

Right Smack in the Middle
A Glimpse into the World of a Trusted News Maven
by M.L. Crider

Snail-trailing a double horse trailer for nineteen of the thirty-three predominantly single-lane, slithery, picturesque miles through the densely fogged ground-cloud (that my car had the faith to puncture as a trusty aimed and released arrow would) in order to topple into my journalism class chair at exactly 1:31 p.m., ended up to be worth every frustrated moment of my unsuccessful yearning to pass the caged-in horse caboose on that wet winding road.

At that speed, what *else* is a gal to do *but* study each incremental tick of her tediously increasing odometer while making sure the windshield wipers are wiping away at accommodating rain speed? The two horses could quite probably have galloped faster on the snaked pot-holed pavement than they did standing still while being towed by the stubborn old gent who chose to pull them *safely* at an excruciatingly snoring speed.

1:31 p.m. Despite the old gent, I made it. My dehydrated, mascara-less eyes scanned the filled seats in front of me and slowed to a solid stop when landing on the long, soft, grey hair of an older woman whom I did not recognize as part of our class. Professor wrote out “Brenda Blagg” in brown cursive on the white board. I straightened in my chair and did a double-take at that sage’s head of hair and then peered more deeply into the bit of her profile that my distant chair allowed from its vantage point. Little did I know, we would be warmly welcomed to peer past her hair and knee-deep into this woman’s journalistic life for the next hour and fifteen minutes. There, seated before me, was Arkansas’ very own widely revered brave news maven, Ms. Brenda Blagg, regional editor and columnist for the *Northwest Arkansas Times*’ winsome boon, *The Morning News*. It felt as if time had crystallized into being one concise cool moment. Finally.

The thumbnail photograph that was planted in Blagg’s *Between The Lines* opinion column, “Pryor Offers Health Care Explanation,” August 19, 2009, did not seem to fully represent the charisma that was emanating from the aura of this calm woman, and that my thirsty eyes were gratefully sponging in. Blagg’s decades-earned accomplished poise would have rendered my *Pollyanna-student-mind* a shaking mess if it had not been accompanied by her serenely self-possessed, mega-cool, earthy presence.

When introduced, Blagg walked to the front of our classroom with grace and began to speak to us as if we were new friends sharing some rooted commonality and the same picnic table for lunch. She gently ushered us into a glimpse of her journalistic journey from its earliest beginnings. Her “sheltered” girlhood brought Blagg up on the White River in Newport, Arkansas. “When Dad and Grandpa would listen to *Meet The Press*, it was an understood household rule that it was to be and remain absolutely quiet,” she mused.

My notation-quotation-possessed hand scribbled to keep up with the fact-packed rich notes Blagg was spilling off of her southern tongue at such elegant effortless speed. Forget the molasses that was my morning drive as *Ms. Horse Trailer Caboose*; this was cool, fast stuff. Much like her columns, deliciously organized facts were rolling out in seamless sequence. I did my best to jot the all-meat/zero-fat content that so fluently fed into the one hour and fifteen minutes of her generous time spent with us. This was merely my first impression of the sixty-two-year-young, East Arkansas-raised hip news sage.

Blagg shared that she was “a joiner” of every group, club, or organization that her high school had to offer. She confided especially that her “root in journalism began when her high school teacher chose *her* to be the editor of the school’s newspaper, *The Greyhound*.” Blagg

belted giddily when recalling the messy mimeograph machine that was then used to produce the paper. She taught us, “A mimeograph machine is a mechanical duplicator that produces copies by pressing ink onto paper through openings cut in a stencil.” Ick and Yikes. After having graduated from Newport High School in 1965, Blagg thought she wanted to be an art major at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Fate had other plans.

Fall of 1969 to spring of 1970, when a late-junior-turned-senior at the university, Blagg found herself being the editor of the university’s magazine, *The Arkansas Traveler*. She recalled that when working in the basement of Hill Hall, one of the tasks of producing the magazine was to baby-sit the pages so that they would roll fire-free over the dangerously tall, long line of gas-lit furnace. The flame’s job was simply to dry the printed ink on the moving parchment. She remembered warmly, “If one of the pages *were* to catch fire, the student was expected to grab it and yank it off of the conveyer belt like this,” she demonstrated with a flailing hand and a giggle.

Fresh out of college, *The Arkansas Democrat Gazette* assigned her to live with... the circus for three days. Yes, the circus. Blagg leveled with us in ensuing pause with the fun question, “What other job sends you to the circus?” Then brightly, my favorite of her opinions, “Journalism puts you *right smack in the middle* of life.”

As the topic of social networking was touched upon, Blagg landed us with, “My voice belongs to my column, not to a social network.” That about summed it up. She P.S.’ed her indelible proclamation with a warning for us to be sure to heed, “Be careful of *Facebook* and other online social networks because when you share there, you leave a footprint; this can affect futures in journalism.”

She spoke breezily of her passion for government and politics, namely one of her favorite memories: being the first interviewer of Bill Clinton, prior to his running for congress. This pronouncement rolled as humbly off her tongue as did the rest of her note-worthy gems. Blagg and Clinton first met at a judge-only hearing in court where Clinton was donning “a very wrinkled suit.” She went on to cover his candidacy in New York and later, the paper sent her to cover Clinton’s inauguration in Washington, D.C.

When inquiry was posed about who her role models might be, Blagg made respectful mention of the late Walter Cronkite, referring to him as “a real *newspaper man* who kept himself on the straight and narrow.” I admired her appreciation and decided mention that, “Cronkite stayed away from commentary and just gave you the news.”

Additional praise of her current immediate editor, Jim Morris, and retired *New York Times* writer and reporter, Roy Reed, punctuated her shared devout drive for “their desire to get it right.” Blagg stressed the importance of *getting the facts right*. This seems to weigh in most heavily with Blagg, as her talk impressed upon me that she deems fact recording to be a paramount principle of conduct in the disciplined discernment of any responsible journalist’s indelible printing practice.

Since 1971, this female maverick has reputedly climbed the predominantly man-made sturdy ladder that was staunchly in place in order for her to successfully arrive at the top of her Mount Everest news career. She gracefully shared with us that she has thus far thoroughly enjoyed her journalistic journey with few-to-no scrapes. In addition to the many dutiful hats she wears at the popular paper these days, Blagg is also a proud, proactive member of *The Arkansas Press Association*.

Another of her passions is their *Freedom of Information Act [FOIA]*. Its purposeful intent is to provide access to information in an open and public government, which FOIA deems to be “one of the hallmarks of a democratic society.”

When alas, I shyly raised my hand a bit to inquire about her fantasized chosen coverage, in the event that she were to somehow make exquisite use of a media crystal ball and paint her own picture-perfect story coverage in the way of predicting life events. Blagg responded, “I see myself as a better hard news writer than a feature writer.” She added, “I consider traveling and feature-writing to be a fun thought to peruse in my distant future.”

Blagg just so happens to adore residing in this part of the country and maintains an ethical vigilance in discerning fairness in both sides of an issue, only then to spell it out as accurately as is all possible on any given hectic office day. I sense that the deep rudder that loyally steers Blagg’s continued allegiance in remaining the merciless guardian of “keeping the facts in print” most probably marks the mere literary *tip* of this dame’s immaculate news *iceberg* bar. Blagg’s invested footprint of scribing the hard facts in order for the truth to be echoed ad infinitum these days, renders us able to enjoy a fuller education—with which to live better, vote better, and share better as a community.

This community is incredibly fortunate to be privy to the fact-filled opinion columns that are consistently mass-produced by this rare and entrusted gem-of-a-journalist who just so happens to now rule the paper-roost of our ever-changing Northwest Arkansas.

Blagg encouraged, “Journalism is for absolutely *anybody* who is interested in *anything*.”

She makes a pen and paper-hungry gal wish to roll up her journalistic feather tightly in the good grip of her trunk and take off running—all the while, *believing* that she will fly.

I will trust Blagg on that.

Yes.