



**PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD**

*for journalistic  
contributions to civic life*

# An Independent Voice for 40 Years

DEDICATION TO HER COMMUNITY EARNS *DOWNTOWN NEWS* EDITOR, PUBLISHER AND OWNER SUE LARIS THE PRESS CLUB'S PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

BY JILL STEWART

**T**HE REMARKABLE, easy-laughing Sue Laris doesn't go around the city bragging about it, but she embodies, more than most women journalists in Los Angeles, the fight for equal rights that began in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s, when large numbers of women finally won key positions in the region's media.

After she founded what is now the *Los Angeles Downtown News* in 1972 with her first husband, Laris thought about expanding the business. But she soon learned, "I couldn't even get a loan without my husband signing for it. And some of that was because we were small—and some of it was because I was a woman. I finally said, 'If we are going to grow, it will be through our own revenues. So I refinanced my house—a couple of times—to make it happen.'"

She has now made it happen for more than 40 years. That longevity, and being an independent voice serving the Downtown community amidst a constantly changing journalistic landscape, has made Laris the 2013 recipient of the Los Angeles Press Club Public Service Award in Journalism.

There were plenty of hurdles. She recalls one time, after her divorce, when a printer told her she had to pay the paper's big printing bill unusually early. Laris scrambled to get a short-term loan, but a beady-eyed banker insisted she produce a full profit-and-loss balance sheet in three days. Over a terrible weekend, she and a friend with extensive accounting skills pulled it together.



Posing with the Mayors: Tom Bradley Richard Riordan.



To her horror, as she headed to the bank with documents in hand, she noticed that her cash flow projection figure was wrong.

"This was basically bank fraud on my part," she merrily recalls. "I just handed the banker the documents and didn't say a word. He flipped through page upon page and says, 'Frankly Sue, I was looking for a way to say No to you, but this is beautiful. I'm going to say yes.'"

The charming Laris readily admits she had no clue that Downtown would ever become a vibrant, booming community of workers, residents, cafes, galleries and shops. Today, her independently owned multimedia company, with an avid print readership of about 150,000 weekly, has morphed from the original *Civic Center News* to a paper whose success is inseparable from that of Downtown's.



A moment with Huell Howser.

With four LA City Council members, (l to r) Dennis Zine, Laris, Jan Perry, Ed Reyes and Tom LaBonge.

It is hard to overstate her pioneering guts, and her key role in joining or leading many volunteer organizations as she grew her newspaper. As downtowns in places like Seattle and San Diego began to revive, residents founded downtown newspapers—and Sue Laris was often the woman from whom they sought advice.

Today her 18-member staff, led in the editorial department by award-winning Executive Editor Jon Regardie, puts out a paper that defines L.A.'s core and its 15 distinct neighborhoods. It has won dozens of awards from the California Newspaper Publishers Association and the Los Angeles Press Club in categories such as Investigative Reporting, Best Writing, Best Business Story, Best Design and Best Cartoon.

One of her only regrets (the ebullient Laris moans, “Why did I do that?”) was years ago, when she wrote in the paper about the breakup of her marriage—while it was breaking up.

For 25 years, her popular personal column focused on everyday family life. But, she says, “During my first divorce—oh my God, it would have been better if we’d been owned by a big corporation that would have stopped me!”

Her husband was writing negative articles about her in the paper, so after several weeks she went after him. Pretty soon, all of Downtown L.A. was following the highly personal debate, which predated TMZ, Perez Hilton and all the rest.

Laris laughs, “I still meet people today who

say, ‘Oh yes, I remember your divorce!’”

Far more people know *Downtown News* for its wonderful, intelligent, and often probing journalism.

Among her favorite published stories, Laris cites the scoop that children were living on Skid Row. *Downtown News* was the first to report on the then-shocking phenomenon.

Another was *Downtown News*' 1990s revelation that the Music Center of Los Angeles was mired in financial scandal. The *Los Angeles Times* had ignored the same tip, then had to catch up.

Not to needle its far bigger competitor too much, but Laris remembers with glee her paper's revelations about what Times-Mirror CEO Mark Willes said in a private meeting. Laris had a source who gave her the goods.

As Laris recounts it now, Willes told other *L.A. Times* execs, “We’re going to increase readership by 500,000 and do you know how? Hispanics. I know what you are going to say: ‘They can’t read!’ But they can read. And they can read English!”

For nine long weeks, *Downtown News* pelted the *Times* with stories about the shameful attitude Willes displayed in the meeting. To this day, she won't say who captured Willes' words verbatim.

Looking back over the decades, Laris says, “It was so rewarding to have had a key voice in a growing city, and in a new city. Of course, many of the old problems still exist. There's still a lot to be done.” 🍷