



LOCAL OBITUARIES

JULY 12, 2017 8:01 PM

Meg Laughlin, former Tropic writer who gave voice to the vulnerable, dies at 70

BY ELINOR J. BRECHER

Special to the Miami Herald

One day in 1982, a Miami Dade College English professor showed up in the offices of Tropic, the Miami Herald's Sunday magazine.

Meg Laughlin had come to pitch a story that Gene Weingarten, then Tropic's associate editor, found intriguing. But he had no intention of letting this non-journalist do it.

So he offered a kill fee, which she rejected. He increased it again and again. Politely but firmly, never betraying her rising fury, Laughlin kept refusing.

"She was stubborn as a mule," recalls Weingarten, who left Tropic for The Washington Post. "If this happened today, I would say, 'Nevertheless, she persisted...'"

Soon, Laughlin, Weingarten and a photographer were on their way to Colombia to find a once-promising astronaut booted from NASA's space program simply because she was female. Anguished, Jerrie Cobb retreated to the jungle to fly relief missions.

The Herald nominated the English teacher's very first story for a Pulitzer Prize.

"We began assigning to this inexperienced academic some of the deepest and most complex stories we had," Weingarten said. "Her work was magnificent, some of the best stories Tropic had ever had...I fell a little in love with Meg the Mule that first day in the office, when she wouldn't take free money for no work because she wanted to write, and knew she was a writer, and knew she could prove it."

For the next 35 years, she proved it over and over — at the Herald, then the St. Petersburg Times (now Tampa Bay Times), lastly at Vero Beach 32963, a weekly newspaper.

"Meg was very proud of the work she did at the community paper," said her friend Sydney P. Freedberg, who worked with Laughlin at both the Herald and the Times. "She said the idea wasn't to make a lot of money but to make a difference."

Born Margaret Cobb Laughlin to Frank R. and Elizabeth Fulton Cobb Laughlin on June 13, 1947, the Memphis native died of cancer at her home in Miami's Roads neighborhood on July 12. She was 70.

 “

A TRULY RARE TALENT CONNECTED TO A THIRST FOR TRUTH MADE HER ONE OF A KIND.

Tom Shroder, the Tropic editor who hired Meg Laughlin full time in 1990.

To use a journalism cliché that would have made her eyes roll: Meg Laughlin comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable better than almost anyone in the business. Her stories saved lives, homes, careers and reputations, even as they infuriated the rich, powerful and influential.

They were counter-intuitive, often up-ending the accepted narrative of the event they highlighted.

The classic Meg Laughlin story was hard to report, harder to write, a treat to read, and practically guaranteed to cause the editor trying to get it into the paper *agita*.

Her fans eagerly pawed through the Sunday paper for Tropic, to see what dark tale of fraud, corruption, sexism, racism, hypocrisy, betrayal, greed, cruelty or exploitation she'd dragged into the light.

She gave voice to some of society's most vulnerable — and least sympathetic — people. Among the former: Haitian house servants, a grieving mother tormented by a stalker, families in foreclosure.

Among the latter: death-row inmates, "incurable" violent teens, accused terrorists and their alleged sympathizers.

"Her life was all about fairness," said her daughter, Helen "Trey" Casey Guzman, a reading teacher at the Cushman School in Miami.

“

MEG LAUGHLIN HAS WRAPPED HER PROSE AROUND THE LIVES OF SOME OF SOUTH FLORIDA'S STRANGEST CHARACTERS AND MOST DISTURBING STORIES. WE LOVE HER FOR THAT.

Miami New Times, which named her "Best Herald Writer of 2000."

In addition to her daughter, son-in-law Henry Guzman, corporate director of wellness strategies for Baptist Health South Florida, and granddaughter Samantha Guzman, a University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill junior, survive.

Single at the time of her death, Laughlin had been married twice: to Miami lawyer Michael Casey, then to Bobby Moorhead, a New Zealander whom she'd met at a Spanish-language immersion program in Guatemala. Between marriages, she lived with Miami photographer George Schiavone.

Laughlin, who joined the Herald's metro desk after Tropic folded in 1998, wrote in short, economical sentences. Her long, detailed narratives unwound like mystery novels.

Poised and sophisticated, she used wit and charm to gain even the wariest source's trust. Before they knew it, they'd be confiding, spilling, dishing.

Laughlin's work won awards at both the Herald and Times, including the Florida Society of News Editors' Paul Hansell Award for Distinguished Achievement in Florida Journalism, and multiple Green Eyeshade Awards from the Society of Professional Journalists.

She shared in two Herald staff Pulitzers and was awarded a prestigious Knight Fellowship in Journalism at Stanford University in 1996.

Naming her "Best Herald Writer of 2000," Miami New Times said: "From the day she began writing for the Miami Herald...Meg Laughlin has wrapped her prose around the lives of some of South Florida's strangest characters and most disturbing stories. We love her for that."

Herald humorist Dave Barry, who worked with Laughlin at Tropic, said that "she could make anything interesting. She once did a story about the woman who did Madonna's bikini waxes. I said, 'They do *what?*' I had never heard of bikini waxing until then."

Tom Shroder, now a non-fiction author, was the Tropic editor who hired Laughlin full time in 1990.

"Nobody could see through the bullshit like she could," he said. "A truly rare talent connected to a thirst for truth made her one of a kind."

Raised by progressive parents in the segregated South, Laughlin developed a social conscience early, said lifelong friend Charlotte Fineberg-Buchner. She'd deliberately drink from "colored" water fountains and together, they'd ride city transit with the sole intent of giving up their front-of-the-bus seats to black women.

The St. Petersburg Times hired Laughlin in 2005 to cover the trial of University of South Florida Professor Sami Al-Arian, accused of terrorist ties. She also covered the Haitian earthquake, the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, and the criminal-justice system.

Notable Times stories included "Doubt," about a Lakeland man convicted of killing his wife despite evidence implicating another man, and "Right by Miles," which investigated why a sheriff's office failed to investigate its own deputy's role in a wreck that killed a teenager.

From the Herald's late, legendary investigative reporter/editor Gene Miller, Laughlin learned "Keep it simple, stupid, and ask 100 questions...," said Freedberg. "She wouldn't be satisfied until she got all the answers. I don't think I've ever seen such a hunger for truth in anyone."



From left: Meg Laughlin, Miami Herald editor Gene Miller, Elinor Brecher and Sydney Freedberg.
Contributed to the Herald

Milton Benjamin hired Laughlin in 2012 for his weekly, Vero Beach 32963, named for the zip code it serves. The former Washington Post editor specifically sought “tough-minded veteran journalists committed to long-form journalism, who wanted the time to report stories and the space to tell them.”

In a time of shrinking newsrooms and straight-to-the-web click bait, this was journalism heaven for Meg Laughlin.

“She became a rock star.” Benjamin said. “She wrote a lot about health care, and there are a lot of people here who care about it. The community invested millions through philanthropy in the local hospital and she held their feet to the fire” about how the money was spent.

“By God,” he said, “she gave it to them.”

Mark Seibel is the former Herald editor who sent Laughlin to cover the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where she’d share sweltering, sand-infested tents with frontline troops half her age.

“Meg was a great writer and fearless in terms of seeing what was there and what needed to be told,” said Seibel, now BuzzFeed’s national security editor. “All you had to tell her was: ‘Just get something special.’”

Embedded with an army unit, Laughlin found a chaplain who offered something precious to sweaty troops...on one condition.

“In this dry desert world near Najaf, where the Army V Corps combat support system sprawls across miles of scabrous dust, there’s an oasis of sorts: a 500-gallon pool of pristine, cool water.

“It belongs to Army chaplain Josh Llano of Houston, who sees the water shortage, which has kept thousands of filthy soldiers from bathing for weeks, as an opportunity.

"It's simple. They want water. I have it, as long as they agree to get baptized," he said.

The army was not pleased.

But Seibel's favorite Laughlin story involved Elian Gonzalez, whose Miami family had enrolled him in the exile-founded Lincoln-Marti School.

"Meg got their base text on civics and went through it and wrote a wonderful story describing what he'd be exposed to," said Seibel.

He would learn, she wrote, that "he lives in a Christian society and should support prayer in public and private schools. He should oppose abortion, homosexuality and racism. He should love the American flag and realize that 'the influence of The United States in the world has been beneficial to all.'"

It took days to convince his jittery boss to run the controversial story, Seibel said.

Laughlin also figured out that the little boy's Miami cousin, Marisleysis Gonzalez, who helped care for him, had been hospitalized 11 times for emotional problems.

"Looking into the actual background of a person who was lionized as Elian's surrogate mother was a very delicate task," Seibel recalled.

Among Laughlin's many memorable Herald stories: "We Love You Dr. Kesselman."

Michael Kesselman was principal of North Beach Elementary, which in 1990 was up for a prestigious U.S. Department of Education award. Laughlin wanted find out what made the school stand out.

Instead, she found that the revered educator browbeat his staff and cooked the test-score books. Kesselman lost his job.

She wrote about how the Miami exile community savaged Cuban-American immigration lawyer Magda Montiel Davis after she kissed Fidel Castro's cheek during a conference, and how a sadistic customs official tormented Susan Billig over the phone for years, pretending he had her long-lost daughter.

Laughlin also pushed for justice in the newsroom, for women who, in the '80s, '90s and early 2000s, made less than men for doing the same jobs. She and an informal support group of other senior newsroom women met regularly at a bistro near One Herald Plaza.

Over much wine, they'd reel off their latest sexism horror stories, soaking each other's shoulders with tears of frustration until Laughlin would launch into a merciless impersonation of a particularly arrogant or clueless male boss.

Laughlin adored animals. Her peach-faced lovebird, Parker, flew freely around house. She fed whatever showed up at the bowls on the porch: feral cats, raccoons, possums, even a toad.

"When I visited her in Vero, I couldn't believe that she not only shopped for fish at the fish market to feed this little bird [Homer the great blue heron] that hung out at the same time every day by the water, but she'd cut the fish up carefully, then place the bird's dinner on a rock," said Marjorie Klein of Asheville, N.C., a former Tropic freelancer. "We'd watch as the bird ate. She did this every day."

During Laughlin's last days, her cat, Plumeria (aka Plumey), snuggled on her chest. At 6:30 a.m. on July 12, Plumey jumped off and yowled at Trey Guzman, who went to her mother's room. Moments later, Meg Laughlin took her last breath.

Laughlin requested cremation and no funeral. Her daughter plans a gathering for family and friends in the fall. She suggested making donations in her mother's memory to the progressive, environmental or social justice cause of your choice.

