

Reporter makes discoveries during interview

Visiting time at the Lane County Adult Corrections facility — otherwise known as the jail — is one of the few situations where the media must take a back seat and wait their turn like everyone else.

This was one of a few rather eye-opening discoveries this reporter made while attempting to get an interview with none other than the already over-publicized Elizabeth Diane Downs, convicted in mid-June of shooting her three children, one of them fatally.

It was almost disappointing to hear the jail official say that all one needed to do

thought was about to be an excellent journalistic experience, an interesting story and ultimately a good clip.

Not even the many negative remarks I got from friends regarding the pursuit of an article on the woman could sway my scummy, National Enquirer curiosity.

"There's got to be something about her no one knows or has looked at," I said to them. "I'll do a feature, a really worthwhile look at the scenario — something with real redeeming value."

But I wasn't fooling them and certainly not myself. I was taking advantage of my role as reporter to get a glimpse of this woman and turn our 40 minutes of conversation into a successful piece of highly readable copy.

No one in the line of family and friends waiting at the jail to see the inmates seemed to mind my being there. All I got was a few blank stares and a couple of all-knowing looks from the bunch. They probably knew exactly who I was there to see and decided, if they even cared to, that I was as uninteresting as the rest of the reporters who'd made regular stops there to see Downs.

The woman at the lobby station told me to lock up my recorder and purse, though, and wait like the rest until Diane was brought in. If she agreed to it, I could interview her, but only after her mother was through with her visit and only through a glass barrier over a phone.

I noticed the attendant had a strangely humorous look when I began asking her if many people, especially the press,

come to see Downs. "Mostly just calls come in for her," she told me, and there weren't many people in to see her lately, usually just her mother, she added.

Her obvious amusement with me grew as I asked whether or not I could talk to Diane in her cell instead of the crowded room, as I needed more time and more privacy. After all, who can hash out one's deepest feelings about life without at least a cigarette or cup of coffee in hand?

Well, I could forget that option and I could forget any hope for a nice long chat. Family was strictly priority here, and the good intentions of a second visitor left me with less than 10 minutes to see Downs.

This fellow was clearly unimpressed with my presence and put up with my questions for only so long, as I spoke with him earlier in the outside area. "Seems like just about every time I come up here there's a reporter around," he said after a minute. He wouldn't give me his name; all he would say about himself was that he was there to offer her his emotional support.

"I want her to know that she does have people out there that care," he began. "I just got good feelings for her. People take things like this wrong. I can't see what's wrong with visiting people."

Downs' mother wasn't one I was going to get anywhere with, either, though she was nice and friendly and even asked for a copy of my article. Like a woman I'd interviewed earlier this year whose backyard is Mt. St. Helens, the eruption

of reporters had gone off a few too many times for her. And my line of questions simply bored her as well.

So what did Diane herself finally reveal to me in our brief discussion? In short, a look at some pictures of her baby daughter at two weeks; the hopes she has about an appeal on her conviction; her desire to teach teenagers about family planning someday; and that there was absolutely nothing special about my visit except my blouse, which she thought was a lot prettier than the standard green one she wore everyday.

She was almost overly friendly, quick to smile and just as receptive to questioning as I'd expected and hoped. In many ways, the session had been successful, but in more ways it had flopped. Downs had nothing extraordinary to tell the world, at least not anything she could divulge in a brief moment.

She viewed my visit as altogether friendly, making it hard for me to drive any hard-hitting questions at her. She was too open, too comfortable and too securely isolated for this frustrated writer to expose or elevate in a matter of minutes. Her tone was even casual as she estimated the pending sentencing would begin at mandatory life at least, probably more. And the parole she expected would not be quick in coming.

Perhaps sooner, though, than the success of journalists like me who try to scoop up a "hot one" in one fast and easy sweep.

by Julie Shippen

Commentary

to talk to this convict, now celebrity, was show up at one of the regular visiting sessions held twice a week, and simply ask to see her.

"Easy enough," I thought as I hung up the phone. "I'll just walk right in and say 'Hi Diane, you don't know me, but I'm from the Oregon Daily Emerald, and ... well, I'd like to know a few things about you. What has convict life done to you? What do you plan on doing in 10 or 20 years from now? How's Randy?'"

From what I'd seen in the papers and on television, as well as heard from colleagues, Downs was open for this sort of business and my little inquiry would be a piece of cake.

So with a bulky tape recorder and note pad in hand, I headed for the jail, feeling particularly excited at getting what I

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had almost unanimous bipartisan support. Check your history books if you don't know what I'm referring to.

3. The remark about the atomic bomb is a horrid cheap shot. We now know that use of

the bomb was militarily unnecessary and an absolute outrage morally. Looking back to 1945, one has to remember that the military was preparing for a land invasion of Japan

which almost certainly would have killed several million Japanese. Neither an invasion or

the bomb was necessary to deal with Japan's armed forces. How wonderful it is to judge our parents and condemn them for not knowing what we know now.

4. With reference to Pol Pot, I again refer to my earlier point that diplomatic relations does

not imply approval of a regime's internal policies. Space limitations limit my reference to a current report circulating Congress which shows a several-year reduction in military readiness which is being made worse by our current giant military expenditures on

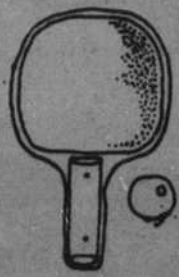
overly complex weapon systems which don't work.

However, Mr. Cross, there is enough blame to go around without nasty cheap shots which are only useful for propagandistic purposes.

Andrew Beckwith
Graduate, Physics

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