

Inside Stories: The Non-Stop Story Transcript

Scott Simmie: Hello again, and welcome to another episode of Inside Stories. Today, we're going to speak with someone I regard as an everyday hero. No, she's not a doctor or a nurse, though I'm willing to bet she is every bit as busy. Today's guest? She's a journalist in a profession where every single day brings a deadline.

Scott Simmie: On today's Inside Stories, I'm really pleased to be joined by Jacqueline Charles. Jacqueline is a multi award winning journalist with the Miami Herald and someone whose work I tremendously admire, as a former career journalist. Jacqueline, thanks for joining me today. I really appreciate it.

Jacqueline Charles: Thanks. Very happy to be with you.

Scott Simmie: There's a lot of ground I'm hoping we can cover today, but I'd be grateful if we could start just with these historic protests and the civil rights movement that we've been seeing unfold. What's that been like from your end?

Jacqueline Charles: Well, I can tell you that I covered the first protest in Miami in response to the George Floyd killing. And the protest in Miami happened a little late in a sense that we were already seeing protests in Minneapolis, Houston, and other places. And in Miami, you know, we've had our own history in terms of police violence. There've been three riots that erupted in the city after a police officer shot and killed a black man. The first one were the McDuffie riots in 1980 and then subsequent to that, we had two others. So this is a city that has a very troubling legacy, you know, with this. But it's also a very multicultural city, and multicultural in the sense that we have a very large Hispanic population, and we also have very large Caribbean population. And what was interesting about the protests that I covered and one subsequent to that is it was very Brown.

Jacqueline Charles: And when I say very Brown, meaning that there were a lot of Hispanics and mostly young Hispanics. And that's been one of the trends that I've seen, that you have a lot of young people today, millennials or a little younger, a little older than that, but they are sort of viewing this whole issue for racial justice, social justice, through a different lens, and they are demanding it. And so when we look at this whole Black Lives Matter movement and we see how far it has come or hasn't come, but you can argue that it's come far in a sense that at one point it was only Black people that are out that were marching and it was Colin Kaepernick by himself taking a kneel. And today, you see that it is attracting a diverse group of people. And what it says to me is that there is now this recognition that's happening that there is a problem. The reality is that being black in America still carries a lot of problems, a lot of issues. There's still injustices.

Scott Simmie: I'm dying to know what you think of this personally, but I understand because of your profession, you can't really comment on that. Could you explain how that works?

Jacqueline Charles: Well, I'm a journalist, and here in the United States as journalists, you know, our job is not to have personal opinions. I mean, you know, on any given day, you know, it's interesting. I cover the Caribbean, but I was tapped because of my combat experience with protests to cover the very first protest on this issue. And I feel as a journalist is very important, when you sit down with somebody on the other end, that they don't assume that you already have an opinion about something. You want them to be honest and open and objective, and you have to bring that up objectivity. If you, yourself start to feel a very strong way about something, you have to understand that it's going to blind you or prevent you from seeing the other side. And that's not fair to your readers. It's not fair to yourself.

Jacqueline Charles: I may not agree with you personally on an opinion, but that's not my place. You know, I tell my sources all the time who do not like a story that I may do or a headline that I'm not responsible for. I said, "My job is to report." And when I report, I talk to a lot of people, even if you only

see two or three quoted in the story. And I may go in with a certain premise, but based on the reporting that I've done, you know, they've now shown me the issue is another way. That comes through objectivity. You know, we as journalists, you're trained to be objective, and that's a very important part. Because all I have is my word, you know, and the trust that I build with somebody that I am interviewing for a story.

Scott Simmie: Could you tell me what your role at the Herald is and what that means in terms of responsibility?

Jacqueline Charles: All right. So I am the Caribbean correspondent and I usually put Caribbean/Haiti correspondent, even though Haiti is in the Caribbean. But I'm responsible for Haiti, as well as the English-speaking Caribbean. Haiti takes up a lot of my time, probably 90% of my time. And so in the rest of the region, outside of breaking news, what I'm always looking for our trend stories, regional stories. I myself am from the region, and we have a tendency to think that we all are islands unto ourselves, but really we have very similar challenges, very similar issues, as well as a similar culture. So my approach to storytelling is finding those stories that sort of binds us as opposed to stories that show how separate we are.

Scott Simmie: And forgive me, I should know this, but when you say the Caribbean, English-speaking Caribbean countries, how many countries would that be?

Jacqueline Charles: Probably, I mean, in total, probably like, 24 countries. I mean, we usually think about CARICOM, which has, you know, the Caribbean community, but they're also, you know, the British dependent territory. And I say English-speaking, but really, if there's a story in Martinique, I'll also chase that, or a story in the Dutch Caribbean. So, you know, people usually think about the Caribbean just in terms of tourism, but there are stories, you know, that are out there. We can't write about every, you know, little island, but what I try to do is just find those stories, and you're finding them a lot with the COVID coverage, that talks about trends or show trends, and show, you know, either stark differences or similarities.

Scott Simmie: You know, we think of healthcare workers as being busy and doctors as being overwhelmed, but journalists who are trying to stay on top of this story, and who have a beat the kind of size that your beat is, the tempo of this, I would think, for you is really, I hate to use the word, but unprecedented.

Jacqueline Charles: It is unprecedented. I mean, I'm the disaster queen. I mean, I've covered my share of disasters. I mean, I've been in Haiti right after the earthquake. I got there less than 12 hours after it happened in 2010. I ended up living in Haiti 18 months and that was really a high pace. It was go, go, go. You know, the first day, and the only day I decided to take a day off, Jean-Claude Duvalier decided to, you know, return to Haiti that day. I've done my share of hurricanes, including The Bahamas last year, but this, in terms of the COVID for all of us, not just me, for all of us at the Miami Herald, it really is intense and unprecedented because news is happening and it's happening rapidly. And, you know, as soon as you publish a story, something's changed. You know, the number has gone up or there's a new development.

Jacqueline Charles: And so the pace you have to keep up. And, you know, there are some stories that you can, you know, you can go back to, and then there are other stories that if you miss that opportunity, you know, you've missed it. But really, our job is trying to keep readers informed and on top of it, and readers, they want to know. They want to know. I mean, remember, I live in Miami and this is Latin America. I mean, it is the Caribbean. You know, we have representatives from all over the region.

Scott Simmie: We talk about some of the disparities within America about how COVID-19 seems to be affecting different communities. But I think some of the countries you cover, not necessarily all of them, but that's a whole different level of disparity again, from North America. Would that be a fair thing to suggest?

Jacqueline Charles: When you look at a place like Haiti, where, you know, the overwhelming majority of the population is young, but today you have a mortality rate of almost 10%, 9.75%, almost 10. So think about it. 129 confirmed cases and 12 deaths. And then when you take into account that in Haiti, you have 4 million people who are already food insecure, facing famine before COVID, you've got issues of high blood pressure, you've got diabetes, you have people, forget about access to healthcare, but probably haven't even seen a doctor. You have all of these negative factors that are not playing in its favor. And so we see these issues of diabetes. Barbados has a high rate of diabetes. You know, hypertension is a problem in the Caribbean, but we're talking about island nations with small community.

Jacqueline Charles: So this is why we're seeing in the place like Turks and Caicos, one death so far, or in some places, zero death. In the Cayman Islands, it was one death, but that death was an Italian tourist. So all of the locals who have acquired this infection, you know, they're recovering or they've recovered. But you're starting to see that disparity play out in terms of the poverty level, in terms of access to healthcare, in terms of co-morbidity. So these are things that I'm looking at and, you know, and probably will be writing about in the next couple of weeks, because there's being sharpened by the experience of one country versus the experience of other countries.

Scott Simmie: Reporters always tend to feel a real responsibility to help the voiceless get their stories out. And I'm curious whether the pandemic has made you feel even greater pressure or greater responsibility to ensure you're doing absolutely everything you can possibly do on that front.

Jacqueline Charles: Yeah. But you know, it's a weird thing. Because one of my frustrations that I have is, in terms of looking at how this pandemic is being handled, right? And, you know, we have regional governments that have always not been press friendly because they often walk with their own media that they have. And they haven't really been great in terms of access. Some have been more accessible than others. But what I have been impressed on, on the positive side is that a lot of them, you know, going to social media, they're on Twitter, they're doing Zoom, they're doing video conferencing. So they are letting the press in, because they're realizing that they need to get the word out, right? But at the same time, you have certain countries where they expect the press like, we're in this together, we're walking side by side.

Jacqueline Charles: And so I've had a couple of conversations in the last couple of weeks to say, "No, my job is not to be a cheerleader or the route you want or to do your job or to be your communications person. My job is to, you know, highlight, you know, where you're faltering, what isn't being done? What is being done? And in that respect, hopefully you will do better because you have to educate a population. You have to let them know." So I think for us, that responsibility is in terms of sort of the information, but making sure that we give good information and we give accurate information and helping people understand, you know, what this is and what this means. These people that are there in this situation, whether they are workers on cruise ships, or they are people that are vulnerable in these countries, they're looking to the media to give them the truth, to tell them what's really going on. Help me decipher this.

Scott Simmie: I'm going to shift from your professional to your personal life a bit. And the first question I have is just whether you're on your own or if you're living with other people during this.

Jacqueline Charles: So I have my mother who lives with me and my aunt. And they're both elderly. So I have this other added responsibility now, and I think that's what's different with this pandemic and in

the context of my job. Because you know, when I'm parachuting into countries during disasters, I'm only thinking about myself or have to keep myself safe. And now with this pandemic, if you're living with somebody and especially if they're elderly, you have this added responsibility to keep them safe. And I am also Haitian descent. And I have been joking saying, "Haitian parents do not understand the word social distancing." It's not even in the Creole vocabulary or even in the cultural context. So I've been trying to social distance even within my own house because I am out, you know? Whether it's making a run to the grocery store or yesterday, I actually went into the office for a few hours. I mean, I'm out. And every time you go out, you know, you're exposed. So that just sort of adds to, you know, the pressure that you're under as a journalist.

Scott Simmie: Outside of work, what are you doing with your downtime?

Jacqueline Charles: I have no downtime. I mean, honestly, I have no downtime. Our offices moved several years ago from downtown Miami all the way out West. And there are people who wanted to work from home and, you know, and that's always been a big issue. And it's always been a complaint, a grumbling among journalists and the fact that not all of our bosses understand the benefits of working from home. And I've never really been one to work from home. I needed to be in the office because that's how I work. And I'm a late nighter as opposed to an early starter. And I will tell you, in working from home with this pandemic, there is absolutely no downtime. It's not even a question of there not being a demarcation between work and personal or, you know, work and time off. But from the minute you're up, you are just nonstop, nonstop, nonstop.

Jacqueline Charles: I mean, I've been trying to order a desk for the last couple of weeks. I ordered one and it broke during the assembly. So it was cheap, you know? So I'm having to make all these adjustments. I mean, yesterday when I was at the office, I feel like I was a little bit more productive and I probably wasn't. But you know, that time of getting up from your seat, chit chatting with somebody, or a boss may say, it's wasting time. It adds a certain amount of balance to you personally, your space. But when you're working from home, you're always on the clock, you're working the phones, you're working the computers. And it just seems like it's keep going. So some days, I said to my boss one day, it was like seven o'clock and I said, "okay, yeah, Jay, I just got out of bed." He's like, "You shouldn't tell that to your boss." I said, "Jay, I got up at 7:00 AM. And between 7:00 AM and 7:00 PM, I have not been able to get up even for a bathroom break because I've been sitting here writing all day."

Scott Simmie: For those of us who don't live in Miami, you know, we picture this beautiful Miami Beach and the ocean nearby and palm trees. I'm guessing you're not getting outside and really enjoying any of that these days.

Jacqueline Charles: No,. I would like to be able to get up and walk as well. But you know, again, you know, journalists today, you know, we're multimedia. We're no longer newspaper. You know, even when you're listening to a radio program, a friend of mine says, "Well, you can walk and listen to the radio." I said, "Yeah. But then I also have to tweet and also have to take notes because sometimes news is happening and I'm doing my reporting, you know, at the same time." But, you know, and we've also kind of been on this weird lockdown in Miami. You know, there wasn't no crazy mandate, but things close early. And again, I have to tell you, knowing that there is this pandemic that's out there, and when you go to the grocery store, you realize how close people are and how people don't really respect social distancing. It's scary. You know, it really is scary. And so you're always have to be cognizant of that.

Scott Simmie: At the beginning of this pandemic and I think throughout, mental health professionals have suggested, you know what? Limit your exposure to news about the pandemic. You know, check into Twitter like twice a day, but then put it aside. How do you manage to insulate yourself so you're not overwhelmed just living in this COVID-19 world all the time?

Jacqueline Charles: I'm in a house with my mom and my aunt. They have the television on all day. They are listening to President Trump, they are listening to CNN. So they're getting the big pictures and they're seeing what's happening. My world is the Caribbean and Latin America. So I have a lot of information, but I'm also kind of picking and choosing in the sense that I'm looking for particular stuff, as opposed to sitting and watching a news program and having it all come at me in 30 minutes, if that makes any sense.

Scott Simmie: It does.

Jacqueline Charles: So it's a different way that you're processing the kind of information and, yes, the information for us too, you know, when you look at Brazil and you look at Ecuador and it's crazy when you're seeing it, but you're looking at this pandemic through a different lens. You know, and I'm working as opposed to I'm taking it in.

Jacqueline Charles: So I think that that's sort of different also for journalists, but at some point too, you know, we do get hit with the PTSD because it does hit home, it comes closer. And for us personally, as we start to hear reports of people who either have passed away because of this pandemic, or it comes at our door, it's a different feeling. I had to go to a funeral over the weekend of a beloved teacher of mine, and it was nerve wracking because I was coming face to face. I mean, she didn't die because of COVID. But I had to go to a funeral where the amount of people are being limited, everybody has on a mask, you're having to do social distancing. And right there I'm freaked out the whole time because you're wondering, okay, is this enough social distance? Are you away from me? Let me not touch anything. You know, do I wear gloves? Do I walk with my sanitizer? That is where it becomes real for you, even though every single day, all day, you're coming face to face with, you know, the impact of this.

Scott Simmie: This is going to be a bit of a tough transition, but this sound here signals that we are close to the end. And it's kind of the rapid fire round where I'm just going to ask you a few very short questions and I'm just looking for very short answers. So, number one, what's the best thing about being a reporter?

Jacqueline Charles: You get to be at the front of history.

Scott Simmie: What's the worst part?

Jacqueline Charles: You have very little work-life balance.

Scott Simmie: Who is one person that you really admire? They can be famous or not.

Jacqueline Charles: Oh my God. I have heroes. And these are women in my life from high school to now that I admire for a number of different reasons because of their qualities.

Scott Simmie: And shero, that's hero with an S in front, correct?

Jacqueline Charles: It's hero with an S in front of it.

Scott Simmie: Very nice. What is something that you would like to learn, a language or a skill or anything, in the future?

Jacqueline Charles: I need do better with French.

Scott Simmie: Finally, what's the one thing you're really looking forward to doing that you can't do now when this is all over?

Jacqueline Charles: I am looking for the ability to get back into travel and not have to worry about catching COVID-19.

Scott Simmie: Jacqueline Charles, thank you so much for doing what you do. And thanks for sharing your inside story today.

Jacqueline Charles: Thank you for having me.

Scott Simmie: There's obviously no good time for a global pandemic, but at least we're in an era where technology has made things somewhat easier. Now, without even touching on the incredible advances in medicine and diagnostics, we've got the internet, social media, streaming video, Zoom calls, all ways of obtaining and sharing information that simply didn't exist not so very long ago. These tools, especially during this time of isolation, help us feel connected. I certainly appreciate being able to interview people, record and edit these podcasts from home, and then share their stories with you, and I hope you enjoy hearing them.

Scott Simmie: I'm Scott Simmie, And this has been another episode of Inside Stories presented by BMO.

Legal Disclaimer: The views expressed here are those of the participants and not those of Bank of Montreal, it's affiliates, or subsidiaries.