Ben Conery ’02 / U.S. Justice Department reporter, The Washington Times

By Elizabeth Walker

Supreme Court justices, suspected terrorists and FBI informants are just some of the main characters that populate Ben Conery’s stories in The Washington Times. Conery, the U.S. Justice Department reporter for the Washington daily, has been reporting the news since he was an Assumption undergraduate. The son of a newspaperman, Conery, a North Dartmouth native, got his first taste – and scent – of the newsroom back in the days when people still smoked at their desks.

“My father was the city editor at the New Bedford Standard Times,” Conery said. “I’ve been around newsrooms my whole life. I was fascinated by them when I was kid. Back then the newsroom was still an old-fashioned, smoke-filled, raucous place. After my sophomore year at Assumption, I got a summer job writing obituaries at the Standard Times. They also let me do some freelance assignments. When I went back to Assumption in the fall, I had a few clips under my belt. I did that for two summers. As a junior, I freelanced for the Worcester Telegram & Gazette, so I was ahead of the game when I graduated.”

After graduation, Conery freelanced for a year before taking a reporting job at a daily newspaper in Connecticut.

“I didn’t really know what I wanted to be, although it was sort of a natural progression for me to go to work for a newspaper,” he said. “I worked at the Republican-American in Waterbury for five years. It was a busy time to be reporting in Connecticut. I did real entry-level stuff – local news, government and school boards. After a year, the police and courts reporter job opened up. For next four years I covered all manner of crime and criminal justice issues and trials. It was an amazing experience. The governor of Connecticut went to jail and I covered his sentencing.”

In addition to covering what Conery calls “cops and robbers” stories, he also covered Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor back when she was a federal appeals court judge in New York.

“The newspaper was small enough that I got to do tons of different things,” he said. “I wrote a five-part series on a murderer in Kansas who was from Connecticut. I really learned how to be a reporter at the Republican-American. My experiences there prepared me for my next job. In 2008, the editor of The Washington Times called, saying he wanted to bring in new people to do some different things. I thought he would have me cover the DC police department because of my experience in Waterbury. When he told me he wanted me to cover the Justice Department, I almost fell out of my chair.”

As the Justice Department and the Supreme Court became familiar territory, Conery found that his Assumption education helped him deal with the complex issues he found himself writing about in the nation’s capital.

“Becoming familiar with the law was important,” he said. “Also being able to ‘unpack’ court decisions is vital. I got excellent training for that at Assumption, where I learned to ‘unpack’ complicated texts. I was a philosophy major. I can’t quote Kant, but I learned to think critically. As a reporter you need to look for the holes in the logic of what people are telling you. Professor Richard Gendron was great. I took an urban sociology course with him and had great interest in the subject matter, which included crime. After I graduated, he was a source in one of my early stories on the gang code of silence. At Assumption, I learned to question everything.”

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One thing Conery does not question is his decision to become a news reporter. The news industry is transforming itself, particularly print news, while trying to remain profitable. In an online world of news on demand, Conery still sees a strong need for well-reported news.

“People have strong feelings about the press,” he said. “Even if they’re angry, it shows how important reporting is … how important democracy is. I was lucky when I was starting out. I was in the right place at the right time. I also work hard, but it’s still really fun work to do. Sometimes I’ve been in the Supreme Court or in a small town in North Carolina and I get that feeling that I can’t believe I’m getting paid to do this.

Aspiring news reporters still need to be able to tell a solid story, but they have to be skilled in a variety of media today, he said. They also need to read as much as they can.

“You can’t just be a writer anymore,” Conery said. “On a more technical level, you need Internet and multi-media skills. Reporters today also need to have strong research skills and know how public records work. There’s an awful lot of public information available. People would be surprised at how much you can find out.”

While so much is changing in the news industry, the art of writing and storytelling techniques, like rhythm, tension and timing, are still vital, he said. There is a craft to reporting, whether it’s for print, broadcast or the Web.

“First is sourcing,” Conery said. “You have to be able to talk with people and you want people to like you enough to want talk to you, but you’re not their friend. It’s a delicate balance. You need to know when to push on people and when to pull back.”

You also need to know when to stay where you are. Conery feels lucky to be where he is both professionally and geographically.

“It was not a planned ambition of mine to live in Washington, D.C., and write for The Washington Times,” he said. “I’m still into the craft and skill of reporting. It’s a job you can always get better at. My goal at this point is to become a better writer and smarter reporter.”
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