

LAURA DIAZ'S *SPLENDID RIDE* >>



ALUMNA-ANCHOR TALKS ABOUT LIFE ON CAMERA AND OFF

BY LEAH KOLT

It was day No. 2 of the 1992 riots in Los Angeles. Cal Poly alumna and broadcast journalist Laura Diaz was out with a camera crew, standing near Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, watching people brazenly loot an electronics store.

It was pandemonium, according to Diaz. In the distance, fires were burning and the noise from security alarms and helicopters made it difficult to be heard.

As a flatbed truck filled with looters made a wild turn, a TV set fell off the truck. "When one of the looters went to retrieve it, he looked right into the lens of our camera and pointed his

semi-automatic weapon straight at me and my crew!" she recalled.

"A plainclothes policeman screamed at us to get down! Fortunately, the gunman decided to take his TV set and flee," she added.

Could even the best hands-on education prepare a student for being threatened at gunpoint?

It might have, if Emmy-winning television anchor Diaz had been a journalism major while at Cal Poly. Instead she studied literary classics – even spending an entire quarter in one class reading and discussing Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*.

"Literature was my first love, but if I had known I was going to become a broadcast journalist, I probably would have majored in political science and minored in journalism," she said.

Still, the native Californian and first-generation Mexican-American found her way into broadcast history, in 1997 becoming the first Hispanic lead television anchor in Los Angeles, at KABC-TV.

While there, she covered many of Southern California's most historic and compelling stories, such as the riots and the Northridge earthquake.

Her assignments vary quite a bit. Recently, at her current broadcast home,

KCBS-TV, she hosted the station's pre-show to the prime time Emmys, while also working on a piece on gangs.

Diaz has won six Emmys of her own, plus a prestigious Golden Mike award from the Radio & Television News Association of California for best feature reporting. She also enjoys interviews with

field. "I learned how to read on the fly, break down complex ideas, and then deliver those facts in a clear and concise manner. Thank you, Cal Poly!" she said.

If she closes her eyes, Diaz can still conjure "the scent of the library," where she spent hours studying and forming lifelong friendships. It's never more

making the big jump to Los Angeles.

A recipient of many honors from national Hispanic organizations such as the Mexican Cultural Institute and the National Hispanic Media Coalition, Diaz understands the responsibility that comes with such awards.

"I realize that I can set an example,

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newsmakers, including a post-election exclusive with Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and an in-depth profile last year on Angels' owner Arte Moreno.

Sometimes the people she meets on the job impact her personal life. "Moreno, the first Latino to own a major sports franchise in the United States, is a fascinating man who came from humble beginnings," Diaz said. "I spent a lot of time at Angels Stadium and am now a huge Angels fan," she said. "I try to get to as many Angels games as possible."

Diaz herself has many fans. One is George Ramos, chair of Cal Poly's Journalism Department, who knew Diaz in Los Angeles when he was a reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*. "Diaz is not only a trailblazer, she's also a role model for young people, volunteering whenever she can for worthy causes while remaining true to her profession as a seasoned reporter. She exemplifies Cal Poly's commitment to learning by doing."

Being a trailblazer propelled Diaz from Santa Paula, Calif., where her parents labored in the fields, into the homes of thousands of television viewers. But it hasn't always been an easy path.

"First of all, when you're a liberal arts major at a technical university, you're a bit of a curiosity. Then the fact that I was a Latina studying English, even a bit more unusual," she recalled.

Even so, she always felt "completely welcome" at Cal Poly by the faculty, her fellow students and the community. "It was beautiful, with warm, friendly people and a small-town politeness."

The rigorous academics at Cal Poly helped Diaz develop the critical thinking skills so necessary for success in her

than a few months between trips back to San Luis Obispo, "where I still have many close friends."

In fact, her former roommate and best friend, Nancy Stauch, is now teaching physics at Cal Poly.

"Laura is the hardest working person I've ever been around," Stauch said.

"When we were students, she had two part-time jobs plus a full course load and still got great grades. You don't find that inner drive in too many people. Yet, she also keeps balance in her life."

While at Cal Poly, Diaz interned at KSBY-TV in San Luis Obispo. "We were such a small-market station then that I even got to run my own camera – when appearing on camera!" she recalled. "I also had great mentors in that newsroom."

After two years of "chasing down stories in a Ford Fiesta from Nipomo to Paso Robles," Diaz spent about eight months at KFSN-TV in Fresno before

be a role model for young Hispanics. That's an enormous responsibility, one I will never take lightly," she said.

So on top of her demanding job, she maintains a hectic schedule of speaking, emceeding and participating in parades and events. Recently, she hosted the national broadcast preview of the Latin Grammy Awards, earning her yet another Emmy.

Her favorite community activity, though, is visiting schools. "I have the most fun just talking with young kids," she said. "Believe me, a third-grader can ask a much tougher question than any grown-up."

Diaz says she has loved her career path, "every stumble, every victory." She has no hesitation in recommending broadcast journalism to interested students: "It's a fascinating, unconventional life."

"I've interviewed some of the greatest leaders, movers and shakers of our times, and had a front row seat to history on many occasions. It's a splendid ride." ■



(Previous Page): KCBS anchors Paul Magers and Laura Diaz. (Above): Diaz and producer Peter Wilgoren. (Photos by Su-e Tan)