



# Journalism's Karen List

**PROVIDING A BASIS FOR CREDIBILITY**

By MARY VERMILLION

In the '70s she thought she could change the world. While her male classmates were being drafted to serve in Vietnam, Karen List enlisted at an East St. Louis, Ill., paper, where as a reporter she fought the battles of the big city.

"We [reporters] all felt like we could change the world," she remembers of her stint at the *Metro East Journal*. "Working on the paper was a good experience because the paper had a strong and positive influence on the city and because the reporting was so significant."

Her stories were the losing battles fought by a transitory, poverty-stricken population. It was her inability to help the people she wrote about that led List to teaching. She remembers talking to people who had lost their homes to fires and to transients struggling to survive in that tough part of town.

"I'd go in to do a story and then sit in the car to cry for five minutes," she says.

Today she works with another transitory group, students at the School of Journalism. But their time together is longer than the who, what, where, when and why of a news story. As only the fifth instructor in the school's required History and Principles of Journalism course, Dr. List is working to help the world by instilling a sense of ethics and history in budding journalists.

## A GRAND LEGACY

List also is making history. She is the first female professor to teach History and Principles of Journalism, part of the curriculum at the School of Journalism since it opened its doors in 1908. H&P was the domain of legendary professors like Dean Walter Williams and Drs. Frank Luther Mott, Roscoe B.

Ellard and William Henry Taft. Now it's List's responsibility to tell the tale of American media history and its ethical foundations to the J-School students of 1986, sixty percent of whom are female. Her students say she handles the legacy well, with enthusiasm and concern. Her tests have a reputation as being highly demanding, but that is tempered by her reputation as a fair-minded professor.

"I failed the second test because I was really ill," says Lynne Anne Stevenson, a senior advertising major from Lakeland, Fla., "but after I talked to Dr. List about it, I felt a lot better. She was very understanding and helped me get back on track."

Robert Kohlman, a senior magazine major from St. Louis, says that H&P was "a class that made me feel we had a real good school. The class gives you a context for the

profession. Journalists tend to think of everything in terms of the present. It's important to see that our freedoms as journalists were fought for over the decades."

Stevenson especially was impressed by List's description of reporters during the Vietnam era. "I'm not a news editorial major," Stevenson says, "but I gained a lot of respect for the profession when I learned about reporters' role in exposing hidden facts about the war."

List incorporates current events to make the history of press freedom relevant to her students. For example, when William Rhenquist was named chief justice, the class was briefed on the Supreme Court and its record of support for the First Amendment.

Her lectures summarize battles waged by advocates and enemies of press freedom, who become the heroes, heroines and villains of H&P. List quotes Justice Hugo Black in a session on the Supreme Court and the First Amendment: "The First Amendment says 'Congress shall make no law'; no law means no law." A host of women reporters, publishers and editors star in the section on participation of women and minorities in journalism.

### LAYING A FOUNDATION

This historical background of the attitude of the government, media and society toward press freedom and freedom of expression builds an ethical foundation for young journalists. Along with the history of the profession comes an appreciation for the media's responsibility to the public. For example, the class considers the role of the media during wartime and the ethics of disclosing to the public classified material that could damage the U.S. military effort or not reporting the information and perhaps damaging the media's reputation for accurate reporting.

Other journalism classes also stress the public role of the media and the necessity of accurate reporting. It's an effort to combat the public's flagging confidence in media credibility.

"The faculty and myself, and I think the students, think that credibility of the press is the most important problem facing the media today," says Dean James D. Atwater. "The public doesn't trust us and that's alarming. The whole democratic process as it has evolved in this country is threatened if people in this very complex and large society like ours have no means to trust for telling them what's going on in their nation, state or neighborhood."

H&P teachers before List also stressed the lessons learned from the past. "You can't study the future without the past," Taft says. And he says Mott felt that if you didn't know history you should get out of the field.

List was one of the 10,000-plus students Taft shepherded through 72 H&P classes.

"She's doing a fine job," he says of his former student. "She has the respect of students and she's making them study harder than when I was teaching. I'm proud to have her succeed me."

Studying harder means reading five required books and taking good class notes to do well on List's short-answer and essay exams. Taft's tests were multiple choice, and old tests were kept on file in the library. The single required text was Taft's outline of *American Journalism History*.

### A RARE TEACHER

List has no plans to follow Taft as an instructor at the school. Her six years at Mizzou, in fact, have been her longest stint at one job. In addition to H&P, she teaches Communications Law, a graduate history course, a journalism history research seminar and News 105. But H&P is her favorite. "I look forward to that class every day," she says.

Associate Dean George Kennedy remembers the day List was hired as one of the proudest moments of his tenure as news editorial department chairman. There was competition from other universities interested in hiring the talented teacher. List earned master's degrees in print journalism and in history from Pennsylvania State University and a doctoral degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication, with a GPA that never dropped below 3.9.

After graduation, she taught history, media and newswriting as an assistant professor at the University of Rhode Island. She returned to Mizzou in 1981.

Kennedy says that List continues to get unsolicited invitations to apply for jobs. "That's one reason why we did a rare thing and sought and got tenure and promotion for her this year before that decision was mandatory. In order for that to happen, there has to be some extraordinary merit."

"Karen List is one of those rare people who has the ability to hold the interest of an auditorium full of students who are there because they have to be, while imparting knowledge that a good number of them remember. It's hard for me to imagine a better teacher."

List's approach to teaching has earned her notable honors. As a teaching assistant in the journalism school at the University of Wisconsin, she was one of five out of 2,000 teaching assistants to be awarded a Teaching Excellence Award. The honor is based on student evaluations and faculty recommendations.

### DEMANDING THE IMPOSSIBLE

At Mizzou, her work has been recognized with several honors. She was inducted into QEBH, Missouri's oldest honorary society, which recognizes "extraordinary service"; and Omicron Delta Kappa National Leadership Honorary. Students have nominated her for the University's Alumnae Anniversary Faculty Award for teaching excellence for four consecutive years. She was a finalist in 1985.

Her teaching inspired March Moore, BJ '85, to write the winning essay for the Student Foundation's chancellor's writing award competition. The competition is a

showcase for essays on outstanding teachers at the University. Moore is advertising manager for Cassidy & Pinkard, a commercial real estate company in Washington, D.C.

Moore had reservations about the School of Journalism until her first day in List's H&P class. "I'd heard a lot about the difficulty of the course and how much work it was. So I walked into the class feeling intimidated," she says. "I found Karen List's attitude and approach refreshing. She knew what she was talking about and was concerned that we understood the material. Usually you groan at having to take a required class, but I recommend H&P as an elective."

In her essay, Moore said of List, "She expected us to read extensively and keep up on world affairs. How else are we to write sensibly? We all complained that she wanted the impossible. Then we went home and did it."

Moore wrote that one of the best things about List is her concern for students. "She keeps long office hours. If you can't see her during hours, make an appointment. She keeps them at Henry's, over a glass of iced tea or a cup of coffee, depending on the weather. She wants to know about you. Where are you from? Why are you here? What do you want to do with all this? Maybe she can't get to know all 250 people in her class on a really deep level, but she's willing to try."

### RAISING QUESTIONS

List wants students to think about relevant issues. "I'm not going to kid myself into thinking they have dreams at night about John Peter Zenger, but if you look at history the same issues continue to surface. I want to sensitize the students to these issues and hope that it gives them a framework to deal with if they are ever confronted with an ethical question. They'll know that they're not the first to have that problem."

In turn, she hopes the students will ask appropriate questions. "Raising questions is one of the most important things you can do," she says. "Sometimes asking questions is more important than answering."

List makes a strong plea for today's journalists to continue to fight for press freedom. "All the students in my class are not going to be public affairs reporters. But even if they are not going to be doing watch-dog reporting, they are all citizens and can benefit from knowledge of the government. Anyone who is in media must be interested in the atmosphere for press freedom."

List senses that her strength as an instructor comes from the perspectives she's gained through the years. "It has something to do with teaching at three different universities and with my personal philosophy. Let's just say that if I were on the city desk, I'd emphasize a different view on the news. I'm more attuned to individuals and emotions."

Perhaps that's why List has such concern for her students. She sees a story to be told in each individual, and teaching is a chance to help the journalists of tomorrow make their mark on the world. □