

37. Yogas Nair

I was born in Tongaat on the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) North Coast. Its history lies deep in the history of sugar cane and indentured labour. To many, Tongaat was seen as a village. But it was growing up in this village that made me dream of spreading my wings and soaring to dizzy heights. I attended an iconic school, Tongaat Secondary. My father had high hopes for me, and saw me as one day being a teacher or lawyer. I kept that at the back of mind. But my father did not have the slightest clue that I was pre-occupied with another idea: Journalism. It was when I matriculated in 1991 that I confessed my aspirations to him. The response was immediate and telling. "Well, then you are going to have to pay for whatever that is yourself?" My father only spoke once. The conversation ended there. But if he thought his would deter me, then he had forgotten I was his daughter - stubbornness was in the genes.

The year of 1992 was a time of incredible excitement, but also trepidation in South Africa. The liberation movements were unbanned, and Mandela was leading negotiations with the National Party which masterminded apartheid. I was aware of these developments, but was consumed by negotiating my own pathway in life. Deep down I still cherished a life of writing. I took a gap year, and worked as a casual at a bank in Durban to save up the R700 I needed to register as a student at the ML Sultan Technikon. While the world of money and the tensions that come with working in banking numbed me every day, it never killed off my dream of becoming a journalist. The changing situation in South Africa, and the world as the Soviet Union collapsed, only served to reinforce the desire to chase breaking news and walk in the footsteps of history.

As 1992 drew to a close, I applied to study journalism at the technikon. It was an anxious wait. I had bet so much on the outcome, going against my father, against traditions that saw becoming a teacher or lawyer as a safe pair of hands. It was a day of utmost joy when I was accepted. I paid my registration fee, with no idea as to how I would pay for the rest of the tuition. But paths were miraculously opening. My student loan was approved a few weeks later. It took away a great amount of angst as it saw me through my three years of full-time study. My journey through the corridors of the technikon was simply amazing. I felt like Alice in Wonderland as I entered an entirely different world. I made new friends, learnt new things, even became more fashionable in my dressing, and persevered with my studies. I became street smart and travelled daily from Tongaat to Durban by train or taxi.

Interestingly, at the time I pursued my journalism diploma, French and Shorthand were part of the curriculum. I loved political science by Dr Sinthie Qono, was truly inspired by broadcast journalism lecturer Robin Sewlal, and greatly humoured by Ramesh Ramlal. I forged some amazing relationships during this time, and remain firm friends with many of my fellow students to this day. I grew in leaps and bounds as a

person, and the world of journalism opened so many doors of opportunity.

In my third year, I was fortunate to secure my internship at the North Coast Courier, a community newspaper based in Ballito. It was a challenging year with difficult working conditions, but I completed it successfully. I went on to work at the Chatsworth Rising Sun for many years before my break in mainstream media came in 2001. A friend of a friend had spoken with the editor of the Post, Brijlall Ramguthee, about me wanting to join the title.



As a courtesy to the friend, Ramguthee granted me an interview. He handed me 10 high court applications, and asked me to have the stories on his table the next morning. That was my welcome to the 'real world'. I had never reported on court matters before, let alone from court papers. I phoned several lawyer friends and colleagues, and after several nerve-racking hours was able to produce the stories. They were delivered to Ramguthee the following morning. He just smiled and asked me to return the next day. I was officially hired as a freelance journalist at the Post. Three years were spent on the title as a freelancer before I was given a permanent job. Post was the perfect learning ground, and I thrived under the strong mentorship of Ramguthee and news editor Khalil Aniff. Goals were set, and nothing but writing the front-page lead each week was acceptable to me. As I chased stories hard, my contact base and sources became limitless.

After spending several years on the title, I was head-hunted by the Daily News editor, Alan Dunn, and offered a job as senior reporter. I was not sure if I was ready for the move. I was also a bit anxious, as I had applied for several jobs on the title over the years, but never made the cut. I knew all things Indian, even writing stories had been limited to this. Would I survive on this mainstream, daily title? The offer sat with me for days, and I eventually decided to leave Post. It was a difficult decision, for various reasons, but the time had come for change. A new challenge was needed, and I started my stint at the Daily News. Here too I was blessed to have amazing mentors in Dunn and Bruce Colly. My first few weeks on the title were not easy. Colly,

who was deputy editor, tore my stories to shreds and questioned every fact as he was a stickler for detail. He was tough to deal with, but in the end, I understood – there was no compromise in journalism. Go after the truth, write the truth and win the trust of your readers. This sticks with me until today. Colly and I eventually became friends, even sharing recipes and home-remedies. Much effort was put into my work at the Daily News, and after two years as a senior reporter, there was a reward. I was appointed news editor.

“My journey through the corridors of the technikon was simply amazing”

In 2014, two years after I became news editor, Independent Newspapers was sold to a South African consortium, headed by Dr Iqbal Survé. It was an uncertain time, and none of us knew what the change-over would mean for us or the business. For me, it opened a world of possibilities. A few months after Survé took over, the vacancy for the Post editorship was advertised. I knew immediately that that was my next move. I had always aspired to edit the title, and decided to apply for the position. It was not an easy journey. I faced many obstacles. There was talk of me not being “editor material” nor having “strong management” skills. But, it took someone to believe in me, and towards the end of 2014, I was appointed as the editor of Post by Survé. This was a ground-breaking event for women in journalism, as I was the first female editor in the 60-year history of the publication.

Two years later, I was saying goodbye to the Post. I knew that I had made an impact. While many tried to question my ability within the profession, I was boosted by the ‘person in the street’, from Chatsworth to Phoenix to the streets of Tongaat - people came up to me to offer their well wishes.

I became the second woman editor of The Mercury in November 2016, the month that celebrated the arrival of Indians in South Africa and the 165th anniversary of The Mercury. I did not have a good start at The Mercury. The fact that I was an

Indian female, leading this title was not easily accepted by many. But when I thought about the struggles of the indentured, the single women who came and made a life in the province, I was inspired and knew that I would prevail no matter the odds. In 2017, I was appointed KZN regional executive editor – a new challenge, and went on to become the deputy editor-in-chief of the Independent Media group in 2019. I still remain editor of The Mercury, and that’s by choice. The love of the everyday challenge of putting an edition on the streets still holds. To see the placards of the paper while driving to work, feel the rustle of the actual paper, know that you are informing and educating are feelings of wonder to behold.

Under the leadership of Survé, Independent Media has transformed, with a lot of focus on women empowerment. Over the years, he has given his full support to achieve this goal in the industry, and this has resulted in several top women appointments in the company. I would be failing, if I did not credit Survé for believing in me as a leader and creating opportunities to grow in my career. This belief has helped grow my confidence and motivates me to work even harder. His constant motivation and encouragement have helped me meet the many challenges to climb the ladder of success, quickly and relatively effortlessly.

Today, I can honestly say that I have lived my dream of becoming a journalist, writing a number of headline stories, and now living my dream of being an editor. While I still remain editor of The Mercury, my focus is on mentorship – growing and motivating young journalists.

It is not an easy journey from university to mainstream media. I understand the challenges, and want young journalists to not ‘throw in the towel’, but persevere and realise dreams and goals, like I did. Our country has lived through momentous changes. But democracy is something that we cannot take for granted. We have to be constantly on our guard, and be prepared to expose those who subvert the gains that so many have sacrificed so much for. In this, journalism continues to play a vital role. In my mentorship, in my own editorship, I try and play a role.

In 1991, I made a huge decision to take the road less travelled. I remember like it was yesterday the train ride from Tongaat to Durban, the first day at ML Sultan Technikon, and the people who supported me through the years. I have lived my dream. I hope I have also opened paths so others can do that too.

Yogas Nair completed the National Diploma: Journalism at the ML Sultan Technikon in 1994. She has worked at various community newspapers including the North Coast Courier, Rising Sun and Coastal Weekly. Yogas joined Independent Media in 2000, and has worked at Post and Daily News. She served Post as a journalist before becoming its editor. Yogas is the editor of The Mercury, KwaZulu-Natal regional executive editor, and deputy editor-in-chief for the Independent Media group.

