

A Passion for Entertainment Journalism

FOR PRESS CLUB LUMINARY AWARD WINNER NANCY O'DELL, JOURNALISM IS ABOUT TELLING STORIES | BY ALEX BEN BLOCK



Appearing on the red carpet, herself.

Two decades after she started as a part-time reporter at a TV station in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Nancy O'Dell loves her job as anchor of "Entertainment Tonight." However, she admits she is frustrated by those who suggest covering show business isn't real journalism.

The winner of the Los Angeles Press Club's 2014 Luminary Award, being presented at the National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Awards ceremony, says those people don't understand that covering entertainment takes as much dedication as covering "hard news."

"It requires the same amount of work," says O'Dell, "the same amount of talent, and often the same amount of investigation when you are doing a story. And it requires the same amount of storytelling, which is what I really love."

It was her love of storytelling that got O'Dell into journalism in the first place. She grew up dreaming of being a marketing executive. "I thought it would be so fascinating," recalls O'Dell.

While attending Clemson University, where she would graduate Summa Cum Laude as a marketing major, O'Dell was named Miss South Carolina and competed in Miss America.

After graduation, she began working in advertising and marketing at WPDE-TV in Myrtle Beach, a small station where she began reporting on weekends.

"I found I loved journalism," says O'Dell. "It was constantly changing, where in advertising you were doing the same thing over and over."

She discovered that telling stories required a lot of research—which she still calls "studying"—which meant constantly learning. It turned out to be her passion, so much so that one of her reports led to a change in state law.

When she was offered a full-time job at WCBT-TV in Charleston, S.C., a news director at another station told her not to take the job because "successful reporters are few," she recalls. He urged her to stay in advertising.

"I remember thinking, 'Gosh, if I don't



Left: Nancy O'Dell greets Mary Hart, the former host of Entertainment Tonight
Above: interviewing Jack Nicholson



O'Dell with husband Keith Zubchevich and Maria Shriver at a Best Buddies event. Anthony Shriver is the founder and chair of the Best Buddies organization



pursue the thing I'm enjoying most, which was storytelling, will I ever be happy in my career?" says O'Dell. "So I didn't let him deter me. You have to make your own path."

O'Dell's path led to Miami, where she was an investigative reporter and an evening anchor for NBC affiliate WTVJ, and in 1996, she went to "Access Hollywood," where she was anchor for 13 years.

She contributed to the NBC News shows "Today" and "Dateline." She consistently anchors live events including the national pre-Emmy show, Fox's New Year's Eve special, the Golden Globes Arrivals Special for 10 years in a row and, for 13 years, The Tournament of Roses Parade. She currently contributes to CBS *This Morning* and is executive producer of *ReconNETions* and *Celebrities at Home* on HGTV, of which she is also host. She was chosen by Oprah Winfrey and Mark Burnett to host "Your Own Show" on the OWN Network. NBC Sports tapped Nancy to host their live 2009 NFL

Kickoff Show and the Kentucky Derby with Bob Costas and throughout the years, has hosted Miss USA and Miss Universe. She is the recipient of two Emmy Awards.

"I definitely have a hard work ethic," says



Covering the Rose Bowl Parade with Al Roker

O'Dell. "I don't know if I'm a workaholic. I certainly make sure to balance my career out with my family. I won't feel like a good person or complete if I didn't make time for my family. That's really important to me."



O'Dell was chosen to host "Your Own Show" on OWN, the Oprah Winfrey Network

O'Dell has been married to her husband, Keith Zubchevich, who works at Conviva, for nine years. She has a daughter and two stepsons.

It was the birth of her daughter, and the unexpected changes pregnancy brought about, that inspired O'Dell to write *Full Of Love: Mom-to-Mom Tips I Wish Someone Told Me When I Was Pregnant*, in 2009. She followed that in 2010 with a book on the importance of keeping memories and creating photo albums.

Her own mother, who was also her closest friend, created 75 scrapbooks about her life, family and career, which O'Dell shares with her children.

When her mother became ill and was eventually diagnosed with ALS, it also changed O'Dell's life. She knew little about the disease but quickly got involved and now is an ALS Ambassador and national vice president of the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

After her mother died in 2008, O'Dell and her family formed a foundation in her mother's name called Betty's Battle: Fighting ALS.

"Life has its ups and downs," says O'Dell philosophically. "The same year my mother died, God gave me my baby girl. I don't think I could have handled the year otherwise if I didn't know that I needed to be there to love my daughter. I was so heart-broken by my mom's passing."

O'Dell remains involved in other charities as well, including Best Buddies, which enhances the lives of those with Down Syndrome and intellectual disabilities.

It was talking to her daughter that



Nancy O'Dell was a local reporter for a station in Charleston, South Carolina.

inspired O'Dell to create two apps and a book titled, *Little Ashby: Star Reporter*, which allows children to follow the story of a cub reporter. *Santa's Big Premiere*, published last year, is the first in a series of books to be published as a result. *Little Ashby: Star Reporter* shot to the Top 20 on the book charts in the iTunes App Store in 2012.

When she was growing up, O'Dell remembers watching "Entertainment Tonight" and thinking "what a cool job that would be to have. It was really the show of record. It was the show that started it all in television entertainment journalism."

She started at E.T. in 2010. O'Dell's day begins with a conference call at 5:30 a.m., after which she drives her daughter to school three days a week. She's at the E.T. office most days by 8:00 a.m. and voices her thoughts and opinions about every idea and story.

"We're never forced to say anything we

don't want to say," says O'Dell. "You're not a talking head. We're very involved, which is why I appreciate the news background I have."

That was especially true when the Internet came along. O'Dell says it "scared me a little at first because the facts do get muddy, people are jumping in so quickly to get the news out there. So I am very careful to ask where did this story come from, who was the source. I double and triple check. It's very important to me to get it right."

Brad Bessey—Luminary Award Presenter

Brad Bessey is the executive producer of the Emmy Award-winning, No. 1 syndicated entertainment newsmagazine "Entertainment Tonight" as well as the executive producer of "The Insider," a multiplatform entertainment news series and magazine show. In 2010, he was named executive producer of "The Talk" on CBS, network television's first daytime talk show in over a decade. Under Bessey's leadership, "The Talk" received a 2012 Daytime Emmy nomination for Outstanding Talk Show, Entertainment.

Bessey has also produced several "ET" specials and over a dozen VH1 specials and A&E Biographies. Concurrently, Bessey contributed his expertise to the CBS Television Distribution development team. He is a member of the Writers Guild of America and The Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. He is a frequent guest lecturer at UCLA and USC as well as his alma mater Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo.



Above, President Obama and First Lady, Michelle
Right: Mother-daughter portrait of O'Dell, her mother Betty and daughter Ashby



CBS Television Distribution
congratulates

Nancy O'Dell

on receiving the prestigious
Luminary Award
from the Los Angeles Press Club
recognizing distinguished
members of the Entertainment
Journalism community.