

Cheryl Jennings, ABC 7 News



Silver Circle Profile
By: *Kevin Wing*



Photo: Marin Magazine

When **Cheryl Jennings** started in broadcast news, she worked very hard to prove herself to her bosses, even when she didn't get paid for it.

Although she was dirt poor at the time, was still in college and had to commute every day from Novato to San Francisco, Jennings knew she needed to get her foot in the door somehow and was determined to make it work – money or no money.

More than three decades later, the popular KGO-TV news anchor and reporter's peers would definitely say her strategy paid off — big time. Jennings celebrates her 30th anniversary with the station in August.

Outside of her colleagues and friends, Bay Area television viewers would likely say Jennings has been a success, too. One look at her top-rated Nielsen ratings proves that. Month after month, year after year, Jennings is one of the region's most popular and durable TV anchors.

Currently, the four-time Emmy® award-winning Jennings co-anchors *ABC 7 News* at 11 a.m. with **Kristen Sze**. Jennings also shares the anchor desk with **Dan Ashley** at 5 p.m. She also anchors the 6 p.m. newscast on Fridays and hosts an Emmy® award-winning community affairs program, *Beyond the Headlines*. When she's not anchoring, Jennings hits the streets with her unique style of special assignment reporting.

"I love what I do. I've never taken it for granted," says Jennings, who was inducted into the NATAS' Silver Circle in 2003.

Born the oldest of seven children at Fort Benning, Georgia, Jennings was a traditional Army brat, moving from one coast to the other, and twice to Germany.

Her family eventually moved to the Bay Area. She attended 12 schools before graduating from Washington High School. Upon entering City College of San Francisco and San Francisco State University, Jennings' career goal was to become a teacher. But, it was an assignment for a women's studies class that changed her life. She was to write about women in broadcasting.

She called up **Karna Small**, an anchor at KGO-TV at that time and **Marcia Brandwynne**, who anchored at KTVU and later at KGO-TV. I asked if I could write about them for my school paper," Jennings recalls. "I also interviewed two producers, **Roxanne Russell** and **Jerri Lange** (Lange is an author and the mother of actor **Ted Lange** from TV's *The Love Boat*). Coincidentally, these four great women in broadcasting all had the same advice for me — get your skills in place, work as hard as you can, get your foot in the door, and be ready when your break comes. I share that advice with everyone today."

Jennings landed her first broadcasting job at KNBR Radio in San Francisco. "I worked in the public affairs office," Jennings recalls. "I worked for free for five months and commuted from Novato and worked 50 hours a week. People told me I was crazy to work for free, telling me to get a real job that pays. It was definitely character-building for me." She wrote traffic reports for the station's legendary morning personalities, **Frank Dill** and **Mike Cleary**.

The KNBR brass got used to having Jennings around and hired her — for pay — to run the station's switchboard. That soon parlayed into Jennings serving as a news secretary to the news director and running traffic information to Cleary and Dill, as well as **Carter B. Smith**.

Jennings' experience with KNBR-AM took on new meaning with **Jane Morrison**, then the station's public affairs director. "I will never forget how Jane took me under her wing. It's one of the reasons I'm so active with public affairs issues," she says. "They really got involved helping people."

Finally, Jennings' on-air break arrived. KNBR's parent company, NBC, launched a 24-hour FM news service. While still working as a news secretary during the week for KNBR, Jennings anchored news on the FM side on weekend overnight shifts and worked as a deejay on the AM side.

Jennings left KNBR for an opportunity at K-101

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Dan Ashley Spencer Christian



Don Sanchez

Radio (now Star 101.3 FM), where she worked for another Silver Circle inductee, **James Gabbert**, who owned the station and hired her to work as a news reporter. Jennings became news director after only four months and was the station's anchor during the weekday afternoon drive-time shift. Then came television.

"KPIX was looking for a woman reporter through affirmative action," Jennings explains. "I got the job. That was 1978." Jennings would work at K-101 during the day, then dash over to Channel 5 to report nights and Sundays.

Due to the budget ax, Jennings lost her job at KPIX. But, in August of 1979, she began freelancing as a reporter at KGO-TV. They eventually hired her full-time.

By coming to KGO-TV, Jennings fulfilled her dream of working with (**Fred Van Amburg** and **Jerry Jensen**, the two *News Scene* anchors who ruled the Bay Area airwaves every night from 1969 right through the mid-1980s.

"In those days, I was working for legends," Jennings says. "It was huge for a kid like me at that time. It was the biggest gift for a young reporter to work with legends who were admired and respected like Van and Jerry were. It was just a thrill to work with them. It was fun. I'm grateful that they placed their trust in me."

In 1986, Jennings joined KGO-TV's anchor ranks when she was promoted to co-anchor the weekend news with **Willie Monroe**. In 1988, Jennings began anchoring the 5 p.m. news with **Don Sanchez**. It's a newscast she has held onto for 21 years, a distinction Jennings currently holds as the only woman to anchor the same newscast for that long. Through the years, she's also been partnered with **Dan Noyes** and Dan Ashley. At one point, Jennings anchored the 5 p.m. news by herself.

Jennings has been honored for her news reporting, including her work during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. She was the first local ABC 7 reporter on the air with live, late-breaking news reports as aftershocks continued to rock the station.

It's a gross understatement to even say that Jennings is hard-working. "I am very diligent that we get facts correct, to the point of annoying people in

the newsroom," Jennings says. "I care about what I do. Everything has to be right. I do this because it's the right thing to do. And, I want to help the viewers. My viewers are my extended family."

"To know Cheryl Jennings is to know the most diligent, the most dedicated, the most unassuming journalist in the Bay Area," says friend **Rigo Chacon**, a former KGO-TV colleague who was the station's South Bay Bureau chief for 30 years. "One seldom walks into the ABC 7 newsroom without seeing Cheryl completely focused on her work. I remember when she started at KGO and, as a fellow reporter I was immediately inspired by her work ethic and the quality of her reports. My friend, Cheryl, is a credit to journalists everywhere."

Jennings won the prestigious national award, the Gracie, from American Women in Radio and Television in 2002. With her four Emmy® awards and numerous other professional citations, Jennings has earned wide respect. Her successful efforts of giving back to the community, along with husband **Rick Pettibone**, have been recognized, helping to raise millions of dollars for numerous Bay Area charities. She also makes public appearances on behalf of those charities. Some of them include: Camp Okizu, a summer camp for children with cancer; the Taylor Family Foundation's Camp Arroyo in Livermore, for children with other life-threatening illnesses; Performing Stars of Marin; Ronald McDonald House in Palo Alto and San Francisco; Community Action Marin; and The Roots of Peace Penny Campaign, in which Bay Area schoolchildren raise money to clear land mines from playgrounds and soccer fields in Afghanistan. She also has played a huge role with Chacon's Abrazos and Books scholarship fund. Jennings also mentors students from UC Berkeley's Sage Program as well as from San Francisco City College's journalism department.

"I try to do as much as I can," says Jennings. "I get a lot of satisfaction, helping out in the community. One thing I've learned — the more you give, the more you get."

(Bay Area television journalist Kevin Wing pens Off Camera's profiles on Gold and Silver Circle members. He's a casual network field producer for ABC News, Good Morning America and ABC World News.)