

PROFILES OF SURVIVAL



BY
ROXANA TOFAN



THE LAST TWO YEARS have transformed almost every aspect of our lives. Almost overnight, Zoom meetings became the new norm. Most people worked remotely. Shopping online became the norm, even for groceries. Our friends, family, colleagues, and communities have had their lives changed in critical ways that will have long-lasting effects. Living through a global pandemic has driven dramatic shifts in our jobs, our habits, childcare, travel and even our sense of time.

Have you ever wondered, as you watched the local news and COVID updates in your community, how those working in journalism, and the news specifically, were affected? How did they manage through reporting the news and updates to us?



↑ Mandi Mendoza

Mandi Mendoza spent 18 years at San Antonio TV stations WOAI-TV and KABB-TV, leading a team of 120 journalist and production members to share incredible stories about the local community. Mandi **is a five-time Emmy Award winning journalist**. She has served on the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas board, the Citizens Advisory Board of USA-San Antonio, and Citizens Advisory Board of BB Texas.

In 2021, Mandi joined Team USAA as the new Director of Media Production. According to Wikipedia, USAA is a San Antonio-based Fortune 500 diversified financial services group of companies offering banking, invest-

ing, and insurance to people and families who serve, or served, in the United States Armed Forces.

Roxana: What did the news station focus on?

Mandi: WOAI-TV and KABB-TV provided the community immediate updates on often life-saving information during the pandemic on several platforms. The updates included the track of vaccinations, the spread of Coronavirus-19 and the impacts on our neighbors.

Roxana: As a news director, how was life through the pandemic?

Mandi: My role was to provide help for our community, and our team. I spent the pandemic trying to uplift and encourage our team through a breaking news story that never ended. As a team, we lost two teammates and countless relatives during 2020 and 2021. It was important to lean in and lead with empathy. For some that meant sitting quietly with them as they hurt, and often crying with them. For others that meant making sure they knew how to get access to more help than I could give. What I failed to do during that period was to show my family and myself the same level of energy and empathy I shared with my work family.

Roxana: What were some of the challenges at the news station?

Mandi: Our challenges at the station were like most of yours. Things were uncertain. Each moment meant creating a new plan, only for it to change based on guidance from health officials and our elected leaders based on what they'd learned that day.

Roxana: What valuable things do you see came out of it?

Mandi: Two valuable things that came out of it. We worked with Gordon Hartman, a local philanthropist, and all of the other local media outlets to streamline communication between the city/county and the community. Hartman brought us together and we agreed on a 6:13pm timeframe we would all air or stream the Mayor and County Judge's message each night. Additionally, the TV news station managers agreed we would share resources to create safer press conferences

and events. Rather than 10 or more journalists at each event, we would divvy up the events of the day and send one journalist who would share the visuals and soundbites with the rest. We still had the ability to press in as journalists to ask tough questions and could keep staffing at events to a safer level.

Roxana: How are things now?

Mandi: As the cases are lower, the vaccination numbers are rising and the new strains seem to be less deadly, the news has moved back from an entire first block of news being about Coronavirus to merely a mention when a big update happens. The journalists standby for the next life-threatening or life-changing event. Right now, that's the war in Ukraine, the fire on Camp Bullis' property, and property tax hikes.

Roxana: In your new role, what is it that you enjoy so much?

Mandi: In my new role as the Director of Media Production, we have a mission to inspire our coworkers to be the best for our members. That is incredible, to have a job where you work to inspire those who serve our military. One of my favorite things is also that USAA encourages you to volunteer and donate. Not just by word, but by action. They give us two days of paid time off to volunteer, and match much of our donations.

Visiting with Mandi is inspiring. She talks a lot about the larger community, her teams, about leadership and being empathetic, about service and family. I would put her in the "heroes behind the scenes" category. She is tough, empathetic, supporting and never complains. She walks the talk as she always focuses on others and the community. As life post-COVID gets calmer and we each find a new norm, both at work and in our personal lives, I hope Mandi does more of what she loves outside of work as well—spending time with her husband, Eddie and their two children, travel, gardening and reading. ■

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