



HALF PARADISE, HALF HELL

Working the crime beat for The Associated Press in New York City is a shifting mix of the professionally thrilling and personally agonizing.

PLANES ON THE HUDSON.

POLICE SHOOTINGS.

NANNIES GONE WRONG.

BY COLLEEN LONG, '00
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It was my first day back to work after having my first child, a son. It was a Saturday shift, Labor Day weekend.

My first assignment: To write about a father who said he picked up his toddler from daycare and drove her home, only to realize she was dead. My own little boy, 7 months old, had just started daycare.

My name is Colleen Long. I'm a journalist and cover crime for The Associated Press. I live in New York City. People often joke that I'm like Lois Lane, or Brenda Starr, as Tom Wolfe once pointed out to me when I was interviewing him for a profile. My job is old-school reporting, and I spend a lot of time chasing down information about gruesome crimes happening in the city. I've covered a lot of bad news: fires, terror attacks, hurricanes, you name it. I've also stood in the center of Times Square and cheered when the ball dropped at midnight. A jetliner landed in the Hudson River and everyone miraculously lived. I wrote about that.

Does it sound exciting? It is. It's also intensely challenging, frequently frustrating, and since I became a parent in January 2014, stomach-churning. I joke with my colleagues that being a mom has made me soft, but really, having a baby of my own has changed how I feel about the stories I cover and how I cope with the stresses of my job.

As I write this, I'm covering the trial of a man accused of kidnapping and murdering Etan Patz, a 6-year-old boy who vanished on his way to the bus stop in 1979. It was the first time he was ever allowed to walk alone. His mother, Julie, let him. I think about that detail a lot as I sit on the hard wooden benches in the spare courtroom bent over my reporter's notebook. I have never interviewed her, and she isn't talking to reporters right now. But I wonder as I sit a few feet away: Does she feel responsible? What does she think about as she quietly watches the man accused of killing her son? There was another longtime suspect; do she and her husband, Stan, believe he's the one? I can no longer look at photos of Julie with Etan without picturing my own little boy, gone.

A reporter can't cry in a courtroom. Or a newsroom, for that matter. I can't internalize other people's tragedies and fall apart when something sad happens to someone else. It's my job to report the news, good and bad, to tell stories, and to pursue the truth. It is an important job and I have to remain professional, and that means I can't let it get personal.

It wasn't always difficult. Before the baby, I could really compartmentalize: It was a bad story about someone else's unfortunate luck. Or it was a bad story about someone who had it coming. Or it was a great story about a really interest-

ing crime. One evening near Halloween three years ago, two stories broke at once: A police officer was accused of plotting to kidnap, kill, cook, and eat women, and a nanny on Manhattan's wealthy Upper West Side was arrested on charges she stabbed two children to death in a bathroom while their mother was out with a third child. The crimes were gruesome. Maybe you read about them? The officer's wife had turned him in after finding disturbing images on his computer, according to authorities. In the second story, the little children were found in the tub, the nanny nearby with her throat cut on the bathroom floor, according to police. The mother returned home and found her children. I worked

Square or a body found in a fancy Manhattan hotel room.

But then I had Wyatt last year, and I was away from work for months. It was an unusual experience after working full time for more than a decade. Before I left, I couldn't imagine being gone, and while I was out, I was so focused on him that I couldn't imagine being at work. I was surprised by how quickly I adjusted to life away from my desk, unchained from my phone. I spent my spring and summer strolling down leafy Brooklyn streets, baby in tow, pushing him in swings and making baby food, not reporting on stories about hurt and lost children. It was novel.

I feel conflicted and sad about being away from Wyatt

IN 2009, I WAS SITTING AT MY DESK WHEN MY COLLEAGUE CALLED TO TELL ME THERE WAS A PLANE IN THE HUDSON RIVER AND ASK IF I COULD HELP.

“THERE’S A PLANE IN THE HUDSON?”

**I YELLED TO THE OTHER REPORTERS
AS I PULLED ON MY COAT.**

“REALLY? HOW BIG?”

late into the evening on both stories, collecting the gory details without blinking. The officer was eventually convicted of a kidnapping conspiracy, but it was overturned by a judge who sentenced him to time served for using law-enforcement databases to review files for potential targets. He was fired from the department. The nanny's case hasn't gone to court yet.

There was a buzzing sense of excitement in the pressroom when those stories were breaking. I think there's a similar coping mechanism and sense of humor with emergency room workers, trauma nurses, police officers. If they surrendered to the tragedy confronting them, they would be unable to work. And so it is with journalists. It is a survival instinct. Gallows humor abounds, and it probably seems heartless or like cold indifference from the outside. But you have to enjoy the thrill of the breaking story, the pressure and panic that come with the phone call about a bomb in Times

and I hate leaving him in daycare, but I never considered staying away from work permanently. Most families I know can't afford to live on one salary, and we're no exception. Both my husband, Andrew, and I work full time as journalists, and it's just not a profession one goes into for the cold, hard cash. I want to do my job well and be creative, but I also feel intense pressure to be available to my family at every possible time, even when the phone starts ringing about a story. I'm lucky because Andrew is supportive and understands when that phone rings or when I'm late because of work. But I am still painfully aware of what I am missing at home when I am at work, and vice versa. Sometimes it feels impossible to do both well. Some women must be able to live this dream combination of work and motherhood, but I haven't figured out how.

I struggle every day with this dual life as a professional and a mother. There's no melding them in our society, it feels

like, and especially not in my job. I can't think about Wyatt when I'm watching a suspect on video talk about suffocating a child then throwing his body into a plastic bag. I would never be able to leave my house.

I've worked for The Associated Press ever since graduation. I am a product of the University's small but mighty undergraduate journalism major. My professors — many of whom continue to teach there, like Tom Mullen, Michael Spear, and Stephen Nash — taught me very important journalism lessons. Like, never convict a suspect in your story who hasn't been tried and convicted. Write a sharp lead. Use proper grammar. My friend Rebecca Miller, also a UR grad, is one of my editors now at the AP. She graduated a year after me, and we were on *The Collegian* staff together; she was always better at catching errors than me. (Than I?) We say that if our UR professors read our stories, we just pray they don't catch any style errors.

I transferred to the New York bureau in 2006 and started on the night desk covering run-of-the-mill breaking news until my colleague who covered the New York Police Department went on vacation and they sent me to fill in. One day, a therapist was hacked to death in her office on the Upper East Side, the suspect leaving behind a suitcase full of women's clothing and adult diapers. The case briefly mesmerized the city, and I found out I had a knack for telling a good crime story. When my colleague returned, my editors announced there would be some changes, and that included me working full time in the police headquarters press room affectionately known as "the shack."

The shack consists of five windowless rooms lined up along a narrow hall on the second floor of police headquarters in Lower Manhattan, across the street from City Hall and a short walk from some of the busiest criminal courts

I STRUGGLE EVERY DAY WITH THIS DUAL LIFE, AS A PROFESSIONAL AND A MOTHER. THERE'S NO MELDING THEM IN OUR SOCIETY, IT FEELS LIKE, AND ESPECIALLY NOT IN MY JOB.

The Associated Press was founded in 1846 and is the world's oldest and largest newsgathering organization. It's a not-for-profit news cooperative, which means it's owned by American newspapers and broadcasters. You've read AP stories. There are AP reporters right now working in virtually every major city in the world, reporting on everything from stock markets to sports to spelling bees. Our work is everywhere. Our names may not always be on our stories — that's the prerogative of whoever is using the work — but you'll see the AP symbol after the dateline. The AP's global reach, as well as the sometimes-anonymous nature of the work, fosters a sense of camaraderie and teamwork among the staff. We work hard on constant deadline, and we do it as quickly and as accurately as possible.

I got hired as an editorial assistant in Denver shortly before I graduated. I packed up my stuff, stopped by my college roommate Kellie's house in Baltimore to take in an Orioles game, and headed west. When I arrived in the bureau, it was a shock to realize my job consisted of filing newspapers and answering phones. It was decidedly unglamorous, and what I really wanted to do was be a reporter. But looking back, I know I had a lot to learn. When I did have opportunities to write, my stories were ripped apart in red. But the reporters and editors there were kind, and they were patient. I spent a lot of time reading the AP stylebook so I would use "which" and "that" correctly. I also wrote stories my colleagues were also working on, just for myself, so that I could compare my version with the published version. My first major story was about a nursing shortage in rural Colorado. After a couple of years, I got promoted.

in the country. There are offices for the *New York Post*, *Daily News* (N.Y.), *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and us. The place is messy. There are mice. There are roaches. There are piles and piles of yellowing newspapers. Sometimes the lights don't work. You can hear reporters through the walls yelling at their editors.

News breaks all the time — often really big news — and I'm responsible for reporting and writing it. I work alongside some of the best, most plugged-in journalists in the city. Many are close friends.

It's half journalism paradise, half hell.

The hell part is easy to define. I'm usually on edge because something can always happen. I want the AP to be competitive, and that means I'm trying to have better stories than publications with more reporters, more resources, and more time. I worry about accuracy constantly. Because the Internet proliferates rumor (see also: Twitter), investigations are always changing, and you really need to be careful about who knows what and why. Sources can be nightmares if you aren't constantly asking yourself WHY. Why are they telling you this? Why do they know this? How do they know this? Is it true? You have to ask: Why does this officer know the bomb in the green SUV in Times Square didn't go off? How does this fire department official know that no one died in the plane landing on the Hudson River? Does this witness really know there were five shots fired? Our standards are high, and I am constantly evaluating whether what I am about to report is the best possible piece of information.

The paradise is harder to articulate. Covering crime is often about people at their most basic, most real, most

vulnerable moments. While that can be challenging, it's also a fascinating and gripping experience.

And working at the shack is being part of the fabric of New York City, being part of huge, developing stories that are being watched by the whole city and sometimes the whole country. It's something you just can't get anywhere else. The shack reporters — most of them are men; the beat attracts males — all understand the same language. This type of work is also a fabulous combination of rigor and creativity. I am telling the truth, but I'm trying to do it in the most interesting way possible. I love that.

In 2009, I was sitting at my desk when my colleague called to tell me there was a plane in the Hudson River and ask if I could help. "There's a plane in the Hudson?" I yelled to the other reporters as I pulled on my coat. "Really? How big?" the *Times* reporter asked.

It was big, really big. It was US Airways Flight 1549, piloted by Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger III, that had landed in the water after a bird strike. All 155 passengers and crew were rescued. My piece of the story was to track down police and firefighters to confirm investigative details, so I ran around in the frigid evening through police lines and scores of first-responders trying to find the answers, then calling into the desk. Sometimes, my job is just to work sources and get details to feed to someone else writing the story. It's often easier.

Sometimes, I am the one writing the story and making calls to my sources at the same time. That's what happened on the afternoon of Dec. 20, 2014, when two New York City police officers were shot and killed in Brooklyn. A police source I spoke to that day said simply, "This one is going to be really, really bad."

The source was right. The deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and Eric Garner in New York, among others, have brought to light longstanding complaints and animosity about how officers treat minority communities. In New York, we have a new police commissioner and new mayor after more than a decade, and with them have come big changes for the NYPD and a new openness on how the department has treated minorities in the past. It is in many ways an interesting time to cover police and crime in the city.

On video, it looked like an NYPD cop put Garner in a chokehold, and then Garner cried out "I can't breathe!" before dying. The cop said it was a legal takedown maneuver. People were angry, and remain so. The protests ramped up after the Dec. 3 grand jury decision not to charge the officer in Garner's death.

Then, an emotionally disturbed man who had vowed online to kill two "pigs" in retaliation shot officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu to death in a patrol car in broad daylight five days before Christmas. The gunman then ran into the subway and killed himself in front of an arriving

subway train full of passengers.

My excellent colleague Jennifer Peltz ran to the scene while I stayed at my desk working the story. I researched background on previous police shootings, and I called my sources to get details of the investigation and the names of the officers. I took calls from Jenn, who gave me details from the press conference and chased around police and politicians for information. I left the office at about midnight and looked at my cell phone; I had made more than 65 calls in eight hours.

The story took a toll on everyone in the city. It quieted some of the protests. It sunk morale lower at the NYPD. Police are an insular bunch, and this type of tragedy really hits hard. I was so busy that I barely saw my family for days, save for the hour in the morning before I went to work. After my husband was asleep, I'd sit awake thinking about the climate in the city, the officers, their families, and my own family, too. I didn't wrap any presents. I didn't bake any cookies. I didn't have any time to.

I worked on New Year's Eve writing about the Times Square ball drop. On New

Year's Day, I was in the main office on a general assignment shift when Mario Cuomo died. A few days later, two officers were shot and wounded. An anti-police protest gathered a few days later.

And then I watched Julie Patz on the witness stand in a Manhattan court recount with composure and sadness the last time she ever saw her son, Etan. It was the morning of May 25, 1979. He got up and got dressed all by himself, packed his school bag full of Matchbox cars and a little pencil case, and told his mom he was ready to make the short trip to the bus stop by himself. She capitulated. He had a dollar clutched in his left hand, she remembered, and planned to go to the corner store. She walked him down the stairs and told him not to dally coming home, then watched him about a block before she turned and headed back up the stairs to their SoHo loft. She never saw him again.

The natural question is: Why am I still doing this? Why don't I change my beat? Put myself out to pasture in a nice education job or something more civilized?

I look at it this way: If I have to be away from Wyatt, I'd like it to be for something worthwhile that makes me happy and engaged. I want him to think I'm not wasting my time during the day when I should be caring for him. I want him to read my stories (when he's older, obviously).

I want him to be proud. ✨



Colleen Long, '00, is a law enforcement reporter for The Associated Press in New York City, formerly news editor of The Collegian. She never would have had the courage to ship off from Richmond to Colorado all alone for a journalism job after college if it wasn't for Professor Tom Mullen, who told her that she was brave and could do it.