

One professor's approach to visual journalism has her students exploring new career paths.

A Reporter's Career

by Christine Oliva
(BSJ01, MSJ02)

Susan Mango Curtis says she came to Medill because she wanted to train a new generation of editors — hybrid journalists who could not only write, but also could see the product in its entirety — who could make visual decisions as well as word decisions and approach the news from multiple levels.

It sounds like a daunting task, but she's been doing just that. And in the process, she's literally changing the course of students' lives.

When I entered Medill as a freshman in 1997 — the same year Curtis began teaching a course titled News Graphics and Design (called Print Media Design in the graduate program) — I was dead set on being a reporter. I was one of those students who came in knowing exactly what I wanted to be when I grew up. I applied directly to the journalism school and from the moment I stepped foot on campus, I began planning for my career by immersing myself in my craft.

Since I was on the newspaper track, I wrote for The Daily Northwestern and became a writer for the theater beat and editor of a biweekly features section. I wanted to learn more about the business side of things, so I took a work-study job at Students Publishing Co., designing advertise-



Photos courtesy of Christine Oliva

Christine Oliva (right) set out to become a general assignment reporter. After a visual journalism course with Susan Mango Curtis (above), Oliva ended up as an art director/designer at Catalyst magazine (far right), and redesigned the publication in March 2004.

Redesigned



ments for the Daily. I completed my Teaching Media internship at the Kansas City Star, where I worked as a metro reporter. Then I spent three months at the Cincinnati Enquirer, working as a features reporter.

During my senior year, I took David Protes's famed investigative journalism class, and at the time, I thought that was the clincher. I wasn't going to be just any old reporter. I was going to be an investigative journalist and I was going to change the world.

Then I started graduate school.

Arts reporting, science writing, an independent study in investigative journalism — each class I took reinforced my ultimate goal, which was to work for a major metropolitan daily. Then halfway through my program, I needed an elective, so I signed up for Curtis's class.

I had heard a lot about it, and about Curtis as a professor, but I didn't really know what to expect. I certainly had no idea that one elective could have such a huge impact on my future.

From day one, Curtis started talking about this idea of visual journalism with a passion and enthusiasm that was nothing short of contagious. In my four-and-a-half years at Medill, I had never encountered anyone like her.

Before I met “Mango,” as she likes to be called, I had always drawn a distinct line between designers and journalists. But she quickly helped me to realize



that the journalists of the future were more than just good writers, and good designers were more than just artists. She explained that in this ever-changing, increasingly high-tech and media-savvy world, making things look pretty was not enough. Newspapers and magazine were looking to hire trained journalists who had a visual eye, but who also possessed a sense of ethics and news judgment. They wanted people who were capable of making intelligent decisions, people who could write when necessary, who could edit and write headlines, who had a respect for deadlines and who could handle the pressures that go along with them.

She kept telling me that I should consider the visual side of journalism. I didn't think I was qualified—my technical skills were lacking, I complained. But she wouldn't listen to my protests. She had planted a seed deep inside of me and she refused to let it shrivel up and die.

“You need to become an art director,” she told me one day, as I was sitting in her office. “And I have the perfect position for you.” Graduation was approaching and the job market was tight, so I figured it was worth a shot. She told me to send a cover letter and portfolio to Catalyst Chicago, a small nonprofit magazine in the Chicago Loop that covers urban school reform.

So I did what she told me, and I wrote this fabulous cover letter, telling the editors why I was the ideal candidate for the job. The only thing Curtis had neglected to mention was that the magazine didn't know they were in the market for an art director. Up to that point, the magazine had been designed by a freelance graphic artist. But they were will-

ing to try me out as a graphics intern. Three months later, they created a new position, and I became Catalyst's very first design associate.

Nearly three years later, I couldn't imagine doing anything but visual journalism.

Curtis says that even though she's no longer in a newsroom, by equipping the next generation with an arsenal of skills, she is indirectly affecting the market. Her former students are now art directors, page designers, photographers and graphic artists. They're working at medium to large newspapers and magazines across the U.S. and around the world.

I wonder how many of them came into Medill thinking they were going to be reporters? **M**

Christine Oliva is an art director for Catalyst magazine in Chicago.

