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How the Grammys Changed My Life: Becoming An Op Ed Columnist

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Abstract

In this essay, I write about my process of becoming an op ed columnist for a newspaper in Hartford, Connecticut, called *The Hartford Courant*, the longest continuously published newspaper in the United States. I share some of my experiences as an op ed columnist, along with examples of columns I have written. The examples demonstrate how I introduce my politics as a Latina and a feminist to a mainstream audience, and by doing so, writing becomes a form of activism, a call to action and an educational tool to enlighten my audience about a given subject.

In a curious way I have Jennifer Lopez to thank for having become an opinion columnist. It was February, 2000 and being pretty proud of being Latina, I was thrilled that the Grammy awards were going to be a wonderful showcase for Latino musicians. There were to be performances by Buena Vista Social Club, Marc Anthony, and many others. Santana, alone, had received at least ten nominations. As I watched, I realized that there were more Latinos on that show alone, than I had seen on non-Latino TV for the whole previous year. I was really enjoying the music when suddenly Jennifer Lopez walked to the podium wearing a dress by Versaci which barely covered her front or back. She was greeted with whistles and jeers.

From that moment I knew that the next morning, all newspaper stories and TV shows would hardly mention that Santana had won eight Grammys, or which artist was selected for the best album. It would be all Lopez all the time, and was I right!

I was so angry by what Lopez had done to steal all the publicity for herself that I called the *Hartford Courant's* op ed editor Carolyn Lumsden. I had recently met her, so she took my call, and I explained my need to write about Lopez and the Grammy awards show. Lumsden's answer to my request to submit an op ed was simple, "If you have it by 3:00pm today I will take a look at it." She accepted it, and the piece ran. It was called "Lopez Ruined Hispanics' Proudest Moment At The Grammys." For months after that, I kept running into people in the Latino community who were angry with me for "putting down" Jennifer Lopez." I didn't hear from anyone who agreed with me.

This was my fourth opinion piece published by the Courant in twelve years. In 1988 I was a U.S. citizen who had grown up in Panama. I felt compelled to write about the hypocrisy of the U.S. policy to oust the Dictator Noriega after the U.S. had supported dictatorships in Panama since 1968. I wrote of the suffering of the Panamanian people as a consequence of both of these policies. In 1989 my brother came to the U.S., and I was moved to write of his fleeing the brutal dictatorship of Noriega, just as my father fled the dictatorship of Cuba's Batista. In November 1990, I was so aggravated by the press predictions of low voter turnout that I wrote a challenge to Connecticut citizens to vote, reminding them that people were dying around the world for the right to vote while so many here took that right and responsibility for granted.

A few months after the Lopez piece I received a call. In response to complaints from the Latino community in Connecticut, the Courant actively sought to add regular Latino columnists for their "Other Opinion" page. It would be disingenuous of me to think that I was invited to become a regular columnist just because of my opinions and writing skills. I know that my ethnicity played a large part in my being hired.

For a number of reasons, of the three Latino and two African American women op ed columnists writing for the Courant in 2000, I am the only one left. Today mine is one of only six local op ed columns. The others are written by four white men and one African American man.

My first regular column was published in July, 2000. It was titled "We Prepare for Terrorists and Ignore our Own Terrors." It dealt with racial hatred and began with the words "Speak English or Die!" which an anonymous caller had left on my answering machine at home. (I later learned that the piece was translated into Portuguese and re-printed in *O Estado de Sao Paulo* in Brazil.)

Before I accepted the position of op ed columnist I asked if I was expected to be the "Latina columnist." I was worried because I wouldn't presume to be the voice for the Latino community and because the topics which inspire my passion are far more diverse. I was given the go ahead and have been able to write about Latino and gay issues, local and international politics, education, the arts, and many more issues that concern me, all without editorial interference.

One of the most rewarding aspects of being a columnist is to interact with the readers. I answer every e-mail, no matter how venomous it is. One was illustrated with the US flag, a rifle, and the words "We Kill Liberals." Another claimed that Puerto Rican women in Bristol, Connecticut only cared about their fingernails, were "loose," and had babies so they could get more welfare money. Other letters are very supportive. Some voice happy surprise that the Courant published such a view. The ones I like the best start with "I have never written to a columnist before." These make me feel as if I truly accomplished what I set out to do: express my opinion and provide a voice for those who do not have access to the same forum. Thanks to the internet and especially to Hispanic Link, a service which translates opinions into Spanish and distributes them through the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, I hear from readers from across the country. I love getting letters in Spanish from readers from other states responding to my opinions.

For me, being an opinion columnist is having the ability to do extensive research and then "connect the dots" on a global scale, to follow the repercussions of one act or event and its affect on our humanity, in a compressed 700-word essay. Having the opportunity to write about the misguided policies of President George W. Bush and the wonderful contributions to the lives of Connecticut's children by the Boys and Girls Clubs with the same passion and fervor is something I cherish and a responsibility I do not take lightly.

Here are examples of some of my columns:

We Prepare for Terrorists, Ignore our own Terrors

"Speak English or die!" was repeated several times on my answering machine as I retrieved the day's messages. The person, whose voice was filled with hatred, perhaps intended to call another number and got mine by mistake. He was confronted with a greeting in Spanish, and his response was immediate. To him, I was just another foreigner, brazen enough to have a greeting on my machine at my house in my native language. How dare I?

He did not care to wait before he acted. He didn't care to think that there might be a reason for that greeting. In my case, the greeting in Spanish was designed to accommodate my elderly aunt, who was at the beginning stages of Alzheimer's, to reassure her that she had, indeed,

reached the correct number. A 20-second message, intended as an act of kindness for a loved one, became the object of a stranger's hatred and a threat toward me.

I felt shocked but not surprised. Acts of hate are something we have come to expect in the United States. But we should be alarmed and not numbed by the frequency with which acts of hatred happen in this country.

Recently, several complaints have been filed with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission because hangmen's nooses -- widely associated with the lynching of African Americans in the South -- have been found by minorities at their jobs in Kansas, Miami, Chicago, Dallas, North Carolina, and San Francisco. Hateful messages are found on school walls. Churches and synagogues are burned, and women are attacked in New York's Central Park and in Philadelphia.

Two years ago, Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old gay college student, was brutally murdered in Laramie, Wyoming, and James Byrd Jr., an African American, was dragged to his death by white supremacists in Jasper, Texas. Byrd's family has reported that his grave is frequently desecrated. In June, Raynard Johnson, an African American teenager who was an honor student, was found hanging from a tree in front of his house in Kokomo, Mississippi. Authorities have ruled the death a suicide, but his family and his neighbors insist that he was murdered.

And just this month, on July 4, in Grant Town, West Virginia, two white teenagers allegedly beat Arthur "J.R." Warren, an African American gay man. They are accused of running over his body with a car and leaving him to die by the side of the road. Under federal law, Johnson's and Byrd's murders would be considered hate crimes and subject to a federal investigation, but Shepard's and Warren's would not. The difference is that Byrd and Johnson were allegedly killed because of their race, but Shepard and Warren were killed because of their sexual orientation. As part of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the federal statute prosecutes crimes committed solely because of a victim's race, religion or national origin.

There is a movement to pass legislation adding the categories of gender, disability and sexual orientation. In June, Senator Edward M. Kennedy, D-Massachusetts, introduced this legislation, which also provides federal financial support to state agencies to aid them with the prosecution of these crimes. Backed by Senator Gordon Smith, R-Oregon, the Kennedy-Smith amendment passed by a vote of 57-42. The bill, HR 1082, is now languishing in the House, a silent statement of our unwillingness to take decisive action against all hate crimes.

According to Senator Kennedy, 70,000 hate crime offenses have been reported in the United States since 1991. The escalation of hate crimes among young people is particularly alarming. Statistics compiled by the FBI indicate that of all the hate crimes reported to them, 9 percent were committed in an "educational institution" -- a school or a college. Last May, Glendale, a community 10 miles north of Los Angeles, became part of that statistic. In Glendale, which has a low crime rate, teens from the Latino and Armenian communities have been at odds. Three Armenian teens drove to the grounds of Herbert Hoover High School looking for a fight with Latinos. Their attack on a student waiting at a bus stop resulted in the stabbing death of Raul Aguirre, an 18-year-old Latino who attempted to break up the fight while nearly 50 other students looked on. The Armenian teens, whose ages ranged from 14 to 17, will be charged as adults, with murder.

The saying "Don't make a federal case of it" should not apply here. The escalation of acts of hate in this country does merit the passing of additional legislation by the House. While we continue to spend billions preparing for international terrorist attacks on our soil, and more billions developing questionable defense systems against foreign weapons, we continue to

ignore the fact that we do not need outsiders to destroy us. We are becoming our own worst enemies.

This column was first published July 21, 2000

We Can't Bomb Our Way to a Safer World

For as long as I live, I will never understand the level of hatred that would prompt people to dedicate the last months or perhaps years of their lives to plotting the destruction of thousands of innocent people who happened to be working in or visiting New York, one of the most important and vibrant cities in our country.

If one may fall in love with a city, then it was love at first sight for me. I think of going to New York as a visit to a fairy godmother always ready to give a magical present. Most of the books and magazines I read are from publishers in New York. On many mornings, I drive to work listening to music performed on Broadway, at Carnegie Hall, or the Metropolitan Opera. The New York City I know is a city of love and acceptance of our differences. It is a city that has always welcomed, sheltered, and embraced people from all over the world.

It took only a few moments of indescribable madness to alter the core of that city and this country. It will take us a lifetime to recuperate from the horrible effects of that one avalanche of hatred. What can we say to those who lost loved ones in the crashes at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania? To those who are still waiting for a phone call or a miracle? What can we do to ease their sorrow and ours?

What had been our complacent way of life has been shattered, and suddenly we find ourselves wondering: What did we do to deserve this?

The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon did not happen in a vacuum. I find it ironic that the news media are suddenly asking, "Why do people hate us?" -- willingly ignoring our involvement in the affairs of other nations and the tragedies and horrible loss of life our actions have brought worldwide. We hardly ever stop to analyze how many crimes were committed in the name of democracy, because our physical and ideological wars have been fought in other countries.

For the first time, people in this country are walking around a city holding photographs of their missing children in a way reminiscent of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who looked for their children who "disappeared" during the brutal military dictatorship in Argentina. In Chile, during the Pinochet dictatorship, relatives looked for their loved ones in the jails and the morgue.

At one time in recent history, every Latin American dictator had been trained by the U.S. military, at the School of the Americas, with the support of our tax dollars. In 1989, we stopped supporting Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega of Panama, who up to then had been one of our exemplary dictators. We bombed Panama City, killing hundreds of civilians and leaving thousands homeless. We did this allegedly to capture one man. At that time, like now, no one stopped to ask about the loss of human life or the financial repercussions of using our troops in the ensuing game of hide-and-seek with Noriega.

There are some parallels between the Latin American dictators and the Taliban. They were both of our own making. By the middle of this week, we had dropped an avalanche of more than 2,000 bombs on Afghanistan, killed unknown numbers of people, smashed to pieces an already broken and terrified populace, and forced millions more to seek refuge in other countries.

How can this destruction of another place and another people make the world safer? Where is the good that can come from these actions?

This column was published Oct. 19, 2001

From The Land of Uncivil Unions

What a wild and crazy heterosexual guy Geraldo Rivera seems to be. In his memoir, aptly titled "Exposing Myself," he discloses his many infidelities during four marriages. Now Rivera has married for the fifth time to a woman 30 years his junior. We'll see if the big religious ceremony and reception will keep him from going back to his old tricks.

Rivera is now neck and neck with Billy Bob Thornton in approaching the record of that other oft-married celebrity Elizabeth Taylor. In a great display of heterosexual love, Taylor has had eight marriages and seven husbands. Her first marriage, to Nicky Hilton in 1950, was a fairy-tale affair designed and produced by MGM studios. Later husbands, particularly Richard Burton, significantly helped to increase Taylor's jewelry collection.

These folks are just so lucky not to be gay. They have had the opportunity to defend marriage over and over and over again, exchanging spouses like buying and selling stocks in the heterosexual commodities market.

Lately, you can't hear or read the news without encountering the words "gay" and "marriage" or "civil union," lumped together as items of great controversy - particularly since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Texas sodomy statutes and the Episcopal Church, in a cliffhanger, voted to confirm the openly gay Rev. V. Gene Robinson as a bishop. The same Episcopal conference also approved an option for dioceses to allow clergy to bless gay and lesbian unions.

However, not everyone is as supportive of gay unions. In Hartford, a coalition of black church leaders is organizing a march on the Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut next Tuesday. What is alarming about this group is that it includes the Rev. Wayne Carter, the city school board chairman. Maybe Carter is not aware that because of the constant harassment gay teens face in schools, New York City is opening a new school for gay and lesbian students. One can assume that Hartford gay and lesbian students who share that experience will find no sympathy if they complain to Carter.

As is to be expected, the Vatican is urging Catholic and non-Catholic lawmakers to oppose civil marriages for gays and lesbians. Fundamentalist right-wing religious leaders trudge their well-worn path to talk shows to defend heterosexual marriage. Now President Bush is reviving attempts to codify marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

But they all seem to be talking about the idealized version of marriage, the one in which, after a beautiful ceremony (civil and religious), the couple has children, and they all live happily ever after. In today's real version, that marriage stands only a 50 percent chance of surviving.

Still, President Bush was quick to invoke the Defense of Marriage Act against the possibility of civil unions and same-sex marriages. His lawyers are looking for the best way to prevent them. Bush, who was willing to use half-truths to lead us into war, now uses the term "sinners" to define a couple of the same gender who are committed to a long-term, loving relationship. He would deny them the opportunity to be legally a part of the society to which they contribute greatly. In a secular democracy like ours, we know that civil marriage brings many legal advantages, including health and pension benefits and transfer-of-property advantages, just to name a few.

I wonder how Vice President Dick Cheney, whose daughter is openly lesbian, feels about President Bush's efforts to maintain the status quo of heterosexual marriages. Perhaps Cheney has forgotten that during a vice presidential debate he said, "People should be free to enter into any kind of relationship they want to enter into. It's really no one else's business, in terms of trying to regulate or - or prohibit behavior in that regard."

What all this talk about marriage between "a man and a woman" really means is that I can get married as many times as I want - as long as my partner is of the opposite sex. Then I can live my married life in any kind of relationship - loving, violent, neglectful. I can have children who

might be loved, neglected or abused. And if I choose, I can get a divorce and start all over again, and again, as many times as I want.

I hope that when the time comes, gays will do better than that.

This column was published August 3, 2003

Feminism's Foes Turning Back the Clock on Gender Roles

I have a habit of keeping a notebook and pen next to me at all times, even while watching TV and reading the newspaper. I take notes about things that interest, puzzle or upset me. Leafing through one notebook reminded me of how aggravating TV advertising is, especially commercials portraying wives and mothers. Like the commercial for Florida orange juice: 1950s kitchen in black and white, wife making breakfast for kids while husband reads paper at table. Cut to 2004 modern-day breakfast scene in color: Husband is still sitting reading the paper. Another ad, for Pledge wipes, portrays messy boys whose mother gladly cleans up after them. Among the many helpless-man-of-the-house ads, J.C. Penney's is a standout. Dad and kids are home alone, kids wreck the house, and all the father can say is "Where is your mother?" Other commercials make fun of women or treat them as lesser beings. There is one that is so maddening I don't even remember the product. A father and son build a rocket together, drive to the park to fly it, and it lands on their car, damaging it. Father's response: "We should have brought your mother's car." In the boys-will-be-boys category is an ad for Tylenol in which a younger brother bursts into his sister's room, disrupting her play with her friend. Sister complains, but Mom doesn't stop him. Final scene, the boy is chasing the girls with a water gun. The two messages in this ad are: 1. Don't deal with the source of your headache; take a pill instead. 2. Mom, don't discipline the boy; it's funny to harass and abuse sisters and their female friends.

We spend billions of dollars on advertising annually because those ads work. They sell products; they also sell ideas. I have yet to meet a housewife whose life revolves around perfecting the cleaning of toilets, but the message of these ads is that a woman's place is to be the sole provider of care for her family in the home. In this country, we have some of the best colleges and universities and a highly educated female population, yet despite the many gains women have made in the workforce, the insidious and constant message of TV advertising in 2004 is that women are solely responsible for cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the family's needs, whether they work outside the home or not. Husbands are portrayed as being absolutely helpless with home and kids or not present at all.

In the 1970s, the feminist movement rallied for equal pay for equal work. Yet, thirty-some years later, The Courant's business pages report that female employees from companies such as Wal-Mart, Costco, Boeing Corp., and Morgan Stanley are filing class-action, sex-discrimination cases alleging that these companies devalue women, keeping them in lower paid jobs while promoting males to higher paid jobs.

These advertisers and businesses are not the only foes of feminist ideals. The Washington Post reported on a July 31 Vatican letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church. Entitled "On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World," it was yet another profoundly distressing attempt to turn back the clock on the roles of men and women in contemporary society.

Feminism, with its struggle for equality between men and women, is twisted in the rhetoric of this letter into causing a power struggle, "leading to harmful confusion regarding the human person, which has its most immediate and lethal effects in the structure of the family." The letter urges women to follow their natural inclination to model themselves after the Virgin Mary "with her disposition of listening, welcoming, humility, faithfulness, praise and waiting."

With trends like these in TV viewing and with alerts from conservative groups in which women's liberation is equated with the end of civilization, perhaps it is time to call on feminists to go back to work full-time.

This column was published August 20,, 2004

Hearing The Dixie Chicks with a New Attitude

My idea of hell is to be stranded in Antarctica listening to country western music. That's why most people who know me are going to be very surprised to find out that in a gesture of sisterhood and solidarity, I just bought "The Long Way Around" by the Dixie Chicks. Several years ago, I heard a song on the radio that piqued my interest. It was "Goodbye Earl" by the Dixie Chicks. I was very impressed with how they dealt with the issue of domestic violence.

Having worked with victims of abuse, I felt that the song presented victim's lives in a very realistic fashion. However, my dislike for that particular musical genre kept me from learning anything more about the Dixie Chicks or listening to their music. Truthfully, I forgot about them. Then, in March 2003, the group was playing a concert in London. That was when President Bush was in a mad dash to invade Iraq. Before singing "Traveling Soldier" about a young soldier who died in Vietnam, Natalie Maines, the group's lead singer, had the audacity to criticize President Bush. She said, "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas."

Until that moment, the Dixie Chicks had been popular, multiple award-winning and the biggest selling female music group in the U.S. A month before they had sung the national anthem at the Super Bowl. Who would have thought that 15 words would cause some to criticize all they had worked for and accomplished? Yet, those words immediately changed their image for some people from good-old-American gals to unpatriotic sluts. They received death threats, radio stations stopped playing their music, and demonstrators destroyed their CDs all over the country.

In a recent interview with Larry King on CNN, they said that if other musicians had spoken out at that time, they would not have been attacked in such a vicious manner. They expressed their sadness when they heard that country singers Toby Keith and Reba McEntire joined the anti-Chicks brigade. Keith performed with images of Maines and Saddam Hussein projected onstage and, while hosting a music award show, McEntire joked that the Chicks sang with their feet in their mouths.

Since 9/11, many people who have expressed a public opinion that cast doubt on the competency and honesty of the Bush administration have been labeled unpatriotic and traitorous.

In 2004, Linda Ronstadt, was evicted from the Aladdin Hotel in Las Vegas after she dedicated a song to Michael Moore and his documentary "Fahrenheit 9/11." Writer E. L. Doctorow was booed and nearly stopped from delivering a commencement speech at Hofstra University when he said that the reasons Bush gave for going to war with Iraq turned out to be lies. Parents were quoted saying that Doctorow ruined the graduation with politics.

Average citizens have also felt retaliation for expressing anti-war views. In 2003, in New Mexico's Rio Rancho Public High School, poet and teacher Bill Nevins was fired from his position after the broadcast of one of his students reading an anti-war poem on the school's closed-circuit TV, which was seen by the military liaison to the school who complained to the principal. At Overland High School in Aurora, Colorado, 10th-grade social studies and geography teacher Jay Bennish was put on leave after a student complained that he had critiqued Bush's economic and foreign policy during class the day after the State of the Union address.

The list of those vilified for so-called objectionable free speech has been steadily growing. The politically correct conservatives seem to believe that ideas shouldn't be expressed in commencement speeches, musicians shouldn't talk politics in concerts, students shouldn't write anti-war poems, and social studies teachers shouldn't make comparisons that put presidents in a bad light.

One can only hope that as President Bush's approval ratings remain low and those who have questioned his policies are proved right, others might feel emboldened to speak out.

On their new album, the Dixie Chicks have included the song "Not Ready to Make Nice," in which they respond to their critics and the controversy by saying that they will not back down. During the Larry King interview, Martie Maguire, another group member, said that she didn't mind if people disagree with what Natalie said. "If they want to do that, that's great. That's what free speech is all about." If only.

This column was published June 16, 2006

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