

Breaking News

With an eviction notice in hand, deputies from the San Diego County Sheriff's Department entered a luxury residential building in Little Italy on March 3, 2022. They took the elevator to the fifth floor and knocked on the door of a woman who had failed to pay her rent. She opened, holding a knife. The woman locked herself back inside before the situation escalated: deputies entered the unit, she charged at one of them, stabbing him. In return, they opened fire, killing her.

The incident happened around 2 p.m.—two hours before our first newscast on ABC 10. I'd been enjoying a light day, working on a wildfire safety story, when my phone rang. It was my executive producer, James. I knew what that meant: a new, rushed assignment.

"We've got an officer involved shooting in Little Italy, apparently an eviction notice served gone wrong," he said. "Woman was killed, officer stabbed, taken to the hospital with non-life threatening injuries. Live Vo/Sot at 4, Package at 5. Ginny will be your photog. She's on the way but stuck in traffic."

"Got it." James gave me the address and we hung up.

I'd be on my own with my camera, tripod and laptop as 4 p.m. inched closer. I slammed my MacBook Pro shut so hard one of the keys popped off. Shoving the laptop into my backpack, I charged out of the newsroom and got into my company Corolla.

The station is a few miles east of downtown, with quick access to a highway that heads directly toward the heart of the city. As I drove, I tuned out the music on the radio, ignored the picturesque skyline and cooked up a plan in my head, likely whispering to myself on the way: leave the tripod, get a quick man-on-the-street interview, shoot-b-roll, send back a soundbite and b-roll, start writing.

In downtown, I turned west on Ash Street, toward Little Italy. Police cars flooded the end of the road, so I got as close as I could and

parked in a fifteen minute zone, making sure my media placard was on the dash.

The first thing I needed to do was find someone, anyone, to interview. I didn't care if they knew anything or not. Anyone can make a comment about how an officer involved shooting in their neighborhood affects their sense of peace. That's the kind of soundbite TV news covets because they make stories relatable to everyone instead of just those in the immediate area.

In these situations, the best bet is to start filming video of the area in the hopes that someone walks by and asks you what's going on. I also put on my ABC-10 sweater to help break the ice. If approached, I'd quickly explain what happened and ask if they'd like to be interviewed.

Camera in hand and backpack on, I power walked onto State Street and found the building. It was one of those fancy high rises with all glass, where you could tell it had some rooftop amenities like a pool or observation deck and studios would go for \$4,500 a month (no exaggeration). I turned on the camera and pointed toward the upper floors, making sure to shoot wide to avoid as shaky a shot as possible.

As I filmed, a guy that seemed about my age walked by. Instead of waiting for him to ask, I stopped him (normally, it's hard to talk to strangers, but when you have a deadline, a fancy camera in hand and wear ABC-10 gear, it boosts your confidence).

"Hey, did you hear about what happened?" I said to the guy.

"Yeah, apparently someone got shot. My friend lives in the building."

"That's right, we're all just trying to piece it together, would you mind if I asked you a couple of questions for the newscast later?"

"Sure!" Jackpot.

With the camera already rolling, I pointed it toward him and asked, “So can you tell me what you heard? What you saw?”

“Yeah, so my friend lives in the building and I was on a different floor. It was pretty close though because we heard a bunch of commotion and loud bangs.”

That was a decent bite. I carried the conversation further, using unconfirmed information the assignment desk heard over the police scanner that James had relayed to me. “Apparently, the Sheriff’s Department was serving an eviction notice and it turned violent. Woman was shot and killed, officer stabbed. What do you think of a situation like that happening so close to you?” (Typical TV news question).

“It’s scary, it can happen anywhere. I hope the officer is okay and I’m sorry to hear about what happened.”

I asked a couple more questions to try to cover my bases, like do you live nearby, are you in the area a lot, etc. But I also needed to get to editing, so I got the guy’s name and spelling and thanked him for the interview.

Now that I had my soundbite, a weight lifted off my shoulders. All I needed was to get a few more shots of the scene and put it all together to send back to the station. In other words, I controlled everything else.

I moved closer to the building and found the police had blocked off the road in front of the entry. Reporters and media vans lined the part of the block leading up to the crime tape and barricade. I got a few shots of the police officers on the ground and the cars all with their flashing lights, then headed over to the area where all the reporters staged. I said hi to some colleagues and also found some people standing off to the side. Looking for anything more specific, I made eye contact with a bearded man in a grey shirt. That usually means he’s approachable, so I went over and asked if he saw anything.

“Yeah, I saw the officer being evacuated.”

“Oh, wow. I’m with ABC-10, do you mind if I ask you a couple of questions on camera?”

“Sure.”

Again, I lifted the camera up and started recording, asking him to fill me in.

“He was bleeding, no shirt, and then when the police officers came he collapsed and they put him in a gurney and they hauled him away, Code 3.”

I wasn’t sure what Code 3 was but I could google it later. That soundbite was better than the first one from the random guy on the street, as this person actually witnessed something key to the story. I asked him a few more basic questions and thanked him for his time.

I headed back to the heart of the makeshift media area, sat at the curb and pulled out my MacBook Pro. I uploaded my video into Final Cut from my camera’s memory card, quickly scanning the interview for a soundbite and trimmed it into a new video file with one second of pad up front, the soundbite, and five seconds of silence after so the producers could cut back to me smoothly. Then, I strung together about 45 seconds of on-scene video and sent that back as a separate file, calling the station and letting them know they had what they needed.

Finally, it was time to start writing. I opened iNews, our content management program, and found my slot leading the 4 p.m. newscast. Like James said, I was in for a Vo/Sot, which is news lingo for a short reporter voiceover followed by a soundbite. With about 40 minutes to spare, I saw that the producers had already written an anchor intro for my spot, so I only had to write my part. Simply put, I wrote what I knew at the time: Sheriff’s deputies served an eviction notice, the recipient wouldn’t come out, and when she did, charged at them with a knife. She stabbed one deputy before she was fatally shot and that the unidentified deputy is receiving medical treatment at a nearby hospital. Into iNews, I transcribed the soundbite that I just got from the bearded guy, and then

ended the spot with a quick tease to the 5 p.m. for something new that I didn't report yet.

I called James and asked him to review the script, then sent a copy to my iPhone so I could reference my notes during my live shot. Basically, I'd memorize the first two lines for when I'm on camera, and once I reached that point, I'd written a cue in the script to tell producers to go to video so I could start reading. With about 25 minutes to spare, I could relax and talk to the other reporters on scene — and that's when Ginny arrived to film the live shot and handle any further editing.

A rush job turned out to be chill... except it didn't.

While I stood with my colleagues, a man approached to say he lived on same floor as the commotion and had snapped a picture of the deputies doing CPR on the woman who was shot. Much of what I'd put together now went up in flames, because I couldn't hold that back for 5 p.m. when every other station had it too.

The man airdropped the picture to all of us and agreed to an interview. The reporters, photographers and I formed a circle around the guy. Ginny filmed and I pushed my way in to hold the mic close. We all had to keep it brief though, because our 4 p.m. newscast was coming fast. His interview would be my tease for the 5 p.m. newscast.

After the interview, I texted the picture to the producers, telling them it was too late for me to re-send a new video b-roll package. They'd have to have a video editor splice it in and put it on the screen when I reference it. Not a problem, they said.

A few minutes later, a police spokesman came over to deliver a brief official update, confirming the details we already heard on the scanner but not much more. Ginny got that on camera, along with the other crews.

At 3:55, I called the station on my cell and got patched in to the anchor feed, sticking my rubber earpiece into my ear to hear the

newscast. A few minutes later, ABC-10 began its first afternoon newscast getting right to the scene.

Anchor Kimberly Hunt's voice came through my earpiece: "Breaking news out of Little Italy where an officer was hurt during a shooting just hours ago. Our ABC 10News reporter Jon Horn is on scene near Beach and State streets. Jon, what have you learned?"

I nodded as I listened for Kimberly's cue, took a deep breath and delivered a calm, measured report, one of the best I'd done: "Hi, Kimberly. Yes, police are not telling us much. All they are willing to say is that this is an active scene. They confirmed an officer involved shooting and that an officer was injured. We don't expect any more updates for at least an hour or two. We will bring them to you and we get them. However, we did speak to a neighbor of a woman on the fifth floor. He told us what he heard, what he saw, and we're gonna show you a picture that he gave us. And I want to give you a warning that it could be sensitive to some viewers. So let's show you that..."

At that point, a producer said in my ear "video" and I knew the picture was on the screen, so I could read from my iPhone. Once through that, I tossed to the soundbite from the neighbor who witnessed the hurt officer being evacuated. I heard it air, and then when he stopped, teased ahead to the 5 p.m. and the new interview with the neighbor describing the woman's behavior that led to the shooting.

"And if we get any other updates in between, we will bring them to you in about an hour. Live in Little Italy, Jon Horn, ABC 10News."

"Thank you, Jon," Kimberly said, moving on to the next story.

"Clear!" The producer said in my ear.

I took a breath and immediately started working on the news package for the 5 p.m. A package is an entire story, with an anchor intro, live introduction, 90-second self-contained story and a live out, teasing to 6 p.m. We did this because the 5 p.m. newscast was longer and there was more time to get details. Luckily, Ginny and I could work together to get

this done, with the new interview from the witness on the fifth floor. I could write the script, get it approved and record my track into the camera while she handled the editing and soundbites. We got everything in and it was another smooth hit. How could it not be? I'd been doing this for seven years now. The 6 p.m. would be a pre-recorded repeat of the 4 and the 7 would be a repeat of the 5, so I really only had to worry about the 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. newscasts.

When I was on air that day, my voice was smooth, my body language calm and I was in control. It wasn't always that way, but this was the most confident I ever felt on TV and as a breaking news reporter. Seven years in, it was time to grow — to get on the anchor desk and move up in broadcasting. But realistically, I sensed something else: my time in the field I once dreamed of as a child was winding down.

15 Years Earlier...

There are certain moments that stick with you growing up: A first kiss, a slow dance at the prom, hitting that clutch three-pointer in front of your entire high school in the senior-faculty basketball game. I've got a few of those on speed dial in my memory bank. But there's another one that comes to mind that isn't nearly as emotional — though I'd argue equally important.

The moment came at orientation in 2007 at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication. I sat in a small auditorium with 50 other incoming graduate students all starting their master's degree program in journalism. At 22, I'd just earned a bachelor's in communication from UC Santa Barbara, but enrolled in grad school because I needed more practical training in journalism to have at a chance at a dream job.

My graduate class was divided into three specialties: Print, Broadcast and Online journalism.

"By a show of hands, how many of you are print majors?" a professor at the front asked.

About a third of the hands went up. I scoffed in my head, knowing newspapers were dying. She asked the same question for broadcast, and most of the hands went up, mine included. After all, I'd dreamed of being on air since I was a kid pretending to broadcast sports with a tape recorder in front of the TV.

Finally, the professor asked for those earning their master's in online journalism. Only a couple of hands reached for the ceiling, and that made sense to me because I had no idea what online journalism was. To me, it sounded like a glorified blogger. But the professor smiled and said, "Those are the ones who are going to get the jobs." The blood rushed from my face and, at my lap, I pulled out my iPhone and googled online journalism. Not much came up, other than news websites, aka online journalism.

As time would tell, the professor was right: everything went online, where video and print combine for a multimedia news package. Truthfully, it didn't matter what your speciality was at USC, because everybody learned how to write a print story, produce a broadcast piece and put them together in one spot — online.

Upon graduation in 2009, I had a multimedia portfolio to show different news outlets. Unfortunately, the field was contracting in The Great Recession. News Directors in TV and radio ghosted me left and right and didn't care that I had a master's degree. My lease in Los Angeles ended and with no job I had to move back home, sleeping in the same twin bed I did as a high school student, complete with its oceanic comforter.

Back home, I kept reaching out to stations and posted my resume on a website for TV reporters looking for jobs. That site got me a call from a small market TV station in the South. After a few phone calls, they offered me \$22,000 a year to uproot my life and move 2,500 miles away to a town that got hurricanes and was not near any major city. Not an easy move for someone who grew up in San Diego, but I strongly considered. That is, until I started getting pressure and negative vibes. My gut told me to decline, and I did. I tip my hat to anyone who takes that leap of faith.

At the time, it hurt, but I knew I wasn't done in my pursuit of making a living being on air. I didn't know it at that moment, but this was the beginning of a journey to be a broadcast journalist on my own terms. Over the next five years, I carved a path to being a live on-air reporter in a sought-after market without having to jump through life-altering hoops.

While the benefits are obvious — I didn't have to move, I got to report in my hometown of San Diego and start a family here, I'll always wonder about the drawbacks and what I missed out on by not leaving. Would I have made anchor if I'd gotten experience in a small market? Would I have made it back to San Diego, my hometown? I'll never know.

This memoir shares how I got where I did without having to move, but also how I knew I'd hit the ceiling and it was time to say goodbye.

If you're a journalism student upon graduation, I remember the uncertainty. I hope this gives you an alternate perspective: Not everybody has to pack up and leave to get their shot. When the right opportunities fell my way, I'd built the unique skill set that set me apart from the rest — skills that don't require a master's degree, but require hustle, timing and knowing what sets you apart.