

KTVU Reporter Rita Williams



Class of 2001
Silver Circle Profile
By: Kevin Wing



She's the queen of the exclusives. As a TV street reporter, she has tenacity and determination, and she asks the kind of gutsy questions that most of her colleagues steer clear of. Her competition scrambles after her time and again, leaving them to wonder how the heck she scooped them. But, by then, it's too late.

Two-time Emmy® Award-winning **Rita Williams** is all of those things, and more. Once, in fact, then-San Francisco Sheriff **Michael Hennessey** characterized her as "a pitbull dog with a heart."

The reporter for Oakland's KTVU has been doing her job a long time. Williams is still going strong, but won't be for much longer. In an *Off Camera* exclusive for this profile, Williams has announced she will retire from KTVU next February. After 35 years on the job there, she is ready to slow down a little.

Williams already had several years of experience under her belt when she joined Channel 2 as a freelance reporter in 1978. Two years later, in January 1980, then-News Director **Fred Zehnder (SC'91)** hired her full-time. Immediately, she opened up the station's San Francisco news bureau. She became a fixture, known for her frequent exclusive reports.

Williams, who, in 2001, was inducted into the *Silver Circle* of the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, also has another distinction worth mentioning. In all likelihood, she is the longest-tenured female television street reporter in the United States still on the air after more than four decades.

"It makes me feel proud to have lasted as long as I have, as a woman," Williams says. "Most women who started with me back then stopped doing it. It was a tough business, lots of barriers, lots of discrimination. Sometimes, people would do their best to get rid of you. So you just worked harder than any of the guys, and you showed them you can do it, and you just did it."

And Williams has. She's showed them.

"It makes me proud that some of the hell we went through as some of the first women reporters

has paid off, and we showed them we can do the job," she adds. "Today, younger women don't have to prove themselves the way we did. We helped pave the way for them. And that's good."

Born in Shreveport, Louisiana, Williams and her family moved to Lubbock, Texas, when she was two years old, after her father took a job at Reese Air Force Base. He had an eighth-grade education; her mother had a high school education. For 40 years, he was a federal government employee working as a civilian communications foreman. Later, he established a credit union that is still in existence in Texas.

"My Mom was one of nine children," Williams explains. "She instilled in me a love of words and a love of poetry. My Mom and Dad were the brightest people I'd ever known. They were poor folks who grew up during the Great Depression." She says her parents always instilled wisdom into their children.

"My Dad said to get the most education you can," Williams adds. "It's one thing people can never take away from you."

Williams, who also has a brother, was the first in her family to graduate from college.

After high school, Williams put her numerous journalism scholarships to good use at Texas Tech University, where she graduated in 1969 with a bachelor's degree in journalism. While there, she joined a sorority, which, she says "helped me to blossom." She was editor of the university's campus newspaper and was involved in student government, serving as secretary of the student body of 20,000 students.

With a college degree under her belt, Williams was hired to write speeches for then Texas Lt. Gov. **Ben Barnes** and state senators – a plum assignment. Then, she became press secretary for Texas Congressman **George Mahon**, who was then chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. The job meant Williams would have to relocate to Washington, D.C. "I made more money in that job (per year) than my Dad did annually in his four decades as a federal government employee," Williams says. "And he was so proud of me."

Williams held the role for three years. At night,

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she attended George Washington University, where she would eventually receive a master's degree in political science and international affairs.

While in Washington, Williams received an offer from the Washington bureau chief of the *Houston Post* to become a correspondent in the nation's capital for the newspaper. Although she was flattered, she wanted to pursue television, and was one of more than 1,000 people to apply for a management training program with Westinghouse Broadcasting.

Williams was one of the fortunate ones chosen. She was assigned to WJZ-TV in Baltimore, where she worked with news management for a year, beginning in 1973.

"But I still wanted to be a reporter," Williams says. "I was being groomed to be a news director, but I felt I was too young to be a news director. I was only 25."

She took advantage of an opportunity to return to Texas and her first TV reporting job, at KSAT-TV in San Antonio.

After accepting the job, Williams was written up in *Texas Monthly* magazine, which was showcasing the "caliber of people coming back" to work in Texas. Still in her 20s, Williams was destined to change the face of television news in San Antonio.

In 1976, she married **Lindsay Bowen**, a former Navy officer (now a retired captain) who'd just finished graduate school. He was offered a job in the Bay Area in the then-burgeoning field of computer science. The couple relocated, in 1978.

Once here, Williams was interviewed by KTVU News Director **Ted "Mad Dog" Kavanau** and KGO-TV News Director **Pete Jacobus**. She ended up freelance reporting for KTVU in early 1978, and also freelanced at KQED-TV on its old *Newsroom* program.

"We got small ratings, but it was the most influential show in the state," she says. "We could get any newsmaker, all of whom wanted to be interviewed and grilled by good reporters: anchor **Belva Davis (SC'89)**, political reporter **Rollin Post (SC'90)**, **Randy Shilts** (later a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter) and **Phil Bronstein** (who became editor of the *Chronicle* and the *San Francisco Examiner*).

But, Kavanau was really interested in hiring Williams full-time. On the day she was supposed to

sign a contract at KTVU, he was fired. She never got the call.

In an interesting twist, then-assistant news director **Zehnder** became acting news director.

"Fred didn't feel he should hire anyone because he wasn't permanent," Williams recalls. "**George Osterkamp (SC'04)** was news director at Channel 9, so he hired me full-time to replace **Pamela Young**, who went on maternity leave. Young later went on to great success at KITV in Honolulu.

Later that year, Zehnder was hired permanently as KTVU news director, and in January of 1980, he brought Williams to KTVU, where she has remained to this day.

One of Williams' first orders from Zehnder was to open up a KTVU news bureau in San Francisco. She did so in the Hall of Justice, along with cameraman **Bill Moore (SC'89)**, becoming the "first broadcast broad" there, as some of the male newspaper reporters in the pressroom called her.

"Bill and I were pretty much a team for the next 20 years," Williams says. "Together, with his wife, Belva, they have been like family to me. They've been such great friends and inspirations. Whenever I wanted to quit or give up, they kept me going. I've had some wonderful mentors through the years.

Throughout her career, Williams has nearly seen it all. In the early '70s, she interviewed **Mother Teresa** in San Antonio.

"I asked her how it felt to be called a living saint," Williams says. "She put her hands on mine, and she said 'you're a saint, I'm a saint. Anyone who does God's work is a saint.'"

"That was one of many special moments," she adds. "I've gotten to see people at their best, their worst. Trust and credibility are very important. People trust you with their story. They know what your reputation is. My Dad said it's the most important thing you can have. I have done my very best to guard it."

Williams was a media witness at the last gas chamber execution at San Quentin. She is proud of her coverage of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. She and KTVU cameraman **Tony Hodrick** were on the Bay Bridge right after the earth shook.

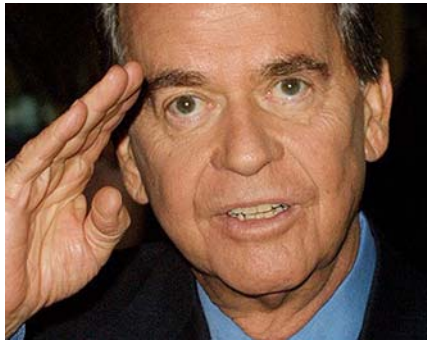
"We were running further onto the bridge as everyone else was running off. Tony and I wondered

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Dick Clark

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environment, both on the stage and on the dance floor, which was unique, especially during the pre-civil rights 1950s. But my fondest memories of Dick Clark will always be in terms of his personality. Unlike other television hosts of the 1950s and '60s (**Milton Berle**, **Steve Allen** and **Dean Martin** come to mind), Clark treated rock & roll music, its artists, and its fans with respect, and for that alone we should be grateful.



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if we were going to die on the bridge," she adds, "either from the debris of the bridge collapsing or when we hit the water."

Williams has also been applauded for her coverage of four national political conventions, the 1978 assassinations of San Francisco Mayor **George Moscone** and Supervisor **Harvey Milk** at City Hall; the "White Night" riots that followed (named after the then-suspect, former Supervisor **Dan White**); and being the first to report the indictment of Giants slugger **Barry Bonds**. Williams also interviewed the leading suspect in San Francisco's infamous Zodiac killings of the 1970s.

In recent years, she was one of KTVU's lead reporters on the killing of unarmed passenger **Oscar Grant** at the hands of BART police officer **Johannes Mehserle**.

She was the only reporter to interview Mehserle. Afterward, she received death threats. Williams says she remains proud of "all my coverage on that case."

Her work on the Grant shooting was a major reason that KTVU received the prestigious **George Foster Peabody Award**, along with the equally prestigious **Edward R. Murrow Award**.

What's Williams' secret to scooping the competi-

tion?

"I'm tenacious," she says. "I don't quit. I keep calling. I keep asking questions. Right up to deadline. It's that work ethic that keeps me going."

Viewers sometime tell Williams her stories are different from those of other reporters, telling her that she cares about people in her stories in a way that others don't, or can't.

"I write my stories in such a way that viewers can feel how I felt when I was there interviewing that person," she says. "I don't tell them my opinions. I do my best to write the story well. It is a great responsibility and privilege to be the eyes and ears of the public."

Williams has received numerous honors through the years, including the Peabody and Murrow awards, many Emmy® nominations; and "at long last," she says, "two Emmy® awards. For many years, I was called the **Susan Lucci** of Bay Area television news,"

In 1985, she spent a year at Stanford University when she was named a prestigious John S. Knight Journalism Fellow. She now sits on the program's board, helping select new fellows. She's also taught broadcast news writing at Stanford.

Last year, Williams received the Associated Press' Chris Harris Reporter of the Year honor. She also received an Associated Press award for best feature and best sports story last year and this year, respectively.

Williams is extremely proud of the honor bestowed upon her last year from her alma mater, Texas Tech. She was presented with the Outstanding Journalism Alumni Award, recognizing her long career in television news.

"I truly have given 110 percent of myself every day," she explains. "I try to make each story the very best. Sometimes, people tell me I work too hard, but I tell them that's just the way I am, a carry-over from those early days trying to prove women could do the job. It is a true privilege to tell someone's story, to be a public watchdog, to carry on the important work of so many great journalists before us."

When she's not working or spending time with her family, Williams remains very involved with Friends of Faith, the organization founded by KTVU reporter **Faith Fancher (SC'01)**, before her death from breast cancer in 2003. Williams also donates time with a lot of non-profit organizations, including Pathways Hospice.

But, it's not her career she is most proud of. For Williams, family comes first.

"The thing I am most proud of is that I am still married to my one and only husband for the last 35 years. My son (**Brad Bowen**) is 25, and he just finished his first year of law school at UC Hastings. He chooses to live in the Tenderloin, where he works with the homeless. I have been so blessed through all these years."