EXIT STRATEGY: WHY TV JOURNALISTS ARE RUNNING (NOT WALKING) FROM THE NEWSROOM

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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Finally, to the 13 current and former television journalists who trusted me with telling their story, I am greatly indebted to each one of you. Your candid answers were far more than I expected when I began the interviews. I hope Exit Strategy can be a vehicle for meaningful change to create a better environment for journalists everywhere.

At the conclusion of one interview, one person finished by stating, “Thank you for the therapy session.” As someone who believes in the power of journalism and worries about what the future holds, I can only say, the feeling is mutual.

ABSTRACT

For decades, there has been a well-traveled path for journalists to leave the television business and enter other career fields. But that trend seems to be greatly accelerated in recent years as the television industry has undergone major changes. Some experts are calling it “an extinction

alert." This project involved semi-structured interviews with 13 experienced journalists: six current television anchors and reporters (including one who left the industry and came back), six former television anchors and reporters and one anchor who was less than two weeks away from leaving. Each was asked questions about their experiences in journalism and either why they remained in television or why they chose to leave the business.

No matter their age, no matter their experience, no matter their current job—one thing they all agree on that an "extinction alert" is very much warranted.

INTRODUCTION

Television news is a relatively new invention. While newspapers date back more than 400 years, if television news was a human, it wouldn't even qualify for Social Security. It wasn't until September 2, 1963, that Walter Cronkite anchored the first 30-minute newscast on CBS. Expanding the newscast from 15 minutes to 30 minutes was such a newsworthy event that President John F. Kennedy sat down for an exclusive interview with Cronkite as part of the newscast (Pelley, 2013). His nightly sign-off catchphrase, "And that's the way it is," was what most of America believed, underlined by the fact he was voted "the most trusted man in America" in a public opinion poll almost a decade later (Nelson, 2009).

A complete list of innovations in the 58 years since is impossible to categorize. Color programming replaced black-and-white. Teleprompters and instantaneous changes took the place of a paper script marked up with ink. News networks provided 24-hour partisan perspectives often supplanting a detached viewpoint. The days when nightly newscasts watched by millions of Americans on the Big Three networks have been replaced by niche

programs that have splintered audiences (Pew Research Center, 2015; Brooks & Marsh, 2007). Single reporters—known aptly these days as one-man bands—now do the same job with just an iPhone and a laptop in less time than it used to take an entire crew and hundreds of pounds of equipment to accomplish.

There have also been a number of cultural shifts which are much more subtle. Smartphones and constant access to email have blurred the lines between work life and home life. Broadcast stations do a lot more than television news thanks to social media, apps and even text alerts (Smith et. al, 2007). Clear facts and "that's the way it is" have been replaced with near-constant accusations of bias and the proliferation of the "fake news" as a buzzword, even by the sitting President of the United States (Waisbord, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2019; Gorbach, 2018). Instead of benign car honks when driving past working journalists, crude phrases or even physical assaults are much more prevalent, especially of female journalists. In fact, in a 2021 survey by the Radio Television Digital News Association reported that 20% of television stations reported having an employee attack in the previous year, with 15% of those attacks seeming at random. As the survey author Papper (2021a) noted, it was the first time in the annual survey's history to include a section of questions on media violence. Meanwhile, advertising revenue for most is declining and profitability is falling, creating a salary outlook that is decidedly mixed. For college graduates in television, they can expect $18,344 below the average starting salary for all college graduates (Papper, 2021b; Reinardy, 2011, Reinardy, 2013; Woodruff, 2020; Davidson & Meyers, 2016; Goldfarb, 2011).

So what do all these changes, big and subtle, mean for the next 58 years of television journalism? While people like Gildea (1979) have been discussing the well-trodden path from news to public relations for decades, current industry professionals like television recruiters are raising an alarm—even calling it an "extinction alert" based on what they're seeing (Carver, 2021). Others, especially news directors, bemoan the dearth of quality candidates entering the journalism field and worry the talent pipeline is drying up with a noticeable difference in quantity of job candidates than a few years ago (Heyward, 2021).

This is a topic which is quite personal for the author. After almost 20 years happily and successfully working as a television anchor and reporter, including 12 Emmy nominations for my work, I realized it was time for me to create my own exit strategy—running, not walking. Frustration about a variety of job-related issues led me to look outside the television news business for the first time since graduating college and accept a communications position, even while I was at a TV station with almost a year remaining on my contract. As much as I enjoyed working as a television journalist up to the very end, at least most days, I've had very few regrets about leaving. My new position has allowed for a much better work-life balance, even while earning a much more lucrative position—which is no small thing as a married father.

With this paper and project, I will examine the current state of journalism by speaking to current and former television professionals about what makes them stay or what made them leave, using decades of research to help inform the questions that are asked and the ensuing discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social scientists have been studying the journalism profession and job satisfaction for more than 70 years. In fact, Merrill Samuelson published a standardized test to measure job satisfaction in the summer of 1962, just over a year before Walter Cronkite's first 30-minute newscast. Samuelson found that journalists who had left the profession cited three main reasons: low pay, poor leadership and not seeing a future in it as a career. Of course, most research, including Samuelson's, exclusively deal with journalists working at newspapers.

Reinardy (2009a) does a masterful job tracing the evolution of the research. Over the decades, from the 1970s to present day, researchers have found varying levels of commitment to journalism as a career. Groundbreaking work by Johnstone et al. in 1971, published as a book in 1976, found 20% to 25% questioned their professional commitment with only 17.2% of journalists expecting to leave the profession in 5 years (Reinardy, 2009a). Weaver and Wilhoit began studying satisfaction with a series of surveys beginning in 1982-83, published as a book in 1986. They found the greatest predictors of satisfaction to be a perception for how well their news organization was informing the public, frequent communication with supervisors and other professional factors like the degree of autonomy a journalist had (Reinardy, 2009a).

Weaver and Wilhoit's 1992 study, published in 1996, found a large decline in satisfaction. Just 27.3% of newspaper journalists reported being "very satisfied" with their jobs, compared to 40% in their earlier study and 48.8% in the Johnstone et al. just 21 years earlier. They did key in on some attitude shifts stating, "Journalists in 1992 appear to want to lead normal lives" and were less willing to endure inconveniences and the unpredictability of

previous generations (Reinardy, 2009a, p. 129). The numbers only continue to fall with the latest study by Weaver et al. (which is one of the rare studies to include television, news magazine and online journalists in addition to newspaper employees) which showed the number of “very satisfied” journalists was down to 23.3%. The “fairly satisfied” group held steady at 51.3% and both “somewhat dissatisfied” and “very dissatisfied” experienced corresponding increases, including a 258% increase in “very satisfied” from 1.7% in 2002 to 6.1% in 2013 (Weaver et al., 2019).

Reinardy (2007; 2009a) is among the researchers (Flores & Subervi, 2014) who have surveyed various newspaper journalist groups using the motivation-hygiene theory first put forth by behavioral scientist Frederick Herzberg in 1959, which has since been adopted for study in many different fields, from education (Katt & Condly, 2009) and high school journalism (Dvorak & Phillips, 2001) to church worship (Katt & Trelstad, 2009). Herzberg hypothesized that intrinsic motivational factors were connected to job satisfaction while extrinsic motivational factors were tied to job dissatisfaction. In short, increasing a salary or benefits wouldn’t help long-term job satisfaction—something that would be greatly opposed by many contemporary advisory pieces from people in the television industry which have not been subjected to peer review (Malone, 2013; Carver, 2021; Heyward, 2021a; Heyward, 2021b; Woodruff, 2020). While the median salary for a journalist rose 14.8% from 2001-2012, the accumulated rate of inflation is almost exactly double that figure at 29.5% (Weaver et al., 2019).

Reinardy found mixed support of Herzberg in a 2007 study which focused exclusively on sports editors at newspapers. Reinardy upheld the Herzberg model with his 2009a study which

found the primary reason (30.2%) cited by newspaper journalists who wanted to leave was a concern about the quality of journalism, with people citing “declining values” and “frivolous” coverage. Salary was the second most-cited reason (27.0%), pressure/stress/burnout was third (15.9%), followed by “other” (12.0%), family issues (8.1%) and retirement (6.8%).

For decades, Reinardy and others like Cook et al. (1993) have turned to another tool to evaluate the satisfaction and health of people who work in the newsroom: the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey. The survey is designed to measure the rate of burnout in various occupational groups by evaluating feelings like exhaustion and fatigue. Reinardy found female newspaper journalists had higher levels of exhaustion and lower professional efficacy than men, with 30% of women less than 28 years of age intending to leave the journalism career (2009b). Two years later, a full 74.5% of newspaper journalists younger than 35 were either expecting to leave the profession or weren’t sure, correlating with higher rates of burnout than earlier studies (Reinardy, 2011). College newspaper editors also showed moderate levels of two key factors of burnout: emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Filak & Reinardy, 2011). Two years later, in a study of television reporters, anchors and producers, Reinardy found average rates of burnout, but 22% had burnout with high levels of exhaustion and cynicism, on their way to becoming “classic burnout cases” (2013, p. 32). While 19% of the 887 TV journalists surveyed expected to leave broadcast news in the next five years, 37% of people with high levels of burnout expected to leave. While Reinardy points out that the workload has increased due to more airtime and social media responsibilities, he doesn’t address salary or “quality of journalism” factors as in earlier studies. More recently, in a smaller

study of 70 TV reporters, Dworznik (2018) found 54.3% had symptoms of burnout with 18.6% indicating they "often" have burnout symptoms. Dworznik also found that 41.4% of participants experienced, at least sometimes, symptoms of compassion fatigue, a form of traumatic stress caused by repeatedly encountering trauma victims.

The effects of declining ratings and profits on television networks and its journalists are also widely studied. Over the 25-year period from 1980 to 2005, the prime-time viewing audience of the so-called Big Three networks of ABC, CBS and NBC dropped from 90% to 32% thanks to the proliferation of additional networks like Fox, cable television programming and networks, the availability of videocassettes and DVDS and other competitive factors (Hindman & Wiegand, 2008). A survey in 2012 estimated that just one outlet—Craigslist—was responsible for a $5 billion loss in ad revenue between 2000-2007 (Miller, 2018). A fragmented audience is no small thing for an industry which has traditionally relied on advertising for 90% of its annual revenue. While growing retransmission fees can help supplement, they cannot fully replace the loss, which is why adding more news programming is an easy and cheap way to fill airtime (Goldfarb, 2011).

As early as 2007, Smith et al. were raising red flags as television reporters and producers were beginning to do a lot more than "just tv" with additional responsibilities, usually online, because of the ongoing convergence of the industry simultaneously with shrinking news staffs. Although the survey results were mixed, 24.9% of journalists said their work suffered as a result (although bosses had a significantly more positive view of convergence efforts overall). A more recent study of almost 1,200 newspaper employees found that the job title and responsibilities

greatly affected how additional digital responsibilities affected job satisfaction, with sports journalists being the only ones to experience increased satisfaction levels (Ternes et al., 2018). While 56.7% reported convergence took less than an extra 30 minutes a day, an additional 29.4% said it involved between 30 minutes and an hour. While that may not seem like a lot, Smith et al. pointed out that a decade earlier, 60 minutes equaled the entire length of the early evening and late-night newscast in many markets (Smith et al, 2007). The changes in the industry were also being experienced on a personal level; journalists saw these changes as an assault on professional autonomy and being able to cover important topics in the way they would choose (although not discussed, autonomy would be a key factor in both Helzberg's theory as well as the Maslach Burnout Inventory). As the researchers highlighted changes, they stated "many of the changes we found do not strike us as positive" (Beam et al., 2009, p. 292).

Part of the reason journalists are having to do more is that there are fewer people in the newsroom. Over a period of 11 years, there was a 28% drop in the overall journalism workforce. Although most job cuts were in daily newspapers and radio, an estimated 1,300 jobs in television were also cut (Weaver et al., 2019). Miller (2018) estimates that 1,800 newspapers have shut down from 2004-2018, with additional daily newspapers transitioning to a weekly format, with the pace only accelerating. Reinardy (2012) puts the newspaper employee cuts at 27%, down to 41,500 overall—the smallest staffing figure since the mid-1970s.

But there are more than purely economic changes to consider when it comes to the decline of the journalism field. Well over a decade before the rise of the buzzword "fake news," others were pointing out societal changes that, looking back, seem to have been laying the

groundwork, including a significant decline in civic participation, a greater ability for citizens to express skepticism towards institutions through public hearings and civic trials, and a decline in trust in television network news (Hindman & Wiegand, 2008). Though, in some ways, as Gorbach (2018) points out, there's a long history of "fake news" with politicians like Thomas Jefferson complaining about lies in a newspaper to say nothing of outright hoaxes or propaganda published in newspapers. Still, news organizations recognize fake news as a problem—usually placing the blame with the current political environment, tech platforms as well as audiences themselves (Tandoc et al., 2019).

Also, traditional gatekeeping roles have changed dramatically with a universe of information that is expanding exponentially (McNair, 2017) and, thanks to social media, the "collapse of the old news order chaos of contemporary public communication" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 1868). McNair (2017) points out that objective journalism relies on the assumed credibility of sources, but when traditionally authoritative sources like the United States president lies, "conventionally objective journalism is in uncharted territory" (p. 1330). It seems like social media and recommendations from friends, as well as complete strangers, are taking the place of high-quality journalism, which is effectively rendering the previous models for news obsolete (Munger, 2020).

This is not a uniquely American problem either. In Taiwan, burnout of journalists was significantly connected to higher and increasing workloads and lesser news autonomy with job satisfaction serving as a mediator (De-Liu, 2006; Liu & Lo, 2018). In a study of 60 current and former Israeli journalists, reasons for leaving were divided into three main categories:

Individual-level reasons like long hours and the emotional toll of reporting, Organizational-level reasons like dysfunction and a push to compromise principles, and Field-level reasons like a shift to short-term employment. Money was cited by 35 of the interviewees, with several saying their salary did not keep up with additional responsibilities and constant mental strain demanded of them. Of 35 subjects still working as active journalists, 17 said they had never considered an exit (Davidson & Meyers, 2016). In Australia, about 2,000 journalists lost their jobs over a two-year period, about 20% of the people in the field (Meade, 2014; Alcorn, 2017). In one survey, 78% of people found jobs in other fields with public relations (19%) and at a university (15%) the two most common landing spots (O'Donnell et al., 2016). While some former journalists expressed that losing their job was "like being shot in the face" (p. 64), more than two years later, 66.3% said they had a better overall well-being, 23.9% said their well-being was the same and only 9.2% said their well-being was worse (Ricketson et al., 2020). Reinardy (2012) stated out that because journalists identify deeply with their profession, because their employment is viewed not just as a job or a career, but as a calling, layoff survivors feel the threat of additional cuts as a threat to their self-integrity. Yet, in a qualitive study of a dozen ex-journalists in Sweden, every single person said they were satisfied with their current job in a new field (11 of the 12 are in public relations or communications) with no plans to go back, saying things like "I've got a new life…I'm not in heart-attack-mode every day…when I leave from here at five o'clock I don't think about work until the next day" (Örnebring & Möller, 2018, p. 1057).

METHOD

Individual interviews with 13 current and former journalists took place on the telephone between April 18 and May 2, 2022. Six people remain employed in the television journalism industry, including one person who left the business, only to return. Six people are former television journalists who are currently enjoying jobs in another career field. One person was currently employed as a television journalist but was in his last two weeks of employment before leaving for a job in communications. The total time on the phone was 959 minutes, or 15 hours and 59 minutes for an average length of a call of 1 hour and 13 minutes. The shortest interview was 47 minutes while two interviews lasted 88 minutes.

The current and former journalists range in age from 26 to 41 years old, with each person having at least four years in the business. Four years is a significant number because it means each person signed at least two contracts in their career, an initial contract, which is typically has a length of two years, and then either a second contract with the same station or signed another contract with a different station in a new city. The average interview subject is 31 years old with 8 years of experience in the industry with some combination of anchor, reporter and multimedia journalist or MMJ. Each profile is ordered by age, starting with the youngest current journalist or former journalist.

No matter their age, no matter their experience, no matter their current job—one thing they all agree on is that Carver's warning of an "extinction alert" is very much warranted.

EXIT STRATEGY

❖ Chad Hedrick, 26 – "I love going to work"

For Chad Hedrick, his job in journalism is a natural fit with his personality.

“Anyone in the family will tell you, I’m extremely nosy.”

Even in middle school, he had an interest in current events and politics. But the 2008 election, when Hedrick was in 8th grade, was the impetus for a desire to work in journalism. He remembers watching both network and cable news leading up to the event as well as after Election Day.

Hedrick currently works as a multimedia journalist or MMJ at WKYT in Lexington, Kentucky, where he has been for one year. Prior to WKYT, he was the weekend anchor at WSAZ in Huntington, West Virginia, after his initial position as an MMJ.

“I had this whole idea of this much more glamorous life of a reporter than what it is.”

But he remembers quickly discovering how much more difficult the job was, as well as how much more of a solitary job it was. Usually it was just him in an SUV, knocking on doors and trying to gather interviews solo.

He was raised right across the river from Huntington in Catlettsburg, Kentucky. That’s part of the reason he was so excited to be working for WSAZ, at least at first, because he felt like he was giving back to his own community.

That connection to the community was part of the reason he felt like lines were blurred in the WSAZ job between his professional and personal life. Managers had no hesitation ruining his plans by calling him to work, reaching out to him when he was off the clock to get information or confirm a tip with a source.

“For crying out loud, there were times when I was on vacation, I’m laying on the beach, and I got a text from the manager saying, ‘Hey, can you check on this?’

The job that never was

That’s part of the reason he decided at one point it was time to leave the business. He interviewed for a job in public relations with the city of Ashland, near his home. He remembers being crushed when they offered it to someone else.

Now, his perspective is far different.

“It’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me,” Hedrick said. “Now, I’m like, ‘Thank God.’ All I saw was weekends off, holidays and things like normal, and that’s all I cared about. I didn’t think about anything else.”

But the new job at WKYT, under new management, has been a breath of fresh air.

“I would say I’m very satisfied. There’s always room for growth and improvement…but I’m right now, honestly the happiest I’ve ever been probably in my entire time in this business.”

He doesn’t feel any current expectations to work outside his shift. Because there is a robust web department at the television station, he rarely has to stay late either. He believes he spends roughly 90 minutes or so in a week working off the clock—mostly posting on social

media because he's competitive and wants to continue to grow his presence on various platforms.

The era of social media and fake news

With being 26 years old, he says he grew up on social media.

"Social media has always been around," Hedrick said. "I think it's an important aspect of it. We are in a society where a lot of people want their news and their information right now as it happens. I feel the best way to do that is using Facebook and Twitter."

Almost his entire career has also been under the so-called 'fake news' era because he was hired fulltime in May 2016, just months before President-elect Donald Trump tweeted out the phrase for the first time in December, then repeatedly used the phrase throughout 2017.

"It definitely affected me more then than it does now."

On one occasion during the pandemic, people falsely accused him of sneaking a video camera into a non-official school dance in the height of the pandemic. Even though he had photographic proof he was out of town that weekend because it was his birthday, it didn't stop the hatred from being spewed his way. Strangers would send him messages wishing him to rot in hell, even calling him a pedophile.

"It was people who fall under that belief of fake news and that we're the enemy of the people," he said. "It never made me want to walk away or get out of the business, but it did remind me that there are some crazies out there who are going to believe what they want to believe, no matter how many times you show them actual evidence to their face. They will not believe it."

Extinction alert

Hedrick believes the extinction alarm is merited because of the current salary offered to rookie reporters.

"People are not going to tolerate making $30,000, trying to live off that, especially in bigger cities, especially now with inflation. Cost of living doesn't matter if you're starting in Market 100 or 75. We have to have a living wage."

But it's more than just money. When he read Carver's article himself, the portion about the work/life balance also resonated with him because that's part of the reason he sought a transfer to WKYT.

"I definitely believe and know that there are stations that have blurred those lines and expect you to be on the clock, ready to roll 24/7. I think the whole newsroom atmosphere in places, the culture, has to change and be more encouraging…I would like to think, and I hope, that there will be enough of a cry for change that some things will give and the culture will get better in newsrooms."

Hedrick started out at $30,000 in 2016 ($35,937 in today's dollars). When he signed his second contract at WSAZ in 2019, for the weekend anchor position, it was for $40,000 ($44,983 today).

He currently makes $46,500 at WKYT, with a raise of $1,500 (a raise of 3.2% on his current wage) that will go into effect in January.

But after that, he thinks his next contract should see a hefty increase—especially with the understanding he's been given by management at WKYT that they want to groom him to be a veteran anchor who stays at the station for 30-40 years. He believes a salary in the mid-50s would be very reasonable for someone with his experience as well as continuity with the same company.

"The pandemic had a lot of people, not just in this industry, but all industries across the board say, 'We don't make enough for what we deal with or what our job expectations are.' We're struggling and I know a lot of other stations are struggling to find people because no one wants to graduate and make barely above what you can make at Chick-fil-A or the Buc-ee's [gas station] that just opened up down here."

He also points to the owners of his television station, Gray Television, touting a "record year" and acquiring two major media companies during his tenure as an employee.

"I'll be approaching 10 years with this company. Pay me like you love me…I've said invest in me. Take care of me. Keep me happy and I'm here."

While one of the youngest journalists, Hedrick was one of the only ones who felt like he could speak to the ongoing situation with ad revenue. He knows there was a hit in 2020, but he believes there's been a rebound because his station has gone back to sponsoring a number of events in the Lexington area.

That's why he hopes to stay for the long haul—as long as the environment continues.

"If I'm still at KYT in five years, I'll be completely fine with it. If I'm still here in 20 years, I will be fine with it…but if I don't feel invested in or if I feel like the culture or the viewpoints of the media are too toxic, I might consider walking away. I'm single. I don't really have any major roots or crazy responsibilities [like a family] so I think a lot of that has been a reason people have gotten out of the business."

"The environment in the newsroom, that was a big reason I left my last [station], was the lack of boundaries between work and personal life, the environment in the newsroom and burnout. I feel like that would be [the final straw] for me and the pay not being worth it for me to say, 'You know what, I've done this. It was a dream job. Time to move on.'"

But it wouldn't be easy to walk away. Hedrick knows he would miss the big stories and the breaking news. It's actually been hard for him to be in Lexington as a few of the big stories have been broken at WSAZ, affecting people and places he knows intimately.

"I feel like I'm Chad 'The News Guy" Hedrick. It's part of who I am. It's what people know me for. I feel like it would be weird to be, 'Oh, it's the Chad the PR guy.' It's weird to even think about it now…I've never thought of it that way, but yeah, it is part of my identity."

Advice for college students

"Expect to have some struggles starting out…but then I would say, it does get better. If you work at it and you are committed to this job, the benefits will come."

It's far different than the words of wisdom Hedrick would have had for aspiring journalists five years ago, when he was in a bad place with the business himself. At that time, he would have said simply, "Don't do it."

Now, he believes patience and perseverance will pay off in the end.

"Give it a couple of years. Show your worth. Earn your keep. We've all had the struggles and had the crappy schedule."

❖ Nikki DeMentri, 26 – "I'm lucky every day that I get to do this"

Nikki DeMentri has been telling stories her entire life. First, as a ballerina as a young girl with a youth professional ballet company. Now, she tells stories as an MMJ and fill-in anchor with WRTV in Indianapolis. It is a job which is the accomplishment of a dream, a career aspiration she first remembers making when she was 6 or 7 years old.

"I love my job," DeMentri said. "This is a job you need to love, especially in this job because you're working those weird hours. You're working weekends, you're constantly on call. Sometimes you talk to people on the worst days of their life. Sometimes it's the best days of their life. I find it personally just an honor to be there for those moments, to be there to be a shoulder to cry on, to be there to cheer and hug on…It's a really cool perspective of history that I have and I'm really blessed to be in this position. So yeah, I definitely am happy and I think I'm lucky every day that I get to do this."

Growing up, watching the evening news every night was appointment television. She also had a different perspective than most thanks to several family members who were in the business when she was a child.

Perhaps that's why for her 5th grade class project, when students could pick any current or historical figure to learn facts about as a simulated wax museum, she chose to become Katie Couric while most of her classmates chose figures like Abraham Lincoln.

"I'm an only child and I like to talk a lot so that boded well for me. I've just taken that and translated that to what I do today."

Still, it wasn't easy at first. She had always thought she'd been good at time management—until she got her first reporting job and got an immediate dose of reality about the substantial number of tasks she was expected to do with a definitive time to finish them—measured by the minute and the second in a newscast.

"When you're trying to drive, tweet, and not at the same time, write a story, file a story, make sure you have a live hit that's actually going to make sense when you're talking on live TV."

Quick ascent

DeMentri has only been in the business four years, the shortest of any of the journalists interviewed.

As soon as she graduated in 2018 from Syracuse University (one of the most respected institutions for broadcasting in the country), she got a job at WKBW in Buffalo, a Top 60 market, through an introductory program run by the E.W. Scripps Company. Scripps owns 61 stations in 41 markets, including WKBW and WRTV.

DeMentri declined to provide a salary history but said her initial contract was "low," though the Scripps program paid for housing. When she signed a new contract after the first year, she made a significant jump, almost doubling her salary. She got another raise when she made the jump to Indianapolis, a Top 25 market, in December 2020.

Nine months earlier, around St. Patrick's Day, she remembers being told to take enough things home to last two weeks. Those two weeks turned into more than two years, and included a move to a new job in the unfamiliar city of Indianapolis.

It was a time period which definitely affected her level of happiness with her job.

"Because of COVID that was a difficult transition for me personally. I don't think it was any fault of where I am or what I was doing. I mean, just moving in the middle of the pandemic, to a place where you don't really know anybody, and not being able to have those face-to-face interactions was difficult for me."

Even though it was challenging, she is thankful Scripps kept the rules for working remotely in place for as long as they did. She felt like her safety was put first—which was no small thing since she lost relatives to COVID.

She's also thankful the restrictions were recently lifted.

"One beautiful thing about this industry, in this job—I guess some people say beautiful, some people not—I think it's a good thing when you move to different markets, everyone is somewhat in the same boat, right? A lot of times people are transplants through the area, and you can all just have instant friends built in, people that understand what you're going through. But when you start in the middle of the pandemic, that was really crazy for so many of us."

Long days

DeMentri's workday starts early. Most days she estimates she spends at least an hour, sometimes 90 minutes, before she's on the clock, looking for story ideas, making calls and setting up multiple stories before the daily morning editorial meeting.

While she is scheduled to work 9 hours with an hourlong lunch break, most of the time, she works right through lunch. While she does get some opportunities to work with a photographer, she usually works solo as an MMJ.

Once her television responsibilities are through, she has to write a web story for the WRTV website. She also tries to schedule posts on social media to try to build her brand. Between that

and the web, tasks can easily take another 60-90 minutes. She does get paid overtime for some things, and said the team at the station is realistic about the realities of the job.

In summary, her theoretical 8-hour workday is usually anywhere from 10 to 12 hours long in reality.

“Then you start all over again the next day and that’s not even talking about all the sweeps and the special projects.”

DeMentri says she is “very satisfied” with her job and says, even though she finds it hard to get away from work, it’s just part of her personality.

“I literally just got a notification on my work phone as we’re sitting here talking and I opened it. It’s 8:44 p.m., so yeah, it’s definitely difficult to disconnect…I personally like to be plugged in. I am just a very ‘Type A’ person. I am pretty much always going in and out, always working in one way, shape or form. That’s something I’ve gotten better with, but it’s something I still struggle with.”

She says it’s a personal choice to work a lot and believes she still has a normal life, at least for people in the news business. But, as she’s become more experienced, she’s figured out the importance of separating from the job—something that has led to greater personal satisfaction.

“Sometimes I need to just be ‘Nikki’ and not be, ‘Nikki DeMentri, WRTV.’ I wouldn’t say that I’m any more happy or less happy. I’m a different type of happy, a more realistic happy.”

Picking your battles

She’s been accused of bias as a journalist and has heard people shout fake news in her direction. She says, as a reporter, you have to choose your battles. If she feels like someone in the public is willing to have a constructive conversation with her, she will always make herself available for a dialogue, even if they disagree. Otherwise, she tries to ignore them—especially the ‘fake news’ term which she believes has become more of a fixture and common phrase in the of American vernacular.

She knows that local news is vastly different from national news outlets which often present stories with a preconceived bias. But she also knows that most viewers don’t see it that way.

“It’s frustrating sometimes, especially in local journalism. I feel that most, if not all, of us are in this to serve our community, to be able to share the stories of our community and help our community. When that type of phrase is used, it cuts in on trust.”

About two years ago, she had a frightening experience when she was alone, at night. She was shooting video after a community meeting on a day when police foiled a school shooting plot. That’s when some people starting hurling sexual insults at her and even tried to get into her car.

She was able to escape unharmed.

In the end, it produced a very healthy conversation in the newsroom about safety. It has also made her unafraid to have those conversations with management or producers, even when she was interviewing for the job at WRTV, to try to prevent a similar situation from happening again.

“It’s definitely made me more aware. It happened right before the pandemic happened, November 2019. That seems so long ago! It definitely has made me more aware, and not just at work but just my surroundings.”

Extinction alert

“We all read it,” DeMentri said. “We’re seeing a large, I don’t want to say a mass exodus, but we’re seeing a large group of people leave the industry.”

She thinks the same factors are leading to similar outcomes in the restaurant and hospitality industries, as well as other places where the “power of the employee” is more pronounced in this stage of the pandemic.

She believes there have been positive outcomes already. She has had quite a few mentors, in different jobs as well as in different cities, who have been able to gain more flexibility in their jobs in an effort to keep them from leaving for personal or family reasons.

She hopes to be in the industry in five years but acknowledges that plans change.

“Check with me in a couple of years,” she said with a laugh.

She hopes to eventually get an opportunity to report in the Northeast region, closer to her home. While she would enjoy staying at a station for a long time, she would also love an opportunity to get a position working for a network, something that has been a staple of the traditional way of doing the news for decades.

“I personally see myself staying in this. I know the industry is ever-changing…I don’t even know if we will have traditional models anymore, reporter/anchor/correspondent/things of that nature. I don’t know what that’s going to look like. I don’t think any of us really know what that’s going to look like in five years or 10 years.”

Advice for college students

Her advice for aspiring journalists has not changed by her time and experience in the industry.

“I told this to college students just last week, know what you’re getting yourself into. Do not be surprised when you’re working weird hours, your schedule is changing, you’re working weekends and you’re working holidays. Just don’t be surprised by any of that.”

She says she’s still amazed by how many of her fellow broadcast journalism majors at Syracuse—a place she felt did a pretty good job of ‘weeding people out’—are hit with a reality check in their first job and leave the television business within the first one to two years.

“They’re like, ‘I didn’t know it was really going to be like this.’”

❖ Trevor Peters, 27 – "My goals have changed"

Trevor Peters has loved breaking news his entire life. He remembers watching the news as a child and getting a thrill from sharing something with his friends they hadn't heard before.

It was only natural that he went to Purdue University to major in mass communication. He started at the hometown station of WLFI in West Lafayette as soon as he graduated in 2017, fulfilling the dream he had since before he was in middle school.

"It wasn't ever a question of what I wanted to do. I knew the whole time."

At the time of the interview, that dream was about to come to an end. Peters had 9 working days left as the alert desk anchor at WXIX in Cincinnati before leaving the television business to become the Senior Communication Specialist for National Media at Purdue.

When he got into the television business, his expectations would be that being a journalist was a glamorous lifestyle—but one that would help people, make a difference and have an impact.

"I saw that many times, but it's not the day-to-day that I expected when I first went into it. My reality is that this is probably the hardest I will ever work in my entire life, probably the littlest I'll get paid my entire life, for the worst schedule…I didn't anticipate the toll it would take on my outside life as well and not being able to have a personal life because I have a professional life."

Polar opposite work experiences

Peters was at WLFI for three years. Soon after he was hired, he was promoted to morning anchor when the previous one left.

On one hand, he loved working at the station. While he grew up in Indianapolis, he considered West Lafayette "home," and thus, even the little stories felt important.

"I was covering news that I truly felt made a difference…[when] there was a big breaking story that was happening and I was off the clock, I would volunteer to go in. I would volunteer to write a web story because I cared about it."

But many other aspects of the job were less than ideal. He was still required to turn content as the morning anchor. But the station was so small, Market #187 of 210 overall across the United States, that he also oversaw all web stories in the morning. Plus, when the floor director position was cut during his tenure, he had to start moving his own cameras in the studio.

"It was a miserable, miserable place to work."

A month into the pandemic, he took the job at WXIX. As alert desk anchor, he is responsible for 8 hits in the afternoon and early evening newscasts, one every 30 minutes between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m.

"It was comical honestly, switching to where I'm at now. I'm very happy with the setting but I am very unhappy. I'm very lonely…homesick is the best word, my heart is not in this city. It's a

great town. It's a great market. You're covering three states. There's a lot of big news here. I couldn't care about any of it."

In contrast to WLFI, Peters is very happy with the television station, both its management as well as its overall ownership, its ethical standards, and its handling of breaking news.

He had envisioned that the move to Cincinnati would be good because it would be position him for his ultimate dream job of becoming the evening anchor at WTHR in Indianapolis, the station he grew up watching. But WXIX meant a separation from his fiancé, then his wife, who is about to finish her medical residency and begin working at Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis. The longer that situation lasted, the less he was willing to sacrifice to try to make WTHR a reality.

"It didn't excite me like it used to," Peters said. "My heart wasn't in it anymore. I would rather spend my time toward a family and just normal things in life, like having a house and being there on Christmas morning, things that people outside of news get to experience. That was far more important to me than getting back to my home market."

The COVID effect

Peters admits the pandemic and the constant coverage of COVID at WXIX helped burn him out on the career. For the first 12-18 months of his time on the alert desk, it was almost exclusively listening to state and national press briefings and, almost immediately, turning the content into television hits, whether it was lockdowns or positivity rates, etc.

"I was the press conference king."

His job, requiring him to daily cover such a sensitive and politically-charged topic, also put him under increased scrutiny from viewers. While scrutiny had never bothered him before, the constant criticism from the "armchair detectives" eventually took its toll.

"No matter what I said, everything was wrong. Too many different viewpoints, whether the left, the right, people in-between, everyone had an opinion…instead of empathy and caring for people and realizing it was a serious issue, it really turned into politics. It made me feel very sad really, and depressed."

Peters believes he heard from 10% of viewers, the extreme 5% on either side. He was confident the other 90% in the middle were rational. But it's part of the reason he saw his job as being abnormal.

"A normal life is being there on Christmas morning with your family. A normal life is not going into work at 2:30 in the morning. A normal life is Monday through Friday, 9 to 5. You come home, you leave your work at work…Everything I do is under a microscope from the public's eye. That's part of getting into the business which I knew going into it. I don't think college or any class can prepare you for the scrutiny that the public has on your profession."

He was prepared for the outsized importance that viewers would place on his every word, on making sure that it was 100% correct. He was unprepared to find out that he needed to tiptoe

around some of his coworkers because of their beliefs. He found that he had to write his words for the anchors differently, depending on who it was.

“I just typically try to ignore it, know that my heart is in a good place. I’m getting my content, every word that comes out of my mouth, is in no way bias or slanted. It is as fact as I can prove it.”

Extinction alert

Peters says what is happening in the industry today is a “mass exodus.” He believes COVID is part of the reason. But he also thinks people who are his age are less willing to sacrifice their personal life for their professional, especially if it means working as a solo MMJ, in the dark, in a strange city, making less than $50,000 a year.

“Their dream market is not desirable anymore. It may have been 10 years ago, but it’s not anymore. When you can get paid 33% more, you can have great benefits, you can work from home, you can have a family, that’s what’s important to people.”

Peters started at $28,000 at WLFI. He got a $4,000 raise to become a morning anchor. At WXIX, he started at $50,000 with a 3% raise for the second year. He believes someone in his role with his experience should be getting $65,000-$68,000. His role with Purdue will pay him $65,000 immediately—a 24% raise from his current “glamorous” job. It’s not quite 33% more, but close.

“It’s all craziness,” he said. “Experience and market and job, it doesn’t mean anything anymore. It’s all whatever they can get you for.”

Peters sleeps with his work phone next to his bed so that if he gets called in the middle of the night, he won’t miss it.

“It’s not a lifestyle that I ever want to live forever. While I’m young, it makes sense. But it’s certainly not a lifestyle that I want to do when I have kids.”

That’s why he thinks a major shakeup in the industry is coming. He hopes the elimination of contracts, which always favor the employer, not the employee, is at the top of the list.

Peters said he’s astonished by the speed upon which the entire industry has shifted to an MMJ model, even at a station like Cincinnati, which is one of the 35 largest markets in the country. In context, there are 210 television markets in the United States.

“Seventy-five percent of our reporters are MMJs. They are sent to breaking news alone. They’re sent to crime scenes alone. They’re expected to succeed. They don’t have time. You can’t fault them because they are being asked to do what used to be the job of four people in one, just to save a buck.”

At WXIX, the station airs 70 hours of news programming each and every week, an average of 10 hours a day. In September, the station added a 3 p.m. newscast—yet they didn’t hire a single additional employee. Anchors were just expected to come in early, and Peters went from six hits a day to eight hits.

"I've seen less and less dedication to real hard-hitting journalism, investigative pieces, extra time for those pieces that will change people's lives and make a difference…for our MMJs, they're just there to be a content-generating machine…Now, at every station, they have young, cheap labor, because that's all they really care about is paying as little as they can for as much as they can."

Still, don't think Peters has soured on his dream, or even completely dismissed returning to television journalism. After all, he still loves storytelling and making a difference.

"I haven't lost the desire for it. How things [in the industry] have changed, that's part of it. But my goals have changed more than anything. My goals of becoming an anchor in Indianapolis are no longer as strong as my goals of being a father and being a present husband, having a home and a stable life and living the American dream, just being normal, having a normal life."

While he's excited to be working for his alma mater, sleeping in the same bed as his wife seven nights a week, he knows he's going to miss covering the big stories and breaking news. Whether it's the election or the Super Bowl, he's had a front row seat for the last five years.

"You don't get this in an average job, but I'm willing to put all that aside just so I can get an average job because it's than important to me to be with family."

Advice for college students

A few years ago, Peters would have been more positive to aspiring journalists just 5-6 years behind him, with similar dreams that he entertained as a child. Now, he really wants to caution others to think carefully, to be ready to give so much of their off time to being on.

"I don't ever want to tell someone not to go into it, but I do think that there are other career paths that are far more rewarding as pay goes, but also where you'll be happier," he said. "My advice is when you start to feel yourself and your heart is not in it anymore, don't keep putting it off. Find what makes you happy even if it's not what you thought you originally wanted in the first place…if they're not 100% in it, it is not going to work in their favor."

❖ Demie Johnson, 27 – "It is what I want to do"

Demie Johnson was 6 years old when she resolved to become a journalist. In fact, she can tell you the exact date she decided—Sept. 11, 2001.

While she didn't understand what was happening on all the televisions playing at school, when she got home, she told her parents she wanted to be the person on TV. When they asked why, she answered, "Because I feel like when everyone was watching TV, they weren't scared."

From that point on, she never wavered.

She's been in the television journalism business for a total of five years. When she graduated from Ball State, she got her first job at WLFI. She was there about two years, mostly as an MMJ,

at the end, the weekend anchor, before she came to WISH-TV in Indianapolis where she's worked as an MMJ.

Johnson feels like her professors at Ball State, many who worked in the television industry before joining academia, helped her set accurate expectations for what the job would be like. She was prepared for the demanding work, the low pay and the unusual schedule. The part that has surprised her has been the way management treats its employees.

"I feel like the news business could use a little help with humanizing its employees…I thought there would be some understanding when it came to, 'Hey, I understand that what you do is hard work. I appreciate you' or 'Take a comp day' or 'Yes, it's okay when you take a day off.' I think that was more surprising to me about this business, when they say the news never stops, it really never stops."

Happiness level

Overall, she says she's happy with her current job, but there are also plenty of bad days. Those bad days are mostly caused by a "huge disconnect" when managers in the building second-guess the decisions she and the other crews make when they are out in the field.

"We cover and see and deal with really hard things…we deal with a lot of harassment when we're just trying to do our job. Then you come back in the building and get, 'You didn't do a good enough job' or 'You should have done this'…those days are hard because you feel like what you're doing isn't appreciated by the people who are telling you to go do it. But, at the same time, they're not the ones doing it. They're in their offices telling you what to do and how you should do it."

Her happiness has remained consistent, even as she's noticed dramatic changes between being a journalist in the 23rd smallest market in the United States and going to the 25th largest.

When she was a rookie, she feels like she had less to worry about. Management was more pleased with knowing she tried her best, regardless of results. Now, in her current job, expectations are higher, raising the stress level. But she's also more comfortable in her own skills as a journalist, pleased to be getting much more compensation financially, as well as respect. She is also glad she gets to do more investigative stories.

"At the end of the day, I always tell myself, 'This is what you want to do.' It is what I want to do, and I think that's what keeps me on course and happy."

Blurred lines

Johnson could only laugh when asked about blurred lines between work and personal life and if it was easy to truly get away from work.

"Very difficult," she said.

She estimates she spends at least an hour every day checking work emails, making work-related phone calls or sending emails to try to set up stories before she arrives to work at 2:30 p.m., all of it uncompensated. Yet, it's a lot less time than she spent early on in her career.

Part of the reason she feels like it doesn't affect her home life is that her longtime boyfriend works a regular job during the day, so the time she works off the clock isn't happening when he's around. She's not sure how she would manage it if he worked the same schedule.

"I don't feel like I cannot pay attention to what's going on because when I come back to work from a vacation or a weekend and I don't know what's going on, then I feel like I'm ostracized or bullied so I don't feel like I can ever turn it off…there's still that expectation from management that you should always be on your phone and you should always be ready to come in and do what they need to do."

Still, she feels like her career and line of work spills into her personal life in other ways. She's internalized the idea that the world isn't such a safe place anymore because of the stories she has covered throughout her career, often operating on a similar premise that awful things happen to good people. Whether it's her young niece playing on her phone or playing outside without adult supervision, she notices and feels almost compelled to speak up to her siblings.

"I feel like I am paranoid…even just traveling, going to new places and being in big cities, I feel like I have a different sense of awareness than other people do sometimes. I think that can take away from moments because I'm worried…I think it's definitely made me not normal."

Mental health

But, then again, it's not normal to have things thrown at you, cigarette butts tossed at you or people spit at you, just for doing your job—things that Johnson has experienced. She and a photographer were nearly run over intentionally by a motorcyclist who was yelling and screaming at them shortly after the 2020 riots in Indianapolis. At WLFI, she had to call the police once because she had a stalker who came to her apartment every day, waiting for her to get home.

Those experiences don't make her more ready to leave though. She does believe that mental health resources should be readily available to everyone in the industry.

"There are people who deal with trauma, see trauma, and then they have to come to work and pretend like it didn't bother them. But we're human. It does bother us and affect us. I think it especially gets worse, and I've seen colleagues have to quit and leave the business when you have kids because you worry about things differently. You have more fears because you're worrying about keeping someone else alive as well."

Extinction alert

Johnson believes Carver's extinction alert is merited. When she has talked to aspiring journalists on college campuses over the years, professors have commented that they are at a loss for what to do or say to their students. They are finding that undergraduates don't want to do the job because of poor pay and a poor work/life balance.

At WLFI, Johnson started at $25,000 a year. While she qualified for overtime, she didn't get it very often. At WISH, she is making $50,000 in her final year, after a pair of raises of roughly 2% annually.

While she doesn't have a problem with her current salary, it's only because she arrived at WISH with only two years of experience. She believes an MMJ in Indianapolis should be making $60,000-$65,000.

"I would feel bad complaining about it because I've made it pretty far, pretty fast compared to other friends and colleagues who have the same experience as me or maybe more experience than me."

She has noticed a change in the Indianapolis market in her three years. When she arrived, she was the youngest person in the entire market, with only one other MMJ a few months older. But now, there are a number of youthful reporters, working in Market #25 at the age of 25 or younger.

While she knows she once was one of those people, it has quickly turned from being the exception to the rule to being the standard in the market.

"I worry what's going to happen to these small markets where you get your feet wet and you learn and you make mistakes, because they're not going to have anyone work at them…[bigger markets] can't get anyone so they'll hire anyone. They'll pay people less money. Young people will take those jobs just to be at certain markets. That sets the tone for the rest of the people who have worked hard and put the time in."

She's noticed the youth movement result in other consequences too. While people have viewed her as a credible source of news, Johnson has had people tell her they won't do an interview with her station because of mistakes that have aired in other stories.

"I don't think it's a problem where I work. I think it's a problem in the industry, just trying to do too much with fewer people and fewer resources. Mistakes are made. To us, it's a typo in a story, but to someone else who it's about, it's their name or an important fact about them…to them, that's everything. That's a huge deal…it should be, 'I'm very sorry because you are a person, and you deserve to be treated with respect. Your story is the most important thing that I'm doing.'"

But Johnson doesn't place the blame at the feet of the young journalists who are rising so quickly.

"You can't live in today's world making $20,000 and have student loans and debt and try to look nice and wear expensive dresses and makeup and be on TV."

In just five years, she's noticed other industry changes as well. There is a lot more animosity towards journalists, thanks in large part to the phenomenon of fake news. At the same time, she feels like many more people don't care about local news as much as they used to.

She's also felt the increased weight put on social media and the station's website. She's broken two large stories in the last year online, at noon, hours before the next newscast. Just a few years ago, that would have been held until 4:45 p.m., just in time for the 5 p.m. newscast, putting your competition at a disadvantage for verifying the story themselves until the following day.

"Now it's all about, 'We got to make money online so we're going to put it first online,' because by the time you go on TV at 5 o'clock, it's going to be around the world."

Changes on the horizon

Johnson's career in Indianapolis is ending shortly. When her contract finishes in June, she will be moving to Orlando where she accepted a job at a television station. She will start with a salary of $75,500 with a $3,000 raise in her second year.

Five years from now, she believes she will still be in the industry. But depending on changes in her personal life in the next few years, including the prospect of having a family, she may not want to continue to be a field reporter because of the emotional toll it takes on you, day after day, tragedy after tragedy. She's interested in moving to an anchor position or perhaps even a role in management.

"I've thought about it because I've seen good management and bad management. If you can be one of the good ones, then why wouldn't you?"

She believes personal reasons would be the most likely reason for her to choose to do something else. She also thinks if her salary doesn't keep up with her level of experience and inflation, that could also push her to look elsewhere.

"If it came between my family and a job, I would choose my family."

But it would be difficult for her to leave. She believes she's actually more motivated to stay as she sees so many other veteran journalists leave.

"When things are tough, like when the world is tough and the industry is tough, it always makes me want to work harder and to do more. That's where I'm at right now. We're working at a time when people don't like us. We're also not always treated well in the building we work in. We're not treated well outside the building by the public. But that makes me want to work harder."

She points to the Larry Nassar, the former team doctor of the U.S. women's national gymnastics program who was sentenced to decades in prison for sexually abusing multiple teenage gymnasts in late 2017. It's a result that was made possible because of a story which began at the Indianapolis Star more than a year earlier. A team of journalists published a story after speaking to some of his alleged victims.

She believes that story demonstrates the power of journalism. If journalists hadn't listened to the victims, Nassar would still be working.

"If good people, who are in it for the right reasons, and not just to be famous and be on TV, people like that leave the industry, then I would be worried about what would happen."

Advice for college students

A few years ago, her advice to college students interested in becoming journalists would have been a message of perseverance. Work hard. Don't be discouraged. It is a hard job. You won't make a lot of money in the beginning.

But now her advice is different. Now she tells college students to make sure they are joining the industry for the right reasons, such as reporting on issues that are important to your community, finding what's wrong and why, being an impetus to change laws and solve crimes.

"Make sure that you really want to do it and that you don't just want to be on TV because such a small part of your job is actually being on TV."

❖ Katie Wisely, 29 – "One day, it's like I just saw the light"

"I wanted to be a teacher for a long time and then I thought, 'Oh I'm not going to make any money being a teacher.' But hey, then I got into broadcast journalism."

Katie Wisely recounts that memory with a laugh.

She spent six years in the television business, with stops at three different stations, before she decided to leave in June 2021 to become an internal communications specialist for a credit union.

While she had gone to college for communications, it wasn't until she started working at the television station at Purdue University that she decided to become a reporter. She realized she liked to talk to people, to hear their stories, and she wasn't nervous practicing in front of a camera, even when other people were around.

"Just the ability to tell people's stories and not sit behind the desk and do something different every day is really what I looked forward to and what made me most excited about journalism."

Paying to leave

Her first job was at WTVW in Evansville, Indiana, where she spent about 18 months. Then she went to KJRH in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She was there for a little over two months before moving home to Indianapolis and getting hired at WISH-TV.

For each job change and station change, she was forced to buy out the remaining time of her contract at her previous station. That is the customary practice in the television field as a way to discourage reporters and anchors from leaving for a new opportunity so quickly. It can also put pressure on employees at the end of their contract who can find themselves without a job if they don't sign a new contract.

While sometimes the buyout can be a flat fee, even thousands of dollars, for Wisely it was a percentage based on the time remaining on her current contract. To move to Tulsa, it cost $500. The move to Indianapolis cost $750. Her education and internship opportunities prepared her to accept it without much of a second thought.

“I was always looking ahead with the future,” Wisely said. “To me, that’s not a lot of money if I’m able to go and make a bigger salary and be in a bigger market. At that point in my life, I wanted to keep moving up. I just thought, in my opinion, that was the best way to go about it when I didn’t have that big of a buyout.”

It was a profitable decision. The Evansville job paid $24,000 in 2015 ($29,275 in today’s dollars). The Tulsa job paid $42,000 ($50,593 in 2022). WISH paid her $50,000—an amount that is less than she made in a small market if cost of living is taken into account.

Looking back, she has a much different reaction to the idea that she had to pay her current employer for the privilege of leaving for another opportunity.

“Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it. What I do now, I would never have to buy out to go to a better job.”

Bigger, not better

At various times in her career, her expectations for the business didn’t meet reality. At one of her jobs, she felt the news director and assistant news director held similar political views and it affected how they covered topics. When she would mention the lack of balance, she felt ignored.

When she went to WISH and worked as a morning reporter, she constantly felt management back at the station wouldn’t believe what was telling them, consistently choosing to report unconfirmed information or what other stations had been able to confirm, because they wanted the story to be something different than what she had determined it to be.

In particular, she remembers covering the FedEx mass shooting in April 2021, just a few months before she left. Her producer had asked her, “Aren’t there bodies in the parking lot? We’re hearing this on the scanner.”

Wisely, who was on scene, said no, she hadn’t seen any of that. Yet, the anchors said it anyway on the air, reading information that had been written for them by the producer who had chosen to ignore her eyewitness account.

“That really frustrated me, especially with the FedEx [incident], because it was a very raw and emotional scene as families were arriving to this parking lot, trying to figure out what was going on with a loved one. But there was nothing visible…We were almost scaring people and putting this fear in people at home when that wasn’t even something that we knew was there.”

Bigger wasn’t better when it came to the issue of feeling safe on the job. She felt safer earlier in her career. At both Evansville and Tulsa, smaller stations, she constantly had a photographer with her. She never had to knock on a stranger’s door alone.

"I felt very safe in both those environments when I was working, but I did not feel that in Indianapolis whatsoever."

When she was first offered her contract, she was surprised that Indianapolis, Market #25, didn't pay better. She knew her friends in other industries were definitely making more money. But because it was her home city, it was worth it, at least at the time.

It wasn't just salary either. She felt like stations earlier in her career tried to extra compensation like a makeup allowance or free haircuts to help ease the burden of looking good on television. WISH only provided makeup.

"When you look at the business now, people aren't making any money. It's the people that are grandfathered in. The people that are coming into it now, I almost feel sorry for them because I don't really see a career path of making that much money in news anymore."

Struggle of personal vs. professional

Wisely didn't find it easy to get away from work. Because she worked the morning shift, she constantly felt the need to set things up ahead of time, after she clocked out. Otherwise she wouldn't be successful. She felt pressured to send emails, post on social media, respond to Facebook or Twitter messages, all done when technically not working, or at least not getting paid. Even on vacation, she felt like she couldn't be away from her phone.

"I never felt I could turn it off because, essentially, you want to be popular. You want that following and I didn't think I could ever turn it off."

She thinks all the extras, all the additional responsibilities, also affected her performance when she was on the clock too. She couldn't focus on her live shot or write the best story she could because she was thinking of the other things she had to do outside her presentation on television.

It impacted her relationship with her fiancé too. They would get in arguments when they were dating because of the number of times she had to answer an email or call someone back to set up an interview for the following week.

"I was constantly thinking about work and not setting aside time just to create memories with the two of us because I couldn't turn it off."

Seeing the light

Still, even five years in, Wisely thought she would be in television for her entire professional life. Even the low pay in Indianapolis, even with the other hurdles, she planned to stick with it. She believed she would eventually end up in New York, working for a network.

Her mind changed after the first year at WISH.

"There wasn't a specific circumstance, but one day, it's like I just saw the light. I knew that this was not going to be for me. I can't constantly run around like this, the traveling or moving or not know where I'm going. Then I knew I also wanted to eventually get married and start a

family. That is difficult in this business…I need to provide a better life for myself. That was when I really decided to get out."

She remembers her last day in television. She started crying, then wondered why she was crying because she knew she had a much better job and personal life ahead of her.

"I think it was because this chapter of my life was finally ending," Wisely said. "Ultimately, it was a better decision for myself and my future. I definitely miss the adrenaline but I think there are so many other benefits to my current life and position than just the one of the adrenaline."

An increase in salary, and likely a shift away from her morning schedule, would have kept her in the business longer.

But now, experiencing life in another industry, it's tough to imagine going back.

"I have a lot of responsibilities and I'm definitely busy, but I just feel that I'm valued. I'm at a place where they take care of you. I just think, 'What was I doing in news for so long?' Sometimes I think about it. I'm almost 30 and I don't even know how I did it for that long."

Her starting salary in her communications role is $75,000—a pay raise of 50% from her last job at WISH. She admits even she's a little surprised it's that high, but also understands the financial industry may function a little different than communications jobs in other fields. She believes a reporting job in Indianapolis should pay around $65,000.

Not only is she getting much better compensation, she has also found that she loves her new job. Going into it, she worried she would struggle sitting behind a desk all day, but she's been able to find variety in both her tasks as well as visiting different branches.

"I absolutely love it," Wisely said. "I have a chance to still talk to people, write stories internally and share with everybody. We're a pretty big credit union. I really, really enjoy my job."

Extinction alert

"You use the term 'extinction.' I think that's coming."

But Wisely's mind goes less to the people employed in the television industry and more toward the viewers who make it financially viable. She believes they're becoming fewer and farther between as people increasingly rely upon their smartphones for information, as well as everything else.

"Nobody waits to watch the news and no one's going to. They're going to get all of it on their phone. The generation is dying who essentially sits home and watches the news. My dad and my grandma sit home and watch the news at night. I don't know any of my friends that do. None of my friends in my generation even care about the news. They only care about what's on their feed of Instagram or Facebook."

Ironically, while she said no one in her generation watches the news, she admits that's not completely true—she always did, even before she was hired professionally as a journalist.

Wisely knows she was burned out on the job at the end. But she feels like that time has quickly passed. She's back to watching the news a lot. But even that is mostly at the network level rather than local news stations.

Advice to college students

Her advice to college students a couple of years ago would have been to "go for it." At the time, she would have acknowledged that she's not sure where the industry is going and would have warned that they are not going to be making any money.

Now, she sings a much different tune.

"Man, this is going to sound harsh, but I would say don't. I just don't think it's worth it. There are other avenues if you think journalism is for you. I think there are other avenues that you can use journalism in than to be in broadcast journalism, than to be in the news."

❖ Alexis Moberger, 29 – "I still do love parts of it"

For Alexis Moberger, it started in the theater as a girl. She always liked telling stories and, around the age of 10, decided that journalism seemed to be the best way to make it a career.

She started at WLFI in West Lafayette in 2015, where she remained for three years as a reporter and MMJ. In 2018, she made a major jump to her current station, WSYX in Columbus, Ohio, a Top 35 market. By making the move, she was able to join her fiancé who she has since married.

She has found the career to be quite different than what she expected. She had to train herself to ask many more questions than she initially thought she might need so that she could fully understand all aspects of a story.

It also came as quite a shock to grasp the full weight that a large audience of complete strangers placed on her stories as a professional journalist. It became suddenly clear in her mind that everything that she had "reported" on in college was a completely different type of practice, in front of a professor and classmates.

"That first news story, everything you say and everything you write really does matter. You have to be 100% right. You have to have your facts. You have to have it really backed up."

Moberger has found journalism to be a very tough career, with a number of outside elements which weigh on her, including the recent media climate.

When asked if she was happy in her current job, she just laughed and said, "Depends on the day," followed eventually by, 'When you have a good day, it seems worth it."

She pegs her satisfaction level as "somewhat satisfied," an answer that results from the combination of days of frustration with days of great satisfaction.

“When we get to help someone or we get to tell their story or make a difference, then I feel satisfied.”

Increasing responsibilities

Moberger estimates she spends six hours of her day on things directly related to her television newscast. The other two hours are spent on digital—Facebook lives, tweets, writing content for the web—responsibilities which have increased the longer she’s been in the business.

At times, she is also pressured to record a Facebook Live on her story before she feels like she’s ready. Sometimes it’s before she’s done any interviews or has been able to verify many of her key facts. So, while the story can change throughout the day, inaccurate information lives forever and can be the subject of personal attacks.

However, it’s not always a negative. Moberger believes some days the digital requirements can be beneficial by furthering the story and reaching a different audience.

She estimates she typically works an extra two hours every evening to put together a solid pitch for the following day. Her story idea must be emailed in before 7 a.m. and requires typing in details like who she plans to interview and what her video would be.

In addition, she is required to be a part of the morning editorial meeting every morning at 9:15, something which is now down over a digital platform. But she isn’t on the clock until 10 a.m.

Moberger estimates, in total, she usually works a 10–11-hour day, while only getting paid for 8 hours of work.

“It makes me frustrated because I feel like I never get to totally shut off or have a full night or even a full morning just to do personal stuff.”

She believes several reporters at WSYX put in a similar amount of work each day, while others don’t do as much.

“I never get away from work. There are definitely blurred lines. I’m always on my phone, always checking my email. I would like to have some life, or I guess, some hours to myself. But if you don’t check your email, you get very behind and then you don’t really know what’s going on at all.”

National vs. local divide

While Moberger has heard people lobbing the phrase ‘fake news’ in her direction, she doesn’t believe it’s ever been a personal attack about her or her reporting. Though some people have refused to be interviewed because they said she was fake news.

It makes her feel horrible. She tries to plead her case that she’s a different type of journalist than the ones they watch on cable television. But it isn’t always successful.

"National news has impacted local news. I think people lump us together, whereas local news still tries to get both sides and not put an opinion in. I think we really strive to do that. I think people who watch local news can see through that, but I think other people lump us together."

Scary encounter

While Moberger has never been physically attacked, she experienced a scary situation about two months ago.

A protester came to WSYX screaming her name, saying she promised him an interview, while also shouting obscenities using a loud microphone. He even tried to get into the station, all while recording the whole thing on social media. Thankfully, she was away from the station at that point, but others at the station had to remain locked inside for their own safety.

Her managers reached out to try to determine who this guy was and how Moberger knew him. She honestly had no clue. Finally, after doing some research and finding his YouTube channel—an experience she found "horrifying"—she realized that he was upset about an incident more than two years earlier.

It all started when she attended a rally for President Donald Trump with a photographer. Almost everyone there refused to talk to her because they believed "we never share their story." Moberger was supposed to talk to this man, but others got a little crazy, screaming at the WSYX crew, so they left, even running a bit to get away.

To this point, the protester hasn't returned.

"At the time, that really freaked me out. Unfortunately, now I haven't really even thought about it [recently], which probably says something too."

That's because the incidents, even if usually not to that degree, all seem to run together. Still, it doesn't seem to affect her willingness or desire to stay in journalism.

"It probably should the more that I think about it. I think we just go through so much on a day-to-day basis. At times it does scare me but, I don't know, we just deal with so much…that's where I've gotten, just being way more aware of my surroundings."

Extinction alert

Moberger fully believes raising the alarm about the future of journalism is more than merited. She points especially to the issues of stress and low pay. From discussions with her friends, she's heard that employers in other industries are much more willing to negotiate salaries than before, almost a 'name your price' type mentality. Meanwhile, she doesn't believe the news business has changed its mindset in that regard.

"I'm so conflicted. There are so many days when it's so fulfilling. And there's other days when I'm like, 'I don't get paid enough.'"

At WLFI, she started with a contract of $25,000 in 2015 ($30,325 in today's dollars). When she began at WSYX in 2018, she more than doubled her salary to $55,000. She now makes $58,000,

but has been on a salary freeze for more than two years, including when she signed a second two-year contract.

Meanwhile, the $58,000 she makes today is equivalent to $50,376 in 2018 due to a cumulative rate of inflation of 15.1%. In other words, in her last four years of journalism, she's taken a pay cut due to the cost of living.

She believes she should be getting $70,000-$80,000 for her job and all the extra time required of her. She estimates she works solo as an MMJ about 70% of the time and gets to work with a photographer the remaining 30%.

Moberger is almost done with her second contract at WSYX. She believes the proverbial straw that would break the camel's back and cause her to leave the industry is if she's in a similar position making a similar salary two years from now.

"Getting paid more for what we do would make me want to stay. Right now, I feel like we don't get paid enough for what we do."

She feels like the pandemic greatly affected her happiness at work.

First, her life at work didn't change, even as everyone else went remote. She got no hazard pay despite the anxiety of being sent countless times to interview people and risk exposure at places like COVID testing sites. Second, the monotony of the ensuing proliferation of interviewing people remotely greatly impeded her ability to be creative.

"Being able to get back out and actually cover things other than COVID is bringing me back. I just felt a lot of burnout during that time, covering the same thing every single day."

Thoughts about leaving

Moberger is pretty sure, seven years in, she won't be a television journalist for the rest of her career. She thinks eventually the pressure/stress/burnout push her to eventually leave. She's truly not sure how much time she has left, even if she can stick it out another five years.

"I don't know because I still do love it. I still do love parts of it. That's what keeps bringing me back. But then there's other times when I'm like, 'Well, we want to have kids.' I don't know if I want to do this when I have kids."

She thinks it would be difficult for her to step away from the industry. She likes the unpredictability that her current job provides, always keeping her on her feet. She also likes that she gets to go out and talk to people. If she were to leave, she'd look for a job that allowed her to still be creative and also do some video work.

If she were to leave, it would feel like she's leaving a part of her identity behind with it.

"It's a good topic of conversation. It's kind of cool when people are like, 'What do you do?' and you tell them, 'A reporter.' It's fun to talk about what you get to do every day."

Advice to college students

Her advice to potential television journalists has not changed in her time as a professional reporter.

“Don’t get into the industry just to be on TV. You will never make it. When we see interns who want to do that, [we tell them] get into it for the right reason. Get into it because you like to story tell and you like to have accountability and hold people accountable. But people who want to be on it for TV, you’re not cut out.”

❖ Kayla Sullivan, 29 – “I don’t want people’s dreams to end up like mine”

It was a dream come true when Kayla Sullivan got hired to her first television reporting job before she had even graduated from college. She had wanted to be on television from the moment she met a local meteorologist who came to judge her fourth-grade science fair. She was enamored and started watching the news more, eventually deciding news was a better fit than the weather.

When she was about to enter high school, rather than continuing in private school as her parents desired, she decided to go to the public one in her area, all because it had both a TV station and a radio station.

While Ball State University is viewed by most industry professionals as having the best undergraduate broadcast journalism school for reporters in Indiana, she chose the University of Indianapolis solely because they promised her that she could start shooting stories with a camera on her first day. When she visited Ball State, counselors had said that using cameras wouldn’t likely happen until she was a junior.

“I was like, ‘No, I want to do it now.’ I was really eager and really excited to join the industry,” Sullivan remembers. “It was my whole life for the longest time so I never thought there would be a day where I wasn’t going to want to do it.”

Sullivan started in 2015 as an MMJ at WLFI making $25,000 ($30,325 in today’s dollars). By the end of 2016, she was also anchoring the 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. newscasts, with a pay raise to $40,000 ($46,916 in today’s dollars). She moved to WXIN/WTTV in Indianapolis in 2019, a Fox and CBS duopoly. When she left in the summer of 2021, she was making $52,000 as the political bureau reporter, providing content for her station as well as all Nexstar-owned stations in Indiana.

She moved to Oklahoma for personal reasons in 2021 where she is the digital media specialist with the Oklahoma House of Representatives. She was able to get them to match what she was making at WXIN—albeit with fewer hours, less stress and better benefits.

Reasons for leaving

Sullivan was not naïve to the difficulties of the business. Industry professionals at both her internships and in the classroom helped her understand, even before she got her first job, that it was a demanding career.

“They always emphasized passion. You need to have passion, and I had that passion. I think what surprised me was just how quickly I got burned out.”

For her, it started with seeing the flaws in the industry and gaining the belief that she could make better management decisions. She was pushed to be first to put information on social media that, too often, resulted in being erroneous by the end of the day.

“Quality stopped mattering. It stopped being the goal. Being correct, being factual wasn’t necessarily always the highest priority, which goes against what we learned in journalism school.”

She also came up against the demands of the job as the list of responsibilities continued to grow, particularly in terms with her job as the statehouse reporter. One of the most stressing parts for her were requirements about shooting a standup or being required to shoot a look live at a specific location.

“Just the extra stuff that had nothing to do with getting the facts out there, nothing to do with actually being accurate and storytelling to the best of my ability. It all had to do with the producer’s vision,” Sullivan said. “I understand that that’s becoming increasingly more important, but it also gets in the way of facts.”

She also felt that producers and management didn’t understand how the legislature worked and its effect on her deadlines. For example, management often wanted a story from her as well as a live report at 4 p.m., but the meeting didn’t begin until 3 p.m.

“Logistically, it didn’t make any sense. As much as I tried to explain it to them, they just wanted to be on air. I had to talk about something, so sometimes I found myself talking about nothing because I had nothing.”

The pandemic also played a role in her burnout. Because of her job at the statehouse, she was constantly covering the same story, day after day. Yet, even though she was covering every daily mid-afternoon press conference with the Indiana governor, she still had to turn a different story. She also couldn’t get away from it when she went home because that’s all that people were talking about there too.

Probably the most important reason for leaving was the stress the job put on her most important job—mother. Sullivan’s son was born in 2019, just a few months before the move to Indianapolis.

Her career was constantly interfering and clashing with the difficulties of being a single mom. Sullivan couldn’t have made it without help from her family living nearby.

She was staying late almost every night to finish all the ensuing responsibilities for her overtime-exempt reporting job, responsibilities that included trivial things like having to write two different titles for virtually identical web stories because management didn’t want the duopoly’s web pages to look the same.

“Those little things got to you. Meanwhile, you’re probably an hour and a half, if not more, past your shift. You got to get home to your kid who my mom would have to pick up from daycare because no daycare in America was open that late. It was like, ‘what am I doing?’”

Balancing acts

One of the biggest shocks in her current job is the expectation that Oklahoma’s only digital media specialist for the House of Representatives will take a lunch every day and take all her allotted vacation days.

“I used to stress about even just asking for my own vacation day that I was granted by the company. But it was just such a stressful situation just even asking for time off, because you were treated as though you were weak or something for taking your actual vacation day.”

Sullivan found the mom/reporter balancing act exhausting and overwhelming too. It felt like she never was “off,” even when she was away on a cruise.

“It was stressful to be away. It was stressful to be there. It just consumed me. I had a pit in my stomach because I just felt like I needed to be doing more. I felt like there was such a need inside of me to succeed in journalism. I just felt like I was never catching up with all the other people. I felt like I was drowning every day.”

Specific stories also made it extra difficult to balance work and personal responsibilities. For example, in January 2021, after the riots at the U.S. Capitol, the Indiana Statehouse was closed down because officials were worried about copycat riots.

“I was just so nervous that day because I kept thinking, ‘I’m all my son has. If something happens to me…’ I got in my own head and I almost didn’t even go to work. My company hired security guards. I was thinking to myself, ‘I have a security team. That means someone thinks I might be in danger. That’s terrifying.’”

‘That’s when I bought a gun’

Sullivan has encountered scary moments throughout her time as a professional reporter. Someone charged at her and her photographer right before the very first live shot of her career. He was mad that they were getting ready to go on the news in front of his home, started recording them and said he was going to send the video to his friends who were going to get them.

“It was terrifying, like I was 22. I was just starting out and terrified. I was already scared to not mess up my live shot, let alone have my life threatened.”

On another occasion, Sullivan covered the high-profile trial for a man accused of killing a teacher. While he was acquitted, there was a lot of evidence that he was the shooter. She interviewed afterwards, but he didn’t like the story. He threatened her on social media and even mentioned her in one of his rap songs.

“Like, this guy is a bad dude. He very well could attack me. That was when I bought a gun. That was when I started taking my safety seriously.”

While she never carried a gun on the job, she kept it at her apartment because she was worried that he would find out where she lived.

Sullivan also had several creepy people who messaged her regularly on social media when she was an anchor in West Lafayette.

One of those people she had to block because he was being really invasive, asking about her day and saying things like “I like that shirt.” She believes he followed her the short distance from the station to her apartment, then approached her, pretending to be looking for another apartment in the complex. He tried to get her to get into his car. At the very end of the exchange, he told her something like “It’s so great to see you in person.”

She filed a police report and then discovered he had a record for both domestic violence and stalking.

“That was a really scary reality for me, that people were watching me and maybe had ill intentions and could follow me home. It was a very creepy aspect, and I was just alone, living alone, young girl, definitely an eye-opening situation for me.”

Fake news not a fake issue

Sullivan found the idea of fake news to be a joke at first. But it didn’t take long for it to no longer to be a laughing matter—especially for someone tasked with covering the 2020 election.

“It weighs on you. My own family members would call me that. Thanksgiving was awkward because people got so divisive, and I was covering the election. My stories were political. I had to interview both sides. So, for some reason, interviewing both sides made people think we were biased,” she recalled. “It absolutely affected my mental health.”

She said felt like the label took a toll because it meant that people thought she had an agenda—something that goes against the Society of Professional Journalism ethics that she prides herself in following in every story.

She remembers the personal pain she felt when she would cover rallies for Donald Trump. There was always a point when he would direct everyone to turn towards the media and boo, saying the media was the biggest liars in the room. Some people would even throw things.

“’Why are you so mad at us?’ It was part of his thing, but it hurt. I just wanted to tell each and every one of them, ‘I’m a person.’”

She feels like that had a long-lasting effect in causing people to be more skeptical and not believe in the journalism industry as a whole. She admits sometimes she even played to those biases when trying to get people to agree to an interview. If she judged them to see her as ‘fake news,’ she would tell them she worked for Fox 59, the branding for WXIN. If she thought they were more liberal, she would say she was with CBS 4, the branding for WTTV.

Most days, she still felt that most people viewed her as a neutral and credible source of news.

“But as my career went on, that number seemed to be dropping. It was not because my methods had changed. It was because the general perception of news had changed. I was still the same journalist I had always been. I honestly believe that other journalists were doing the same thing as well.”

Extinction alert

Sullivan believes an alarm of extinction is merited. In fact, at the beginning of the interview, unprompted, she talked about her fear that there’s an ongoing giant exodus. She believes something needs to be done because every good journalist is struggling, and they’re “dropping like flies.”

When her contract was coming up, she believed she deserved more money. Viewership hadn’t gone down. Her hours and responsibilities had increased—factors that outweighed any issues with advertising. Instead, she was told there would be no raise offered.

“I’m sitting here thinking, ‘Are you kidding me? I just put my life on the line for this job,’” Sullivan said. “I think the culture needs to change. If somebody’s got an appointment for their child, don’t make them feel bad about that. Encourage mothers to go take care of their children.”

She believes the outcome of management being addicted to saying “No” and not being flexible is that the only employees who are left are the people who want to be on television for the glamour of being on camera and being viewed by others. But even they will leave after two years because it’s a harder job than they ever imagined—leading to an unending cycle and recycle of fresh faces.

“It’s tough. You’ve got to really have a passion for it. To the extent where you’re going to be poor and you’re not going to have a good work/life balance. I’m not saying there aren’t still people out there that would do it because they just love journalism that much, but I thought I was that person and look at me now.”

Early in her career, making $25,000, she’s not sure how she made ends meet.

“I was eating peanut butter sandwiches when I first started out on the regular. I was really struggling because you have, for the first time, you have rent. You have school loans. You have your car payment. I was so overwhelmed.”

She still wonders if she still might be a reporter if not for the pandemic and all the problems it exposed. But she’s sure that if her employer would have compensated her more, it would have kept her in the business longer.

“Sadly, money does make a difference,” Sullivan said. “The real no-brainer decision is, ‘You mean I can make more and do less? You mean I can make more, do less and have a life? You mean I can make more, do less and be a better mom?’ Why wouldn’t you take that deal?”

Continuing consequences

Just because she has left the television news business, she still carries some of her stories with her. While she knows she brought those sad stories home with her at times, it made her more grateful for other people in her life.

She is still more cautious, even paranoid, as a parent. She still remembers interviewing a mother whose son had a fever. The mom was in the parking lot of the emergency room but didn't go inside because she thought her boy was sleeping. Instead, he had actually gone septic and died. As a result, Sullivan refuses to take even the most minor of issues or most common of illnesses lightly.

"I will never forget her pain, talking about the fact that she was so close to the emergency room. She was so close to saving her kid's life in her eyes and she didn't do it. So now, whenever my son as a fever, I have to spend hundreds of dollars because I don't want to be that girl. Had I not been a news reporter I wouldn't be this paranoid."

That paranoia and questioning was also exacerbated after witnessing countless trials of child molesters, teachers, and other trusted people who proved themselves untrustworthy and dangerous.

Getting out of television felt, to Sullivan, like she was giving up on a dream. She said her grandmother is nice about it, but still wishes her granddaughter were on her television every day.

"At the end of the day, I knew that this was what I needed to do to be a better mom. At the end of the day, I knew that I would be happier. I miss aspects of TV, but I would not say that I'm pining to go back."

She still misses the adrenaline. But she also feels like it's rewarding knowing that there's something else out there.

"I feel a lot more accomplished than I did before because, in a way, TV news defined me."

The only way she would consider going back is if she saw real change in the industry—pay, benefits, more flexibility. As a result, combining her stories with others who have left, she feels like there's a real blind spot in the reporters who remain.

"Mothers need to be journalists. Fathers need to be journalists. We also need to be parents. I feel like parents who are also journalists have so much more to offer because we have special questions that people without kids wouldn't ask. We see things differently when we have children."

Advice to college students

Sullivan says she refuses to be cynical because that was often the attitude of industry professionals when she was in college. She knows she had to figure it out for herself.

"I have zero regrets. I do not regret the time that I spent. It was incredible part of my life. I feel really accomplished that I did what I set out to do. I was part of history. So, for me, this is what I'm going to be talking to my grandkids about."

While her advice earlier in her career would have been more practical, like get internships, she has a much wider view of things now. Her words to aspiring journalists these days would be to enjoy the good days because there are plenty of those and they will keep you going through the bad days. She also wishes she would have taken the advice of a veteran journalist who once told her to write down every story she did so she could document an entire career.

She also says, be willing to sacrifice some things, but not safety.

"The biggest problem is that people think they have to suffer to be a journalist. But they don't. It's just because people take advantage of people who have a passion for something, and they've been able to do so for so long, because it's such a fun, rewarding career. I would say, please, demand more pay. Demand a two-person live shot. Demand the things that make you feel unsafe."

She hopes that more people, both younger journalists as well as older ones, hold the television business and ownership accountable.

"I hope that the industry changes. I hope people wake up and start making changes because we want people who have a passion for this industry to stay in this industry. We don't want people's stories and dreams to end up like mine. I never expected to leave the industry and I have. I think it would really be sad to me if more people ended up in my situation."

❖ Brenna Donnelly, 30 – "I was ready to be loyal"

Brenna Donnelly was a sophomore in high school when she realized television news was the perfect combination of creative and intellectual pursuits. She liked learning about politics, crime, and health issues. Yet, she also loved creativity exhibited in videos from a brand-new website called YouTube, just a year old back in 2006.

Between her college education at Brigham Young University and her internships, she felt like she had a clear grasp for what the job expectations would be like as a professional television journalist. She relished the thought of becoming an expert on a subject in matter of hours, then explaining it to viewers by the end of the day to help them grasp the same subject.

"I loved that puzzle and challenge to simplify my language and make it clear," said Donnelly. "I was thrilled to get to do that every day."

She was hired at her first job when she was still in college—at BYU Television, an alumni-focused cable and satellite network. She was a reporter and host for three years, turning a weekly 3-4 minute package featuring fun and cool things on campus.

After 18 months as a missionary in Japan, she returned to the United States in 2015. She got a job as the morning anchor at KFDX, the NBC affiliate in Wichita Falls, Texas. In addition, she produced and anchored the noon newscast.

She was able to transfer within her company to WISH-TV in 2017 when her husband got a medical residency in Indianapolis. She began as an MMJ, but started filling in as an anchor within a few months. In 2018, she was promoted to the weekend morning anchor position, reporting on the morning show during the week.

She retired from television news in October 2021, leaving to become a senior public relations specialist for Ascension St. Vincent Hospital.

A difficult decision

Leaving the industry was something she only decided a few months earlier, after long conversations with a lot of different people who transitioned out of news. She had fully expected to be in television for her entire career.

She had created a new series at WISH, the Golden Apple Award, which turned out to be the most lucrative news franchise at the station in a decade. She enjoyed the close-knit team that had developed on the weekend.

Plus, one of her biggest role models at WISH was Patty Spitler, a member of the Indiana Broadcasters Hall of Fame. Spitler arrived at the station in 1982, stayed for more than 20 years, only retiring from the daily job for health reasons. She eventually came out of retirement after a few years to produce and host a weekly show called Great Day TV which still airs at several Indiana stations.

“I wanted to be like Patty Spitler and just create my own show at some point in my life. I wanted to work and learn the industry so well that I could just make whatever I wanted my job,” Donnelly said.

Donnelly thinks she was getting close to that point toward the end of her career.

“I didn’t aspire to work in the top three markets in the country or go national. I just wanted to be loved and beloved in my city.”

Becoming a mom

But things started to change in 2020 with the birth of her first child. She became burned out over the next year as she juggled trying to be a mother, morning anchor, wife of a medical resident in pediatric anesthesia, not to mention other priorities like spending time with her parents and siblings in the area.

“I was struggling to find enough sleep in a 24-hour period to do all of the things that I wanted. Even though I loved my job, I needed a change,” Donnelly said. “About 12 months of that was as much as I could handle without making a change. I obviously couldn’t change my son and my husband, so I changed my job.”

The job in public relations has provided a welcome change in scenery.

“It fits my life right now perfectly. I marvel at how many things are fixed that were stressful in my life.”

Increasing workload

Donnelly said her workload and list of responsibilities only increased the higher up the ladder she climbed.

She never had to shoot her own story at KFDX or BYU Television—she did at WISH. Her social media page, which had only been an afterthought early in her career, suddenly had a list of expectations and responsibilities spelled out in a handbook, in terms of a required shares per day, a required number of Facebook lives in a month, etc. Plus, contrary to what would be expected by working at a Top 25 market like Indianapolis, she trained more fresh college graduates at WISH than she ever did at KFDX, Market #149. In particular, she found the reality to consistently provide continuing education to rookies in the business to be disheartening.

“We have been given more responsibilities with no compensation financially as well as no validation. We’re not treated any better. We’re not, as employees, journalists, we’re not respected anymore. There’s just so much more demanded, not just social media, but the MMJ model, the ‘you-have-to-train-everyone-around-you’ model.”

Particularly in her anchor role, she felt great responsibility in keeping up with the news going on around the city, the state and the world as well as using her platform on social media to be a trusted source for breaking news. She estimates the extras on Facebook, Twitter and other outlets took 2-3 hours a day, often after her shift was over.

“I did a lot of work while I was going on a walk or walking around the zoo or having dinner or watching a movie. I did it to myself. I downloaded all the Indy station apps, all the national apps and had push alerts.”

Final straws

Donnelly declined to provide specific salary figures, instead providing ranges. At KFDX, she made $30,000-$40,000 ($36,593-$48,791 in today’s dollars). At WISH as an MMJ, she made $40,000-$50,000. As the weekend anchor, she made $55,000-$65,000. Now, at Ascension St. Vincent, she started out between $75,000-$85,000.

“It was encouraging to receive such a significant compensation raise switching to public relations, especially because I consider myself a rookie in public relations. My boss and hiring manager did not see it that way.”

She believes the salary range for her anchor job at WISH should have been between $75,000 and $100,000, depending on the individual’s years of experience. It’s an amount she feels would have been reflective of her job, the fact that she was the de facto executive producer for the weekend morning show, as well as the work that she put in. But she discovered the harsh reality that even creating the profitable Golden Apple franchise did not result in any type of

raise in her compensation. Later, she became aware that very few anchors at WISH, even full-time anchors, were making six figures.

“When I found out that was not the case, I was concerned for my future at the station financially.”

Donnelly said a change in her schedule would have been the biggest thing to get to her stay longer. But a higher salary would also have made her more willing too.

“That would have not only been better for my family’s finances, but it would have told me that my employer valued my contribution and wanted me to stay,” she said. “I did reach a point at which I realized my bosses didn’t care if I stayed or went. They weren’t going to try to keep me, and I shouldn’t be very loyal to them if I’m that expendable.”

It was a realization that caused her to feel “bummed.”

“I was ready to be loyal, I was. Patty Spitler is kind of my hero.”

There was also an opportunity for her to work a regular anchor shift during the day, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, perhaps subbing on other shows as needed. She had been told she was the top candidate. In the end, the position was eliminated. The existing morning anchor shifted an hour later and the existing evening anchor shifted an hour earlier to cover the midday gap.

Donnelly believes COVID put pressure on the budget, especially because WISH has been off most of the major cable networks for the last two years of her tenure. The removal, something that is currently in the middle of litigation, happened almost six months before the pandemic. But it was after the pandemic that salaries were frozen, with not even an adjustment for a cost-of-living increase.

“I think the management at WISH-TV decided that employee compensation was not a priority to maintain,” she said. “That had to be a decision somebody made at some point. I know that had to be at a roundtable. ‘Well, we could give them more money or we could not. Let’s not.’”

She said there was not one thing that happened that caused her to look for a job switch. Instead, it was a general realization of all that had changed versus how she felt like the station viewed her.

“Those moments piled up into a realization that I’m not well employed right now. I could do better.”

She believes her final week at WISH provided the perfect example for why she was leaving. She worked roughly 70 hours that week because a Golden Apple feature was set to air. Plus, there was also an extra five-part series that she had been assigned and had already shot. While it had been set to air later in the year, management told her that if she didn’t write and edit it herself, the entire project would be trashed. Because she felt responsibility for the people who had entrusted their story to her, she couldn’t let that happen. She also wasn’t given any time during her regular shift to do those extra things.

Then, in the end, none of her bosses even acknowledged it was her last day. There was no cake, not even an email to the employees saying, 'Goodbye, thanks for your 4.5 years of service.' None of them even came by her desk to shake her hand after that 70-hour workweek.

"No thought for my balance and my life. Just get everything done on our timeframe," Donnelly remembers with a laugh. "Deciding to leave was difficult. Leaving was very easy."

She's found it to be a revelation to work for management which values her as a person and as an employee. When she's working remote and not felt well, her bosses have encouraged her to take it easy, even take a nap.

"The value that my managers place on my happiness has been shocking."

It's a stark contrast to the world of television, a workplace with a constant short staff, and getting pushback from just calling out sick.

"Every time I called in sick or needed time off, I knew I was pulling a cord that dumped a bucket of cold water on all my coworkers because they had to cover my work. That was a downside that I had no idea would be there, that there would be so much pressure to be there every single day of the year, every single shift."

Extinction alert

It saddens Donnelly to know so many people who are very good journalists and contributed greatly to public information have left the business because they were not treated well. She feels like it's a loss for the entire community.

While she believes increasing salary can help, she points out there are plenty of public servants like teachers and emergency medical workers who don't get paid a whole lot. That's why she feels like the biggest cause for alarm is the current workload and work balance for journalists—plus that the industry seems to increasingly put more pressure and work on individuals, rather than utilize a team approach.

"The amount that is now required for one journalist to complete in a day, it's like climbing a mountain every single day. Then, for low pay, bad hours, sometimes negative reviews from your coworkers, managers, and the public, it's not motivating."

Advice to college students

Her advice to several people, especially those who have a large and varied number of skills, is to do something else in another industry if they can, rather than journalism. But she also respects those who choose to ignore her, just like she ignored others when they had the same advice for her when Donnelly was in college or at an internship.

"I thought the only way I'll be happy is doing TV journalism. That was probably true in the beginning of my career, so I'm happy to encourage people to follow their dreams and live skinny for a while. Do the public servant thing and tell the news…all those great hallmarks of journalism. Do that but know that you can always leave and that you are valuable elsewhere."

❖ Aleah Hordges, 31 – "I have a plan"

Aleah Hordges doesn't hold back—she just wanted to be on television when she was in high school. At first, she was most interested in entertainment and the red carpet. After listening to others including some mentors, she decided local television was the best way forward.

But she quickly discovered the career was nothing like she expected.

"It was a slap in my face. I literally did not know it was this hard to be in television and to navigate local news."

She felt woefully unprepared by her college education at Savannah State University. Hordges was taught how to use a camera and how to edit. But she was not taught how to write a script or what a package was.

"When I got my first job, I was completely naïve. It was really hard for me to grasp writing and television. I don't think college fully prepared me for the real world of local journalism."

Less money, more problems

It actually took her two full years to get her first job. She moved back home to Atlanta and worked odd jobs like talking about animals at the Georgia Aquarium or substitute teaching. She had to rent a camera and create a video reel because no one at college had told her that's what television stations looked for.

The small salary was a huge shock too. Hordges got her foot in the door with a bureau reporting job in Houghton, Michigan, a town of 8,000 people in Market #183. She made $24,000 in her first year, in 2015 ($29,275 in today's dollars). She almost doubled her salary in 2017 to $47,000 ($55,435 today) when she began working as an MMJ at WTKR in Norfolk, Virginia, Market #46. She took a job at WISH-TV in 2019 and is currently making $51,500—less than what she made in Norfolk if one considers inflation.

"When you first get into something new, you're eager. You want to learn. 'Okay, I'll settle for $20,000 a year and I'll do my time. I'll climb the ladder.' But at some point, there's got to be a downhill. How far, how long are we going to keep paying our dues?"

She believes stations take advantage of people like her who want to be on TV, at least initially, and are willing to do it for virtually any price.

"The longer you have been in it, it's like, 'No, I got bills.' We get older. Family comes into play. Life changes. We need more."

Working alone

While money is the top reason Hordges puts her satisfaction level between 'somewhat dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied,' the constant repetitiveness of the job—doing the same thing in a city with 1.2 million TV homes as she was doing in a town of 8,000—is also a source of deep

frustration. Having to shoot her own stories as an MMJ is the second-biggest cause of dissatisfaction.

“If you were paying me, I can deal with the MMJ, but you’re not even paying me,” Hordges said. “Five years ago, I was way more eager than I am now. Now, I’m working smarter, not harder. I’m not going to go out of my way to get extra stuff done because I know what’s going to be in return. I don’t feel valued. I feel overworked. All these stations care about is content. They don’t care about the people behind the product.”

She’s also become very disillusioned by the current owner of WISH-TV, DuJuan McCoy. McCoy officially took ownership of WISH a few months after Hordges arrived, the result of a merger announced in 2018 between WISH’s previous owner, Nexstar, and Tribune Media, who owned WXIN and WTTV, the Fox and CBS affiliates in Indianapolis already.

WISH is the only television station that McCoy owns, a marked difference from the massive consolidation that has been happening across the industry in recent years—including the one which resulted in the sale of WISH.

Hordges said he made boasts and promises that he has yet to keep—first, declaring in a station-wide meeting that he doesn’t see Indianapolis as an MMJ market. Also, he announced plans in late 2020 to launch a national network called MNN (Multicultural News Network) by the second quarter of 2021 to provide an unbiased forum for underserved communities. At the time of writing, more than a year later, no network has been launched and no visible signs of a broadcast facility that could run such an operation are evident.

“You’re just like every other owner. You’re just like every other company. You’re supposed to be different. You’re supposed to be innovative. You’re supposed to be this locally owned, single guy. You’re supposed to go against the grain. You’re supposed to be a trailblazer. I just thought you were different and you’re not. You’re just like every other company, which set the morale back.”

She believes things have only gotten worse as time has gone on. She also believes COVID was just the excuse they needed to make budget cuts and put more pressure on employees.

“It all starts with the top. When you have the owner who is shitty, that sprinkles upon management. And management is shitty, and they had bad attitudes, that sprinkles upon the little people. There’s only so much that people can take.”

The plan

Hordges hasn’t given up completely. She has a plan that she believes will bring her happiness—being an anchor. Her contract at WISH is up in two months and her agent has been applying to anchor and anchor/reporter jobs, even if it’s in a smaller city.

She admits she was fired from her job in Norfolk.

“I was hurt because I really liked that market. I really liked living there.”

She says it was all because of personal differences with management. The person who was hired to be the assistant news director when she was there had been a web producer in her last job. That individual was also the interim news director because the station was trying to hire someone to that job as well as open general manager position.

Hordges said her boss did not like being held accountable, especially when Hordges would follow up with her on one of her written goals at the station, including to get off the weekend shift. After bringing it up with her on multiple occasions as newer and less-experienced reporters were able to keep moving to a desirable shift, she felt like the assistant news director worked to get her fired once the news director was hired.

“I don’t think she liked that I would hold her accountable in certain things. It probably made her feel like she was inexperienced, which she was, but I’ve learned to just play the game. You can’t really call people out. You got to go with the flow. It’s political. You just got to keep your mouth closed and roll with the punches of what management offers.”

So, while WISH was a jump in market size but no jump in salary size, she told her agent yes.

“I said, ‘Alright, I’m going to do my time. I’m going to MMJ through this struggle one last time.’ But I promised myself, after this, the next jump has got to be worth it.”

If things go well, if she gets the anchor job she hopes, then she believes she’ll still be in the business five years from now. If things don’t go as planned, she will be out.

“I don’t know about after five years, I really don’t. I couldn’t tell you. I’d like to, but I got to do what I got to do. If y’all still want to pay me shit, and still want to have this MMJ model, I’m out. I don’t have to be on TV. I’m good. I did that. I can tell my grandkids I was on TV, but I have to pay bills. I got to save for retirement. I’m almost 32 years old and I don’t have shit. I have no savings. That’s fucked up.”

Hordges said her salary clearly hasn’t matched inflation. She believes an MMJ in Indianapolis should be getting a minimum of $70,000, an increase of $5,000 from what she would have believed they would have made when she first arrived.

She believes the most likely reason that she will leave the industry will be burnout, with the pay and the MMJ issues playing a role too. Still, a salary increase alone isn’t enough to stop that from happening.

“I just want to be comfortable. I don’t want to hustle anymore. I don’t want to make calls. I don’t want to go out to a fire scene and [be asked] ‘can you talk to the mother who just lost her son in the fire? Can you give us some sound?’ I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to ask her that. I just want to sit in the car. I just want to be comfortable…I want to get paid. I just want to look pretty and deliver what everybody else writes for me.”

Blindness to blurred lines

While Hordges says she doesn't feel too much pressure to work outside her shift, it's still hard to get away from work. She points out when you're required to have story ideas on Monday morning, you can't completely disconnect on the weekend, even if it's only subconsciously.

"I think the lines can be blurred because we're so immune. It's so usual for us."

She also feels like managers will get upset and hold it against her if she's not immediately available to pick up a shift, even if she's already made plans.

She's also come to realize that the job of a television journalist has resulted in her questioning her own empathy. After covering so many deaths and tragedies, she has to remind herself that, while she's telling the story of the incident on television, it is not a story. It is real.

"I don't think that is normal."

She also believes viewers increasingly do not see WISH as neutral and objective. She feels like they are listening intuitively for what is said, how it is said, and if there's a pattern to the coverage, or perhaps a lack of coverage, around a particular issue or viewpoint.

"I don't really have political conversations with people, but I like to think the majority of us are Democrats. So oftentimes, when we tell stories, we have the majority angle of a Democrat angle. I don't think we intentionally do that. It's probably just because we didn't have the time to do it or forced on deadline."

Extinction alert

Hordges believes it's not just her who is burned out. On a scale of 1-10, with the highest level of burnout being a 10, she puts herself at an 8. The only reason her number is not higher is that as an MMJ on the morning show, she doesn't have to work as hard as she would if she were working a dayside shift. She believes the burnout goes a lot farther than her though. It's the entire industry dealing with so much going on in the world—between COVID, inflation, even the war in Ukraine.

"A lot of people think journalists are robots, like we can compartmentalize, and we can, but there's a breaking point, right? After a while, it's like, 'So when are you going to pay me? When am I going to get assistance…Is it going to cost my mental health? Is it going to call the time away from my family?"

The situation is not improved by managers who don't give the proper amount of respect to their employees. Burnout becomes the widespread result.

"People care about their 1:30 [length of a package] more than they care about the wellbeing of their staff. People care about the product before they care about the people."

If Hordges leaves the industry, she said she will become an entrepreneur. She's always wanted to be an author. She's also thought about opening up a consulting agency to help public relations firms pitch stories to local news stations. Whatever it is, she does not want to have to work for anyone else.

Advice to college students

Five years ago, Hordges would have told future journalists that the beginning is hard, but to stick it out, even though there's so much to learn.

Now, with a few more years of experience, Hordges advice is very simple: make sure you know what you're getting into—and the only way to do that is through good conversations.

"Talk to people. People who are in the industry. Don't talk to, 'Oh well, my uncle he was a journalist in the 90s and now he's retired.' No. Talk to people who are doing it right now, who are in the business, right now. Talk to them. Don't be afraid to ask the good, bad and ugly…don't be afraid to ask uncomfortable questions, like how much am I going to get paid?"

❖ Brittany Tyner, 32 – "I really enjoyed what I did"

By fourth grade, Brittany Tyner already knew what she wanted to do when she grew up—become a "weather girl." It's what she dressed up as for Career Day that year. As she got older and realized the science required to be a meteorologist, she soon realized, that wouldn't work so well. But, as she developed her writing skills in high school, journalism felt like a natural fit.

"I was actually touring at Ball State and saw their student-run newscast and I fell in love. I said, 'This is what I want to do. This is an exciting environment and I want to be in it.'"

After graduating from Ball State in 2011, she was hired at WLFI in West Lafayette, just a 20-minute drive from her hometown of Delphi. She started as an MMJ, eventually working her way up to be the 11 p.m. anchor at the station for her last two years. In total, she worked for almost 7 years in television journalism before leaving in 2018.

Although things somewhat improved financially with the promotion to anchor, she always said she was choosing happiness over money for her entire time at WLFI.

"I knew the salary was going to be low, but I didn't expect it to be as low and as hard to live off of as what it was. I didn't expect to be doing what I loved but struggling financially."

Tyner started at $22,000 in 2011 ($28,276 in today's dollars). Each year she got a small annual raise and was up to $26,000 in June 2016 ($31,319 adjusted for inflation) as an MMJ and fill-in producer when she jumped to $35,000 ($42,161 today) as the 11 p.m. anchor/MMJ/acting nightside executive producer.

Small market frustrations

Other factors began to weigh more heavily as the years progressed. She usually spent an extra hour after the newscast on web responsibilities because there was no one else at the station overnight. It meant uploading her own story, proofing the nightside reporter's story, as well as posting other stories like criminal charges that she may have written earlier in the day.

While she didn't feel a mandate or requirement from her bosses to pay attention to her email, she felt like it was better for her personal state of mind to know what was going on before she arrived at the station. That way she didn't feel so far behind. Coming in at 3 p.m. meant there was often a limited window for setting an interview for the night's newscast.

"I didn't feel pressure from my bosses, but to stay 'in the know,' I felt pressure."

Tyner says her stress level and anxiety about television was greatly magnified, especially early in her career, by social media. With WLFI being the only television station in the area at that time, she felt like it had a particularly large Facebook following, with plenty of people willing to speak their mind and complain about stories or the journalists behind them.

"Whenever I posted a story, I would honestly get anxiety thinking about the comments. Then I just stopped reading the comments and that helped a lot. I'd say social media was rough."

She was also feeling burned out about the repetitive nature of attending a large number of boring meetings—City Council, school board, Area Plan Commission, etc.—that are often an important part of news and current events in a smaller market like West Lafayette. But those meetings are usually ignored by stations in bigger cities or perhaps just monitored remotely.

Plus, along with the other videographers and MMJs, she was part of the rotating on-call schedule for any breaking news which happened overnight, a time period when there was no one on the clock who knew how to operate a camera.

"I was so tired of those times…waking up in the middle of the night and sending us to a barn fire in Warren County when you're on call."

Leaving the business

In 2018, her contract with WLFI was up. She offered to stay, but only under her terms. She wanted a $5,000 raise to $40,000 and a 1-year contract.

"That didn't even get a discussion. It was shut down immediately so that made it easier to be like, 'Well, okay,'" Tyner said. "It showed me a lot about value."

If she had been able to make more money, she absolutely would have stayed longer. But the rewards of regular hours for the first time in her life, along with a significant pay and benefits increase was just too much to pass up.

"It was a little said because I really enjoyed what I did. I really like telling stories and I loved meeting people on a day-to-day basis. I loved the people I worked with. It might sound shallow, but I also liked being on TV. I think that's part of the glamour of it. I enjoyed that so I was a little sad leaving, but I knew my quality of life would improve. The good outweighed the bad.

She left for a position outside the television business. Her title was Communications Coordinator for the President's Council of the Purdue Research Foundation. She started out at $51,000—a pay raise of $16,000 from WLFI, a 45% raise from what she had been making.

Extinction alert

Tyner agrees with all reasons for alarm raised by others about the television industry. She specifically points to the idea of the one-man-band/MMJ model which requires one person to do many different jobs, while, at the same time, limiting creativity and the ability to do standups.

She also recalls several incidents where a female reporter at WLFI was alone and frightened by people harassing them at the scene.

“I get it. It’s a way to save money and all this jazz, but I really disagreed with the whole concept.”

The only reason she would consider going back would be the “right circumstances” with a great salary and great shift—which is why she’s never explored job ads for a position in television since she left.

A little more than a year after she took the job with the Purdue Research Foundation, she left to become the Communications Associate for Administrative Operations at Purdue University, where she has remained for almost three years. While she took a small pay cut, “it was worth it to me” because of other factors at the Research Foundation.

Looking back, she’s discovered one unexpected perk about working in television compared to her current job. Because of the daily deadlines, it was a lot easier to go home after her shift with no longer-term projects looming. In her current position, there’s always unfinished business.

“When I have longer deadlines, it’s like there’s always work. I can always do something. Especially working remotely, I can pop on anytime. I’m actually in my office right now and was working before you called me,” Tyner said of an interview which began at 9:02 p.m.

Advice to college students

Tyner’s advice to college students is unchanged, even almost four years removed from being employed in the television business.

“Make sure it’s something you really want to do and you’re really going to enjoy doing it because you do sacrifice a lot for this industry, more so I think than other industries,” Tyner said. “It is a tough industry. If you don’t love what you’re doing while you’re doing it, a lot of other factors can get you down.”

❖ Nina Criscuolo, 36 – “I was just ready to not be in news anymore”

It was politics that drew Nina Criscuolo to journalism—specifically all the women on the news who were well-spoken and confident. She was only 11 or 12 at the time.

In high school, she convinced a teacher to create a course which produced a small daily newscast with announcements and sports scores for the students.

She felt prepared entering the world of journalism after college. Professors drilled into her that she would move to a small city she'd never heard of, make very little money, work weekends and eventually get into a better situation in terms of "scenery and salary."

"My head was in the right place," Criscuolo said. "When I got into the business 15 years ago, you really had to work your way up. You had to make those stops in order to get to a big market."

Criscuolo started at KOAM-TV in Joplin, Missouri (Market #153), in 2008 as an MMJ. She moved to KNWA-TV in Northwest Arkansas (Market #101) in 2010 as an MMJ/fill-in anchor mostly because of her husband's job requirements (who doesn't work in television). In 2012, less than two years later, she transferred within the Nexstar media group to accept a main anchor/MMJ position at KARD-TV in Monroe, Louisiana (Market #140). In 2014, she transferred within the company to WISH-TV in Indianapolis as an MMJ and fill-in anchor. She was promoted to full-time weekend anchor in April 2019 where she remained until leaving the business completely in August 2021.

During a time at WISH where several people were leaving and some positions were likely to be up for grabs, as a wife and mother of four children, she realized there was no longer a job at the station or the industry that she wanted.

"If I don't want the morning anchor job and I don't want the evening anchor job, what am I doing? That was a turning point for me."

Time for a change

The task of finding a new challenge had been building for a while. In fact, she had even applied for a job outside the industry in 2019. But things didn't come together in a way that felt right.

"I'm actually surprised I was as content as I was in Indianapolis working in news for almost eight years."

She was frustrated by the environment at WISH where she constantly was working different shifts throughout the week, often with very little notice. She also felt like she was just going through the motions, with less energy and motivation to find stories.

"That was a cue for me that I needed something different because people deserve better than that," Criscuolo said. "I was just ready for something new. I was just ready to not be in news anymore."

Criscuolo left for what she calls a huge passion project. After four children of her own, she really enjoys pregnancy, birth, postpartum and supporting women through the transition. She became a doula so she could support them in a more knowledgeable way, while also providing birth videography services, which combine the shooting and editing skills that she's always enjoyed, with a much more relaxed deadline.

She and her husband became franchise owners and opened up Selfie WRLD Indy in January 2022.

"It's been just amazing and really refreshing to be my own boss, to have everything on my shoulders," Criscuolo said. "I'm getting a lot more sleep. I'm no longer waking up at 2 a.m. or working until nearly midnight on other days. So, in that way, I feel a lot healthier. It's just been a really good change for me."

Personal and professional pressures

As the years went by, she noticed a lot more responsibilities on social media, to both create content as well as broadcast more behind-the-scenes material. She believes it became a bit consuming in her last few years, with a greater focus placed on that than ever before.

When she was not anchoring the weekend evening shows at WISH, assuming she wasn't filling in for someone else who was sick or on vacation, she was an MMJ for the morning show. She felt the early shift was particularly difficult to leave things behind when she went home for the day.

"They're calling you back at 2 p.m. when you're trying to take a nap because you're up at 2 a.m. and you have to pick up your kids at 3:30. You got to take that call. Sometimes you have to go shoot that story at that time even though it's inconvenient. It was a very consuming career."

It was putting a strain on her kids and her family, even as she had almost the perfect babysitting situation with her mother living in their house.

"It wasn't like strangers were watching them, but I didn't have kids to have them taken care of by someone else all the time. That was not my goal."

The irony is, as she points out, management expects reporters to take their calls and texts no matter what or when, because reporters want the people they are interviewing to answer <u>their</u> calls and texts no matter what or when. It's a culture of urgency, with no healthy balance between work and life.

She also felt additional pressures as she advanced in her career and became more recognizable in public.

"I never wanted to even just go to the grocery store looking a total mess because somebody's going to know who you are and talk to you. Then you're going to be embarrassed. It becomes like you're this persona."

Losing the 'art' of journalism

Another change that Criscuolo has seen in the industry is the erosion of the journalism craft—the thoughtful use of words, writing techniques like alliteration, writing well to video, or actually using natural or "nat" sound.

"I just believe in this craft so much," Criscuolo said. "That's what we're seeing less and less of, instead of just like slap stories together. Is it fine? Is it factual? Yeah, but the art of it has been lost I think."

She believes that's a direct reflection of younger and less experienced people working in major markets.

"You can tell. I'm sorry to say that, but I see stories in the news now, in a market like Indianapolis that wouldn't have been able to air in Joplin, Missouri. They would have said, 'this can't go on.'"

She believes that's also a direct correlation between the rise of the MMJ, which was just starting to take hold when she started in the television industry, and the decline of the photographer in the business. Now, they are both working by themselves, each with a huge workload. It's a quantity-over-quality mindset.

Additionally, the people who felt like she was biased was also quite frustrating and wore on her as the years went by.

"When I chose this career, it's because I really felt like it was a noble one…it was so frustrating for people to constantly act like we had this agenda when, as you know, we don't…a few times it was almost like journalists were being talked about like lawyers used to be talked. That it was this dirty job for slimy people. That was hard for me."

Extinction alert

Criscuolo agrees with the idea of an extinction alert—believing that the biggest reason is the pay. While there's challenging work and skill involved in public relations jobs, as well as better schedules, it just seems to be accepted that those jobs pay better than television. She doesn't think that used to be the case, especially in major markets like Chicago where making six figures was just assumed.

Now, with less experienced people getting into bigger markets earlier, they're not getting paid at the same scale.

"These bigger stations and bigger markets are paying journalists what they would have paid in the midsized market. These people are never going to be able to catch up. They're never going to make it to that six-figure mark and have what is a comfortable salary to live in and raise a family," Criscuolo said. "I'm not even sure there's a way to reverse that trajectory at this point."

In her first job at KOAM, she made $17,000 her first year ($22,828 in today's dollars).

"I was really raking it in at that time," she says with a laugh.

At KNWA, she believes she started at $24,000 her first year ($31,820 in 2022). She started at KARD at $32,000 in 2012 ($40,295 in 2022) and finished closer to $40,000 two years later, while simultaneously adding hosting responsibilities for a lifestyle show and negotiating a new contract. She believes she started at WISH around $55,000 in 2014 ($67,168 in 2022). By the end of her career, working as the weekend anchor, she was making $78,000.

She felt pretty good about what she was making as she left television news, even as she believes she would have been making more money 10 years ago, particularly when cost of living is considered.

For now, her doula/birth videography business is building. She hopes to get to the place where she works a very flexible schedule with 2-3 births a month for 9 months of the year, bringing in roughly $60,000. Income from the Selfie WRLD Indy franchise is in addition to that.

A crucial factor for her was that as her new career gets off the ground, her husband's job provides a good income as well as health insurance.

"He has a very solid job and was really supportive of me doing something different. We know the birth business is going to take possibly several years to build, but [Selfie WRLD Indy] is going to keep us afloat, especially here at the beginning."

Saying goodbye

Five years ago, she would have thought she had more time in the business. Though, in the end, it didn't play a role in her exit story, she was aware of the battle that women fight as they begin to age—a complete hypocrisy in the industry since it seems to be no big deal for male anchors to age and look older.

"I at least thought I would probably be in until 40 is probably what I assumed, maybe 45. Instead, I left at 35."

In some ways, leaving the industry has been easier than Criscuolo expected. She worried she would feel like she was losing her persona as well as sense of importance and value if she weren't on television anymore. She's been pleased to discover that hasn't been the case.

"I haven't missed a beat with that."

Increasing salary would not have been a significant factor in her willingness to stay longer. She did find a lack of appreciation from her managers for her flexibility as another motivating reason to not stay longer.

"Just solidified the feeling that you're no longer really a person or someone with a family and goals and dreams. You're just a cog in the wheel that they need."

When asked if she would ever go back, Criscuolo just laughs.

"No, no, never. I would never go back."

She feels like she was a little burned out at the end of her career, even if she wouldn't have labeled it as such. While COVID didn't change her timing, the shackles of virtual interviews and almost exclusively using file video for stories, sucked the creativity her storytelling and sucked the fun out for her personally.

"Since I have left news on August 7th, I can probably count on one hand how many local newscasts I've watched. That isn't because I don't love people who are working in this market who work really hard, but it's just not what I enjoy anymore."

Advice for college students

For years, Criscuolo has given prospective journalists the same advice she was given by her college professors. Be ready to move to a place you've never heard of, work hard, work Christmas and all for very little money. If that doesn't sound good to you, then the television business is not for you.

"I think it's a really, really fun career. I don't blame anyone for pursuing it," Criscuolo said. "If you are getting into this career to be a star on TV, that's not what it is. It couldn't be further from it. You spend an eight-hour day turning a story and then spend maybe 2.5 minutes on TV. Honestly, you can be on TV every single day five days a week for years and people are still not going to know who you are. So, if that's your goal, your expectations are not going to be fulfilled."

❖ Dustin Grove, 40 – "It is a calling. It's in your blood"

There might be some irony in the fact that every morning when Dustin Grove got ready for school in the 7th grade, he watched two programs: The Jetsons and the 30-minute local morning news. Both now seem completely outdated.

"I have never been more concerned for the journalism industry than I am right now."

Grove was a television reporter and anchor for 14 years before leaving the business to teach full-time at the college level. After two years, he re-entered the field in 2019 to become an anchor/reporter at WTHR-TV in Indianapolis.

He is happy and "very satisfied" with his current job.

"When I leave work at the end of the day, I feel like I have accomplished something. I feel productive. Most days I feel like I've made a difference in my community. I think that's what journalism is all about—giving people knowledge. With knowledge comes power, so I feel like I'm helping empower people to make decisions that affect their lives."

In some ways, he became the beneficiary of that empowerment as a 7th grader watching the morning news. Grove always was curious, liked communicating with people and storytelling. He wrote letters to both local anchors and reporters as well as network anchors, reporters and network news executives for advice. Most journalists wrote back to the boy from Lebanon, Indiana, with dreams of television news with words of wisdom, encouragement and advice.

Career moves

Ball State University prepared him for what the real world would look like. He feels like the expectations set helped brace him against the temptation to leave.

His first job was as the nightside reporter for WSBT-TV in South Bend. It was a really good match. The realities of the job matched his personality.

“I was just so happy to finally be doing what I had wanted to do for so long, I just loved it. I really enjoyed and was excited about coming to work every day, to be able to tell a different story every day. I liked the excitement and the thrill of live news and the pace. I’m the type of person who could never sit at a desk all day.”

Grove was at WSBT for nine years. He was promoted every couple years however, eventually reaching main evening anchor. He left in 2012 for WISH-TV in Indianapolis where he remained through 2015. All that time, he made the hour-long commute from his home in West Lafayette because it’s where his wife’s family and family business are located. He transferred within the company to become the morning anchor at WLFI-TV, shaving his commute from 65 miles each way down to a single mile.

He hoped it would a “life promotion.” Even though he was moving to a much smaller market, the virtually non-existent commute would give him hours more time to spend with his family.

But the reality turned out to be much different. Grove really struggled with waking up for the morning newscast. And while he was excited at the thought that his new role would provide a chance to mentor younger journalists in the newsroom, he soon discovered that everyone was so busy, himself included, there was no time to do any mentoring.

While he eventually picked up a part-time teaching position at Purdue University nearby, when an opportunity to teach full-time arose in 2017, he jumped at the chance. But, after two years in academia, he found the bureaucracy and snail’s pace of working at a large institution stifled his creativity and took away from class time.

He decided it was time to get back into the journalism profession at WTHR, even if it made a much longer commute and crazy hours once again.

“There are positives and negatives to every choice that we make…the positives outweigh the negatives. Not to sound cheesy, it really is a calling. I believe that when you’re called out [of the industry], you’re called out. You’re satisfied. You are fulfilled in whatever it is you choose to do differently. But if you aren’t truly called out, you miss it. That was the case with me.”

Considerable changes

In a career that spans almost 20 years, Grove has noticed and experienced a considerable number of changes.

There’s no bigger shift than his list of responsibilities. When he began, his job was to create one TV news story by the end of his shift for a single newscast. Now he is expected to produce content for digital platforms multiple times a day.

“Today the deadline is immediate. It’s as soon as I get to the scene, I’m expected to take a picture on social media and post something, whatever I know about what’s happening…then,

when I learn more, update it again. It's what's called process journalism. I'm basically reporting and publishing all day long."

At the beginning of his career, 100% of his day would be spent on the television product. Today, he estimates it's shrunk to 60%.

"TV news is still the bread and butter. It is still the primary driver of a TV station's budget and revenue. It's still the most important thing, but it's definitely not the only thing I spend time on anymore."

Unlike virtually everyone else interviewed, Grove does not feel any pressure from his employer to work outside of his scheduled work time. Still, he feels like the lines are blurred as a consequence of technology that has changed considerably since he began in 2003. To put that date into context, it's the same year that 3G technology was just beginning to get deployed on a limited basis and four years BEFORE the first iPhone.

"Just because of having a smartphone and social media. I have work at my fingertips 24/7 so that's how the lines are blurred. I sometimes end up working because I will see an email come in…or someone will call me with a story idea when it's my day off and I think that story can't wait until the end of the weekend, it needs to be told."

Grove said that he's really noticed a shift in the attitudes and beliefs of viewers. He's learned that many times people only hear what they want to hear and are also quick to judge and accuse him of being biased. The phenomenon of mistrust and the perception of a move away from the neutrality of journalism is something which he has especially noticed accelerate in the last five years. He tries to let it roll off his shoulders.

But, far from pushing him to leave the industry, the swing in popular opinion has the exact opposite effect.

"It actually motivates me to stay just because we've never needed journalists more than we do today. Journalism is necessary for a healthy democracy. I feel like in an age of so much misinformation and disinformation, journalism, in my opinion, has never been more important."

Salary has also changed over nearly 20 years. Grove made $27,000 when he began at WSBT in 2003 ($42,424 in 2022 dollars). It's an amount which he realized years later was very high for a starting salary. His salary continued to climb as he was promoted, first to weekend anchor, then weeknight anchor. He left in 2012 making $55,000 ($69,257 today). He started at WISH making $65,000 ($81,849 today)—he believes it was about $10,000 more than most of the reporters at the time because of his experience and background.

He took a pay cut down to $45,000 to come to WLFI. His salary was almost unchanged, $46,000, when he went to Purdue full-time. When he started at WTHR in 2019, he earned $79,000 in his first year ($89,337 today). He declined to give his current salary but said it has gone up from there.

While he hasn't noticed a decrease in ad revenue, he's noticed that the staff at the television station is a lot smaller than it used to be.

Extinction alert

Grove believes an extinction alert is completely warranted. In fact, he had just read the same Carver article just before his interview with the intent of posting it on his personal Facebook page. He said the state of the television industry is probably the biggest current frustration in his life.

"The local news industry is in a state of emergency. We are losing quality, talented journalists because of burnout that is a combination of pay, workload, workflow and schedule. We're also not attracting new journalists into the business. They are choosing to do something else."

Perhaps no one is more qualified to speak to that choice than Grove, someone who spent three years teaching aspiring journalists the craft, including two years in a full-time capacity. It's a job he said that he loved every minute of. Still, even with that enthusiasm, he saw many of his students choose public relations because of better hours and better pay.

"I have seen many, many, many colleagues and friends leave the business because of the pay and the schedule. Until media companies, until ownership companies and managers, do something different, we are going to continue to lose too many good people."

When he found out that multiple reporters in Indianapolis had disclosed for these interviews that they made about $50,000 right now—a salary that was much lower than when he was hired in Indianapolis 10 years earlier as a reporter—Grove replied, "that is the problem."

"An experienced TV news reporter in Indianapolis should be making at least 80 because that's what people are making when they leave to get into public relations."

But, even if that is outside of the realm of possibility at this point, he suggests a number of other things that could be changed to encourage people to stay. He mentioned the idea of giving people more paid time off, especially if they work in an industry where they normally work holidays and crazy hours—perhaps five weeks of vacation instead of two. He also said working a four-day workweek with 10-hour days could also be enticing, especially to people like him who truly feel like the profession is much more than a job.

"It's a calling. It's in your blood. Not everybody could do it," Grove said. "I am concerned about the future of the industry because, in my opinion, ownership companies have placed profit over the health of journalism as a whole."

Grove hopes to still be in television journalism five years from now, hopefully for the rest of his career. But even he isn't sure if he will last that long.

"I would like to say yes. I hope that I am because I love it and it's very, very important. But if the trend of lower pay and more hours and fewer people, smaller staffing, if that trend continues, then I don't know if I will be able to continue working here."

The proverbial straw that would break the camel's back for him would be not getting a pay raise.

Even as he loves his job and takes great satisfaction in the work he does almost every day, Grove admits to fighting waves of burnout, which are often connected to a vacation or a circumstance in his personal life. Despite the battle, it would be difficult to leave for good.

"That's why I returned because I think a lot of people choose this career because it is a calling, it is not just a job. It's something you truly love. It's also a lifestyle."

If he were to leave, Grove thinks he would look to get back to teaching, even if it's on the middle school or high school level.

Advice to college students

It's the same thing that Grove has been saying for the last 5-10 years, but he thinks it's now more important than ever before.

"If you want to get into this industry, we need you. We need journalists. Democracy needs journalists. But you must recognize that you are doing this as a public service more than anything else. You will likely be paid less than other careers…crazy hours…terrible schedule… but you have to be willing to stomach all of that for the great good. Not everybody can do that. You just have to make sure that you're one of the few."

❖ Amanda Decker, 41 – "Someone else has owned me for the last 20 years"

It wasn't until college that Amanda Decker decided to become a journalist. She started as a musical theater major at Ball State University but wasn't interested in making that her life's work. Her next thought was to major in communications and political science and become a lifetime politician. But when her political science classmate told her about NewsLink, Ball State's student-run nightly newscast, she discovered what she thought was her life's work. Though she admits she continued for less than noble reasons.

"It was the only thing in college that I was good at, so I just stuck with it."

At the very beginning, she expected it to be glamourous career—she envisioned herself as Christiane Amanpour, never marrying, embedded with troops overseas on humanitarian missions. As Decker learned more, that dream changed. She figured she'd move back and settle down with her family and anchor at one of the Indianapolis television stations.

But one of her professors warned Decker and the rest of the graduating class that they had been spoiled with great teachers and great equipment that will not be matched in small market television stations.

"I really underestimated that comment until I started moving around to other local news stations. To be honest, in my entire career, TV20, that first station we worked for in Gainesville,

was by far the best equipped and best functioning station that I've ever worked for, if that tells you anything."

Career moves

Decker spent more than 16 years in the television business. She started as the morning anchor at WCJB/TV20 in Gainesville, Florida in 2006. She spent more than four years there, before leaving the industry for a brief stint.

Next, she was hired to anchor for the Independent News Network (INN) in Davenport, Iowa, in 2011. It's a company which provides anchors and other on-camera talent remotely for small market television stations, supplemented by a few MMJs in the local market who gather and write stories for the newscast. She continued to move up in the company over the ensuing four years, eventually becoming news director when the ownership changed and the entire operation moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, along with a new name for the business: News HUB.

She moved back to a traditional local news role when she was hired to anchor at WEVV-TV in Evansville in 2015. She eventually became Executive Producer as well and remained a total of five years.

For her last year in the television business, she reported remotely on a freelance contract on the coronavirus for News HUB.

In April 2021, she left to join The Plaid Agency in Central Indiana as a public relations manager and copywriter. At the time of the interview, she was preparing to celebrate her one-year anniversary.

"I am, surprisingly, extremely happy in my current job. My biggest fear when I finally made the decision in 2021 to leave the news industry was that I was not going to ever love what I did as much as I loved what I was doing."

But that hasn't been the case. She is excited to get up in the morning and has to force herself to stop working at night because she loves the projects she's working on.

"It's been an amazing transition and I was not expecting I would say that," Decker said. "I thought that I would be heartbroken. I thought I would miss everything about it."

Finding a new normal

But, in almost everything else, it's almost impossible to see any similarities in what she had spent her adult life doing and what she's doing now.

She met her husband in Davenport. For the entire time they've been together as a couple, they have worked together in the newsroom until the last year or so. She was on camera. He was behind the scenes. Frustrations at work that could spiral them into fits of rage at home are now non-existent.

"We come home at a normal time. We're having dinner with our child together. We're doing all these things that I never realized I was missing out on."

In fact, when Decker was an evening anchor in Evansville, she resorted to eating dinner on FaceTime with her son and husband every night who were at home.

“My child was definitely secondary, and my marriage and my relationship didn’t even exist. Just because we were both in the industry, we were both experiencing the same thing. I think that stress had just worn on us so badly.”

While her sister had always warned her that things would change with a child in the picture, Decker never imagined that she was right. Decker always assumed she wouldn’t either miss her child’s big events or wouldn’t care if she had to. Now, she catches herself going to swimming class on a weeknight just so they can be together. Decker and her husband joke that they are officially living “normal” lives.

“We live in the suburbs. Our kid plays soccer and goes to an Academy preschool. Like, we completely sold out and I’m completely fine with that because I get to enjoy my family.”

She’s also found her current employment to have a radically different work environment in terms of boundaries and respect. While in news, managers had no problem calling at all hours of the day or night, her current coworkers in public relations don’t even send electronic messages to each other if they see that person is scheduled to be in a meeting at that time.

In television, she felt like she was embedded in current events and her job from the moment she woke up to the moment she went to sleep. She also recounts a story where her co-anchor at WEVV got a phone call from their bosses on July 4th, when he was on a boat, demanding that he come in for a mandatory meeting which was scheduled on the holiday after his vacation had already been scheduled. They did the same thing to Decker about a month later.

“It was just those constant mind games, that constant control. One of the first things that dawned on me when I left the industry was someone else has owned me for the last 20 years. I didn’t really own who I was or my name. Everything I did reflected on someone else and that starts to wear on you over time.”

Realizing it was time

The end of her time at WEVV was not pleasant. She felt like there was an impossible balancing act by virtue of being a main evening anchor and having decades of news experiences and judgments. It’s a position she viewed as being in the trenches with the staff, who often viewed her as ‘in charge,’ which she often was, especially as executive producer. However, at the same time, she felt friction with news managers and even the news director who was literally in charge, but who also made a smaller salary than the main anchors did.

“The further I got into my career and the more knowledge I got, the more threatening it seemed I became to people that were supposed to be in management and in charge of us. I didn’t really like the dynamic.”

After a messy end, she took the COVID freelance job with her former employer. By night, she assisted in authoring a book which documented the historical timeline of President Donald Trump’s term and every day he was in office. The book turned out to be a bestseller. But, by the

end, by January 2021 and the attack on the Capitol, with COVID numbers rising again, she felt like she was having a mental breakdown by being so deeply immersed in just two things.

“The Trump part was more irritating…was no longer a fun project…but to the COVID point of it…I walked up to my husband in the kitchen and I said, ‘I can’t. I can’t talk about it anymore. I can’t see anyone else die. I can’t listen to another doctor get upset. I can’t listen to another person tell me I’m crazy for telling them to get vaccinated.’ I couldn’t process the craziness.”

She felt she could no longer be a balanced and unbiased source of neutral information. She wasn’t sure she wouldn’t continue to be a good journalist. She was only sure that it was no longer a good fit anymore.

Extinction alert

Decker feels like Carver’s assessment is a rundown of all the things that happened in her professional life over 16 years in the television industry.

She points to the dramatic improvement in health benefits she’s experienced having left the business. One of the main motivating factors for the move to WEVV was that for the last three years in Little Rock, her family wasn’t offered health insurance at News HUB. Still, even after the move back to local news, she had to work extra hours because she didn’t get any paid maternity leave.

She currently gets full health benefits through her husband’s work, who also has left the business.

“I didn’t realize what I was missing.”

When it comes to other benefits like retirement, she said she made more money in her 401(k) match at her current employer in her first nine months of employment than she did in five years at WEVV. Meanwhile, she has since heard from former co-workers that the television station has done away with, not just with the matching portion, but the entire 401(k) program.

“That says to me that this job is now a job and not a career. It has no future because we are not investing in you or your future,” Decker said. “The disconnect is that the TV industry treats it almost like the employees owe it something and not that they’re doing a service.”

Decker made $26,000 at WCJB in 2006 as a morning anchor ($37,286 in today’s dollars) but also qualified for overtime so usually averaged about $40,000 in take-home pay ($57,363 in 2022). She continued to make roughly $40,000 with the move to INN. When she moved to Little Rock in 2014 and became news director, she was bumped up to $65,000 ($79,380 today). She took a pay cut to $55,000 for the WEVV job in 2015 ($67,088 today) but ended at $75,000 in 2020 ($83,780 today).

She’s making $60,000 currently as a copywriter and public relations manager.

“To me, it’s fantastic because it’s my first year in the industry.”

That's part of the reason merely increasing salary would not be enough to keep her in the TV journalism business longer. She would have needed to feel like there was a future, evidenced by a great retirement plan from her employer.

What's astonishing to her, having been executive producer at WEVV and knowing what everyone made, is that salaries in the television industry have completely flatlined, to say nothing of a cost of living adjustment. In Gainesville, back in 2006, roughly Market #150, reporters were making about $22,000. In Evansville, in 2020, Market #105, reporters were making about $22,000. It's a pay cut of $6,974 when inflation is considered.

"My noon anchor at one point was making $21,000. I don't know how you survive on that as a 28-year-old. I just don't. There are so many problems with paying people that low, right? Like the stress you're putting them through and focusing on having to get second jobs."

Nostalgia for newsrooms past

The biggest difference in the industry Decker has experienced over the course of her career is the explosion of high-speed internet. It has transformed everything. She believes television stations are now going through, with the advancement of social media, what happened to newspapers 20 year earlier with the proliferation of free news online.

She believes she misses the industry most circa 2008—a period of important historical events like watching President Barack Obama become president, University of Florida national championships and being on-scene in Gainesville for the viral 'Don't Tase Me Bro' moment.

But more than news events, she misses the spontaneity of discussion in the newsroom during that time, before the age of the "internet journalist."

"A newsroom of intelligent people standing around and having good, engaging conversation and putting together amazing shows, like our veterans show which won us the 'Best Newscast in the State of Florida' award. Those days didn't exist anymore toward the end of my career. They definitely don't exist now."

Now, first thing in the morning, she checks an app on her phone for the weather, not the morning news. She gets alerts from the Associated Press on her phone all day long. If it's a local story which intrigues her, she'll go to their website and read the story.

"I will never set intentions to come home at 6 p.m. and sit down in front of the television and watch the six o'clock news. I expect for that package to be posted online when you're done getting this story. I want the first live shot posted up there."

Decker said it's a transformation of the way people consume media. She's only watched the news twice this year—both because of severe weather in the area.

Still, every once in a while, she says she'll do a job search for news anchors. She's often shocked by the number of available openings.

"Twenty years ago, I was sending VHS tapes to Minot [North Dakota] and Wausau, Wisconsin, for producer jobs. Now I feel like I could just walk into a TV station and say, 'What do you need me to do?' and they would just hire you for something. It's absolutely mind-boggling."

But she's confident she's not going back. Newsrooms are going to become increasingly more distant, thanks to the proliferation of MMJs, the Internet, and what was learned about the possibilities of working remote during the pandemic. While the re-creation of a newsroom culture and connection from a decade ago would be the biggest factor to draw her back in, other changes would also be needed to actually make it happen: better benefits, more flexibility, better work/life balance, an acknowledgement that mental health is a real thing.

"I don't think those things are going to shift in that direction."

Advice to college students

Decker has two pieces of advice to aspiring television journalists.

First, she points to the importance of taking ethics and law classes seriously.

"Journalists are extremely important. They are telling our history. They are telling our story and they are documenting it. You need to know how to be a good journalist."

Second, while she believes there are more people joining the industry to be recognized on social media, she said it's important to understand what it means to be a journalist. More than just the basics of not being biased, it's a realization that the story is not about you.

"You don't need a standup in the emotional story about a sick child. If you're going into it to get famous and be Insta-famous, that's the wrong reason to become a journalist. Go do something else in television or media or something, but if you're really going to become a journalist, do it right."

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