

The Oral History of Jessie Degollado, reporter at KSAT 12 News

Journalist and Mayborn graduate student, Rebecca Aguilar conducted the oral history of Jessie Degollado, a reporter at KSAT 12 News in San Antonio, Texas. The interview was conducted March 9, 2019, at the television station.

AGUILAR: The Jessie Degollado of today; what would you tell the Jessie Degollado graduating from Baylor and ready to take on this journey?

DEGOLLADO: I would have said what I told myself then, never say never. Keep your options open. I knew that I loved print. I wanted to be a serious journalist. I told myself back then all those TV people are so full of hairspray, what do they know about real news. And I'm glad I didn't stick to that, because then I decided I'm tired of print, let me try radio. I did radio and that opened the door to television and that opened the door to where I am now.

I just told myself there is no way that you are going to try to limit yourself at this young age. How can you? That is not realistic.

AGUILAR: Where did you get that? I see a lot of confidence here. Obviously you had that confidence in college. I know you grew up in Laredo, right?

DEGOLLADO: Yes.

AGUILAR: Is it from your mother? Is it from your father? Is it something that just happened? Tell me about that.

DEGOLLADO: My father without a doubt. My father was very much a people person. My mother was more reticent, more cautious about her interactions with people. She'd always say, "Rodolfo why do you have to be friendly to everybody?" "Because that's who I am," he'd say. And I guess that's how I was.

I just knew that I was shy, painfully shy as a child. So shy that I would stutter. I couldn't look people in the eye. And yet in my father I saw someone very outgoing

and so warm. People responded to him and that reinforced that in me to try and get out of myself.

I was in my teens and by the time I reached eighteen I knew that I was having to function in the real world. My father used to tell me, “Jessie, don’t think that the rest of the world is this cocoon, that you’re in here as an only child. *No mijita*. it’s a cold cruel world out there.” Those were the exact words and of course so many people say, and you have to be ready for that, for anything.

AGUILAR: So he gave you a reality check early?

DEGOLLADO: Very much so.

AGUILAR: Why? Did he go through that himself?

DEGOLLADO: Well, he went from growing up the son of migrant workers in Laredo, following the cotton where ever it took them. So all he knew was that world, but then when World War II came he joined the army. He saw the world sort of speak, and saw some of the worst conditions, part of the Pacific. He lost his brother in the Pacific, but he was also exposed to other people from other parts of the country, and other parts of the world. So he came back with a renewed confidence that yes, I can handle whatever is out there. He never went to college, but he became a draftsman. He became a very good draftsman. He worked for one of the best architects in San Antonio at one point. He carved a way for himself.

AGUILAR: Tell me about your mom? Here’s your dad very outgoing, but your mom is more subdued. Right?

DEGOLLADO: Yes, funny lady. (laughs) She was great, but she was more than that. She was more than a good mother and good housewife. She was a good Christian and very active in her church. We are not Catholic, we were Baptist. She was really into missionary work. She served as a translator for a lot of the mission doctors who would travel into Mexico and along the border. She was very aware of the needs in South Texas and in Mexico and she was always wanted to help. She like my father would tell me, “Jessie don’t ever look down on someone. As they say here by the grace of God go any of us. That could be you. That could be us”. I

got that compassion, I suppose from my mother and I think I brought that with me to this business.

AGUILAR: So you have a little bit of each. You say that you stuttered.

DEGOLLADO: In junior high, that's when I had this serious one on one with myself. I said, "Jessie you cannot go on like this."

AGUILAR: What? You wouldn't talk?

DEGOLLADO: No, I would talk but I would be so nervous when I spoke and people would be very patient with me. Of course other kids laughed at me. I said, I can't go on like this. So what do I need to do? Well, do what you're most afraid of. What's that? Speaking to people.

So I challenged myself to take speech classes, speech courses in junior high and high school and at Baylor. The first few times in high school that I gave speeches before the class, I "stu..stu..stuttered," and everybody is giggling and laughing, but each time it got easier and easier.

What really worked for me was to get into drama in high school where I could pretend to be somebody else. Suddenly I had that confidence of not being me on stage, but being someone else. That's when I really came out. Speech and drama really helped out a lot. That's what I always tell kids when I go talk to them, and they say "What? You were shy, you stuttered?" And I always tell them, "Yeah and this is what I did, I'm not sure if it will work for you, but it certainly worked for me." By doing something that we are most afraid of, then we realize that we do have that strength, we do have that power to do what we need to do.

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

DEGOLLADO: Early on, when I was growing up. My grandmother who lived with us from Nuevo Laredo. She would sometimes stay with us in Laredo. And she'd always say, "*Mijita tráeme el periodico, El Diario y pon las noticias en la radio.*" She'd have me turn on the radio. She was really into the news and what was happening in Nuevo Laredo, and what was happening then as in now, a lot of

violence. She loved it. Also back then we would watch Channel 12, but back then it was 12 Star Final.

AGUILAR; You guys could get it in Laredo?

DEGOLLADO: Yes, we had cable. Laredo was one of the first cities in America that had cable. Little did I know, but yes. My grandmother didn't understand a word of what was going on, but loved seeing the ambulances and the gurneys, and the police crime scenes that we cover all the time.

And of course I grew up watching Walter Cronkite, Huntley and Brinkley, but I saw that and I thought I could do that. I also enjoyed writing, because as an only child, I read a great and so words and books were my best friends. I enjoyed writing.

I was the weird kid in the class and the teacher would ask "Okay time to write and essay or a theme." Everybody would be groaning and I would be like, "Okay, okay I got it." I would be in writing contests and all of that. I just knew early on that I wanted to be a writer. I thought a magazine writer and travel the world like National Geographic, but then I decided newspaper is where I wanted to be.

AGUILAR: Is this in high school?

DEGOLLADO: This is from high school to college.

AGUILAR: Why did you decide on Baylor?

DEGOLLADO: I would read Seventeen Magazine, the back to college issue and I would see all these young women attending Ivy League schools, Sarah Lawrence, Barnard, all these colleges in the East and I thought, "Oh boy I would love to go there someday." So I was always yearning to go on to something, but I thought I can't go there, but I'll go to the University of Texas, and then the sniper happened at UT Austin. My mother and I were watching it on TV and my mother said, "*No vas a ir*. You're not going to UT, no!."

We were active in the Baptist church, and the pastor encouraged me to apply for a Baptist scholarship which I got. Thank God, and that's how I went to Baylor. Actually I started going to Mary Hardin-Baylor, because back then it was a small women's college in Belton. It's still there, but it's coed.

At any rate, I went to Dallas to accept the scholarship. The gentlemen at the Baptist General convention of Texas said, "Jessie I'm so sorry to tell you that Mary Hardin-Baylor just phased out its journalism program."

I said, "Okay, so what do I do?"

He said, "Well Baylor has excellent program."

I said, "I know but it's Baylor, I know it has an excellent school." He said, "Hold on a second." He picked up the phone, called the Registrar, and said, "I have a young woman here from Laredo, she's one of our new scholarship recipients," and he explained the situation with Mary Hardin and he said, "okay great, all right, good I'll tell her. You're in."

AGUILAR: One phone call.

DEGOLLADO: One phone call. A little girl from Laredo, Texas at Baylor University with students from some of the best schools in the state and across the country. And here I am coming from Martin High School in Laredo, not even Nixon that was considered a newer and a better school. (laughs)

I was so nervous and I started feeling that insecurity, that stuttering, that feeling inside of me. I don't know if I belong here, I don't know if I can do this, but I still pursued journalism courses, and I decided to start volunteering, sort of speak, no pay as they say at the Baylor Lariat. Back then I was just a gofer. Go across to Baylor Drug and get us some grilled cheese sandwiches and Dr. Peppers, cut the wire and things like that. I was like, okay that's fun. At least I'm here with everybody else and kind of observing a newsroom.

AGUILAR: Is this as a freshman, sophomore?

DEGOLLADO: As a freshman I was already involved. I would do anything it took. But after a while, after six weeks of that I got a little discouraged and I went down to talk to Dave Cheavens, the late Dave Cheavens. The chairman of the Journalism Department at Baylor, and I told him, “Mr. Cheavens I love what I do but I want to do more. I’m just running errands for people.” And he said, “Jessie, if you can do the small things well, you just wait, you’re going to be doing bigger things even more. You’re going to realize that you have what it takes. And sure enough by my senior year I was a paid staff writer for the Baylor Lariat and that open the door journalism internships at the Laredo Times.

AGUILAR: Do you remember the first story you wrote?

DEGOLLADO: (laughs) For the Baylor paper?

AGUILAR: That was published?

DEGOLLADO: I wish I did, because I know it was the 60’s and even Baylor at the time had anti-war sentiments against the Vietnam war. I covered a lot of demonstrations. There was some discontent among some of the campus women, because they were being relegated to strict dress code at the time. They wanted more freedom.

AGUILAR: It really is the hippie era, right?

DEGOLLADO: Yes, yes! So we would do those kind of interviews. The wonderful thing about the Baylor Lariat, to this to this day it functions like a real newspaper. This is not just a college newspaper. No, it is run like any daily, like any weekly, with professional standards and expectations.

AGUILAR: With great stories for sure.

DEGOLLADO: Yes.

AGUILAR: In college, did you have a mentor. Did you have people tell you, “You can do this?” or did you have people say, “No, not really?”

DEGOLLADO: Thank God, I had people who took me under their wing. Mike Strickland was one. He was kind of a teacher's aide, but he had also attended Baylor. He had worked for the Peace Corp in Latin America. When I came he would always try a little Portuguese on me and I would try a little Spanish on him. (laughs). But David McHam is the one who saw in me what I could be.

And I will never forget this and this is what I tell young women, especially young Latinas, teenagers, college age, again its the Vietnam war. My high school sweetheart had gone to Vietnam and fought two tours there. He came back and he came to Baylor to see me.

The day he came back I got a call from Columbia University offering me a full graduate fellowship to Columbia University. "Oh that's wonderful, but I have to say I'm sorry I can't. My boyfriend just got back from Vietnam, and we're going to get married I think. So, thank you but no." David McHam was disappointed, because he had gone to Columbia. He had opened the door and I had said, "No thanks."

And this is what I tell young women, the boy who was I thought was the love of my life, that marriage lasted three years and he was gone. So, there you go. But never say never, don't always look back with regret. Look back with what you learned. Had it not been for all this (makes zig-zag hand motion) I wouldn't be here today.

AGUILAR: It's interesting, because when you were telling me that, I was just about to say so that's one of your regrets, but it isn't. You used it as a learning experience.

DEGOLLADO: Again that's from my parents. They've always believed in that even in worst of times there is some good. I think it's their faith that they see that and believe that and I do too.

AGUILAR: Then it's time to graduate. What happens next?

DEGOLLADO: I did marry that boy my senior year in college, only to divorce a few years later.

AGUILAR: Where did you land after Baylor and after the marriage?

DEGOLLADO: I knew I wanted to try something different. So the radio station in Laredo that people would always listen to for midday news had a reputation of being a strong news oriented station along with popular music I said let me go down there and just try.

So I walked in cold, cold, cold. GM had me sit down and I introduced myself and he said, "Wait, you have a great voice for radio." I said, "I do?"

"Yes, yes you do," and when I told him my background, he said, "You're hired." I started off as a reporter in a reporting staff of one. I was it and a news director and he was a hard nose and I am glad he was. Again it taught me a lot about the pressure of broadcast.

I have to tell you about my first radio broadcast that I remember very well. Back then the newsroom was right here with a microphone and there was a window with a disc jockey on the other side. And he came in and he knew it was going to be my first broadcast. The disc jockey came out while the music was playing and said, "Okay when I point to you, you go." Because it was a bulletin of some sort.

I said, "Okay I'm ready, I'm ready."

He said, "Okay good." (She motions someone pointing)

"This just in." And I got through the whole thing, maybe two or three minutes, and he came in afterwards and says, "Great job! Great job!"

"Really?"

"Yes, except one thing."

"What?"

He said, “Next time try to get a chair that doesn’t squeak, because you were moving around a lot and the chair was squeaking. (She starts laughing.) It was my first radio broadcast.

AGUILAR: Oh my gosh.

DEGOLLADO: But it got better and better, believe me.

AGUILAR: I’m seeing a pattern here. You walk into the school. The teachers love you and they are encouraging you. You walk into the Laredo paper. Boom! You have a job there. You walk into the radio station. You have a great voice. Boom! Another job. It just seems like the opportunities and timing has always been just right.

DEGOLLADO : I like to say and again it’s my faith. I like to feel it was because of my parent’s prayers. They would always say, “*mijita estamos oramos por ti*. We’re praying for you *mijita*, we’re praying for you.”

And so in that regard I feel blessed even when there was a story that we have been struggling to get and then suddenly it works out. I say, “Thank you God, thank you mom and dad.”

I just think, and people who don’t have that kind of faith which I respect, each to his own, but for me I think people feel that about me, I would hope.

AGUILAR: How long are you at that radio station? And again, is this where you developed your voice, because you have one of the best deliveries I know?

DEGOLLADO: Thank you very much. There at the radio station and also in drama. Again, I didn’t want to sound like I was just reading a story. I wanted to say it such a way, a conversational way, speak in a way that people’s ears would perk up. As opposed to going on and on, reading a script or reading whatever is in front of me. That’s what I try to do every time I go into that audio booth, is to try to bring some life and some energy.

AGUILAR: You’re at the radio station, and then you just fall into TV?

DEGOLLADO: Therein lies, as they say, the rest of the story. A fellow who used to work there, in fact the disc jockey who pointed at me like that (she points away) he was a newsman in himself. He is the one who would tell me, “The secret to broadcast journalism is to attach your mouth to your eyes, your eyes to your mouth and say what you see.”

So that fellow went to KRGV, the NBC affiliate in Westlaco, Texas. He spoke to the news director, Bill Spangler. He called me and said, “Jessie, the news director wants to hire you.”

“Wait a minute, Bill I’ve never done television and I have glasses the size of coke bottles.”

He said, “Well that’s why God invented contact lenses. Come on he wants to hire you. Come down and at least talk to him, would you please?”

I said, “Ok Bill, for you I’ll go down and visit with him”

Sure enough the legendary Rick Diaz who was still in the valley. He hired me right then and there. Another blessing and seven of the best years in my life were at KRGV working in the Rio Grand Valley. It gave me tremendous experience.

AGUILAR: Because it’s really a great news market?

DEGOLLADO: Oh huge! You have political news, you have immigration, you have crime. You have it all. You have international news. You have Mexico right there. It was just so rich in opportunities. It was great. It was just wonderful.

AGUILAR: You’re a reporter, but you eventually become an anchor, right?

DEGOLLADO: Yes, I was a general assignments reporter and at one time (laughs) I was doing it all. Back then we were a small operation and at one point I was actually the assignments manager, producer, anchor and the reporter. When I would get on the anchor desk, I would look at the rundown and go, “This is my

newscast (laughs) and I wrote that story and I wrote that story, and that's my package."

AGUILAR: It was all you.

DEGOLLADO: Yes, it was all me. (laughs) We worked as a tag team and I would shoot the other reporters story and they would shoot mine on film. We started out on film.

AGUILAR: It really has come full circle because they do that now?

DEGOLLADO: MMJ's

AGUILAR: What was one of the biggest stories that you covered when you were in the Valley?

DEGOLLADO: The most exciting news stories, I would imagine in late 70's, early 80's. It was a big farmer's strike over farm subsidies in the United States, back then. And of course they were very weary about Mexican goods, products competing with Mexico's agriculture industry. And so thousands of farmers ended up on the Hidalgo bridge, demonstrating, and there was a small army of DPS troopers armed and tear gas ready and riot ready.

They were in full riot gear and sure enough, all hell broke loose and we were right in the middle of it. Tear gas and everything. For me that was one of the most exciting stories, because it was happening all around me. Yes, I it was a day that I will never forget.

AGUILAR: You've never been scared on assignment or have you?

DEGOLLADO: One time during a hostage situation at Pan-American University. That's what it was called back then. A student had taken a class hostage and he had a rifle. He was shooting at officers who were outside. Imagine that was then not now. The other reporter and I were running between pillars for cover, but still trying to get the shot that we needed. And we heard, "Zing! Zing!" (makes motion

with hand going by her head). Today they keep us way back, not anywhere near. At that point I was like “what was that? That was a bullet.”

AGUILAR: You’re there in Laredo. You make your mark there. And then do you come to KSAT?

DEGOLLADO: I went to the valley. I worked in Westlaco. I had re-married, but before we divorced more than ten years later, my husband had been promoted and transferred to San Antonio. I started putting out feelers, here and in Austin and I’m proud to say all the stations offered me a job and KSAT made me the best offer.

And mind you, Bill Church was the news director back then. God bless him.

AGUILAR: What year was that?

DEGOLLADO: ’77 I think it was.

AGUILAR: Do you remember the first story you did here (KSAT)?

DEGOLLADO: It was one of those stories involving handicapped children on horses.

AGUILAR: Has there ever been a time in your 35 years that you thought, “You know what I need to do something else” or is it just embedded in your soul?

DEGOLLADO: Interesting you should say that, because there was a six month period where I did try something else.

AGUILAR: You walked away from here (KSAT)?

DEGOLLADO: Soon after I was hired and after working here for three, four or five months, I got a call from a big public relations firm that I earlier visited with as I was exploring my options as I was considering moving to San Antonio. They called me and said, “Okay we have a position and its a management position. Would you be interested and it pays this much.”

AGUILAR: More than here?

DEGOLLADO: More than here. “All right I’m very interested, let me see what I can do.”

I went to Jim and I said, “Jim I’m sorry, I’m in a very awkward position. I just want to get it out of my system and try something else to see if that is really what I want to do.” And he said, “Look I understand, if it doesn’t work out, come back okay?”

I said, “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” And sure enough after six months I called him and said, “Take me back, take me back!”

AGUILAR: What was it?

DEGOLLADO: I just couldn’t handle public relations. I just couldn’t do it.

AGUILAR: Were you missing the deadlines, and the adrenalin rush?

DEGOLLADO: Believe it or not, sometimes we wonder as reporters whether we actually do have more control over a situation. Yet we do. I’m in an interview now. I need to talk to —and do get this video. I need to do that. In the corporate world there are layers of approval. All eyes have to approve what you are doing and saying. It just wasn’t a good fit. I felt like a square peg in a round hole. It just wasn’t for me.

AGUILAR: If you had to look at your 35 years here (KSAT). What would be your top five memorable stories that you thought thank God I was there? Where history happened or an interview that you were glad to get. I’m sure you have a gazillion of them.

DEGOLLADO: Certainly, some of the hardest stories I ever had to do was speaking to grieving families of the fallen during the Iraq war. It seemed like every week we had to talk to a family about their son or daughter killed in action. That was really, really tough.

One time, a photographer and I went out to South Bexar County. A young marine had been killed in Fallujah. So we're going down this country road and there is a man who greets us. And I said, "We're looking for the parents of ...". And he said, "Yes, come in."

The Marines had just left from notifying them. And yet they were gracious enough to let us enough to talk to us about their son. (sighs)

AGUILAR: How did you handle those?

DEGOLLADO : It was tough holding back the tears, because this family was just devastated, especially the father. I ran into them some years ago and they are still not the same.

AGUILAR: What helps you function outside this newsroom? You've been here 35 years. You've been in the business how long?

DEGOLLADO : Well since '77. Home sweet home. (laughs) I'm blessed to be in a relationship almost 30 years ourselves.

AGUILAR: He understands the job? He knows sometimes you won't be there on his birthday, Christmas, Thanksgiving or whatever?

DEGOLLADO: Yeah he knows and he's a news junkie. He's very attuned to what I do and that helps.

I tell young female reporters that whomever you have a relationship with must be secure in themselves and in you, because you spend eight or nine hours a day with another man, a photographer.

AGUILAR: Did you ever get caught up in that insecurity, oh no here comes this younger woman she may take my job? It appears to me you didn't get caught up in that mess.

DEGOLLADO: I helped that I was no longer an anchor after I left the valley. I think as an anchor I would have been a lot more nervous. That's why when I

became a reporter I thought, thank God! I don't always have to be looking over my shoulder and think, how many tapes does Jim have on his desk or who's coming.

I always tell people, I may not be the youngest or the prettiest or the thinnest (laughs) but I have a reputation. I think that counts.

AGUILAR: What do you tell Latinas out there, because we're still few in newsrooms. What do we do to open doors? What do we do to survive? Because you are one of the few who has survived this long.

DEGOLLADO: It helps to be bilingual and not just have a Hispanic surname. That is something not many people have these days. Thank goodness we have more Latinas here who are bilingual. Bill Barajas is bilingual. Alicia Barrera is bilingual.

They're wonderful and when I see them I am so proud and so encouraged to know that I am not the only one. What you and I knew at one time.

Just know that it is possible and again you don't always have to count on your looks, especially if you want to be a reporter. Yes, looks are important because you want to be presentable on camera. You don't to distract from the story, but know that the viewers and readers (online) want to know that we are telling the story accurately. And that we are going a step beyond to go a step beyond to get deeper and hopefully tell another angle.

So I think they should find encouragement and the progress we've made and build their skills. Make the most of their skills.

AGUILAR: Do you see yourself every telling Bernice (news director), "I'm done!"

DEGOLLADO: I'm done! (laughs) That will be the day. Well, that day will come. I'm sure it will, but not right now. I tell people as long as I am willing and as long as I'm able physically and mentally, I still want to do it, I'm still enthusiastic about what I do. Believe it or not even after all these years.

I'm so proud to be at KSAT and this point of my career because I can look back and see that this—where we are now, is where KSAT always wanted to be. Where

so many of us had worked so hard. Jim Boyle (former news director) laid the ground work for all the talent he hired and he encouraged and built. And now Bernice is built on top of that and now we have some of the best people in the business and I'm working for some of the best people in the business.

I don't need to go to New York, I don't need to go to Chicago, I don't need to go to LA. I'm at one of the best stations in the country.