

SPECIAL HEART

A Journey of
Faith, Hope,
Courage
and Love

**BRET
BAIER**

WITH
JIM MILLS



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Courage and Love

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New York Nashville Boston

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*For Amy—the most amazing wife and mother to
our children and my co-anchor in life.*

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PROLOGUE

Washington, D.C.—January 6, 2014—7:02 a.m.

It's Monday morning—the first full week of the New Year. After its traditional—and long—Christmas break, Capitol Hill is slowly coming back to life. As I approach the Fox News bureau two blocks from the U.S. Capitol, I look down at my watch and see I am running a few minutes late.

I am here early this morning so I can appear on several local Fox stations across the country—part of an affiliate outreach project I began about eight months ago. I really enjoy doing these affiliate interviews. Even though *Special Report* doesn't air for another eleven hours, mixing it up with anchors from coast to coast this early in the morning helps me get my head in the game for the rest of the day. It also gives me a golden opportunity to hear what stories might be resonating nationwide and worth paying attention to on tonight's show.

Under the banner “all politics is local,” D.C., like much of the rest of the country, is being affected by what meteorologists are calling a *polar vortex*. It's a new phrase for me, but frankly, it seems like just a high-tech way of saying it's very cold outside. Fancy terminology or not, weather conditions across the country are get-

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ting a lot of attention on all the networks as I enter the bureau and scan the bank of television monitors in the newsroom.

Despite the extreme temperatures, much about Washington seems quite normal this morning. Just six days into the New Year, the 2014 political cauldron is already starting to boil up as both parties jockey for tactical advantage in the November midterm elections—still a full ten months away. First out of the blocks on Capitol Hill is a measure to extend unemployment benefits; right behind that—an expected fight over raising the minimum wage. Based on political talking points unfurled on the Sunday talk shows, both sides seem quite comfortable hunkering down in their well-worn trenches for some traditional class warfare over income inequality—a topic President Obama has been talking a lot about lately.

New Jersey Republican Governor Chris Christie, frequently mentioned as a possible 2016 presidential contender, is facing questions this week over whether he intentionally created a traffic jam on the George Washington Bridge in order to punish a mayor who didn't support his re-election bid.

So-called *Bridgegate* has also become quite fertile ground for the late-night comics. Combined with the less-than-stellar rollout of President Obama's signature health care plan, it is safe to say stand-up comedians everywhere will have plenty of material to see them through the vortex and well into the spring.

With the Senate confirmation of a new Federal Reserve Chair, a Supreme Court hold on same-sex marriage in Utah, an emerging \$1.1 trillion budget bill, an upcoming vote on raising the debt limit and the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq and this promises to be a very busy week.

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As I sit at my computer checking the newswires, my assistant Katy Ricalde hands me the list of the affiliates I'll be talking with and the precise times they will come to me in the studio—the same studio we use for *Special Report* every night at 6:00 p.m. ET.

WTFX Philadelphia with Mike Jerrick and Sheinelle Jones at 7:30 a.m. WTVT Tampa with Russell Rhodes at 7:35 a.m. WAGA Atlanta with Gurvir Dhindsa at 7:40 a.m., followed by live hits spaced out every five minutes with Dave Froehlich at KTBC in Austin, John Brown at WOFL in Orlando, Greg Kelly and Rosanna Scotto at WNYW in New York City, Tom Butler at KMSP in Minneapolis, Tony McEwing at KTTV in Los Angeles, Allison Seymour at WTTG in Washington, D.C., Anquetette “Q” Jamison at WJBK in Detroit, Ernie Freeman at WHBQ in Memphis, Shannon Mulaire at WFXT in Boston, Tim Ryan and Lauren Przybyl at KDFW in Dallas, Natalie Bomke at WFLD in Chicago, and wrapping up with Jose Grinan at KRIV in Houston at 9:20 a.m.

Drop in a few live segments with *Fox & Friends* and *Happening Now* on Fox News Channel and a couple of radio hits with WLS in Chicago and *Kilmeade & Friends*, and my first day back following the break is proving to be extremely hectic—just the way I like it.

After I finish up the studio interviews, I walk through the newsroom and morning assignment desk coordinator, Pat Summers, greets me with a robust “Happy Anniversary!” It's hard for me to believe, but today is the fifth year anniversary of the day I started anchoring *Special Report*. Given the job when my friend and mentor Brit Hume stepped down from the anchor chair in January 2009, I am sure some critics were standing by

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with egg timers to see how long I would last—especially filling the shoes of a broadcast legend like Brit. But 1,305 shows later, and I’m still here. Needless to say, anchoring *Special Report* the past five years has been the high point of my professional life. By all measurements the program is doing great—consistently one of the top four most-watched news shows in all of cable, number one in its time slot and picking up new viewers all the time.

As exciting and interesting as anchoring *Special Report* is, the daily challenge for me is that my world is dictated by the clock and that unforgiving second hand as it marches toward the moment right before show time when my stage manager, Mary Pat Dennert, holds up her hand and counts out “*Ten—Nine—Eight—Seven—Six...*” When Mary Pat gets to “*Five*”—everything in the studio—including Mary Pat—goes silent as she performs the rest of the count using only her fingers.

A few minutes before we go on the air each night I often catch myself glancing up at the clock I have been battling with all day as I try to regain a little non-TV-world perspective. I count the many blessings in my life—my beautiful and loving wife, Amy, and two wonderful sons, Paul and Daniel, who fill our lives with so much joy. Whether it’s a father-son golf lesson that morphs into a sandcastle-making class in the practice bunker, or all three fully-costumed Baier boys—*me and the other two*—spending a Saturday bouncing around the house playing Batman and Robin; network news anchor or not—it doesn’t get any better than that!

As the final seconds tick down tonight I am reminded that it wasn’t too long ago when the clock on the wall had an entirely different meaning for me. Instead of

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counting me down to host a television show or signaling me that it was time to race to the White House lawn to do a live shot, one day that second hand came to a screeching halt. It was June 30, 2007—the day I was confronted with the sobering reality that I was not in control of anything.

Throughout my career in journalism I always felt as if I could out-hustle the next guy and get to the bottom of whatever story I was assigned. I could always dig down, work hard and tackle the challenge before me. I always prided myself on being able to put my nose to the grindstone, work the problem, achieve the goal, make it happen—*all on deadline*. But not this time. I quickly learned that if I was going to be of any help to my family in its greatest moment of need I was going to have to reset my priorities, take a leap of faith and rely on a completely different set of resources than I was used to.

Mary Pat's silent countdown now at "3 . . . 2 . . . 1," the red light on top of the studio camera pops on and she signals me to start tonight's anniversary edition of *Special Report*.

"Welcome to Washington. I'm Bret Baier . . ."

It might be the standard, familiar introduction I use at the beginning of every show, but with tonight's fifth anniversary I have an extra measure of joy and thankfulness in my heart. I am also overflowing with gratefulness that the Baier family made it through the roughest part of the storm. But I think I might be getting a little ahead of myself . . .

SPECIAL HEART

CHAPTER ONE

Young Man on the Move

It was a beautiful, crystal clear day in Atlanta. The sticky heat of the summer was behind us, but we still had a few weeks to go before the full autumn chill would set in. The minute I woke up I remember thinking, “Man, if I didn’t have to go into work today, this would be a perfect day to play some golf.”

“Maybe I could finish up my story assignments early and still be able to hit a bucket of balls after work,” I thought as I drove to the Fox News bureau near Georgia Tech. Anyone who knows me is well aware of my passion—some might say my obsession—with hitting that little white ball all over God’s creation. And this glorious September morning was no exception.

Growing up nearby in the Atlanta suburbs, I played golf every chance I got at Dunwoody Country Club, conveniently located about a mile from my house. To be journalistically precise, that stretch of road from my house to Dunwoody was exactly 1.2 miles. It’s a number I will never forget, because during the long summer days of my youth, I would walk it, run it, moped it,

and sometimes hitch rides on it to get back and forth to the golf course. Later, when I had my own car but little money for gas, I often begged the Saint of the Empty Gas Tank for precisely 1.2 miles' worth of heavenly fumes so I could make it home from Dunwoody late at night.

My first car, a 1982 green Ford Grenada, was affectionately nicknamed Kermit the Frog by my friends. With his forest-green exterior and emerald-green cloth interior, what Kermit lacked in style and class he made up for in character and originality. Multitalented, Kermit actually inspired a few original phrases around my neighborhood in those days. One was the "car blister" because of the way Kermit's interior roof cloth constantly drooped down and slapped passengers and driver upside the head as though they were in a 1970s' sparring match with Muhammad Ali. During typically muggy Atlanta summer days, anyone who drove with Kermit's windows wide open had better be prepared to go several rounds with no corner man to close the cuts.

Kermit was not exactly the textbook Casanova chariot a young man dreams about to impress potential high school sweethearts, so I was always thankful when autumn came and I could roll up the windows and keep all that head slapping to a minimum. I often drove Kermit, with no sweethearts anywhere to be found, to the Dunwoody chipping green late at night where I would park and strategically aim my high-beam lights just right so I could practice my short game well into the evening after everyone else had left for the day. Golf went way beyond a transitory childhood preoccupation for me. I played so much golf I eventually became one of the top

players on my high school team, which went on to win state finals my senior year.

Although I was totally dedicated to golf during high school, I did fit in a few other activities from time to time, such as being sports editor of the Marist School newspaper *The Blue & Gold*, interning for sportscaster Ernie Johnson Jr. at Atlanta's WSB television station, serving as president of the Marist student council, and something that never, ever seemed to make it onto my résumé reel over the years: playing the Cowardly Lion and Tevye in school productions of *The Wiz* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. The VHS tapes of those performances are hermetically sealed and under lock and key in an underground bunker somewhere in the mountains of West Virginia.

After high school I went on to DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, where I continued playing competitive golf at the NCAA level and double majored in Political Science and English. DePauw offered me a wonderful opportunity to combine the two great passions in my seventeen-year-old life—golf and journalism.

Sometimes I don't know how I fit it all in, but along with my class work, fraternity responsibilities, and active social life, I was playing some serious golf under the tutelage of Coach Ted Katula, who became a great influence on me during my college years. Coach Katula, or Katman as he was affectionately called, was a great athlete in his younger years, having played on both the Ohio State football team under Woody Hayes and the Ohio State golf team that included the great Jack Nicklaus.

A fantastic golfer, Katman was also a brilliant teacher

of golf—and life. He had a huge influence on everyone who had the good fortune to be coached by him. And that was a very long list. In fact, just a few months after I landed on campus, a former member of one of Katman's golf teams by the name of Quayle made some nationwide, nongolf news by getting himself elected vice president of the United States.

Often when we traveled to golf tournaments throughout the Midwest, Coach Katula, a wonderful storyteller, would regale us with unbelievable tales collected over decades of playing and coaching. But some of Katman's best stories came courtesy of his days in the 1960s when he served as DePauw's student activities director and was responsible for entertainment on campus.

With his winsome personality, sense of humor, and down-to-earth midwestern take on life, Katman was successful in cajoling some very big names to come to the relatively small DePauw campus to perform. Smokey Robinson, Billy Joel, the Byrds, and the Temptations were just a few of the acts he recruited. Once, in the mid 1960s, Katman booked the Isley Brothers for a concert, and they apparently blew the doors off the place—perhaps with a bit of an assist from the group's young, unknown guitar player, Jimi Hendrix.

For golf team road trips, Katman would typically start out very early in the morning in a large team van and pick up several of us in front of our fraternity house so we could get to tournament sites in plenty of time to play practice rounds before the actual match.

One early Saturday morning, making his stop at Sigma Chi, Katman arrived before a road trip that had been unmercifully scheduled right after a formal dance at the house the previous evening. Staying up all night

dancing and partying with my date, I completely lost track of time and Coach Katula's schedule to get the team on the road. The only way I could make it to the van and not miss the trip was to show up wearing my tuxedo. Doubled over in laughter, Katman said, "Baiersy, all my years being a coach here, this is a first! Even Dan Quayle never showed up for a road trip wearing a tuxedo."

Another big influence on me during my years at DePauw was former NBC correspondent Ken Bode. DePauw had just launched a brand-new, state-of-the-art media center, and Ken headed up the whole thing. The more time I spent around the newsroom, cameras, microphones, editing bays, and Ken, the more I started to focus and set my sights on what I needed to do to become a professional broadcast journalist. Ken became a great friend and mentor to me during those years, and his course on presidential politics inspired me to step it up in the classroom.

During my junior year at DePauw I traveled to the nation's capital as part of a Washington semester program based at American University. Along with taking classes at American, I got my first real taste of big-time news reporting when I landed an internship at CNN working directly with veteran news anchor Bernard Shaw. Being around Bernie was a truly amazing experience. This was after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and the United States was in the run-up to Operation Desert Storm. Washington was electric with activity, and I was thrilled to be in the middle of all the excitement.

There were wall-to-wall news conferences and tons of congressional hearings about Iraq that CNN sent the other interns to. Perhaps to ensure I was plugged in ex-

actly where my gifts and talents could best be utilized, my particular job was to supply Bernie with popcorn during commercial breaks. I have no idea why this veteran broadcaster enjoyed munching on popcorn in between delivering the news, but he did, and my job was to keep the anchor happy. I always thought it was a strange snack for a television anchor since popcorn can easily stick to your teeth. But Bernie really liked his popcorn.

Another one of my important culinary jobs at CNN was to feed scripts into the teleprompter so Bernie could look straight ahead at the camera while reading the news. Teleprompter duty is pretty standard stuff for those getting their feet wet in television. Although there are always things that can go wrong, prompter work these days is much simpler than it was then because news scripts written on a standard computer can be electronically sent directly to the teleprompter screen. It's no longer necessary to print out pages and feed them into a machine.

But working for Bernie in 1990 with 1990 technology, my job was to take script pages and place them in sequence on a sort of conveyor belt that moved along at whatever speed fit the anchor's speaking style. One day during the lead-up to the Persian Gulf War, while Bernie was on the air live, I inadvertently knocked the switch to the fastest setting possible. Suddenly, script pages started flying around the CNN newsroom like an EF5 Kansas twister. It was a real mess.

Bernie deftly ad-libbed until a commercial break, when we could get things, not to mention script pages, sorted out. Mortified and sprawled on the studio floor scraping pages together, I heard that well-known, au-

thoritative Bernard Shaw voice proclaim, “We’ll be right back.” But I had serious doubts I would be. I was convinced this would be my last day in the CNN newsroom. After we were safely into the commercial, I apologized profusely, fully expecting a tap on my shoulder from the show’s producer informing me my shift had just ended—permanently.

To my surprise, there was no tap on the shoulder, and Bernie nonchalantly dismissed the entire episode by saying, “Don’t worry about it, kid. Happens all the time.” Bernie was not upset in the least. Or at least he was gracious enough not to mention it and possibly destroy the confidence of an overeager college student who aspired to sit in a similar anchor chair one day. It was a lesson in graciousness I would never forget.

A few months later, with scripts or teleprompters nowhere to be found, Bernie stood on the rooftop of the Hotel Al Rasheed in downtown Baghdad and reported live to the world on the first incoming missiles and bombs of the Persian Gulf War. I have often wondered if Bernie’s popcorn needs were sufficiently taken care of in between bomb blasts that night in Baghdad.

During summers at DePauw I would travel south from Greencastle to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, where I worked at WJWJ-TV based in Beaufort. The first year there I was a volunteer, with no pay or benefits. To be perfectly honest, the sensational golf courses scattered around Hilton Head more than made up for the fact I wasn’t getting paid. I started out being a gopher and doing whatever I was asked to do, but over time the folks at WJWJ gave me more and more responsibilities. It wasn’t long before they started trusting me to shoot interviews, edit tape, and help put

together news packages. Eventually, I wore them down and they let me produce my own stories and even appear on air.

South Carolina was a good fit for me, so after I graduated from DePauw I returned to Hilton Head and became what WJWJ called their Low Country bureau reporter. I liked to call myself the Low Country bureau chief, but in reality I was a one-man band: reporter, cameraman, sound engineer, editor, janitor, driver, and office manager all wrapped into one. The station's mother ship was in Beaufort, but I was on my own out on Hilton Head Island, about an hour's drive away. I came up with my own story ideas, wrote scripts, shot video, and edited everything down for the evening newscast produced out of Beaufort.

There were all the normal go-it-alone TV reporter challenges like trying to frame up a stand-up shot by guesstimating how tall I was next to a tree or lamppost, or adjusting the camera focus by using a pile of leaves on the ground where I would eventually stand. But the tricky part of the job was my tight deadline. Even though the evening newscast was at 6:00 p.m., my personal deadline was 3:00 p.m. because I had to finish my story, then race to the Hilton Head airport so I could load my clunky three-quarter-inch tapes onto an old prop plane that made a daily afternoon flight across the Port Royal Sound to Beaufort.

If I happened to miss my 3:00 p.m. deadline and that plane, I would have to drive to Beaufort, deliver my tapes by hand, then trek all the way back to Hilton Head, a real pain for someone who was trying to maintain an evening social schedule. So to get my tapes on that flight, I was often forced to do my best Dale

Earnhardt impersonation and haul that beat-up old two-toned red and blue boat of a WJWJ station wagon from the bureau to the Hilton Head Airport. More times than I care to admit, I drove directly onto the tarmac of that little airport, hazard lights flashing, while I leaned on the horn the entire way to prevent the pilot from taking off without my tapes.

I've often thought the pilot of that prop plane probably got a big kick out of messing with the TV boy by intentionally idling at the end of the runway till he saw that red and blue blur of a station wagon careening down that dusty airport road, all so he could enjoy a nice Low Country belly laugh at my expense.

When I wasn't driving on the tarmac of the Hilton Head Airport you might find me lobbying my bosses about yet another golf course we needed to inform our viewers about. But more often than not, I would probably be on the beach shooting video for a piece about the nesting habits of the loggerhead sea turtle, or possibly at a town council meeting covering the latest raging Hilton Head political controversy. The annual debate over the color of the azaleas to be planted on the median of highway 278 was always particularly heated and scintillating.

I didn't earn much money in those days, so when I wasn't chasing down loggerhead turtles on the beach or thinking deep thoughts about the various shades of azaleas, I worked a few other jobs to help make ends meet. On the weekends I tended bar and waited tables at the local Applebee's. On weeknights, I delivered food all over the island for a company called Restaurants on the Go. Once I showed up at a home with a food order and a middle-aged man answered the door.

“Hey, you’re the guy on channel six, right? I just saw you!” he said.

“Yessir,” I replied. “Thanks for watching! Now, did you have the calzone or the crab legs?”

One big upside to working in South Carolina at the time was its rich history of political figures, not least of whom were the two sitting United States senators who would occasionally pass through Hilton Head for a fund-raiser or ribbon-cutting event of one kind or another.

Senator Fritz Hollings was a complete piece of southern construction with a deep drawl and laugh that was instantly identifiable in a crowded room. Hollings looked the part of a southern senator, with his silvery mane of hair and straight-from-central-casting looks. In fact, when Hollywood was looking to cast the role of a distinctive southern senator for a big scene in the Al Pacino film *City Hall*, Hollings was selected to play the part.

A former presidential contender during the 1984 Democratic primaries, Hollings had a bit of ignominious fame by being the third, and often forgotten, name on the once-heralded Gramm-Rudman-Hollings budget-balancing bill of 1985. Hollings, who always had spectacular navigational skills around the English language, said of his own balanced-budget legislation, “Gramm-Rudman-Hollings is a *baaad idea*—whose time has come.”

Republican Senator Strom Thurmond, whose first campaign slogan exhorted voters to “Give a Young Man a Chance,” was still a relatively young man of ninety-two when I was working in Hilton Head. I could never get out of my head the idea that Ol’ Strom, as he was affec-

tionately known in South Carolina, was born the year the Wright brothers were still gliding. Strom had lived the entire history of American aviation and even jumped out of a few planes over Europe as a paratrooper during World War II.

On one particular occasion in the fancy ballroom of a Hilton Head hotel, both Fritz and Strom were working the room at the same time, always a treat. There was a sumptuous buffet table loaded with all sorts of Low Country offerings such as cucumber sandwiches, fried oysters, Frogmore stew, and what appeared to be a small mountain of fresh shrimp. Upon seeing this spectacular gastronomic presentation, Ol' Strom headed right for Shrimp Mountain and proclaimed, "Shrimp! I love shrimp!"

All perfectly fine and a totally understandable tribute given all the wonderful delicacies being displayed, but what followed next is something I will never forget. Not only did Strom unceremoniously start stuffing shrimp into his mouth, he also proceeded to stick handfuls of the catch directly into his pockets. No embarrassment. No napkins. No nothing. Just suit pockets filled with finely prepared fresh shrimp.

I thought, "Gheesh! Here's a long-standing United States senator, for gosh sakes. Can't his staff do a better job of getting this guy some shrimp once in a while?"

I guess Ol' Strom just wanted a little snack for the long car ride home.

A bemused smile on his face, Hollings took in the Strom buffet line episode as if he had watched this scene play out a thousand times before. I suppose we should all be thankful Strom didn't have a taste for cocktail sauce. Even though I was on a very strict budget in those days,

I am proud to report I did not stuff anything in my pockets for my own car ride home.

Not necessarily because I was an eyewitness to the Strom shrimp episode, but about this same time I started getting itchy and thinking it just might be time for me to move on. Hilton Head had been a fantastic learning experience for me, and the folks at WJWJ could not have been any nicer. But, counting my college summers, I had been working down there four years. You can do only so many loggerhead sea turtle nesting stories in one lifetime.

I think I actually made my decision to leave Hilton Head in the middle of a five-hour, knock-down, drag-out town council debate on whether the awnings at the local TGIF restaurant should be red and white, or, because of the sensibilities and sensitivities of a higher-end leisure town like Hilton Head, might the community be better served by the colors maroon and gray.

Before Fox News ever came along, my reporting on the Hilton Head TGIF color-scheme controversy was always “fair and balanced.” But truth be told, I was a bit of a traditionalist and personally preferred red and white. I sure hope they got that color scheme figured out down there. To this day, I cannot pass up reading a good article about loggerhead sea turtles. And I definitely cannot walk by a buffet table with shrimp without breaking into a big Low Country grin.

Leaving Hilton Head with no specific job prospects, I decided to move back to Washington, D.C., a city that made a huge impression on me during my American University–Bernie Shaw days. My long-term goal was to work in Washington for one of the networks, so D.C. seemed like the perfect place for me to shake the sand

out of my sandals, regroup, get my résumé reel in order, and start sending out tapes. A few friends of mine had moved to Washington to attend law school and were living in a great house on Capitol Hill right behind the Supreme Court. Despite the rigors of studying law, my friends all seemed to be having a lot of fun. They also happened to have a spare bedroom, so that pretty much sealed the deal for me.

During the summer of 1994, about the same time Newt Gingrich and his band of Republican revolutionaries were on their way to winning the House of Representatives for the first time in forty years, I found myself living in D.C. and tending bar at the top of the Center Cafe in Washington's Union Station to make ends meet. I used every cent of my tip money for postage so I could send résumé tapes out across the country.

Although I knew I wasn't yet experienced enough to land a big-time reporting job in the D.C. television market, I made a few brassy attempts anyway, only to be shown the door. But thanks to the tip money from mixing margaritas at the Center Cafe, my tapes eventually stirred some interest in several local television markets across the country.

The next thing I knew, I was on the road to Rockford, Illinois, and a reporting job at WREX-TV. I briefly considered taking a job in Amarillo, Texas, but to an East Coast boy, Amarillo seemed to be about thirty-seven hours from the next closest town. No offense to the fine folks of Amarillo, but when I traveled there for an interview, I actually saw an honest-to-goodness tumbling tumbleweed, and it scared the daylight out of me. Just two hours from Chicago, Rockford seemed to have

its tumbleweed situation under control, so that choice was fairly easy.

Rockford was an interesting place to work. Although they seemed a little disinterested in the challenges facing the loggerhead, I worked on a wide range of other stories, including many dealing with crime, racism in schools, and drugs. I lived in downtown Rockford and once produced a piece about drug dealers in my own neighborhood by setting up the camera in my apartment and shooting the story out my kitchen window: the offer of drugs, exchange of cash, arrival of the police, everything. If I hadn't had to go into the station to edit my piece, I could have stayed in my pajamas all day and finished the story sitting at my kitchen table while drinking a cup of coffee.

After Rockford, I headed south to North Carolina where I took a job as a general assignment reporter at the highly rated CBS affiliate in Raleigh, WRAL-TV. Over the course of my career in journalism, I've had a lot of interesting first days on the job, but my first twenty-four hours at WRAL took the cake.

The day started out tame enough, with my photographer and me heading to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill to produce a story about Title IX college sports programs. While we were on the UNC campus getting ready to do some on-camera interviews we got a call on the radio that a tornado was about to touch down near Zebulon, a very small town about twenty miles east of Raleigh.

Unceremoniously, we threw all our equipment into the van and raced toward Zebulon, about an hour's drive from Chapel Hill. While we were on the road approaching the town we looked out our van window and saw a

funnel cloud. We stopped along the road so the photographer could shoot video of the tornado touching down, then we continued to a trailer park where several dozen homes had been damaged or destroyed.

It was a mess, a heartbreaking disaster area with several folks milling around, confused, crying, and trying to reconnect with their loved ones. I remember trying to help a woman find her young daughter when suddenly a police officer came by and hollered, "There's another one coming. Another one is coming. Another one is coming!"

All of a sudden everyone started running in the same direction toward a ditch by the side of the road. Being in the TV business, we, of course, shot video up until the last second before we, too, dove into the ditch and hunkered down for dear life with everyone else. Thankfully, the second funnel cloud kept moving and touched down about a mile away from where we were.

Eventually my cameraman and I shot some more video, and with as much sensitivity as we could conducted interviews with several local folks, some of whom had lost everything. Despite the loss of property, everyone, including me, was extremely thankful there was no loss of life.

Meanwhile, the station sent a transmission truck to meet up with us so we could do live reports from the scene. I wound up doing live shots all night long and producing a full package for WRAL's 11:00 p.m. newscast. In the middle of gathering the elements needed for my story, I was also doing live hits throughout the evening for various CBS affiliates across the country.

Barely making it back to my apartment in Raleigh for a few hours' sleep, I returned to Zebulon at first light for

appearances on the CBS morning show and some live walk-and-talks to show the path of the storm and the devastation. I had only been in Raleigh for a few days and was still living out of a suitcase. I barely knew the names of the anchors back at the station, let alone my fellow reporters. I was so new to the area I had to ask folks around me for the correct pronunciation of Zebulon seconds before I went on the air for the first time. I had pretty much been on the air nonstop for the better part of twenty-four hours, all on my first day on the job.

The following day, cameraman Mark Copeland and I went to the nearby town of Lizard Lick about five miles west of Zebulon to do some storm aftermath stories. Lizard Lick didn't even have a stoplight in 1996 and was basically just a crossroads on the map with a small diner and gas station. When Mark and I walked into the diner, six big-bellied regulars were at the counter eating breakfast. As I walked through the screen door all six of those burly guys turned to me and said, "Well, hiyaah, Bret!" like they had known me their entire lives.

With all the affiliate reporting I had been doing—and this just my second day on the job—I had probably appeared on WRAL only three or four times over the past twelve hours, and these guys at this small diner in the middle of nowhere were calling me by my first name. That encounter convinced me not only how popular WRAL was throughout the region, but it was a good reminder of the vital, up-close, on-the-ground role local reporters can play in a community, whether they are diving into the same ditch with their viewers or not.

Many memories from those early days filled my mind as I cruised along I-85 and edged my way over to the right lane for the Georgia Tech exit and the final few

blocks to the Fox bureau. A great space in the Georgia Public Television complex, the bureau was a huge step up from just a few years before when the entirety of the Atlanta bureau was in the living room of my 600-square-foot apartment.

I absolutely loved working at WRAL and living in Raleigh, but when the brand-new Fox News Channel came along and offered me a chance to open a regional bureau in my hometown of Atlanta, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

The only resources I had during those early days in Atlanta were a clunky fax machine, a cell phone about the size of a loaf of bread, and an end-of-the-world supply of Pizza Combos and Diet Coke. This was early 1998, about the same time news headlines across the country were screaming with stories about President Clinton and his relationship with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky. While the impeachment drums were beating on Capitol Hill and special prosecutor Ken Starr was becoming a household name, I busied myself with covering any number of non-Monica stories across the southeast—and there were plenty.

In a few short years our fledgling Atlanta bureau had grown into a fully functioning news operation with full-time camera operators, producers, and even some real office space. My bosses in New York also hired a full-time bureau chief named Sharon Fain so I could work on stories 100 percent of the time and not have to worry about the million and one logistical details a bureau chief needs to deal with.

It wasn't long before the Atlanta bureau earned the reputation within Fox for being the crazy folks who would go anywhere, at any moment, to cover stories

that no one else wanted or were too busy to cover: tornadoes, hurricanes, the search for the Olympic Park bomber in the North Carolina mountains, Timothy McVeigh, and the Elián González story that took me to Cuba several times, just to name a few.

We also did our fair share of water-cooler/refrigerator-magnet stories, such as lawnmower racing in Alabama, UFO sightings in North Carolina, and the population explosion of rodents called nutria in Louisiana. Nutria became such a problem the state actually encouraged restaurants to come up with nutria dishes for their menus.

I was easily spending three weeks out of each month on the road in those days. I was traveling so much I sometimes wondered why I kept an apartment at all. Maybe I should have just bought a cot and slept in the bureau like those congressmen who sleep in their Capitol Hill offices. Given the fact that most of my colleagues had actually seen my apartment and knew where neatness ranked on my personal hierarchy of needs pyramid, I doubt they would have gone along with that idea for very long.

I was on the road for such long stretches I am fairly certain I still hold some Guinness Book records for killing the most apartment plants in a year. It wasn't just me. Everyone in the Atlanta bureau had the same pick up and go mentality. In fact, it was a bureau requirement that we all have go-bags stuffed with fresh clothes and toiletries so we could pick up and roll on a moment's notice.

When it came to catching last-minute flights to the next news hot spot, we had it down to an absolute science. Upon receiving word we were needed somewhere

across the southeast to cover a story, several of us would immediately pile into a car or a van loaded with all our television equipment and race to Atlanta's Hartsfield Airport. Pulling up to the outside drop-off point, our cameraperson would jump out to find the special baggage handlers we generously tipped to move our cases of equipment onto the plane. My producer Malinda Adams or I would run to the counter to buy tickets while the other would park the car. We would typically reassemble at the gate and all bundle onto our plane to wherever just as the doors were about to close.

It was a matter of bureau pride with us. If the bosses in New York or Washington called to see if we could travel that day to report a story, we responded yes even before we knew where we were going. I was convinced that if they ever held any kind of news bureau Olympics and the event was covering spot news, my colleagues in the Fox Atlanta bureau would have been gold-medal winners. Sometimes this life was glamorous, but mostly it was just a lot of endless sixteen-hour days, and I often wondered how someone with a family could ever handle such a hectic schedule. Those rare, reflective moments didn't last very long, however, because it was always time to head off to the next hot spot.

Despite the fact that I loved being based in Atlanta and had a wide range of stories to choose from, after covering fifteen hurricanes and tropical storms for the network, I sometimes worried I was being typecast as Hurricane Guy and perhaps undermining my chances to be assigned to the political stories I loved doing.

Don't get me wrong. Hurricanes, tropical storms, and tornadoes are huge stories that need to be covered and

covered well. Folks across the country are very interested in extreme weather events, and those living in the path of destruction certainly deserve to have their stories told. But with my previous stints in Washington and my keen interest in political news, while handling all my other story assignments I was constantly lobbying the network bosses to let me produce political pieces every chance I got.

Fox had been extremely fortunate to recruit longtime ABC News White House Correspondent Brit Hume to the network, and he and his team in Washington had launched an incredibly interesting political news show called *Special Report* that was really starting to catch on. Whenever I wasn't tracking hurricanes or doing manhunt stories in the mountains of North Carolina, I was constantly looking for creative ways to get southern political stories into the mix, and specifically onto Brit's show.

Over time, the folks in Washington and New York took notice of my pieces, often southern-fried and spiced with a healthy dose of local color. Brit was incredibly supportive and encouraged me to do as much as I could without shirking the normal news responsibilities expected out of a regional bureau.

Life was good. The Atlanta bureau was humming. I was being encouraged to produce more stories about southern politics, and at a moment's notice I was parachuting into one exciting story after another. I was definitely a young man in a hurry and living the lifestyle where one late-night phone call could send me to the airport and three weeks on the road without a break. That is exactly what happened in November of 2000 when the network sent me to Nashville to cover the Al

Gore victory—or defeat—story, depending on Election Day results.

I packed relatively light for Nashville, fully expecting it to be two days at most, win or lose. But after election night produced no clear winner, I was told to head to the center of the storm, which seemed to be the Panhandle of Florida. After a day in the Panhandle, and still relying on my two-day clothes supply as if I were tracking the uncertain path of a raging hurricane, I was instructed to divert to Tallahassee where the front lines of the Bush-Gore legal battle were taking shape.

With my interest in politics and having covered all those hurricanes and tornadoes for the network, I felt right at home in Tallahassee, working, arguably, in the middle of the nation's largest political storm of the past hundred years. I had the great fortune of being able to work the Florida recount story with veteran reporter Jim Angle. For a month Jim and I worked side by side in the back of a U-Haul truck we rented and parked right outside the courthouse in Tallahassee. Working in extremely tight quarters, Jim and I were forced to become instant friends, not to mention instant experts on any number of election topics, including a new one on me called a voting card chad.

Jim and I soon realized that not only did we have to become experts on your everyday run-of-the-mill chads, there was an evolving bit of expertise to be had in dented chads, dimpled chads, perforated chads, and something that seemed to be driving folks crazy down in Palm Beach County called butterfly ballots. Throw in all the nuances and ambiguities of Florida election law, and the expectation that we be able to wake up at 3:00 a.m. and clearly articulate the differences between

Volusia, Broward, Palm Beach, Miami Dade, and Nassau counties, and you get an idea what we and everyone else covering that monster of a story were up against.

The Bush-Gore recount was unlike any story I had ever covered. Typically news divisions will have a morning meeting to map out the day's coverage, but with the Florida recount, by the time that first idea emanated from the morning meeting, the story on the ground had already changed at least three times. We had to constantly be on our toes to make sure we didn't miss the latest developments that could erupt at a moment's notice and in any one of Florida's sixty-seven counties.

With the American presidency hanging in the balance, it didn't get any bigger than the Florida recount. But despite all the pressure associated with covering such a historic moment in American politics, I was having the time of my life. After the Florida recount, I definitely had the bug to do political reporting full time, and that probably meant having to travel directly into the well-formed eye of just about every major political storm out there—Washington, D.C.

As I drove past Atlanta's iconic Varsity restaurant on this brilliant September morning—still holding out hope for that always elusive postwork bucket of balls—I wondered what the bosses in Washington or New York might be wanting from me today.

As was my habit driving to the bureau, I scanned the radio dial to see if there was any buzz about anything, and I quickly picked up on a story about a plane that hit an office building in New York City. Parking in my normal space outside the bureau, I started to think that if a building in Manhattan had accidentally been hit by

a plane, the New York folks would probably have their hands full for the morning, leaving me to come up with my own story for the day.

Fine with me. I always had about forty-three different political stories rolling around in my head and ready to pitch at a moment's notice, all part of my master plan to get on Brit's show as often as possible and reinforce my case for working in Washington full time.

As I walked into the Fox Atlanta bureau on the morning of September 11, 2001, I had no idea that within fifteen minutes I would be racing out the same door with my producer Joe Hirsch on our way to Washington, D.C., two-day go-bag slung over my shoulder. How could I possibly know this would be a one-way trip and my last day working in Atlanta?

