderful introduction to news reporting.

My career ramped up when I joined the Associated Press, the premiere American news

cooperative with international offices. Based in Albany, the capital of New York state, I worked the overnight shift from 23:00 to 07:00 monitoring the police scanner, TV channels, radio stations and local news while writing stories for member stations and newspapers. It was the most challenging and competitive news position I held, and the most formative as I was trained by some of the best journalists in the industry.

I moved into TV as a reporter for CNN in New York covering Wall Street. This too was a thrilling job writing news reports and speaking to the camera effectively to millions of people, but I wasn't so much attracted to the show business part of the job. I've always considered being a writer for newspapers to be a true journalist. Over the years,

my employers have been mainstream media outlets and conglomerates like Gannett (which owns USA Today), McClatchy, TimeWarner and AOL.

But also, I accepted opportunities to work for small, independent and privately owned newspapers and media companies like the Chronogram in New Paltz, NY, the Woodstock Times (as in 1969's Woodstock), the Lake Champlain Weekly and Whatcom Watch, to name a few.

An American in France

Since I was in middle school, after taking French as a subject for a few years, I've had the dream of speaking French. So in August 2014, I moved to France for one year to enroll in university. I was living in the south of France in Montpellier, studying for exams and enjoying the French culture when I revisited Anton's e-mail to

come to South Africa.

After several e-mails and a Skype call, we hammered out the details of a visit. I started researching airline flights to South Africa from Paris, France, which was a much shorter trip and less expensive than from Seattle, USA. I booked my flight in mid-April, the same day I read headlines that said: "South Africa moves to defuse anti-immigrant violence" and "Xenophobic violence on the rise in South Africa." What's going on in South Africa? Did I make a mistake? Would I be safe? Some of my friends feared for my safety; others questioned why I would travel to South Africa now? I too was concerned because my only image of South Africa was formed from news reports, movies and books. In the



Our guest editor, Jennifer Karchmer from the USA, flanked by Wikus Lee, editor of *Limpopo Mirror* (left) and Andries van Zyl, news editor of *Zoutpansberger* (right).

USA, when we hear of South Africa, we think of Charlize Theron, Nelson Mandela, wild animals in the Kruger National Park, and recently, Trevor Noah, who has blasted onto the comedy scene as the new host of *The Daily Show* (he is hilarious).

The news reports about violence were disturbing but

like a good journalist, I did my research. I talked to a Facebook friend who lives in Johannesburg. I joined blogs and Facebook pages about South Africa, and I checked the United States Dept. of State for travel alerts for Americans. On 22 May, I took an Egyptair flight from Paris to Cairo, where I spent one day touring the pyramids and the sphinx. I arrived the following day in Johannesburg at OR Tambo International Airport. Touching down in a new country and a new hemisphere was exciting but nerve-racking for me. Thankfully, as I entered the terminal after the immigration desk, my first view of South Africa was a black and white sign: "Jennifer Karchmer – welcome to South Africa." accompanied by two smiling faces, those of Ronel Welman and her friend Emmie.

They had driven all the way from Louis Trichardt to come and fetch me and take me to my

new "home" for the next three weeks.

The news that's fit to print

The atmosphere at the *Limpopo Mirror* is reminiscent of weekly papers in the U.S.: a friendly, casual, team environment where the editorial, marketing, sales and production staff all understand the weekly deadline rhythm. Mondays to Wednesdays are the busiest with a slowdown on Thursday and Friday but everyone is ready to get back into the swing of things. Many of the issues that American journalists face are the same here in Limpopo.

For example, covering the scene of a fire or robbery can be tense approaching the police and getting information. It's a balancing act as the police need to do their job and sometimes don't have time to give to reporters. At the same time, when you build trust they too realize you are doing your job of getting information to the public, so it's in their best interest to be cooperative with quotes and information.

Lions, tigers and bears?

I'm told no trip to South Africa is complete without a visit to the Kruger National Park. I am scheduled to go this week with the Van Zyls, where we will stay at the Mopani Rest Camp. This is where I hope to see elephants, cheetah, giraffe, and maybe hippos in their natural habitat. I have seen a few monkeys scurrying across the street in Anton's neighborhood, which is quite different from a stray cat or a squirrel that I typically see running on my street back home.

Next week I talk to journalism students at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) about newswriting, US media, social media reporting techniques and layout and design of newspapers. Apparently, they would like to know how freelance journalism works in the US and how journalism differs in the US. While the experience is about sharing my background as a US reporter, I too am getting a lesson in history, politics, culture and language. In fact, on Sunday, I enjoyed my first braai. The meat was cooked to perfection and I appreciated being included in this South African tradition.

(It was really nice having you here Jennifer. You may see lions in the Kruger, but most likely not tigers and bears. - Ed)



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