

## 36. Uveka Rangappa

I can't remember exactly when, why or how I decided that journalism was what I wanted to study . . . but it happened! I always thought I'd be a clinical psychologist. After all, my close friends said I gave the best advice. But according to my parents, my penchant for news was evident from an early age. I would cut out articles from the newspaper and read them out aloud in front of the mirror. My primary school teachers were astounded that I always had something to "report" at daily news time.

It's 1994, and there I am at Technikon Natal. I'd been set on going to Rhodes University, but my Dad who rarely said "no" to me for anything was dead against it. I then found myself at a cold and dreary campus in Smith Street, Durban. I later realised that that decision was the best thing as the structure of studying at a technikon with its one year of in-service training set me on my early path into the formal world of journalism. I made it through the requisite two years of theory, getting up to a fair share of mischief!

I was fortunate enough to spend the first few months of my internship at the legendary Capital Radio 604. There was no pay, it was early mornings, the work was fast-paced with no room for mistakes, and the woman in charge of news was a tough 'cookie'. I made plenty of mistakes, but grow I certainly did! I met many very interesting people in those few months – our paths would cross many times over the next 23 years (and counting!).

**“my friends had to endure tears as I told the story of my ‘lost’ boy over and over again”**

After my brief stint at 'Capital on the beach' (literally) in early 1996, I went searching at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) in Durban. I was given the opportunity to work on *Newsbreak*, a current affairs show on Lotus FM, and I also read the news. Despite working for "separate" stations under the SABC umbrella, the journalists managed to form lifelong friendships. Many have gone on to become feared in the field, top radio and television news anchors, legendary radio show hosts and esteemed authors. I worked with producers and writers who could make anything happen . . . like finding a person to talk with in Lesotho during unrest there – this was done by calling a payphone and interviewing *any* person who answered the phone! Now that's dedication. We joked about

it back then, but it was a great place to hone one's skills. And it was in the day of reel-to-reel tapes - literally splicing and sticking words together! During my time at Lotus FM, working behind the scenes and occasionally reading news, I had the privilege of interviewing local and international stars. But what really excited me was when I got to tell the stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things on the *Community Slot*. I started the weekly feature which sang the praises of unsung heroes. Gift of the Givers' Dr Imtiaz Sooliman was one of them. Little did I know that less than a decade later I would be on a cargo plane with him en route to post-war Iraq.



*Dr Imtiaz Sooliman of Gift of the Givers*

I spent five years at the SABC, eventually hosting *Newsbreak* before moving on to the now independent East Coast Radio (initially Radio Port Natal). It was the year 9/11 happened. The other big events I covered were the 1999 national election and the death of Princess Diana. It was exciting to be part of such a trendy environment, and even greater when I was made part of the popular breakfast show team. However, I was strongly encouraged by my mentor to venture further to Talk Radio 702 in Johannesburg. I made the call, and was told to come through. I suppose it was auspicious that on the day of my job interview Nelson Mandela was there doing a radio interview - the next time I would see him would be when I walked past his coffin at the Union Buildings to pay my respects. I soon found myself in the heart of Sandton. It was terrifying, intimidating yet liberating all at the same time. It was hard working . . . running from one story to another, just when you thought you were done with a protest and heading back on the highway, you'd get a call to return to Pretoria for another march. And you still left three angles on every single story for that evening, and three more

for every story for the next morning. I moved from reporting to anchoring news on the afternoon drive show. It was just as manic. In 2003, a rather embarrassing occurrence led to one of my most memorable assignments. It was about a year and a half after 9/11. I was working on a public holiday and had gone into the news booth for my bulletin. We were preparing for the United States to announce a halt to its invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, but we didn't know when that was going to happen. As I was about to go on air, the television monitor flashed BREAKING NEWS! The announcement had been made, but there was no sound coming through, and all I had to go on were the pictures and straps. I ad-libbed my way through an entire bulletin based on what I could see. The listener was none the wiser yet it turned out to be a great bulletin. It was nerve-jangling. I stormed back to the newsroom blurting out expletives, and there, staring at me, was my chief executive officer with two elderly guests. She asked, "Where would you like to be, Uveka?" My reply, "In Iraq, Terry, in Iraq!" A few days later, I was on a plane headed for Baghdad with Gift of the Givers.



***Uveka Rangappa with Bono of U2***

It was a life-changing trip complete with nearly being shot down over Baghdad for an unauthorized landing, doing interviews, and filing stories via satellite phone on the roof of our dilapidated hotel under the watchful eye of snipers, racing against curfew to get back from covering stories about refugee camps and long-lost relatives. But what will always stand out for me is the beautiful little boy I met on the day we arrived. He would turn up every morning to say "hello", and be there every evening when we got back. It had nothing to do with food: he just wanted to be in our company. I'll never forget the day we left Baghdad. I panicked because I couldn't see him anywhere as we were about to leave for the airport. As our minibus went past a pillar, there he was . . . and as he turned to look at me, the tears were streaming down his face! It's a picture forever burnt into my memory . . . the heartbreak of that moment has lived with me ever since. For many years, my friends had to endure tears as I told the story of my 'lost' boy over and over again wondering what had become of him. They told me that I had to channel that pain into some kind of work with kids. I would find it, many years later, in my work with Rise Against Hunger (RAH) which feeds children at early childhood development centres.

I also did work for sister station 947 where I had the time

of my life in the company of radio legends. I was advised to get myself an agent. Not long after, I landed my first television gig, presenting the legal show *Rights and Recourse*. At one point, I was doing a live television show all week long, doing voiceovers for a sports show before heading to do news on the afternoon drive show on radio. You quickly learn that journalism is about juggling jobs. And you don't say no even if it pays a pittance!

My one love radio led me to my other love . . . my husband Shaun. He never listened to the radio, but to his CDs. On one particular afternoon, he tuned into the news on 947 and heard me. According to him, it was the "voice"! A few emails later, we were on our first date. We married in 2008, and so ended my 'always the MC, never the bride' phase. I left radio, and begun my first television news job on what was then the eNews channel. I anchored the news on weekdays. I had my daughter Suryana in 2009, the year Michael Jackson died, experienced the euphoria of the story of the year in 2010 . . . the FIFA World Cup, went back to 947 in early 2011, and later to 702's morning drive. One highlight of 2011 was meeting U2's Bono! The bigger highlight came later that year when I had my son Surav. Earlier that year though, a few weeks after learning I was pregnant with him, I landed the job as one of the hosts of the parenting show *Great Expectations* at midday once a week. I did radio in the mornings. There was laughter mixed with tears as we unearthed the good, the bad and the pain of raising a child.

I was then offered the opportunity to go back to television news. It was to co-anchor *Morning News Today* on eNCA and work with the man who would come to be known as my "partner", veteran journalist Dan Moyane. It was back to early mornings . . . 3.30am starts! Not easy with two kids, but I couldn't have done it without the help of my husband. Who would have thought we would end 2013 mourning our beloved Madiba? They were long, emotional days and a bleak December. I never made it to my high school reunion that year. In 2014, I'd cover yet another election, cross to studio every morning from a cold and sometimes wet sidewalk as Oscar Pistorius went on trial for the murder of Reeva Steenkamp, and things started falling apart for Jacob Zuma as well as the country. It was Nkandla, GuptaGate and more scandal.

I was asked in July 2017 to direct proceedings at a gala function for RAH. I, thereafter, started raising funds for the organisation. I often thought of my little friend in Iraq and prayed that someone would be feeding him through the years too. I've never used who I am to get things done, but when it came to my work with RAH, I unashamedly used my position as a media personality when arranging golf days, family movie days, art auctions or ladies' nights. After all, it was for the love of children.

Somewhere in the middle of all of this, I found myself playing a journalist on the television series *Strike Back*, and then in a Leon Schuster movie *Frank and Fearless*. The roles lasted all of a minute, but I had my own trailer with my name emblazoned on it.

My coverage of the 2019 national elections included a cross country "election bus" trip during which I spoke to ordinary people about the hardships of daily life. The most memorable

moment was standing at an intersection in crime-ridden Helenvale in Port Elizabeth interviewing three very nervous gangsters because they were literally not in their 'territory' when asked "why they kill".

Over the years, I've often found myself questioning why do I do this! Your audience will love you, they'll hate you, they'll love to hate you. Further, social media and the freedom to have your say has made people unaccountably vicious. Everyone's a critic! You have to grow a thick skin, and it's taken me years yet mine is still not thick enough!

It's not important for me to push the envelope in trying to

attract the attention of an international news network. Right now, there so much still to do in South Africa. As a journalist, it's about getting the best possible information to people so they can make important decisions as they navigate life. My role in media is to bring about change. I love my job, but I love it more when viewers contact us soon after I've interviewed a genius child from a township who can't raise the money to participate in an international maths competition, and they want to help. Knowing I played a small part in helping someone on their road to greatness is worth more than a countless number of presidential interviews!

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**U**veka Rangappa is a senior anchor on eNCA, and has anchored both morning and evening prime time shows on the channel. Uveka has had an extensive career in both radio and television. She holds a National Diploma: Journalism from the Durban University of Technology. Uveka has had the pleasure and honour of interviewing people from across the spectrum – from high profile figures such as former presidents and celebrities to ordinary people performing the extraordinary. She has covered many elections and landmark events, and rates her coverage of post-war Iraq as one of her toughest assignments, but that which brings the fondest memories.

