



Oral History of Rebecca Lopez

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Transcript of Rebecca Lopez Interview

Rebecca Lopez: So I have been here for 22 years. I've mainly covered the Dallas Police Department. I cover law enforcement, but I also cover the Dallas Cowboys. And I'm on the Dallas Cowboys because I'm a big, big sports fan. So I've also covered everything from the World Series to Su—

We haven't had a Super Bowl since I've been here because they haven't been to the Super Bowl, but I've covered a couple playoff games. I covered the Mavs in the NBA finals. You know, some pretty cool stuff.

But then I've also been to some of the biggest things in our history, like July 7th when the officers were shot and killed in downtown Dallas. I was down there that night.

I've just had an incredible career of covering some of the biggest stories in our nation's history. So I started at the University of North Texas. I got an internship there at what is now Fox 4. At the time it was KDFW. And I got to go to the Democratic and the Republican National Conventions as an intern in 1988. So I got to meet a lot of celebrities and top political leaders.

John F. Kennedy Jr. to President Bush, who wasn't the president at the time. But, you know, I got to meet a lot of really incredible people. And from there, I got my first job back in my hometown in Midland-Odessa, and I was there for only about a year and a half. And I got a job in Corpus Christi. I was only there, like eight months when a news director in Austin saw me and I had broken a really, really, really big national story that actually was international. A woman was excommunicated from the Catholic Church over the issue of abortion, and that never happened before. So even the Vatican ended up having to do a statement, it was [on] the front cover of Time magazine. And that story landed me in Austin.

So I was there for five years when I covered the Oklahoma City bombing, the siege at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco. I covered the Cowboys there when they were at training camp. And then from there I went on to Phoenix for three years where I covered, I was an investigative reporter and covered police as well and did some really big stories there and then came to Dallas to my dream job. When I was in college I wrote a little note and it said to myself of where I wanted to work. And at the top of the list was WFAA. And I said I wanted to be there within ten years of graduating and how much money I wanted to make.

And I – I got the job almost ten years to the day that I wrote that note. So I believe in if you write these, if you believe in things, then you will succeed.

Tiffany Martinez: Okay, that's super cool.

Lopez: Yeah.

Martinez: So speaking of goals, what was your journey from growing up, to being a reporter?

So I grew up in Odessa, Texas, in West Texas. I was in the band. I played the flute. I was on the flag corp, I was a pipette [laughs]

Martinez: [laughs] I played saxophone.

Lopez: Yeah, Oh, yeah. So I went to Odessa Permian, which is Friday Night Lights, the book, Friday Night Lights, the movie, all of that. So I did ...

So I was a big, big football fan, which is why I get to cover the Cowboys sometimes. So I just, you know, just grew up regular small town girl. I had never driven on a freeway until I got to Denton, to the University of North Texas. I was scared. I like I like driving like this with my knuckles on the – white knuckles on the steering wheel, because it was kind of scary. But yeah, I didn't know I was gonna go to broadcasting. There was one girl on television, Lydia Evaro, and she did ... looked like – I think she did some weather, she was the only Latina I had ever seen on television in news. And I thought, wow, that's kind of cool. But I still didn't really think that I was going to get into broadcasting until my junior year at UNT.

The dean of students at the time said 'you should think about taking some speech classes.'

So I didn't know that I was gonna do, so I took an aptitude test.

And at the top of that test was a lawyer and a broadcaster or a journalist. And so TV broadcasters, so I took some radio TV film classes. That's how I got started.

Martinez: So would you say that diversity is something that—

Lopez: Absolutely.

That is one of the reasons when I really looked back on it now that I decided to go ahead and do that because I felt like there wasn't enough representation, especially of Latino stories. So when I was in Odessa, in West Texas, you know, again, there were no Latinos in television, really.

And so I was there and I think when I got to Corpus Christi, there was another Latina, but there were very few of us at the time. Gloria Campos, who was a longtime anchor here, was my mentor.

And she encouraged me in college to continue to pursue my goals as a reporter.

And she helped me. She mentored me along the way because there's a lot of pitfalls, especially as a female journalist at the time, because it was pretty much a male-dominated industry at that time. When I first walked into Channel 8, there were maybe four or five of us that were female reporters.

And we didn't get the big assignments. The big assignments went to all the guys. We just didn't get the big assignments.

But that has changed. Now we have a female news director and a female general manager and half of our producers are women and the majority of our reporters are women. So times have changed in the 22 years that I've been here.

Martinez: And aside from times changing, what, I guess, what have you also experienced and seen that has contributed to that change?

Lopez: Well, I think, you know, as women, you know, we bring a different perspective.

It's important to have different voices. And that's why diversity is so important to have those different perspectives and different voices. So I have seen, like our newsroom now, we have a Asian American and we have an Indian American and we have Latinos, African Americans. And so I have seen that transformation over the years of more inclusion, because I think that what happened was people realized, you know, we are not just one ... when I first got to WFAA our four main anchors, no offense, were all four white guys. And that has changed over the years tremendously because I think that we realized that if we wanted to get a bigger audience, we have to speak to what we look like as a society. And I have seen that change tremendously over the years, yeah.

Martinez: That's pretty cool. Speaking of support and everything, how is your family? Were they supportive?

Lopez: Oh, yeah. My parents were very, very excited. They get nervous. You know, they get scared because I've been in tornadoes, hurricanes, riots, I was at downtown Dallas during the shootings. So they get nervous. I cover a lot of controversial stories now because I do more investigative work and a lot of law enforcement.

So, I mean, sometimes we get death threats. Sometimes we get, it's kind of crazy in this day and age. So, yeah, they're supportive, but they get scared. I will say that, you know, the career was very demanding. And so I was married and then I got divorced. It was very demanding for me. And I do have a son and he's amazing. He is probably gonna go off to USC film school this year. Yeah. And so I'm most proud of him as my accomplishment. Even more so. I just won two Emmys this weekend.

But that is not even my greatest accomplishment. He is.

Martinez: And how is that work-life balance with being a journalist?

Lopez: Well, I cover the Dallas Police Department, it was 24/7. I mean, my phone rings at, you know, two o'clock in the morning with officers calling me with tips and stuff – it gets difficult. It

gets hard. It was very demanding and that can be hard to balance. Now, as I get older, I think I've kind of slowed down a little bit. I mean, I'm still going pretty hard but not as vast and paced as it used to be, I've come to try to slow down so ...

But I've been I've been very fortunate in my career, I've not only covered some of the biggest events, I've interviewed some of the top people in the country, in the world. I interviewed Oprah Winfrey, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Cicely Tyson, LeBron James, Bill Cosby before the whole controversy. I look back now and I wish I'd written down – I wish I'd kept a diary of everything that I've done every day, because every day is a different experience.

And I've been very fortunate to interview some of the best people and top leaders in our country. I was at the White House. I got to meet President Obama.

I just recently met Michelle Obama.

I didn't get to interview her, but I've been working on an interview with her. But I got to meet her. So the the career gives you an opportunity to be among some of the most fascinating people in the world.

Yeah, now, I've won the six Emmys, but I've also won an Edward R. Murrow National. And that was for our coverage of domestic violence because I feel like we have to be a voice for the voiceless. And that to me is probably the award that I received that meant the most to me because we won the award, unfortunately, over a tragic event of a woman by the name of Deanna Cook, who died while on the phone with 9-1-1.

And her case was messed up. And the way that it was handled from the 9 11 call taker to DPD to— She just didn't get the help she needed in time, and she was murdered while on the phone. But our stories changed the way the Dallas Police Department responded to domestic violence calls. It led to a bunch of big changes. The mayor of Dallas took domestic violence on as his cause. So there were—I think as journalists, that's also our goal is to bring about change, to bring bring out the truth.

Martinez: A call for action?

Lopez: Yeah, I mean, we live in our community. We want our communities to be better, too. People think that we're somehow just talking head on television, but we live in the communities and we want the best for people as well.

And so that was a great accomplishment, it wasn't just me, but it was a team of reporters. And we did a series of domestic violence pieces and we won the Edward R Murrow for that. That was that was quite a feat.

Martinez: That's really quite the experience. Considering all these experiences that you've had what were some of the biggest life lessons you've learned throughout your journey?

Lopez: You know what? I feel like we meet people on their worst days of their lives sometimes. And for me, because I cover crime. But what I've learned is to find hope, even in tragedy. So take, for example, on July 7th. When five officers were killed in downtown Dallas, four Dallas police officers. One DART officer in the midst of all of that. There was heroism. There were officers who saved civilians lives who literally threw themselves in front of bullets to firefighters who took gunfire as they're going in their fire trucks and DPD is telling them 'get out of here.' They're under fire, they don't have bulletproof vests. They don't have guns. And these firefighters are still going through to get to the fallen officers to help the DPD officers that have been shot.

And to me, that's the human spirit. So for me, one of the greatest lessons I have learned is that the human spirit will always trump evil.

The good in people still trumps evil. And I cover a lot of evil and a lot of bad things that I always see that there is a human side and that there are people that come together. And I still I still believe that there are more good people than bad.

Martinez: How long have you covered crime?

Lopez: Oh, almost since the beginning of my 30 something years. The DPD since 2003.

Martinez What has drawn you into it? Was it an accident or did you know that—

Lopez: I think I was just really good at developing sources, which is really key for where I was at. People feel comfortable talking to me. And one of the things that you have to do as a journalist is you have to maintain people's anonymity. You have to protect your sources. And they trust me, man. I've never done anything that has compromised a source. Even when the Dallas Police Department has called me from Internal Affairs, saying 'Who gave you that information?' I have never compromised any of my sources. And what's important is to build trust with people and they trust me.

And that took time, it took years. But I've gotten to a point where people just say they want to tell their stories, even from within a department right now that is struggling. But I think that I've just always been drawn to law enforcement and the courts, because I think it's—we all want to feel safe. And it's important for us to let the public know. Public safety is probably one of the things that people are most concerned about. Well it's one of the top. When you look at research public safety is up there and it's an important position.

Martinez: And considering since you talked about not compromising resources, what about your ethics? Have your ethics changed or are you dead set on them?

Lopez: I grew up in being trained by some of the best in the business. A woman by the name of Carole Kneeland, who was the news director at KVUE in Austin. And my mentors have always

been Big J journalists. You know, there's this line that you don't cross. They are these you know, you always follow the facts.

Stick with the facts. Stick with the facts. Stick with the facts.

So many people want their opinions into pieces. But you can't. I mean, at some times it's unpopular to do some of the stories that we do, but we have to stick to facts and we cannot let people dictate to us and let us be called big news or whatever. We have to stick to our principles and our guiding principles and our ethics, and that is to tell the truth and go where the facts lead you.

Whether it's a popular story or not. I mean, I have done a lot of stories exposing some of the people that are leading some of the protests here in Dallas against police. That's not popular sometimes because, for instance, one of the lead guys is a convicted felon who is under two criminal investigations. Now, they don't like when you point that stuff out because they want you to cover news the way they want you to cover it from only their perspective, but you can't do that. You have to cover both sides. The Dallas Police officers have a voice as much as community activists have a voice. And you cannot allow people to pressure you into.

Covering news the way you want it to be covered, whether it's from the White House, from the police chief, from the mayor, from the city council, you have to go where the facts lead you. And yet you have to stick to your principles and you have to stick to your ethics. That's what we're here to do. We're journalists. I think a lot of people want you to be a PR department for them, like I cover the Dallas Police Department, they only want me to do the hunky dory stories about them. But that's not what's happening with the Dallas Police Department. It's a department in complete right now. So that's where you become unpopular with the people at the top. When you have to tell the truth about what's really happening inside. Again, stick to your ethics, stick to your principles and follow the facts.

Martinez: Especially considering journalists are being called fake news and being pushed around.

Lopez: And it's easy to not get threatened or I mean, it's easy to go the other route, to just be handed the press release or just take facts at face value that are given to you by people that are being paid to feed you facts. Or do you take that and then you go and you start taking and researching on your own and find out and go down another layer and another layer and another layer to the truth.

And so there's so many reporters, I don't want to say that they're lazy or complacent, but it's easy just to take what is given to you instead of digging. But it's important that we dig and that we find the truth.

And it may make you unpopular.

You might get threatened. You might be called fake news, but you have to keep telling the truth. That's why we're here. That's the core of who we are, as journalists. Truth finders.

Martinez: And is that something that you knew straight into going into your courses?

Lopez: Yeah.

Yeah. I knew, I've had incredible mentors who have.

Carole Kneeland, when she was here at WFAA and then became the news director at KVUE.

She brought down a governor, you know, for corruption. Some of our reporters in this newsroom have exposed some of the greatest injustices in this city and in this county. And if we don't hold public officials accountable, if we don't hold those folks accountable, who will. Like who's spending your tax dollars, where's your money going? What connections do they have? I mean, what policies are being made because so-and-so has. It's it's up to us. It's up to us as journalists.

So many people don't want to do that because I think we've grown up in a time now, at least the younger generation with fast paced, fancy video and all of that. And that's great. I love it. You have to keep moving with the times and and you have to change the way you edit and all of that. But at the core, you still have to have good journalism, good writing, good fact finders, people that are out there telling the truth. And that's harder and harder, I think, to find in this day and age, because people like the flash and the featurey story. That's great because they're wonderful stories to tell. And we want to tell the stories, positive stories of the human spirit.

But there's also people over here that are doing corrupt things and we can't be bullied into not telling those stories. And it takes courage. It takes courage to do what we do.

Martinez: And I've seen your cover on social media like the Amber Guyger trial.

Lopez: Yeah. In fact I'm speaking to the Dallas Bar Association right now after this.

[Rebecca Lopez's phone rings]

Yeah, I'm in the building, I'm downstairs in the studio. Then I'm gonna head over to the bar association thing.

I don't know, in about 15 minutes or so. Yeah, alright bye.

[Phone call ends]

We're both speaking because we covered the Amber Guyger trial. So that was another story. That story got us a lot of hate mail. Tanya and I. And we just won the Emmy for it because early

on people started putting out false information on social media. Social media is a great thing, but it can also be our greatest enemy in this day and age because immediately they started putting out a picture on social media. Somebody put out a picture saying that Amber Guyger knew both John and here they are in this picture together. It wasn't Amber Guyger.

And then they put out this police officer saying this is the woman that shot Botham Jean, but it was the wrong police officer. It was a different Dallas police officer. So that officer started getting threats. And then it was a fiasco of how people use that to politicize their agendas. They wanted a certain narrative out there. So they began pushing all this stuff out, which wasn't true.

There was early on somebody said that there was a witness that heard Amber Guyger kicking in the door. But we knew early on from our sources that that wasn't the truth. And so eventually it all came out in trial. But early on, we said we were trying to set the record straight by putting out both sides of the story.

Well, there was a group of people that were putting out false information and so when we corrected them on this and did the stories of what was really happening, that made us unpopular with certain segments of the community. But then you also had police officers upset because they felt that we weren't telling, you know, the story correctly from Amber Guyger's point of view as well. So there was all of this like just angst around this story. And I can understand why, because there had been injustices against African-American men in this country.

I've covered many of those stories before. This became an issue that for two decades before there were videos of people that had said that things were happening to them. So I understand the frustration of the black community and the African-American community, especially black men, of how they're being treated by police because they've happened. But on the other side, there's also a lot of great men and women that put their lives on the line every day to protect us. And we need police, we need police. We need people to keep law and order. The majority of the Dallas police officers or police officers in this country are good people. So it's hard when something like this happens.

And you have these two factions that are, you know, fighting against one another to stay in the middle and to stay the course, because it's easy to want to go this route. And there are some journalists that went that route and there are some journalists that went this route. We tried to stay in the middle and tell the facts. We go where the facts lead us.

Also, there was a witness that was murdered early on.

People are like, oh, they had him murdered. The Dallas Police Association and others, they started tweeting out wrong information about that. This guy was somehow targeted because he was a witness in the Amber Guyger case. Now, the guy was a drug dealer who shot a 20-year-old guy before he was shot and killed. He was a known drug dealer, had a long criminal

history of being a drug dealer. He was afraid to testify of Amber Guyger, because he was a drug dealer.

He was a drug dealer who had lived life on the edge, had been stealing drugs from other drug dealers. His reputation was legendary. He just happened to be living next door to Botham Jean and heard what happened. His testimony wasn't even that critical in the trial. All this false information out about his death. So we did the story showing that he had a long history and that two people had been shot because of him.

And so people didn't like that.

A certain part of the community thought that we were somehow blaming the victim. I'm like, he was a drug dealer who shot a guy right before he was shot in a drug deal. Those are the facts. So you can't be upset when we tell the facts, but you can't allow people to spew false information that will further divide the city without setting the record straight.

And that is an unpopular piece sometimes.

And again, that's why we have to be courageous to go out there and tell the facts and the truth of what's actually happening.

Martinez: So with the fact checking that you mentioned and trying to keep false information out, how do you approach your work and how would you want your stories and career to be remembered?

Lopez: Well, I would I want my career to be remembered as a person who told the truth, made a difference. And maybe impacted people's lives where we brought about change that made our community better. Like in the domestic violence (story) where DPD had to change the way they responded. To get to tell the stories that matter to us. That's how I want to be remembered.

Yeah, someone who followed the facts and did the best to tell the truth on both sides.

Martinez: That's a good goal.

Lopez: Yeah, it could be, you know, especially when you're covering controversial issues. I had to interview David Duke once, the head of the Ku Klux Klan. So sometimes as journalists, we have to, we do interviews we may not want to do.

But again, David Duke had a rally in Austin and he was upset about some things, and of course we had to go and tell the other side of the story. But we did his piece on the fact that they were there to protest certain things.

And I mean, we have to be careful also that we don't give people a voice who don't deserve a voice. I mean, what I'm saying is so we can't just allow people to tell lies on our air.

You know, we have to, but we also have to be balanced and tell both sides of stories and sometimes it's hard to do that.

Martinez: And he and I (referencing Jelani Gibson who was also present for interview) have both worked at the newspaper at UNT. But we're among all these aspiring journalists. What advice would you give those students, especially in such a day and age?

Lopez: Well, I'm going to tell you what one of my professors at UNT told me. He said, "if you do not have Teflon skin and allow things to bounce off of you, and you're thin skinned, you need to get up out of this room and walk out the door, because our job is not to be loved by the community and to be loved by people. Our job is to be journalists." And that, again, is unpopular sometimes.

And so if you can't withstand criticism, if you cannot withstand going out there and doing your job and not allowing people to say, bully you, then you probably need to not be a reporter, especially in this day and age.

You have to be tough. I mean, there are different variety of reporters. And we also need reporters that can do feature news, that can tell that we have amazing reporters--Sean Giggy who gets on our morning show every day and tells his great positive stories. And I love that. But Sean Giggy could also be thrown into a big spot news story if he wanted to.

But I mean, I just say to be courageous and stick to what are, I guess, the founding fathers of journalism that, you know, that was your First Amendment right. And people's First Amendment rights to speak and to tell the truth and to have a voice. And it is up to us to give our community a voice. And we can't be afraid to do that.

So I would say if you are not tough and you don't really want to go out there--you just want to be on TV or make a name for yourself--this is not the business for you. Because that will only be short lived.

I know so many women and men that got on television because they wanted to be on TV. "Yeah, I want to be on television." You won't last. Not in this environment, in this day and age.

Martinez: Yeah. It's very much an on-call job.

Lopez: And you have to be willing to sacrifice time, holidays, Christmases, time with your family. Yeah, it's it's it's not an easy--if you want to make it to this level of journalism--you have to sacrifice and you have to be thick skinned.

Martinez: And it sounds like you found such amazing mentors.

Lopez: I have had *great* mentors.

Martinez: Who, I guess, has had the most influence in your life?

Lopez: Gloria Campos. [Adamantly] Gloria took me when I was a little reporter--your age--and she mentored me and she encouraged me. And I think it's so important that we empower others as we get up in our careers. I mean, I probably get to retire in the next three to four years, maybe five. Gotta get a kid through USC.

And I think that it's important that we take what we've been given and pour that into some other other young journalists so that they can carry the torch. Because again, I just sometimes feel like we're a dying breed--those that really want investigative journalism and that really want to go out there and be a *journalist* and not just on television. And I would hope that there's more and more of us that will, as we retire, mentor young people to carry the torch.

Martinez: Is there anything that you would change in your life or things like that?

Lopez: [Laughing] I would change a lot of things. But, you know, I think everything happens for a reason. I'm a person of faith. And so that's how I get through a lot of the ups and downs and the hardships of this career. I mean, I went through a divorce as I was, you know, a reporter. There are challenges every day, whether people are always pulling at you and demanding things--people want you here and there and everywhere.

But it is my faith in God that has kept me balanced, that has kept me on the right path, that has kept me doing the things that I do. And I believe sometimes it is a calling--it is a service--and I want people to also see that part of my life--that it's my faith that has sustained me.

Martinez: Yes, I'm glad we get to tell your story and that we get to put this out there as well.

Lopez: You know, I mean, it's an exciting career. I would have had that. I would have never thought. I was a little girl in West Texas. I grew up, again, in Odessa. There wasn't anything there: oilfield, tumbleweeds, high school football--that was it. But over the years, I have been in amazing places. At the White House. Inside the Cowboy locker room.

One of my most fun moments was the Rangers won--I think it was the A.L. [American League] West--because it was that they hadn't won the pennant yet to go to the World Series--but I was in the clubhouse when they won and they had the big champagne shower--everybody. So I'm standing there interviewing Prince Fielder and Adrian Beltre-- favorite player of all time if you ask me--any player--if it is for all time, it's Adrian, right? I love the guy. And he came through and he poured champagne on top of my head. I'm like, oh my God, Adrian Beltre just poured champagne on top of my head!

And I it was such a fun moment to get to witness that as a big, big sports fan that I am--to be in the clubhouse with the Texas Rangers having a champagne shower, celebrating a victory for them, was really an extremely memorable moment for me.

I was in Green Bay at Lambeau Field when Dez Bryant caught the ball, but they said he didn't catch the ball, so we didn't advance in the playoffs. I was there for that. I was with the Mavs when they won that. I got to travel with him to Miami when they were playing the Heat, when they won the Mavs championship.

It hasn't always been gloom and doom. I get to do a lot of really cool things as well. I've covered Tiger Woods. I interviewed Serena Williams last year. Just incredible opportunities that I've had that I wouldn't have had had I decided to become an interior decorator that I initially went to college for, which I was actually thinking of doing.

And I've just it's has been a journey to get to witness history. I was at the Space Shuttle Columbia when it blew up over Nacogdoches. I was in Nacogdoches, as is the parts of the space shuttle were still falling to the ground. I was in Waco when the compound burned. I was in Oklahoma City. Just--I look back and it's just been a really, for me, epic life and I'm glad that I decided to pick this crazy career. While it has been at times stressful and at times I sacrificed a lot--sometimes I feel like I gave a piece of myself up--I am glad that I did it and I wouldn't change anything.

Martinez: I'm just looking at how I guess, you know, how exciting that you can talk about your experiences and stuff like that.

Yeah. I mean, I've gotten to do some great things. I can't even think of all the people that I'd gotten to interview. I was in an elevator with OJ Simpson. [Laughing] And think about all these crazy things that I've had the opportunity--and the people that I now call friends that I've met along the way, too. And also just extraordinary people whose stories I got to tell who were survivors.

There was a woman by the name of Nancy Howard. Her husband hired a hit man to kill her, and she was shot in the eye, and she thought she was going to die. And eventually they figured out it was the husband that had a lover and so he paid a hitman to have her murdered. But Nancy survived. And she did get an exclusive interview with me. And she said she's down there, she's shot in the face. She's praying to God. And she's like, "God, you know, help me. Help me God. Help me live." And it was her will--she should have died at the scene-- she's shot in the face. And she lived, she says, because of her will, because of her power of prayer.

And Nancy and I are now really good friends. We were just texting the other day. And so I look at people like Nancy Howard who survive these incredible things. And I've got to tell her story and those are really proud moments for me. I look at people who did extraordinary things and I got to be a part of their life--and that's pretty incredible too.