

Ira Chinoy: Inside the life of an accomplished journalist

By Matt Shea



Photo via <https://merrill.umd.edu/directory/ira-chinoy>

It was the summer of 1976, and The Pine Bluff Commercial had just received a notice from a woman complaining about the lack of programs for individuals with developmental disabilities.

After speaking with people in the state, she discovered that by finding five children with Down syndrome in Pine Bluff, a grant could be started. And so, a meeting was set in place in which families could come, and these children could be identified.

Ira Chinoy, a senior in college, and a young reporter at the time, was tasked with covering this meeting.

“I just remember opening the door and walking in, and it was standing room only,” said Chinoy.

“This room was packed with families and parents who had kids with Down syndrome. It makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up when I think about it. I went back and I wrote the story for the next day’s paper, followed up a little bit, and eventually identified way more than five kids.”

After Chinoy’s article was published, he received a letter from publisher Ed Freeman. It read: “I thought you’d like to see this. You kind of started it.”

“It was a clipping saying that Pine Bluff had gotten it’s grant to take care of these kids with Down syndrome,” said Chinoy.

At that moment, Chinoy found his passion: journalism.

“That was my moment...I was finishing my senior year and I thought: ‘This is what I want to do. I like this,’” said Chinoy.

That spark would lead Chinoy to embark on an illustrious journalism career, starting with 24 years as a writer and then nearly two decades as a professor at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism.

FINDING HIS VOICE IN PROVIDENCE

After Pine Bluff, Chinoy spent four years at The Lawrence Eagle Tribune before moving on to The Providence Journal in 1981. There, Chinoy focused on his writing.

“The managing editor was a fellow named Joel Rowson, and he was a big believer in having reporters experiment with their writing and sort of try different things,” said Chinoy. “I had a chance to kind of figure out what my voice was there.”

Chinoy not only found his voice in Providence, but he also worked on a team that uncovered a scandal at the state Supreme Court.

“There was a fund, kind of like a slush fund, that the [state] Supreme Court held onto, where every time lawyers took the bar exam, they had to pay for that, and there was like an ethics fund, and they were sort of abusing the ethics fund,” said Chinoy. “We rented a photocopier and went to that court building, and photocopied hundreds, maybe thousands, of documents, and then built a database that showed how they had spent that money.”

The team working on that project won a Pulitzer Prize for its work, which also taught Chinoy important lessons, some of which he now shares with his students.

“You can’t pick the facts that are convenient. You have to sort of see what the data has to tell you. If you are too wedded to a particular idea, that is what you’re going to see,” said Chinoy. “You have to force yourself not to make assumptions.”

ON TO THE WASHINGTON POST

After working with The Providence Journal for 14 years, Chinoy joined The Washington Post in 1995, specializing in computer-assisted reporting.

“It was basically this idea of using the computer as a tool,” said Chinoy. “It was more about working with data and finding patterns and stories in the data.”

Chinoy eventually became the director of computer-assisted reporting at The Post.

‘We started training, and we would train like nine reporters a year to be able to do [computer-assisted reporting], which was sort of one of my first teaching experiences,” said Chinoy. “We did a ton of projects...and these were all things where we could find the data and find stories that no one else had.”

At The Post, Chinoy continued telling the stories that no one else had, including a project on police killings in the District of Columbia.

“My work in that primarily was to oversee one person who was working for me in sort of analysis of data that went with that project, and do some of that analysis myself,” said Chinoy.

With the work of Chinoy and his team, The Post gave readers insight into how D.C. police officers used guns recklessly because they received little training or supervision.

And so, with that project, Chinoy earned his second Pulitzer Prize, this time a gold medal in 1999 for public service.

Chinoy would conclude his time at The Post in 2001, but he retained important lessons that he would bring into the next phase of his career as a journalism professor at Merrill.

AN INSPIRING TEACHER

After six years working at The Post, Chinoy was recruited by then Merrill Associate Dean Chris Callahan to work as a non-tenured visiting professor and take over the teaching of computer-assisted reporting.

“That seemed like a great opportunity and a great new direction in my career,” said Chinoy. “I recognized that right away.”

Chinoy recounts that not many journalists had expertise in computer-assisted reporting, which was required of students in the master’s program. After coming to Merrill, Chinoy expanded the teaching of data journalism to also include upper-level undergraduate students. He also entered the PhD program.

“After I had been here for a few years I was offered an endowed chair at the University of Illinois,” said Chinoy. “I decide to stay and was granted tenure here at Maryland, with the rank of Associate Professor.”

After earning his Ph.D. in Journalism Studies in May of 2010, Chinoy went on to serve many roles at Merrill, acting as the school’s associate dean for academic affairs from 2012-2014, and his current role as the director of the future of Information Alliance.

As a professor, Chinoy’s work in the classroom has not only been innovative, but his lessons have left a mark on students, helping them better-understand content and become talented journalists.

When teaching, Chinoy stresses the importance of writing with integrity, and getting things right.

“[Chinoy] always emphasized writing with accuracy,” said Sarah Cassuto, a student in Chinoy’s “Journalism 200” class last fall. “Professor Chinoy’s class made us better writers, thinkers and truly prepared us for the world of journalism.

Chinoy said he stresses accuracy for a reason.

“The thing is, if you get [the facts] wrong, you can have a great career that goes on for 25 years and then the last three months of that career, you screw something up, that’s how you’re going to be remembered,” he said.

EXCELLENCE AMID THE PANDEMIC

Even for someone with a long and fulfilling journalism career, there are always unexpected twists and turns. For Chinoy, and most professors, that came last year amid the pandemic, when classes were moved online.

One challenge he faced was reinventing a class that had previously included exams that would be hard to administer online. So, he replaced those exams with a “Personal Learning Journal” in which students described what they had learned.

The “Personal Learning Journal” was a success among students, allowing them to interact with the material each week and better understand the content. Even in a class where that content was all on a screen, students remained invested.

<https://twitter.com/ichinoy/status/1337035779814658049?s=20>

“Online classes were tough to keep engaged in, but Professor Chinoy cared for every individual person and gave us tasks that kept us engaged and wanting to learn,” said Andrew Chodes,

another student in Chinoy's "Journalism 200" class. "His class was definitely a bright spot in a dull semester."

Chinoy's work on his online class not only enhanced the experience for students, it was also recognized on a larger level. The innovation that went into the class led Chinoy to receive the 2021 Jinx Coleman Broussard Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Media History, as well as the 2021 National Award for Excellence in Teaching, from the American Journalism Historians Association.

But awards - be it Pulitzer Prizes, or awards for teaching - aren't the most important things to Chinoy.

"Those aren't necessarily the most meaningful things that happen in a career," Chinoy said.

"They're great, but I bet most people would tell you there are also other things that are much more meaningful in some way."

So, what does matter most to him then? For Chinoy, it will always be about the students.

When it comes to being a professor, Chinoy has found more value in putting students first, showing them care, dedication and creating deep connections built on understanding, something that no amount of teaching awards could ever substitute for.

“When you teach, it’s just you and your students,” said Chinoy. “I think trying to see the student as a whole person has been very important.”