

From the COURTROOM to the NEWSROOM

David Zeman loved the law—but not enough to remain a lawyer. With a law degree from the University of Miami in 1984, he practiced for two years in Florida but decided that his heart was not in it. “I’m not going to be great at this if I don’t love it because of all these smart people around who do love it,” he reasoned. And rightly so, because his second career, newspaper journalism is where his passion lies.

A master’s in journalism from Columbia University in 1987 launched his career first at the *Raleigh Times* (N.C.) followed by *The News and Observer*. A reporter with the *Detroit Free Press* since 1991, Zeman has won many state and national awards for feature writing and investigative reporting, twice capturing the University of Michigan’s Morgan O’Leary Award for excellence in political reporting, the state’s top investigative honor.

In 2002, time spent going through long-forgotten police transcripts, police files and witness interviews yielded another big story—“How justice failed Eddie Joe Lloyd,” co-written with Ben Schmitt, which won the State Bar’s Wade H. McCree Award for the advancement of justice in 2003. The article is about Eddie Lloyd of Detroit who served 17 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. DNA testing confirmed Lloyd’s innocence in the rape-strangulation of 16-year-old Michelle Jackson. In reconstructing the 1985 murder case, Zeman and Schmitt discovered that the police were not the only ones who assumed Lloyd’s guilt. Court-appointed lawyers and the trial judge helped to “railroad” this mentally ill man, who had been “tricked into confessing” while he was a patient in a Detroit psychiatric ward.

“Everyone was blaming the prosecution for wrongly convicting him. We saw another



David Zeman

story in the incompetent legal representation that he got from the defense and the really incompetent job that the judge did. He was supposed to be guarding this guy’s interest when no one else was.”

While he gets public recognition for his investigative writing, the real “high” Zeman says comes from the satisfaction of helping others and “getting them public recognition when they don’t feel like anybody is on their side.”

The switch from law to journalism was an easy one for him—Zeman was single then and unencumbered, ready to do not just something else, but something that he was passionate about. The law background came in very handy. “There’s a thoroughness and completeness that’s ingrained in you as an attorney—when you’re taking depositions, when you’re setting up interrogations, when you’re doing all the little things that you need to do to make sure that you’re prepared in case you go to trial. All of those things were a benefit to me when I set out to try and investigate a story.”

What was not so easy was trying to unlearn the kind of legalese that’s also ingrained in most attorneys. Zeman tries to write for his readers. “There’s a temptation to let the lawyers know your background. But I find that it actually helps me quite a bit more not to say that I have a legal background because it forces the attorneys to talk to me like a lay person and spell things out for me because if they’re talking to me in a kind of legal shorthand, it doesn’t make for a good quote.”

Endowed with a likeable personality, a good sense of what makes an interesting story, and the ability to write and capture readers’ interests, Zeman thoroughly enjoys being able to “ask anybody anything, to find a story that interests you and to get paid for finding out what the story is behind the story.”

*By talking to the reporter and creating
an open and accessible environment
(while protecting the secret parts of your case)
a lawyer can go a long way in building
good relationships with the media.*

So, what's a typical day like in the life of a busy reporter? "There is no typical day," is the reply. Zeman has not covered a beat in a number of years. His time could be spent sitting in the basement of the court building sifting through court documents, interviewing an automobile executive, covering a medical breakthrough, or attending a bar mitzvah! He does very well immersing himself in subjects that he knows very little about. "That's part of the fun of being a journalist. You get to poke your nose into all kinds of different things that you would have never learned about otherwise."

Zeman thinks that law-related issues get plenty of coverage especially since the O.J. Simpson trial. "Half of the talking heads on TV are lawyers and certainly media in general and TV in particular focus on the glamorous cases or the criminal case. Reporters are also better-trained to cover legal issues than they were 10 or 15 years ago." He predicts that in the next few years, there should be plenty of material focusing on Justice Department tactics under Attorney General John Ashcroft because of the very nature of those tactics. "Journalist researchers are going to come up with a fantastic story about the lengths to which the Justice Department has gone to shut up the public from what is happening in the war on terrorism."

He also observes that the public is more sophisticated than it was a decade or two ago and that a lot of people who criticize the media still watch it intently. "I think people have a good antennae for who's credible and who isn't. People scrutinize. They're better consumers of the media now than they were."

His advice to lawyers when they get a call from a reporter is: "It is always better to take a telephone call from a reporter because you can always politely decline. Being open and courteous goes a long way. Reporters hunger for people to return their calls and to be nice to them. By talking to the reporter and creating an open and accessible environment (while protecting the secret parts of your case) a lawyer can go a long way in building good relationships with the media," he advises. ◆

Naseem Stecker is a staff writer for the Michigan Bar Journal. She can be contacted by e-mail at nstecker@mail.michbar.org.