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Freelance Success Cathy Scott www.cathyscott.com

The Accidental Stringer

By Amanda Lynch

By her own admission, Cathy Scott “just fell into” crime reporting while working at the Las Vegas Sun around 1994. Primarily a journalist and author in the crime niche, Scott started freelancing full time in 1998 and contributes quotes and research as a stringer for the New York Times and Reuters. Seventy-five percent of her Reuters stories are bylined.

Calling stringers “workhorses,” Scott explains that stringing means sometimes phoning a staff reporter to file quotes.

At the Sun, Scott listened to a police scanner and covered politics, so had plenty of good story ideas, but she admits she has a “real affinity for crime.”

“If there’s a national crime story, there’s always a Las Vegas connection. A lot of time for the New York Times, I’m confirming AP info and providing fresh quotes,” she says.

Starting at the youthful age of 38 and coming off a career as an executive secretary for Pacific Bell in California, Scott says, “I always wanted to write, so I wrote for some of the freebie pubs in southern California just to get a byline. I faked my way in and I was competing with 21 year olds but I had an advantage because of my experience.”

In 1989, Scott achieved her BA in business from the University of Redlands (CA), took copyediting classes from the University of California at San Diego, went to writers conferences and “read anything about news writing and reporting,” she says, adding, “I taught myself.”

The Beach & Bay Press gave Scott her first real writing job in 1989 and she won an award while there. In 1991, Vista Press, a small daily in northern San Diego County, hired Scott as one of five staff reporters. “We worked our butts off,” she says, explaining that this job gave her the opportunity to be the first reporter in the county to go Somalia on assignment.

“That’s how I got into crime reporting,” Scott says, recalling that she left Vista just as the paper was about to fold. “I picked up the phone and started stringing for the San Diego AP, I tried magazine writing and started looking for a job.”

The Las Vegas Sun made her an offer to write the city beat and a year and a half later, Scott got the crime beat. This single mom with a grown son says it was tough going financially at first, but she loves the news business and loves working from home. But then Tupac Shakur died and Scott’s life changed forever. “I kept reporting and kept a file of everything and I finally had enough for a book,” she says.

“The Killing of Tupac Shakur” was published by the small Nevada house Huntington Press in 1997 and graced the bestseller list. Scott’s web site still lights up with thousands of hits each week from Tupac fans. That book led to another, “The Murder of Biggie Smalls,” and “Death in the Desert: The Ted Binion Homicide Case.” Suddenly, Scott was no longer a struggling writer, but a successful freelancer and author.

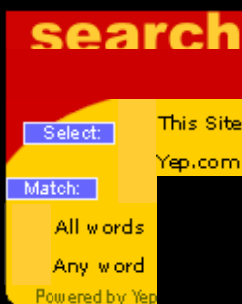
“I hear my stuff runs all over the place but it’s a hustle,” she says, “Freelance work pays less now than it did a few years ago. The New York Times used to pay a flat rate, now they pay an hourly rate. I can expand an eight inch story that runs on the world wire and pitch it to Christian Science Monitor or Las Vegas Magazine. That’s what I call self-syndication.”

When Scott writes a book, she says it’s just like writing a magazine piece, only longer. “The toughest part is grabbing an editor’s attention. You have to keep trying, but once you get the editor you can pitch two or three stories at the same time,” she says, recommending that freelancers cultivate these important relationships and “be available to reporters and more work will come your way.”

The New York Post once called Scott out of the blue when a drive-by shooting occurred with a female rapper because “I’d written extensively about Tupac and Biggie,” she says.

The road to success is never mistake-free, as Scott attests. “I pitched a story to a small monthly magazine in San Diego, got the assignment and should have told the editor it was going in a different direction after I started researching and interviewing. She just screamed at me on the phone when I filed it. She took the story away from me because I didn’t find the angle she had in her mind,” Scott recalls.

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"I was devastated, I felt like a fraud, thought I was nothing. The hardest thing is rejection and not taking it personally and moving on. Now I look back at how unprofessional she was and how demoralizing it was to me," Scott says, admitting, "but I should have updated her along the way."

Scott, whose work has appeared in *George*, the Los Angeles Times, America Online and the San Diego Union-Tribune and who has herself appeared on *Unsolved Mysteries*, Court TV, the CBS Morning Show and National Public Radio, hopes to someday write a top bestseller.

"I have no desire to write a novel, I'm fascinated by people and true crime books are really about people and the crime," Scott says. "You can't look for a niche and if you're trying to pitch a national story, you have to come up with new information and that means hitting the streets."

SIDEBAR:

About the money: If all you do is freelance for newspapers and local pubs and really hustle you can make \$20,000 a year. You can get to the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range with national news magazines, book advances and royalties. Think big and don't be picky.

I knew I made it when...CNN called and wanted an interview.

Worst advice? A fellow freelancer told me to stand up to an editor. But if you pick up the phone and complain about how they handled your copy, they'll never use you again. I just flow with it now.

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