

The Oral History of Bernice Kearney, News Director, KSAT 12 News

Journalist and Mayborn graduate student, Rebecca Aguilar conducted the oral history of Bernice Kearney, the news director at KSAT 12 News in San Antonio, Texas. The interview was conducted March 8, 2019, at the television station. Full transparency, Kearney was Aguilar's intern while she was a reporter at KENS-TV in the late 1980s.

AGUILAR: If you could talk to Bernice who graduated from St. Mary's University, with what you know today; What would you say to her? What's that piece of advice you would give her?

KEARNEY: I would say don't underestimate yourself. Don't under estimate how much you are going to learn. The end of college was not the end of learning. I think I always sort of knew that. I would have definitely would have told her there is more to life than work and don't forget that. Make sure you take care of yourself not just work.

Now 30 years later, I realize I'm not going to be any good to people at work, if I'm not good to me at home. If I don't have certain me time. You know my husband and I like to do stuff. We like to travel.

Being the boss isn't all that. Being a leader is much more important and so it doesn't really matter what you are. What your job is or what your title is. I have never been high on titles anyway. This wasn't that important to me.

AGUILAR: You grew up in Dallas. Then you moved to Phoenix.

KEARNEY: Then I moved back to Dallas.

AGUILAR: A single mother raised you?

KEARNEY: My mom was a single mom for several years and she and my dad got married when I was eight. They had my brother when I was almost nine. He was born eleven months after their wedding. I'm quite a bit older than my brother, Will and quite a bit older than my sister. She is 14 years younger than I.

AGUILAR: What do you think you learned from your mother growing up that I think made you the strong woman you are today?

KEARNEY: I think what I learned from her is to be truthful, to be honest even if that is painful, to be kind and try to be gentle and generous to people.

AGUILAR: Did your biological dad leave the picture early?

KEARNEY: He and mother divorced when I was six months old. I did not meet him again, well he did meet me when I was a baby. He was not part of my life until I was 40-years-old. I met him and I have met my two brothers. So now Jimmy (biological father) and I have a relationship, it's not the same as me and my dad. My dad adopted me when he and mother married, and after my sister was born. I was 15.

AGUILAR: What did he teach you because it takes a special man to take in child that really wasn't his child.

KEARNEY: Right he's very disciplined. He's got a great work ethic. Dad is a midwestern, nose to the grindstone, really hard worker and I definitely got that from him.

AGUILAR: How old were you when you decide, you know what I think I want to be a journalist?

KEARNEY: (laughs) When I walked into KENS. I did not study journalism.

AGUILAR: What was the plan?

KEARNEY: There was no plan. That's the part I did not get from my dad. There was no strategic planning and thinking out. When I went to college I went to become a psychologist. Well, that lasted two months. Then I changed my degree plan to English Communication Arts because that was what someone else I knew was studying, and I was like, "Oh that sounds like fun." It was literature, art, and very liberal arts.

The plan was—well I had taken every art class I could and I love it. Maybe I'll go work in a museum. So when it was time for me to do an internship, this is a true story, I procrastinated and I waited until the very last time possible time. I went to talk to my advisor and I said okay, need to sign up for an internship. I think I want to do the one at the museum. I think the San Antonio Museum of Art, the McNay, or the Witte, one of the museums here had an internship. Well, someone got it because they didn't procrastinate. She says that's taken and here are—there's an internship available at KENS-TV, and I said (laughs) , "Oh I watch TV let me that one." I didn't even realize it was a news station.

Then I have to go and do an interview with the executive producer, Henry Bonilla. I walked in, sat down in his office. I finally realized this is a news station not like TV, it's news. Totally different, right?

He goes, "Well what are you interested in doing?" And I said, " Well I don't know. What do you have? I don't know."

He says, "What classes have you taken?" I said, " Art, sociology, some poetry classes, some literature classes."

(She laughs) And God love him, he said, "Okay, do you want to be a reporter." I'm like, "Not a clue." He said, "What about a producer?" I said, "I don't even know what that is."

So he said, "Well, I'm going to set you up with a reporter and a producer and you can do a little bit of each and then see what you like." And I'm like, "Okay that sounds great."

I can't believe it. We would never have hired me now.

AGUILAR: What did he see in you?

KEARNEY: I have no idea. Sure enough I come in and I think it's the next day or something that I had to start. And he said, "You're going to work with a guy named Michael Hanson who is our ten o'clock producer." I said, "Okay."

He said, "When you get here. Come in at 5 o'clock. So I came to the station the next day and I ring the doorbell, because by then the reception was gone. And asked for Michael Hanson. This guy comes along and he's wearing jeans and a t-shirt. He looks like he's twelve. I said, "Oh hi, I'm Bernice. I'm an intern." He said, "Okay, come on in." I said, "Are you an intern too?" He said, "No, I'm Mike Hanson, I'm the 10 o'clock producer." And I said, "Oh! Okay."

AGUILAR: Great start.

KEARNEY: Yeah! Then he had to write a story after he gave me a tour. He said, "Here is a piece of wire copy and I want you write a 20 second story. No, he said I want you to write a story from this for the newscast." And I said, "Okay."

Well, I wrote this beautiful, flowery prose. He must have ripped that thing up five different times and whittled it down and I finally got a 20 second story. Chris Marrou (anchor) read my story that night on the 10 o'clock news and I was like, done and done!

That's how I got into journalism.

AGUILAR: When did you realize you wanted to be a producer?

KEARNEY: It was quickly. I was working weekday nights with Hanson, and my stories are on the air. And I'm writing and I'm learning how to do different things and then on weekends I was

out with you (reporter) and if you weren't there I was on VO-bite patrol with Jeff (photographer). I just liked crafting the whole show.

In April for Fiesta, Deborah Knapp was anchoring the show. She was the anchor over there. Henry calls me that morning in my dorm room and says, "So and so is out sick and so and so is out on vacation and not in town. Do you feel confident in producing the 6 o'clock news tonight? Can you do it?" And I was like, "Yeah put me in coach."

I had been working with the producers and Hanson had left by this time. He had moved to Minneapolis. The 10 o'clock producer, Kevin Walsh, he and I worked together. He still to this day I consider him a friend of mine.

AGUILAR: He's mentoring you?

KEARNEY: Yes, he's helping me. He would have me build out segments. He'd make me produce the segments. He's make me time the show and he's have me do the whole show. He was teaching me. He'd say, "I would have stacked it this way but tell me and tell me why?" And if I gave him a good enough reason then we kept it my way and that was cool you know.

That's one of the things I did learn and I try to tell producers is there's a thousand ways to skin a cat, and if you can tell me why you have come up with this plan versus something else that I might think, more often than not I'm going to let you do it. You go and you do you, because if it's a good plan than I've learned something. And if it doesn't work out, then you've learned something. Either way somebody is learning something.

Anyway, sure enough I'm going to produce the 6 o'clock news. And I'm like, "Oh my God! I'm going to produce the 6 o'clock news." Now, the good new was that it was parade day. It was the Battle of the Flowers parade day. So the only thing going on in San Antonio is that parade. That's it! So we had different live shots and different stories. For the first show you're going to produce that's the one you want to do, because it sort of produces itself.

AGUILAR: You're still a college student?

KEARNEY: Yeah, it was like a month before I was graduating or a few weeks before I'm And so Henry said, "All right, what's your plan?"

I go, "I don't have a plan."

He goes, "What are you going to do when you graduate Bernice?"

I go, "Well I got to get a job somewhere. I guess maybe I'll see if I can get a job in Corpus." I figured I could live in Corpus, because I have family there. I know I have to get a j-o-b, because dad said, it's time to get a j-o-b. So that's what I'm going to do. I just don't know where. "

He said, "Okay, I looking for a promotions producer. Maybe you should produce some promotions, some promos for me, and slip them under my door tonight before you leave and I'll take a look at them." I said, "Okay."

And so I did it and then he told me, "I don't know if you want to be a promotions producer."

I said, "I don't know, I want a job Henry."

He said, "Well let me think about this."

So then he comes to me and says, "Marcia Ponds is our morning producer and I'm going to move her to the assignments desk. Do you want to produce the morning show?"

I go, "Well sure! I've never been on the morning show, but why not?"

He said, "Well it's an hour." Which I was like "uh!"

He had me write some stories. He checked them out, and said it looked good. So he hired me to be the producer for the morning show. I started that a week before I graduated. Marcia trained me for two days and that was it.

AGUILAR: You're there a couple of years right?

KEARNEY: I was there from the time they started paying me in April of 89.

AGUILAR: Do you remember your salary?

KEARNEY: It was like \$14,000. I moved around the clock by then, and when I left it was December of '93 and was producing the 10 o'clock by then. So I was the morning producer for about three years. I became the noon and six producer and then I became the 10 o'clock producer.

AGUILAR: For someone who didn't have an idea of getting into news and suddenly you're a news person, and you've done every show. What do you think was your motivation there?

KEARNEY: To remain in news?

AGUILAR: Yeah, because the big show is the 10 o'clock.

KEARNEY: I think I was just motivated to always be moving forward and try new things and continuing to achieve.

AGUILAR: Did you know back then you wanted to be a manager?

KEARNEY: No.

AGUILAR: Again, no plan.

KEARNEY: No! Not all interested. Not even remotely. I love producing. I would probably still be producing if given my druthers. Honestly, I love producing.

AGUILAR: Why?

KEARNEY: Because it was creative. It's like a little puzzle that everyday you have to figure out how the pieces fit together to tell the story of the day. Tell this story of who we are as a community for that day.

I loved the graphics. I loved the writing. I always really really loved working with my anchors and learning how to write in their voice. I took a lot of pride in being able to write in the voice I knew they could deliver.

AGUILAR: You're at KENS. How did KSAT get you?

KEARNEY: My director at KENS left, Mark left to go to KSAT because they made him an offer. I knew that I probably needed to leave that station, because I was probably always going to be considered the intern who made good versus a producer who was worth investing in. He came here (KSAT) to direct the 10 o'clock show and a few months later he called me and said the 10 o'clock producer leaving to go take a job somewhere else. He said, "You would love it here. You'd like it. You should come."

I was like "Well, tell the news director to give me a call" and Mark said, "Okay."

Mark hangs up and calls me back and says, "The news director if you want the job you better call him, he's not calling you."

I said, "Okay that's fair."

So I called (Jim) Boyle, and we talked on the phone and I said, "I understand you have a position open" and he said, "Yeah." At the time KENS was still number one and I said, "I would be interested in talking to you. Would you like me to send you a resume?" He laughed and said, "I can watch your work anytime I want." I said, "Well that's true" and he said, "In fact I know who you are."

He and I met a couple of times. Jim Boyle was the news director. He was very engaged. He was always talking to people. He would talk about your show with you. He would discuss stories. And I never saw Bob (KENS-TV news director) do that. It just felt like there was more energy in this room and I liked that.

The hardest thing about leaving KENS was I really loved producing for (Chris) Marrou. I loved it. I loved producing for Marrou (anchor) because he was willing to try new things and try different story treatments. He read so well. He understood how to take your script and bring it to life.

That was very hard for me. In hindsight, one thing I wish I had done was talk to him about the things I was considering. I don't know if it would have changed anything but I didn't show him the respect that I really should have, given that he really helped shape me as a storyteller. That is one regret I have.

So I come over here.

AGUILAR: You're the 10 o'clock producer.

KEARNEY: Yeah.

AGUILAR: How soon are you bumped up to executive producer?.

KEARNEY: So I went from 10 o'clock producer to senior producer. That kind of happened was interesting. The executive producer who was involved in my hiring, he left to work at KENS. He

left probably a year or I don't think it was a year. He left and I told Jim (news director) I wanted to be executive producer and he said, "No" and I said, "Oh okay."

He said, "You're not ready for that" and I was like, "Okay fine."

AGUILAR: Really you're fine or are you not thinking wait a minute, why not? Or do you just let things go?

KEARNEY: I let it go. I was fine. It's his party. He gets to invite the guests. Not long after that, again I don't remember the timing of this. I became senior producer because he didn't have an executive producer. He basically asked me to, I would still be producing my show, but I would help reporters with their writing. Check scripts. See if any of the other producers needed anything, any help.

AGUILAR: Just oversee...

KEARNEY: Yeah just do that.

AGUILAR: What do you think are the three characteristics, three things that have made you a success? Because when I look back you had no plan, you went with the flow. From my perspective, wow lucky woman. There had to be something that you were strategic about that now has helped you remain a success.

KEARNEY: I think going with the flow has been part of my success. I did that as a producer. When I was producer I would go with the flow. I was nimble. (snapping her fingers) I was moving. I was able to shift priorities and was able to shift whatever I needed to make that show a success. So it's very similar. Going with the flow with my career just worked out because I wanted it to work. I saw where I needed to shift, change direction or change tactic or whatever. So that is probably one of the biggest strengths, and enabled me to do that.

You know what? I don't want problems so I don't have problems. I don't have them, and I don't want them. That's why I let things roll off my back. More often than not, I don't want to have a problem, so I just don't.

If I had tried to manage my entire career, I probably would have left years ago. If I have let things like, "No you aren't ready to be executive producer, no you're not ready to be this, that or the other," if I would have let that get in my way I probably would have left years ago. I don't want any problems, so I don't have any problems. That has been my strategy I guess or why I have been able to continue to move forward and succeed and that kind of thing, because I shifted when I needed to. I didn't let things get me down and ruin me. I never needed to get to network. I never needed to get to a bigger market. I never needed to do whatever. I was happy.

I probably spend more time in this office than I should, but you know I like people. That goes back to my mom. I like talking to people. It's fun. I don't work at home by myself in a home office. I would actually, but I would miss people. I like being around people. I like to be around younger people. I like being around older people. I like being around people who are interested and interesting. I have whole bunch of people here who I find fascinating and I like talking to.

AGUILAR: You learned a lot from Jim Boyle (news director) right?

KEARNEY: Yes

AGUILAR: He was a people person. The kind of person who was out there engaging with his staff.

KEARNEY: He was very much like that. I by no means just like him. I hope in the right ways I am. He was a very smart news man. I learned a lot from him, but by no means am I on that same level and I know it.

He didn't care about digital. That was not his thing. He didn't understand it. He didn't like it. He knew it was necessary but that was not his gig. So, that's where I set my stake is on the digital side, because it is important.

AGUILAR: You've done a good job of diversifying your staff. There are a lot of women. A lot of people of color. Obviously you have LGBTQ people in here. Why has that been important? Because again, this is the business where we have heard the lip service about diversity, but when you look at your newsroom this is a reality.

KEARNY: I am a very believer that if we don't reflect our community, you can't possibly cover it. In all the ways it needs to be covered. I think it's important to have African-Americans on staff, and we have young people on the staff, and we have Hispanics on the staff. You said it earlier—

AGUILAR: Veterans.

KEARNEY: Yeah veterans. The person sitting at home can watch the news and see that the person who is reporting, and telling them this, looks like them.

AGUILAR: What do you say to the college student who wants to get into TV news, because right now it's the world of selfies. What advice do you have for them in order to take this business seriously?

KEARNY: I always tell people you have to write. You have to be a good writer. You better learn how to write and you have to be interested in things and you need to be interesting to people. Everybody is not going to be able to be a feature reporter. We don't even have feature reporters, but everyone can be an enterprise reporter. You look anywhere and you can find a story. Look behind you and you can find a story. Be thoughtful and have your ears and your eyes open, because if you bring stories that no one else is doing, your value is so much greater.

We get a lot of people coming, “I want to be an anchor.” I don’t need an anchor, I need good storytellers. I need good writers. I need good communicators. If you want to be an anchor, you can’t start as an anchor, you have to be a reporter. You have to get your hands and feet dirty. You have to be out on the streets. That was a good thing for me, to have done an internship with you and do the reporting.

AGUILAR: It got you out there.

KEARNEY: The world has changed a lot in those 30 years, but the idea that you have to be out and talking to people and listening to what they have to say, and what they are interested in, that doesn’t change.

AGUILAR: Do you see yourself ever retiring?

KEARNEY: (Laughs) Oh yes! I tell my boss, Phil, our GM, I’m always looking for an exit strategy.

AGUILAR: Seriously?

KEARNEY: Yeah! Why not? There will come a time when I want to retire. And I will want to retire to spend more time traveling or taking up a new hobby. I don’t know. Maybe someday I would actually like to learn how to cook. My husband does all the cooking so I don’t have no real need to be able to do this on a grand level, but someday I will take a cooking class or maybe someday I will live on a houseboat for a month or two months or something. I am definitely not the person who will work until I die.

AGUILAR: What last thought do you want them to have when you say, “Goodbye KSAT!.”

KEARNEY: I hope they will see that I loved working along side them and that I didn’t try big foot people, but that I tried to be part of the team to help them nurture and helped them grow and

develop. Just like I tried to grow and develop myself. I'm pretty good at strategy, not for me. So strategic planning is one of the things I do as a news director.

We're very lucky in San Antonio, because people still watch the news a lot. We're very lucky but that might not always be the case. They might want other ways to get the news. We're very fortunate that we have a robust digital audience and we're developing other platforms to help tell the stories of community.

I like being on the forefront of that, so I hope the Alicia's (reporter) and the Oriana's (producer) of the world, will when they are in my shoes, when Oriana is running a newsroom or whatever—that they will see that the choices that we made today, and that I helped us shape, and the product that I helped us shape, and the efforts that I helped to lead were first and foremost remaining about relevant to our audience and remaining a leader for the audiences that look to us for information.