

VFS Episode 4: “GAY REPORTER WANTS TO BE ACTIVIST”

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EPIISODE 4 CREDITS:

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EPIISODE 4 LINKS:

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[“Objectivity is dead, and I’m okay with it.”](#) by Lewis Wallace, *Medium*, 2017

[“I was fired from my journalism job ten days into Trump.”](#) by Lewis Wallace, *Medium*, 2017

[“Trans Reporter Lewis Wallace: In Trump Era, Journalists Urgently Need to Know What We Stand For”](#)[VIDEO], *Democracy Now!*, 2017

[“Gay Reporter Wants to Be Activist.”](#) by Timothy Egan, *New York Times*, 1996

[“Publishers Play the Game With Two Sets of Rules.”](#) by Sandy Nelson, *Socialism.com*, 1995

[“Newsroom Heretic.”](#) by Sandy Nelson, *On the Issues Magazine*, 1996

[“Nelson v. McClatchy Newspapers: What Happens When Freedom of the Press Collides with Free Speech?”](#), by Adam Horowitz, *University of Miami Law Review*, 2000

[The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity](#), by Lewis Raven Wallace (University of Chicago Press, 2019; available now!)

[View from Somewhere Tour Details](#)

MUSIC (in order of appearance):

- **Dolce Beat** by Podington Bear
- **The Gall** by Podington Bear
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky
- *Chill Vibe + Typewriter* by Dogbotic, *Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Reckoning** by Podington Bear
- *Variation One, Percussion* by Dogbotic, *Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **New Skin** by Podington Bear
- **Gymnopedie 1** by Podington Bear

- *View from Somewhere Theme (Chill Version sans Accordion), Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **Peter Gray** by Podington Bear
- **Mirabelle** by Podington Bear
- *Tango Mécanique, Electro Variation by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

TRANSCRIPT:

Ramona Martinez: This is the View from Somewhere podcast. I'm producer Ramona Martinez. Just a quick reminder that the View from Somewhere is on tour. We'll be in New York November 19, 20 and 21, and L.A. December 5. Get the details at viewfromsomewhere dot com, and while you're there, do us a solid and help us get to the end of the season by clicking on the DONATE button!

Also, this podcast is serialized, so if you like this episode, you might want to skip back to the very start and take it from there...

Lewis Raven Wallace: It was February, 2017. And I was all over the news...

The Pub's Adam Ragusea: *...it's been covered by the Washington Post, the Daily Beast, and I'm sure much more mainstream press will soon follow.*

Democracy Now's Amy Goodman: *Until last week, Lewis Wallace was the only out transgender reporter at the public radio show Marketplace, then he published a blog post on the website Medium ...*

On the Media/Bob Garfield: *...Medium, raising questions about the viability of neutrality in the face of a "post-fact" administration, and imploring journalists to fight back. Wallace...*

MUSIC: Dolce Beat by Podington Bear

Lewis: The whole thing felt surreal. The story was, I got suspended from my job at Marketplace, a national business show that airs on NPR stations, about a week into Trump's administration...it was over a blog post I wrote challenging the idea of "objective" journalism—as a transgender reporter, and as a white person committed to anti-racism. And when I refused to take this post down, I got called into a meeting I'll never forget.

MUSIC OUT

Lewis: It was a Monday morning, I put on a button-down and a tie, rode the train to Grand Central station like I always did, but instead of walking over to the Marketplace offices where I

worked, I walked a few blocks to this bistro. Where the VP of the company had asked to meet me.

Raven: And then when you went in that morning you called me afterwards and they had completely blindsided you, and there was the big big boss sitting there.

Lewis: This is my mom, Raven McCrory. As I recounted to her that day, I walked in, calmly removed my jacket, sat down in a chair...next to Deborah Clark, who's the big big boss, and a woman from HR.

Raven: And apparently, I mean what I remember is you walked in and they basically said 'you're fired,' with no consideration of giving you real reasons, or making suggestions for how you might stay on or anything like that. So it was pretty shocking to you and to me and to everyone who knows you.

Lewis: And my mom, you know, she's a little biased...Clark did give reasons, in that conversation, she said I clearly didn't want to do the kind of journalism they do at Marketplace. Which was weird, because the whole thing was about my personal blog, not my journalism at Marketplace.

Anyhow, Deb Clark also told me this messed up story, that I still think about all the time, because it was kinda emblematic of the whole reason I took a stand on this...

MUSIC: The Gall by Podington Bear

Lewis: She told me that when she was a young reporter—a journalism student—she'd been involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. She's British, and white...which is important here. She had a professor who told *her* that she needed to choose: be a journalist, or be an activist. You can't be both. So, she chose journalism and *left* the anti-apartheid movement. And for her this was like a point of pride—as if she was saying, look where it got me.

But even having a choice there is a privilege. Obviously Black journalists, living under apartheid, couldn't just choose to opt out of that struggle. I *still think about that moment*.

There's a reason I'm able to tell you all this now.

Raven: They had offered you at the meeting a non disclosure agreement essentially that said, 'If you won't talk about this, then we'll give you...' whatever, I've forgotte what it was, money or severance, I don't know what it was.

Lewis: It was barely anything, it was two weeks pay.

Raven: Okay two weeks pay, oh whoop de doo. But you rejected that, because you wanted to be able to talk about it and, not because you wanted to have a lawsuit, but just because you wanted to be free to express yourself.

Lewis: I had decided to go public because I thought my story had much larger implications in the world of journalism. And I was able to do that because I have so many allies, and a financial safety net in my family of origin, which a lot of people, especially transgender people don't have. So because I could afford to, I put the severance offer in the recycling bin.

Lewis: Yeah, I like to think that they kind of misestimated me. You know, in terms of, I'm so sweet and then I can be such a thorn, you know? And I think that I was a thorn in their side after that, and from then on [laughs.] Not out of anything personal, but because I just really thought that they were wrong and that the way in which they were wrong was a symbol of a much larger issue.

Raven: Yeah, which was quite wonderful to see...

THEME MUSIC

Lewis: This is the View from Somewhere. A podcast about journalism with a purpose. I'm Lewis Raven Wallace, your host and a 35-year-old who still calls their mom in a crisis.

Today we're jumping back to this moment, after I got fired from public radio in 2017. I *did* get media coverage—the fact that I'm white and had a national position also meant I was given the benefit of the doubt by the journalists who covered me...and I know for a fact that lots of people of color, Black and indigenous people, have lost journalism jobs and opportunities because of this oppressive environment and then not been believed, lots of people have signed non-disclosure agreements for various good reasons, and lots of similar stories to mine have *not* been told.

So point being, the lens was on me, but that felt kind of wrong. I *knew* I wasn't the first person to be fired for not being perceived as impartial. But...when and *why* did this become a fireable offense for journalists? And who else had it happened to?

MUSIC: Chill Vibe + Typewriter by Dogbotic

Lewis: In the weeks and months that followed I was doing media appearances and freelancing. And then in between, I was starting to work on a book about this history. I was always at the library...trying to find these other journalists from the past who'd been fired or punished. One

day I came across this article in the New York Times, 1996. The headline was so perfect, it said *Gay Reporter Wants to be an Activist*.

Here's the opening lines of this article, reported from Tacoma, Washington: "To labor leaders in this old blue-collar port, a shot-and-beer stronghold, Sandy Nelson is an unlikely hero -- a lesbian, Socialist journalist. But to the top editors at The News Tribune, where Ms. Nelson works, she is a walking conflict of interest whose off-duty activities threaten the credibility of journalism."

NELSON: Really never had anybody come up and say I'm going to drop my subscription to your paper because I think that you're biased.

Lewis: This is her. Sandy Nelson. She lives in Colorado now, works a job doing technical editing. Back in the late 70s and 80s, she confirms she WAS a rabble-raising lesbian socialist. AND a pretty conventional newspaper journalist...

NELSON: I mean there's people that didn't like certain things that I that I wrote about like I'm trying to think back in years and years ago I wrote stuff on pagan Christmas and things like that and that I think that upset people more than anything else I ever did. This is the fact that I was presenting the perspective of people that were not you know fundamentalist Christians at Christmas time about how they feel about the season and we had everybody from you know pagans witches and you know Seventh day Adventist to Jews and everybody else you know. They just didn't want any other ideas or a diversity of opinion presented, so...

LEWIS: So that's very funny. That reminds me of my sort of story about that because similarly I you know like you was accused of this ethical violation but I had never had an audience complaint about bias in my stories except for I did a story where I made a joke, this is on the radio. So you're talking in your own voice. I made a joke at the expense of lawyers and really pissed off the legal profession as a group

NELSON: Aren't they used to it by now, pretty thin skinned?

LEWIS: That's what I thought, get over yourselves...[laughs]

NELSON: We can't have a sense of humor anymore....

MUSIC: Reckoning by Podington Bear

Lewis: Nelson had studied journalism at the University of Washington, inspired to be a journalist by the Watergate scandal coverage. And by her socialist politics.

NELSON: Well I guess I came from the 70s school of thought that journalism was where you did change the world. And you did make the world better. And that's how journalism was all the way through history of this country.

Lewis: And while she was studying, and then doing her first full-time journalism job out of school, she was going to protests, signing petitions. It was pretty fundamental to her identity...

NELSON: I've pretty much followed my experience of oppression to what I thought would be actual solutions to it.

Lewis: In 1983, she joined the News Tribune in Tacoma.

NELSON: When people found out I was an activist, when I say people I mean my employers, I never hid that. Full disclosure was something I always did, and most of the time they didn't care because I was so active, I knew what was going on better than a lot of other reporters that were living inside this shell. And so they were happy when they got good stories out of it.

Lewis: She was good at her job, too. She became the Tribune's education reporter, *and* continued her activism.

NELSON: It was protected by our union contract, which said that your off duty activities as long as you weren't competing with the paper, like as long as I wasn't going and writing for a competitor which is...that's fair. And that was all pretty much the limit was.

MUSIC: Variation One, Percussion by Dogbotic

Lewis: So, because of this union contract, "objectivity" was defined not in terms of your off-duty activities. It was what you did *on* the job. It was a set of techniques for journalism, and not an *identity*. And Nelson largely agreed with those techniques—with the idea of keeping herself out of her news stories.

NELSON: As long as you don't distort the news, as long as your political views don't distort your coverage and become an editorial, make a news story an editorial, then that's that's all that really should be required of anybody.

Lewis: But then things took a turn. In 1986, a big conglomerate, McClatchy, bought the Tacoma News Tribune from local owners. Busted up the union. Fired everyone...

NELSON: They made us all reapply for our jobs. So... they hired me back...

Lewis: She was kinda surprised they hired her back, since they knew about her socialism. But Sandy kept doing her thing...if there was a union strike in town, she'd spend time in the picket line with the workers. She went every Thursday to help women seeking abortions get to clinics

safely. And she got involved with a gay rights referendum in the city. And all of this wasn't a problem...until it was.

MUSIC: New Skin by Podington Bear

NELSON: I basically got called into a meeting at the end of the day by the managing editor and told that they were going to move me to the copy desk at least until after the election so that the newspaper could maintain its appearance of objectivity and because I had somehow compromised that and so I of course disagreed with that and but I just decided well I'm going to go home and figure out how to fight it.

Lewis: They weren't firing her. They were just...telling her she couldn't report anymore. And it wasn't just until the election, it was until she agreed to stop doing activism. But her reporting mattered to her. And, shocker, so did her rights as a gay woman.

NELSON: The Constitution doesn't say everybody except journalists have the right to be citizens. So I really wanted it resolved. I was tired of..kinda livin where I was doing this balancing act all the time. And I just. One way or the other I wanted it resolved.

MORNING EDITION CLIP:

BOB EDWARDS: Just how far a news organization can go in restricting a reporter's off the job activities soon may be tested in the courts. In Tacoma Washington, the American Civil Liberties Union has filed a lawsuit against the Morning News Tribune. The ACLU says the newspaper violated the free speech rights of a reporter who was active in the local gay rights movement. From member station KPLU, Paula Whistle reports.

WHISTLE: Sandy Nelson now works the four to midnight shift as a copy editor. Three years ago, she was a Morning News Tribune reporter, covering the education beat by day, and spending her off duty nights and weekends campaigning for a gay rights law in Tacoma. Even though she wasn't covering events she was personally involved in, her high profile role in the campaign prompted newspaper managers to yank her off her reporting beat, and put her in the less visible job on the copy desk. After the election she was told, if she gave up her political activities, she could have her reporting job back. Nelson refused.

NELSON: That's like having a gun put to your head and told, 'Do you want to exercise your civil rights, or do you want to have this particular job at our newspaper.'

WHISTLE: Nelson says she sees no reason why she should be denied the same free speech rights guaranteed other US Citizens.

NELSON: I don't consider that my constitutional rights are negotiable.

MUSIC: Gymnopedie 1 by Podington Bear

Lewis: Among other things, she argued that *everyone* had off-duty activities—boy scouts, the PTA, whatever. Which are political in their own way. The newspaper argued its credibility was at stake, that reporters must not become part of the story. But she doesn't think this was *really* about credibility...

NELSON: It really was just a way to control me. They don't like union activists, they don't like people who don't just do what they're told like they tried to get me to do.

Lewis: And she fought this case for seven years. Still going to work every day on the copy desk.

NELSON: So I just you know people have gone through a lot worse than I have to survive something like this .

Lewis: Nelson argued that her off-duty activities shouldn't have a bearing on her work—and she had RIGHTS as a citizen, to free speech, that an employer shouldn't be able to deny. The case went to the Washington Supreme Court in 1997. And she lost...

She appealed it to the U.S. Supreme court. Which declined to hear the case. And that was the end of that.

Music out

Lewis: Nelson was at the News Tribune almost 20 years, 7 of which she spent fighting. But at one point not that long ago, Sandy Nelson had the right to be BOTH a journalist and an activist—because she was in a strong union, with a contract that protected that right. Breaking up the union made journalists like her who were standing up for their own rights as humans more vulnerable...

NELSON: But I think the whole idea of people not expected to live their lives and do things and express their opinion is so antiquated now. It was a phony idea to start with. It was usually a control mechanism. They did that during the McCarthy era. They would basically get rid of people who they thought or suspected were leftists and then say it was just objectivity. You know this stuff goes way back as far as a tool that was being used to control to control people's off duty lives.

MUSIC: View from Somewhere Theme (Chill Version sans Accordion), Original Music for The View from Somewhere

Lewis: This control mechanism Sandy Nelson is talking about...it goes far back. But like, how far? This question obsessed me. I read all the histories of

journalism and objectivity I could find. And I found out that it really wasn't until the 1920s that these ideas about objective or impartial reporting started to be codified—in journalism guides and policies. But even these early codes were about the journalist's *reporting*—not about the journalist's political identity or off-duty activities.

Right around the time that journalism was adopting these codes, journalists were doing labor organizing for the first time—forming the Newspaper Guild to fight for their rights as workers. And I was reading along one day, in historian Michael Schudson's book *Discovering the News*. When he mentions this guy Morris Watson.

MUSIC: Peter Gray by Podington Bear

In 1934, Watson was working for the Associated Press. And, he was a lead organizer with the new newspaper guild chapter. At that time, the heads of the AP and other big publishers were having meetings, making statements about how it was inappropriate for journalists to be organizing unions. The bosses didn't like it.

And right then, it was like these publishers had a lightbulb go off. They thought, OH. What if we accused the workers of *bias*...of not being able to *be* objective due to their union involvement. And Morris Watson got fired from the AP for that. Just like Sandy Nelson, he was persecuted *not* for his reporting but for his supposed inability to be impartial or appear impartial on the job. This was the first instance I could find that a reporter was fired under the claim that the reporter was not objective, or couldn't be.

But of course he wasn't even *really* fired for that. He was fired for organizing a union. Watson sued the AP, and that *went* to the Supreme Court, and he won—because his lawyers could easily show that he was targeted as a union organizer, which was protected by new labor laws. He got his job back, although he later left and had a long career editing the paper for the Longshoremen's union on the West Coast.

Point being. Objectivity was only around as a code of professional ethics for a few years before it was first used as a weapon—against people who resisted the status quo. And it's been used that way ever since.

BREAK

Lewis: Sandy Nelson was just another in a long line. And maybe, so was I. I loved talking to her...it was inspiring. But also kinda sad, because, I didn't *really* expect to be fired over

expressing what I thought was such a basic idea about privilege and objectivity, and it just felt sad to realize that it's been happening like this...

MUSIC: Mirabelle by Podington Bear

LW: You know, I shouldn't have been surprised, I think it was my own naivete but I really was surprised by that decision to you know by the people who employed me to focus on like a blog post that I wrote that a few people read you know, and to sort of go above and beyond in the censorship and self-policing from this place of fear. That was like, why is the thing that you're afraid of right now your one transgender reporter who has a blog that nobody reads? You know, when I mean, look at the real challenges to journalism today, like...

Sandy: Well you know what's also true though is that look at the way it's so structural and so institutionalized this kind of policing. And I say that because look at the way the, the ruling class if you want to use that term has managed to keep us fighting each other ...you know if you assert your rights you're taking something away from me and that's not really true you know but they that's how they that's how the whole structure of capitalism maintains itself by keeping working people fighting amongst themselves instead of kind of looking around and going. Wait a minute. Who's our enemy here?

Theme song

Lewis: Journalists are *not* the enemy...though, big media organizations, like McClatchy in Sandy's case, or the AP with Morris Watson, or American Public Media with me, *can* operate that way, caring more about maintaining themselves and their public image, than protecting real journalism and the people who produce it. And the environment of fear and self-policing that kind of corporate mindset creates among journalists isn't a coincidence...it's a mode of social control. Designed to keep journalists from organizing together for better wages and work conditions, and to keep journalism from standing in solidarity with oppressed groups of people. Journalists have been told that they have to give up their rights to free expression in order to do the work...and so often, they're spending more time nitpicking each *other* over the appearance of objectivity than protecting each other from violence and oppression.

So I don't know about you, but I'm ready for a dose of solidarity in this story.

Next time, on the View from Somewhere...

Cooke: It was not ladylike to don picket signs and march up and down. It thrilled me. I never minded getting out there on the picket line, and I enjoyed going to jail, even though I know that the women's editor shivered at the thought.

Lewis: We'll meet an antidote to *all* this, 1930s and 1940s labor organizer and groundbreaking Black woman journalist Marvel Cooke. Come back for that. Y'all are great.

I'm Lewis Raven Wallace...you can read more about alllll of this stuff in my book, which is also called *The View from Somewhere*, available wherever you get your books. This podcast is distributed by Critical Frequency, and produced by the indomitable Ramona Martinez...

Ramona: Howdy y'all! Hope to see you this week in New York—we have events Tuesday at Barnard, Wednesday at McNallyJackson in Williamsburg, and Thursday at the Strand. The details are all at [view from somewhere dot com](http://viewfromsomewhere.com). Our theme music is composed by Dogbotic. Additional music comes from Podington Bear. Our logo is by Billy Dee, and our editorial consultant on this episode is Ashley DeJean.

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Talk to you in a couple weeks!