Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE2869

Haxton, Nance

Occupation Journalist, Print journalist, Radio Broadcaster, Television Journalist

Summary

Nance Haxton is a Walkley Award winning journalist who impressed the judges in 2001 with her coverage of the riots at the Woomera Detention Centre in outback South Australia. She has worked across a variety of media in both metropolitan and regional locations.

Details

Nance Haxton has little time for recent Australian feature films that represent the Australian outback as a place of fear and menace, a place where women are routinely snatched by psychopaths only to disappear into a vast, unfriendly landscape. Given her own positive experience of living and working in regional and remote locations, she is frustrated by cultural images that serve to deter women and girls from doing the same. Not a country girl herself, (Nance was born in Brisbane in 1971) she gathered many personal and professional rewards when she took on these imagined bush psychopaths in 1999 by taking the posting of ABC radio's sole reporter in Port Augusta, South Australia. Tempting fate as she drove her four wheel drive around her patch (almost three quarters of the state of South Australia) she encountered no serial killers, just plenty of stories about people in remote and regional communities who she is proud to have given a voice. A journalist with a keen sense of social justice and the power of journalism to promote it, Nance Haxton's award-winning career vindicates the efforts of many rural and regional based reporters whose ground-breaking work often goes unrecognised.

Nance's childhood and family life in Brisbane were happy and stable, although her brother's intellectual disability created particular challenges for her and her parents, challenges that she has written about as a contributor to the book *Siblings*. Attracted to drama and performance as a youngster, she nevertheless decided she wanted to be a journalist at the age of ten and her secondary and tertiary education was geared towards achieving that aim. After completing her secondary education at Brisbane's Somerville House in 1988, she completed a Bachelor of Business in Communications with a major in Journalism at Queensland University of Technology in 1991. She went on in 1992 to complete Honours in Communications, the first person to be chosen to do so at QUT, and graduated with a Masters in Journalism in 2001. Beginning with a cadetship with Quest Newspapers in Brisbane in 1992, Nance has worked in print and electronic media, at a local and national level, while dabbling in the arts. An accomplished vocalist and actor, Nance has also combined her career in journalism with one in the performing arts. The lead vocalist in a local jazz band, she sang the national anthem at Port Augusta's official Australia Day ceremonies in 2000 and 2001, the same years her journalism was recognized by the Walkley judging panel.

The quality of Nance's work was first recognized while she was working for Quest Media in Brisbane when her investigation of cults on campus at the University of Queensland was recognized by the judging panel of the Queensland Media's Hinchliffe award for suburban and regional reporting. Deciding she wanted to expand her horizons and move into the electronic media, she wrote to a number of women with national profiles seeking advice on how to implement such a move. Only one of them wrote back. Sandra Sully, a television newsreader at the time, graciously provided some advice and remains a mentor in an industry where female friendships appear to be difficult to cement and maintain.

Nance successfully made the move to the electronic media when she took up the position of the ABC's reporter in Port Augusta in 1999. Working in a one woman bureau without supervision, writing stories for television, radio and the internet, she overcame logistical issues that reporters working in metropolitan contexts could barely imagine. Despite the challenges that working independently in remote areas threw up, including the occasional bout of loneliness, Nance thrived personally and professionally in the environment. She established strong relationships with local people, indigenous and non-indigenous, and has used her position with the national broadcaster to bring their local stories to a broader audience.

Her effectiveness in so doing is reflected in the range of media awards across a variety of subject matter that she has won over the last ten years. In 2000 her story about possible mining in the Gammon Ranges National Park was highly commended by the Walkley judging panel. In 2001 she was awarded a Walkley for Best Radio News Story for her coverage of the riots at Woomera Detention Centre. She received a United Nations Media Peace Award for Promotion of Aboriginal Reconciliation in 2003 for a

report on the Northern Flinders ranges Aboriginal Community of Iga Warta. She received a South Australian Media Award in 2004 for the same story and another one in 2005 for the best coverage of Social Equity Affairs for a story about the fiftieth anniversary of nuclear tests at Emu Field in South Australia's far north; the South Australian Institute of Justice also recognized this story in 2004. In the same year, the South Australian Law Society acknowledged her work as best radio reporter of the year with the Des Colquhorn Media Award. Most recently, she received awards for Best Sporting Coverage and Best Radio News and Current Affairs Reporting at the 2008 South Australian Media Awards. She was a Walkley finalist again in 2007 in the Best Radio Feature, Documentary or Broadcast Special. She is a finalist in the United Nations Peace Awards again in 2008 in the section Increasing Awareness and Understanding of Children's Rights and Issues for her coverage of the Mullighan report into the abuse of children in state care in South Australia.

Given the size of her patch, the range of stories Nance has covered is hardly surprising. She has reported on tragedies such as the Whyalla Airlines disaster and subsequent enquiry into the crash, and good news stories such as the initiative of one South Australian woman to coordinate a project that sees Australians donating bras to the help the women of Fiji. When asked to nominate her 'favourites' within her repertoire, the Woomera Detention Centre story rates highly because she was forced to draw upon all her resources to make it happen. Good local knowledge alerted her to the fact something was happening and where to go to find out; working independently enabled her to move quickly; a good grasp of the technology she had at hand facilitated her speedy response and the ability to accurately describe what she observes combined to produce a great scoop. The judges were impressed by Nance's ability to not only sniff out the story but to respond with speed in such a remote location and to hit the ground running once she was there. Fifteen minutes after arriving at Woomera she had her first live cross, telling a national audience that:

'I'm looking at the detention centre now and reports are filtering out that 80 rioters have destroyed four buildings, including the recreation building, dining room, school and ablution block, and have set fire to more. As well, they are using slingshots and spears made from fence pickets in an attempt to repel the guards. Detention centre guards have used a water cannon in an attempt to break up the group, however they are continuing to storm the perimeter fence which has a number of holes'.

Nance painted a vivid picture of what was happening to detainees in the middle of the Australian desert, at a time when border and national security were staples of the Australian news diet.

It is hardly surprising that a journalist should list such a news gathering and reporting tour de force as the Woomera story amongst her favourites. Another choice of favourites is perhaps a little more surprising. In 2007, Nance reported on the rise of the community 'men's shed' in Australia. Her report focused specifically on the shed in Salisbury in Adelaide's northern suburbs as a place where men might connect and 'potter' but was reported to a national audience via the ABC's P.M. program. The audience response to the story was extraordinary as men and women contacted the station to determine the location of their nearest shed, or give information about the sheds in their own community. For Nance, the story was proof positive of the power of radio to bring meaningful, local stories to a national audience.

Nance has moved beyond radio (she had a stint in ABC television as a researcher for Australian Story) and South Australia (moving to Broken Hill and Sydney for a period) in the course of her career. The fact that she has returned to both of them indicates the extent of her commitment to both, a commitment that is unlikely to waver. What is likely, however, is that if a young woman working on a suburban newspaper asks for her advice on how best to further her career, she will a) reply; and b) tell her to pack her bags and go remote. It has worked for her.

Events

2012 - 2012
Radio News and Current Affairs Reporting – 'Justice system fails disabled victims of sexual abuse', AM, PM and The World Today, ABC Radio Current Affairs

2001 - 2001
Radio News Reporting, 'Woomera Detention Centre Riots', Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Article
Inspiring Women in Journalism, Haxton, Nance, 2008,
http://www.abc.net.au/corp/communications/access/stories/s2432534.htm

Resource Section
Police battle to contain detainees at Woomera Detention Centre, Haxton, Nance, 2000,
http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/stories/s168422.htm

Coroner overturns previous Whyalla airlines crash findings, Haxton, Nance, 2003,
http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2003/s909542.htm

All Australian boys need a shed, Haxton, Nance, 2007,
http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2007/s1944289.htm

Bra charity giving Fiji women a lift, Haxton, Nance, 2008,
http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2008/s2313784.htm

Book
Siblings: Brothers and Sisters of Children with Special Needs, Strohm, Kate, 2002

Site Exhibition
The Women's Pages: Australian Women and Journalism since 1850, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2008,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/cal/cal-home.html

Archival resources

National Film and Sound Archive
[ABC Radio News. 2001 : Woomera Detention Centre Riots]

[ABC Radio. 2001 : Woomera Detention Centre]

Author Details
Nikki Henningham

Created 20 November 2007
Last modified 24 November 2016