

## The Ruth First Award for courageous journalism



Phillip van Niekerk, winner of the award for courageous journalism.

**Phil van Niekerk, who barely escaped death after being shot in the head while reporting in Evaton in 1994, says no story is worth a life. Winner of the 1996 South African Courageous Journalism award, he put the case in his acceptance speech:**

I am honoured to win this prize which is in memory of Ruth First. I never met her but her integrity as a journalist and an intellectual has been an inspiration in my own life.

When I interviewed Joe Slovo in Pretoria three weeks before he died, he justified his own decision to turn a blind eye to the excesses of the Soviet Union because he had not wanted to suffer the same fate as Ruth — she was ostracised, he said, because of her independence of mind and outspoken criticisms of events such as the invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Not only did she have the courage of her convictions, she was physically brave. She chose to move to Maputo, an hour's plane flight from Pretoria, to pursue her research into migrant labour on the goldmines. That was where the regime killed her.

A few weeks after Joe died I interviewed Craig Williamson who confessed that while working with the security police in Pretoria, he had been involved in doctoring the parcel-bomb that fatally wounded Ruth. He claimed that it was done under instructions of Colonel Piet Goosen - who gained notoriety and his nickname for his role in the murder of Steve Biko. It was a crucial piece, though not the final piece in the puzzle. Hopefully, the full truth will emerge at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As I pointed out to the judges panel when I entered this competition, in fulfilling my job as a reporter I often put myself in danger. Extraordinary times in our country and our continent have meant that merely to do the pedestrian job of gathering the news — and giving some meaning to them — is to put our lives at risk.

I am not an adrenaline junkie. I strongly believe that reporters should not be required to take unnecessary risks with their lives. My philosophy is that no story is worth a life — and that no story is worth anything at all unless it breaks new ground, explains something the reader doesn't already know or challenges a prejudice.

There are hundreds of journalists on our continent and in our country who put themselves at risk every day just to get the story. I am constantly amazed that every smalltown in Africa has at least one: the local stringer for the BBC or a newspaper in the big city.

He's the guy who's plugged in to what's going on, the scandals, the night-life, how the aid agencies are wasting money. And generally he's doing it for an old-fashioned virtue: a genuine desire for the truth, though he would never turn down a bit of extra pocket money.

Yet newspaper readers in North America and Europe for the most part rely for their information from Africa on journalists para-

chuted into air-conditioned hotels who interview half-a-dozen diplomats, NGOs and human rights activists before they emerge with what they think is a complete picture of the enormously complex society they have just passed through. Their only insight into the feelings of the people is a conversation en route back to the airport with a taxi-driver.

There are notable exceptions, such as Chris McGreal of the Guardian, for instance, whose work appears regularly here in the Mail and Guardian. He is the bravest and pluckiest reporter on the African continent.

But the point I want to make is that these "barefoot" journalists of Africa are brave not only because of the physical hazards of reporting in Africa: they are prepared to take on the authorities. In fact, they regard it as their duty to give the government a hard time. Anyone who still thinks that African journalists are cowed by authority should spend a few days in Lagos. The newspapers there are technologically crude but journalistically tough, exciting and usually written in superb English.

Unfortunately, our newsrooms have been denuded of the skilled reporters. Talented journalists are promoted onto editing jobs, on and up what is regarded as the ascent up the corporate ladder.

Yet it is reporters who make newspapers: professionals who can pursue and break the big story, whose first-hand accounts of major events are history's raw material, whose interpretation of complex events as they are unfolding is the public's primary credible source of understanding.

It is time newspaper owners in this country invested in reporters by paying them what they are worth — and ensuring for them a status equal to and even above that of the senior editors.

What we need is a knowledgeable, outspoken press that keeps politicians on their toes - because they are public figures and they should be able to take it. It's time people stopped blaming the media for everything.

Take the management of South African rugby: totally out of sync with the new South Africa, treating men like boys, behaving like tin-pot dictators. Yet they turn around and blame their image problems on the media.

Frankly, I don't like the sound of some of our new ministers when challenged by the press. They see conspiracies where there are none, label mild criticism as vendettas, and often respond defensively to routine questioning of their conduct.

I don't want to advocate that newspapers become a permanent, almost misdirected opposition, but the tendency of some political journalists to fraternize with the hoi polloi at cocktail parties - not to get stories, but just to rub shoulders with the powerful - is not healthy.

In the end, it takes moral courage to stand up and say that the emperor has no clothes. That is the oldest tradition in journalism. It is surely one that will keep the awards committee busy for some time. The battle has only just begun.

**H**ONOURABLE MENTIONS in the competition also went to Evening Post journalist Beverley Garson, African Eye newsagency editor Justin Arenstein and Star regional editor Anna Cox. Each will receive R500 as a tribute to the quality of their work.

Judges Prof Guy Berger, veteran journalist Juby Mayet, and Freedom of Expression Institute executive director Jeannette Minnie said the four journalists had all shown sustained courage in the face of danger and intimidation.

"Despite a close call with death after being shot in the head while reporting in Evaton in 1994, Van Niekerk kept his journalistic nerve and had since reported in extremely dangerous conditions," said the judges.

He was one of the few journalists to enter diamond territory in conflict-wracked Angola this year, and discover how conflict over the gems had been a major factor in the continuation of the civil war in that country.

In Liberia's civil war, Van Niekerk reported how fighting came to the country's capital Moldavia as a result of armed factions having milked the countryside dry. He was trapped in a hotel for four days, with street battles raging outside. Until President Nelson Mandela intervened, Van Niekerk was unable to get a position on the US military aircraft evacuating people from the city.

Van Niekerk, who wins R7000, works as a freelance correspondent for the Observer and the New York Times, and for several South African papers.

● Beverley Garson received an honourable mention, because despite receiving two death threats for her reporting, she had continued to cover gangs in Port Elizabeth, staying in in close touch with gangsters, police and members of the community.

● African Eye newsagency editor Justin Arenstein was commended for uncovering four major scandals in his province, the most well known being the Eugene Nyati and ex-ANC Senator Patrick Mogale exposes published in the *Sunday Times*.

Arenstein persevered despite intimidation, racial abuse, burglary, suspected computer sabotage and a battery of legal threats. He faces a potential R8-million defamation case brought by former Kwangwe homeland political heavyweights Enos Mabuza and Mangisi Zitha for articles he published about their land purchases.

The judges commended Arenstein for determined investigative journalism in one of the remoter provinces despite a severe lack of legal and other support for his work.

● Anna Cox was also named a runner-up for having put journalism ahead of fear by reporting from within, and on a regular basis, news from Johannesburg's Alexandra township. In one incident, she was caught in crossfire between residents and squatters and had to flee for her life.

The judges were impressed with the way Cox appeared to have built up trust on all sides and was able to report many stories direct from the actors themselves.