

Lessons of a Former Journalist

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Some of my students, and fewer of the parents of the Bet Shraga community, know that, in between gigs as an educator, I had a career as a journalist. Some people would claim that I was using the term “journalist” loosely because I was an electronic journalist, a radio broadcaster. But, nonetheless, I gathered, wrote, and reported the news on a fairly large scale, and even earned some awards along the way. There are amusing memories of being hung up on by former Lieutenant Governor Betsy McCaughey Ross and of continuing to record a conversation with Senator Alfonse D’Amato after he thought he had hung up the phone. (With the help of his mother, I had found him at a cocktail party and wanted a comment on a story that was breaking. I don’t remember what it was, but it seems that the U.S. must have been invading some place.) There were adrenaline rushes when reporting on the first World Trade Center bombing, covering the northeast blizzard of 1993, and being one of the first to report that Elvis Presley had died. I was on the air taking live phone calls when President Reagan was shot. (I got more phone calls about Elvis Presley dying than I did about Ronald Reagan being shot.)

So what? What does a former broadcast journalist have to offer middle school social studies students in a classroom setting?

First, there is the appreciation for the First Amendment. There is a particular passion when I teach seventh graders about the importance of the First Amendment, how it evolved in colonial America, and why it is still important in a democracy today. And, I can relate that the importance of the amendment is due to the all of the freedoms it protects, not just freedom of the press. I can provide my students with applications of the First Amendment in a democratic society. They can provide me with stories about the importance of the First Amendment, and its guarantee of freedom of religion, to Jewish people searching for life and livelihood.

Second, as a journalist I became somewhat expert at hiding my political convictions. (Note: Journalists today do not work as hard to do that, particularly on certain news networks where political bias is blatant and expected). I registered as an independent voter. I never placed political signs on my front lawn. I examined each story I wrote to be sure I was not showing bias, and always tried to get comment from both sides of an issue. I hope I carry that over to the classroom, as well. (Many students have asked me what political party I belong to, so I believe I have successfully hidden my political bias and give students insight into both sides.)

Third, the inquisitive nature of a journalist can also transfer to being an effective historian (and student). I try to pass along to students the importance of asking that next question, and of knowing that we never have all the answers, but we should strive to find them. Interpretations of history are fluid, always changing, which makes it a lively subject to teach. As I try to prepare future historians, I try to teach them the value of

being inquisitive and of never settling for one answer.

For all of my students, particularly my ELA students, I try to convey the importance of writing succinctly, to the point. In broadcast journalism, radio reporters (except on NPR) often have thirty seconds or less to tell a story. I like to get my students to write economically. (It will serve them well in life and it takes less time for me to read and grade papers that way.)

When I socialize with my journalism friends, and we share old memories and stories, it often makes me long for the microphone again. But, I am not ready to trade my classroom for a studio again. In a studio, I am alone, but often communicating in one direction to a large audience. In the classroom, I have a smaller audience, but the communication is two-way. And, I learn as much from my students as I hope they can learn from me.