

KUSA Wins Station of the Year for the 10th Time

By Pattie Logan

The walls of the photographer's room at KUSA could be painted orange and you would never know it. Award plaques cover the walls from floor to ceiling. The photo staff will have to do some rearranging to clear space for its 10th Station of the Year honor for 2004. No other station has won it as often. KUSA's Corky Scholl also won Photographer of the Year. He joined the staff just last year. Before he landed the job, he knew the station had a reputation for great photography but says, "It didn't sink in until I walked into that room and saw all those plaques."

The first Station of the Year plaque is from 1977. They've come consistently ever since. This time the award followed a six-year drought – the longest stretch KUSA has had between Station of the Year honors. Eric Blumer of Denver rival KCNC says, "KUSA is widely recognized as the leader in the country. Saying they haven't won in six years is a little like saying the Yankees haven't won the World Series enough. They're consistently at the top."

Like a great pro franchise, KUSA has built a winning tradition that is ingrained in the station's culture. The morning news meeting has an assignment board with categories that read: Today's Ideas, Big Stories, Courts, Government, and Visual. "We put visual up there front and center," says News Director Patti Dennis. "They are often the reason we do a particular story." Photojournalist and News Project Supervisor Manny Sotelo agrees that visuals are a priority, "In almost every meeting someone asks, 'what do we have that's visual and what's memorable?'"

But that doesn't mean photographers are shooting fluffy pink clouds over 14-thousand foot peaks every day. KUSA has six newscasts to fill. There isn't a lot of free time for crafting works of art. Photographers have to do great work and do it fast.

The commitment to visual storytelling is instilled in every person in the newsroom, including newscast producers. "With the legacy of this station and the photography staff we have, how can you not have that at the top of your mind? It would be insane not to take advantage of that talent," says Executive Producer, Jack Maher.

During KUSA's coverage of the "Blizzard of '05" the station had the requisite live shots next to the highway, talking heads with airport officials and graphics with 16-inch snow totals. It was everything the viewer needed to know. Or so you'd think. In the chaos of covering the massive spring storm, Maher had an idea. He asked photojournalist Don Brookins to get something different. Brookins put together a 1:20 photo essay that began with a hint of sun peaking out from the clouds, snow sliding down the face of a stop sign, tumbling off tree branches, the South Platte River swollen with runoff. "In the middle of this madness, I wanted viewers to get a sense of the beauty of the storm," says Maher.

Photography is also emphasized in reporting and writing. When the station hires reporters, they not only meet with the news director, they interview with members of the photography staff before getting the green light. Anchor Gary Shapiro says, "From a writer's standpoint the photographer expects you to write to video and knows your writing will make the story stronger for the viewer."

Photographers say the commitment to visual storytelling ultimately comes from management. It requires good salaries, time and equipment. Because of that financial commitment, photojournalism has to show up in the bottom line. KUSA General Manager Roger Ogden says, "It has an indirect benefit. It differentiates your product." Ogden started at KUSA, went to rival KCNC, then returned to KUSA. When he left KUSA he took the commitment to photography with him, making visual storytelling a priority in building ratings at his new station. "If you're not at the level of your competition or a little higher, people will notice."

Eric Blumer was one of the photojournalists Ogden hired at KCNC. They eventually won Station of the Year in 2001. Blumer says the Denver market has developed a style that

emphasizes quality visual storytelling. But he says that can be threatened if a station focuses on production tools, such as doing live shots just for the sake of being live. “It takes away time from storytelling. Management must be behind you to give you the resources to do great photojournalism. KUSA has had that commitment consistently for a long time.”

KUSA wasn't the first station in the market to do great photojournalism. KWGN won Station of the Year in 1962, 15 years before KUSA's first award. Four of the five stations in the market have won Station of the Year and three have had Photographers of the Year. Brian Weister of Denver's KMGH won Editor of the Year for the past two years and says, “What stands out in the market is vivid photography, excellent composition, creative interviews, creative stand ups and excellent storytelling in general. It's obvious that reporters and photographers are communicating out in the field, because it shows up in great stories being told.”

Eric Kehe is KUSA's chief photographer and 1996 Photographer of the Year. He says there are so many great shops in the Denver market and nationally, that it's a constant effort to stay on top. “There is so much good work being done. In the past it may have been good enough to do an interesting feature on a broom factory. Now it has to be the broom that saved a woman's life.”

There are no top-secret photography techniques being pioneered at KUSA. It's an open reel, at least if you're in the building. Edit bays have sliding glass doors. You can always see who is inside and what they're working on. Frequently a door slides open and a head pops out, “Hey, come check this out!” Photographers are eager to share stories they're proud of. Anna Mitchell joined the staff last year and says, “Photographers like to talk about their work and I like to ask about it. We watch each other's stories and ask, ‘how did you do that?’” Photographer of the Year, Corky Scholl, says they feed off each other's work. “It's like a snowball effect. You just keep getting better and better. It's a never ending process.”

Staff veterans say the new blood keeps them fresh, always evolving. Rookies say the experienced photographers are eager to help them grow. Each person is encouraged to take those influences and develop their own distinct style. Kehe says the photo staff is carefully thought out – like adding positions to a baseball team. Each photographer has a unique style, but they have shared standards and chemistry that “is huge”. When Kehe makes a new hire it isn't necessarily the best photojournalist available. “It's the person who fills the void of what is missing at the time. My job is to find the right dynamic that works. You have to have people who want to do the morning shift, the late shift, work off the desk, be foot soldiers. You have to have people who are storytellers, experienced, and those willing to push the envelope.”

And you have to have team players. For the first time, one of the station's stars, Dan Wood, didn't have a story on the winning tape. He says with a sly smile, “I was out getting all the VO's to free up the other guys.” Somebody has to hit the sacrifice fly.

Wood has been at the station for 9 of the 10 Station of the Year awards, helping to build KUSA's reputation. He and photographers like Tom Baer, Sam Allen and Butch Montoya have an almost mythic standing. Most are gone now, but they set a standard that motivates the staff today. “You don't want to be the guy who has the tradition end with you,” says Kehe.

The tradition began by accident and intention. In the '70s you could get hired at KUSA without experience. All you needed was desire, instincts and a glimmer of talent.

Sam Allen won Photographer of the Year in '77. Before he got the job, he called the station every single day for months trying to get hired. When a position finally opened up chief photographer Tom Baer took him for a try out. They were shooting film back then and Sam's audio equipment, an MA-11, broke. “Other guys would have opened it up and tinkered with it, wasting a bunch of time, but I just smacked it and it started working. Tom said, ‘you're hired.’”

Persistence also paid off for Dan Wood. He was a young kid filling the station's vending machine. He kept bugging news director Roger Ogden to hire him as a photographer. Ogden was impressed with Wood's desire and told Allen to give him a shot. Allen was not thrilled at first. "I said, 'he throws sandwiches in the machine, what does he know about film?'" But Allen handed Wood the camera one day. When a suspect was arrested and put in the back of a police car, Wood slowly zoomed in on the suspect's face and kept it in focus the whole time. Allen says, "He did it instinctively. He had no idea why he did it or how. I thought, 'we might have something here.'"

Good fortune may have gotten that first group of winning photographers their jobs, but hard work took them to the top of their profession. They would stay after their shift almost every day to critique the newscast and make each other better. That work ethic that continues today. It was a Sunday when Manny Sotelo heard that 40 bald eagles had gathered around a lake just outside of Denver. It was his day off and his birthday, but he took his camera out to capture the story. He got images of eagles skimming the lake, talons extended, snatching fish from the water. "It was the kind of thing you only see on National Geographic."

Being in the right place at the right time is one of the intangibles that makes a great photojournalist, but Sotelo says the staff is also committed to doing their best on the mundane, every day stories that are newsworthy but not necessarily visual. When he shoots at the Capitol he hauls in a light kit. "I'm always thinking that I'm going to get a better shot than the other stations do. If their guy is using one light, I'm going to use two."

Legislator sound bites may not contribute directly to national awards, but good habits and a strong work ethic pay off on the air every day. Kehe says, "We try to inspire, teach, entertain and make a little difference in people's lives every day. If they take the time to tune in, we have to provide them a good story."

It works out pretty well. Denver viewers get rewarded every night and the photo staff never has to paint the walls. They'll just squeeze in another plaque for Station of the Year.