A New Anchor is Born

By Mel Lavine

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Some twenty-five years ago, when I was producing pieces for the CBS News “Sunday Morning with Charles Kuralt,” I was assigned to do a major story on drug smuggling in El Paso. My reporter would be a young man from a CBS bureau in Texas. He had never worked for the show before so, as I was told, I would have to be patient, guide him the best I could, and hope for the best.

“Sunday Morning” was not always able to pry top reporters loose for field work from the Evening News. We sometimes had to settle for something less.

As it happened, this young man needed little help from me. He hit the ground running, and possessed the “stick-to-it –ness” that I once heard Carl Sandburg say was the key to success. After long days of chasing leads and angles and fending against authorities required to mask the truth, I’d find my reporter still on his feet, pursuing angles, digging for facts.

I don’t remember how good or poor a story we produced. Probably good, or good enough. There were no complaints. I would remember complaints.

Over time I’ve watched the reporter from Dallas climb. In more recent years he’s been one of the star correspondents on “60 Minutes.” His interviews, including some with presidents, are typically respectful but also probing and focused. I can’t think of anyone who does big interviews better. Not Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, Mike Wallace, Barbara Walters. You have to go back to Walter Cronkite, a great reporter and anchor, but, frankly, the interview was not Walter’s strong point.

When the reporter from Dallas was still new to the network, the backbiting about him around the shop would have it that he didn’t quite fit the CBS mold, whatever that was supposed to mean. I remember one senior producer saying the young man was too nice and too self-effacing to make it big.

I wonder what she is saying this week when the young man from Dallas, whose name – soon to be a household word – is Scott Pelley, age 51. In case you missed it, Scott is the new anchor of the CBS Evening News, succeeding Katie Couric who's left for other venues.

I know what I am remembering this week. "Hey, I think we can call it a night," I sounded off back in El Paso on more than one occasion when Scott and I were working late on that drug story. The youngster paid no heed to me. He kept on digging.

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