

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

A 'Journalist Forever': Suárez leaves a legacy of commitment & quality



Manny Suárez

By EVA LLORÉNS VÉLEZ
Special to The STAR

Manny Suárez, whose journalism career spanned over four decades, will always be associated with investigative reports into the 1978 killings of two pro-independence supporters by police at Cerro Maravilla, but editors at the San Juan STAR relied upon him to cover many other stories that will forever live in the public conscience.

Suárez died last week at the age of 92, leaving a legacy of commitment to quality and values that should be imitated by all journalists. And while he would best be remembered for the investigation he conducted with fellow STAR journalist Tomás Stella, now deceased, into the events at Cerro Maravilla, his body of work ranged from features to crime to political news.

Suárez wrote for stateside newspapers such as The New York Times and received an award from the Overseas Press Club in 1971 for an article on the Spanish-language problems experienced by Puerto Rican youths raised in the mainland United States who would return to the island to live and attend school.

Former STAR journalist Peggy Ann Bliss was close to Suárez, whom she met while working for the Associated Press and later as a business editor for the STAR in 1972. Suárez got her involved in the Overseas Press Club and she fondly recalled that he was supportive of her stories about stray dogs and cats as well as the arts.

"He was supportive of reports on those least likely to be heard," the longtime reporter said.

Bliss recalled that editors always relied on Suárez and his professionalism for covering the important stories of the day. "They knew he would get the story," she said.

The STAR never provided funding for plane tickets so reporters could cover events outside of Puerto Rico, Bliss said. However, they made an exception when they sent Suárez to Israel to cover the Lod Airport massacre, a terrorist attack in 1972 in which three members of the Japanese Red Army, recruited by the Palestinian Liberation Army, killing 26 people, including 17 Puerto Ricans, who were on a Christian pilgrimage.

He covered other events such as the robbery of \$7 million from an armored truck at a depot in West Hartford, Connecticut in the 1980s to finance the fight for Puerto Rico's independence from the United States, and the 1979 attack by Puerto Rican independence militants that killed two U.S. sailors and wounded 10 as they were traveling to Sabana Seca.

"Whenever there was a big story, he was there," Bliss recalled.

Suárez also covered the killing of jewelers from New York and the subsequent arrests of members of a police drug ring headed by former officer Alejo Maldonado. He helped translate a novel on the subject after he retired and while suffering from Alzheimer's disease. He helped out in the coverage of other stories such as the conviction of three individuals accused of participating in the theft of \$2.2 million in federal funds from the San Juan AIDS Institute in the 1990s.

Suárez covered not only hard news, but feature stories as well. He interviewed renowned Life photographer Gordon Parks, who died in 2006 and was best known for photos that documented American life with a focus on race relations, poverty, civil rights, and urban life from the 1940s to 2000s. Suárez was good friends with former STAR editor William Kennedy, who won a Pulitzer for his novel "Ironweed," hosting a party for him after he won the award in 1984, Bliss recalled.

His coverage helped give the former San Juan STAR the glory and credibility it enjoyed for many years.

Former STAR editor John Marino said that by the time he arrived at the STAR in the early 1990s, Manny was already a legend and both the conscience and historical memory of the newsroom.

"If there was a discussion going on regarding an editor's judgment or some sloppy reporting, Manny was usually at the center of it and was a force that helped keep the STAR honest," Marino said. "He was also extremely generous with his time and provided novice reporters with vital background that he knew from the top of his head for as long as you were willing to discuss the subject, a hugely important source of information in the pre-database age when getting background information meant digging through actual newspaper clippings filed in a dusty library."

"At some point, Manny received a 'Journalist Forever'

baseball cap that I remember him wearing around town and that fit him perfectly. Manny literally lived his life at the daily newspaper and would continue to come in on Saturdays -- to help with copy or work on his column -- at a stage in his career long past when he should have stopped working on weekends," Marino recalled. "It was during those slow news days that I learned so much from the maestro about Puerto Rico politics as well as all the characters who passed through the STAR over the years."

Former STAR reporter Lorelei Albanese wrote in social media about Manny's good humor. When he would answer the phone, instead of saying "City desk, may I help you?" he would say "Silly desk, may I help you?"

Personally, Suárez was a good mentor who helped me out with legislative stories. His last years at the STAR, nonetheless, were not very rosy. Because of a dispute with the newspaper publishers, he was not allowed to cover political news at all. The situation frustrated Suárez because every topic of importance in Puerto Rico was touched by politics, so the decision seriously limited his work as a journalist. He left the newspaper in the early 2000s for another job and then retired.

Peggy Ann Bliss contributed to this column.



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