

# Up**Close**and professional

*with Alexandra Close*



**NONPROFIT MEDIA BARONESS:** Alexandra Close is founder of New America Media, a nationwide association of over 700 ethnic media organizations that seeks to promote more inclusive journalism.

**A**LEXANDRA CLOSE GREW up in New York City, considered by native New Yorkers to be the center of the universe. Yet, for Sandy, as she is known, India was always the “Great Destination.”

Watching her dad in his import-export business, the advocate for ethnic media says, made the rest of the world seem “much more interesting” than New York City. “I wanted to see the world. Especially Asia. It was the time of McCarthyism. Anticommunism. Anti-China. However, whatever

everyone else was demonizing, I gravitated toward,” she says.

That led Close, founder of the San Francisco-headquartered New America Media, halfway across the world to India and China.

“As I stood at Dum Dum Airport in Calcutta in the late ‘60s, I was amazed at the scene. Everyone was arguing. Everyone was gesticulating. Everyone had something to say. Everyone had an opinion on everything,” Close says of her visit to India. “It was so liberating considering what was happening in the world at that

time.”

At the time, Close was a journalist on assignment for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and had just arrived from Vietnam. Her travels in India have included visits to Calcutta, Delhi and Bombay.

“India, for me, has always been the Great Destination,” she says. “It’s interesting because India is such a powerfully communal culture, yet it is made up of the most individually eccentric people I’d ever met in the world.”

The trip to India as well as her time in Vietnam, Hong Kong and

even Oakland, Calif., helped shape her mission in life. She has always been on the forefront of giving a voice to those whose voices may not have been heard otherwise.

An interview at her San Francisco office offers a glimpse into Close’s world. The large loft-like office space is just south of Market Street. But she had been there before lofts were trendy. Lots of young people of all ethnicities work at their open-air desks. Close’s desk is just like everyone else’s, she does not have a private office. The only difference is she



RELENTLESS ACTIVIST: Above and below, Close at work to raise funds and influence mainstream media coverage of minorities.

has her colorful pet bird by her desk.

Waiting in the lobby I sat next to an African-American woman who had just arrived in San Francisco. She wanted to become a journalist and had stopped by to meet with Close for some advice. No appointment.

I recognized Close by her shoulder-length white hair, sitting in a conference room filled with people. When she finished her meeting, she approached us apologizing for making us wait. She spent time giving advice to the would-be journalist and then sat down for the interview. I could tell that her day had been non-stop. But I heard that most of her days are that way, and she thrives

on it.

Wearing loose-fitting, bohemian-style clothes that came from India, 66-year-old Close kicked off her sandals in a small conference room and said, "I didn't have time to stop and get tea after the meeting. I've been talking for hours. Would you mind if I had a sip of yours?" I gladly shared my tea. I was happy she felt comfortable asking.

Close's love affair with Asia began much before she ever visited the continent. She went to the University of California at Berkeley to study Chinese, and after graduating in 1964 she moved to Hong Kong. "I was in the center of the universe for international reporting," she says.

She started working for Far Eastern Economic Review. "The paper was like The Economist of Asia," she says. "Independent. Muckraking. Unpredictable." Those characteristics appealed to her.

She returned to America in 1966, a pivotal time for the civil rights movement. It was a prelude to the riots of the '60s. "I was a lover of Oakland," she says. She was embedded in the inner city and it reminded her of her time as a Vietnam War correspondent. "Oakland was like a third-world country within America."

Deciding to do something about what she saw happening around her, she started a community newspaper, The Flatlands.

The goal was to provide a voice for Oakland's inner-city residents.

"If mainstream journalism can be described as parochial today, which I think it can, it was even more parochial in the '60s. As an example, The Oakland Tribune was not able to use the word ghetto. They weren't allowed to cover the inner city. The paper was ashamed of the inner city. And it was an international paper. It didn't cover the Flatlands at all," she says, referring to the part of the city that was the ghetto as compared to the Oakland Hills, where people with money lived.

Close gave a voice to the people of the Flatlands. "Andy Warhol described this need to become visible as 'the awakening.' ▶





AT THE CITY HALL: Above, during Willie Brown's tenure as mayor of San Francisco, Close fought for dedicated space for ethnic media reporters in the City Hall press room. Above right, Close with then-Sen. Hillary Clinton. Right, Close participates in a media seminar.



**“I went to University of California at Berkeley to study Chinese in order to go to Asia.” After graduating in 1964 she moved to Hong Kong. “I was in the center of the universe for international reporting,” Close says.**

◆ ‘the acknowledgement,’ being seen in the public,” she says. “Everyone needed to be visible. To be invisible is to not exist. Having visibility is to be validated. This is such a reality today. Everyone is visible on Facebook and communicating in the public space.”

Close felt that one of her goals was to ensure that the public forum in America reflected the on-the-ground realities. She listed those realities as the huge impact of immigration, the global economy, the birth of the Internet, lifestyle changes such

as the rise of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement, and the rise of the women's movement. “Oddly enough the alternative media of the '60s and '70s brought these issues to the forefront. They are now mainstream issues.”

Richard Rodriguez, a writer and editor at New America Media, has worked with Close for over two decades. “Sandy is always, always looking for ways of understanding the news,” he says. “She has an instinctive resistance to the conventional. If the herd is saying one thing, she tries out possibilities that are different and often challenging to orthodoxy.”

Even as she was fighting for the rights of those in her immediate vicinity, Close kept a connection to Asia. One way was her work as a research assistant at the Center for Chinese Studies at UC Berkeley.

A defining point in Close's championing of ethnic groups

was an afternoon trip to Chinatown. During a strike of major newspapers, everyone around her surprisingly seemed to be reading papers. She saw these were Chinese papers and wondered what was inside them as well as what was inside other ethnic newspapers. Close felt people would gain a wider knowledge of the world if information from ethnic papers were accessible.

“Ethnic media was the stepchild of American journalism,” she says. She felt that although ethnic media was around for 200 years but it wasn't acknowledged. “Ethnic issues did not have a place in mainstream journalism.”

She saw this as an indicator of the failure of mainstream journalism. “If mainstream journalism would have been able to deliver a sense of ethnicity, we might not have needed so many specific ethnic papers. It was a failure of imagination of main-

stream journalism,” she says.

As a result, in 1974 she became the director of Pacific News Service (PNS) to bring minority realities and voices featured in ethnic media into greater prominence in American journalism. “PNS was an alternative medium which brought the issues to the forefront. We exposed the issues that never quite penetrated mainstream media,” Close says.

In 1996, she founded New California Media, now New America Media (NAM) since it outgrew its California-centric roots. “NAM is the country's first and largest national collaboration and advocate of 2,000-plus ethnic news organizations,” Close says. NAM's headquarters are in San Francisco and the group has offices in New York City and Washington, D.C.

New America Media is “dedicated to bringing the voices of the marginalized ethnic minorities, immigrants, young



AWARD-WINNING ADVOCATE: Above, Close at the screening the film, "Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien," which she co-produced. The film about Berkeley poet and journalist O'Brien, won the Academy Award for best short documentary in 1996. Above right, Close O'Brien and the Oscar award. Below right, FCC Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein and Close at the 2003 NCM EXPO & Awards.



New America Media's mission is "bringing the voices of the marginalized ethnic minorities, immigrants, young people, elderly into the national discourse. The communities of the New America will then be better informed ..."

◆ people, elderly into the national discourse. The communities of the New America will then be better informed, better connected to one another, and better able to influence policy-makers."

NAM is also a pioneer in multilingual polling. "We broke the mold on multilingual polling, including the first national poll of immigrant women entitled 'Women Immigrants: Stewards of the 21st Century Family,'" Close says. "The safety net in America is the family. The driving force in

immigrant families is the woman." She likened the difficult role of women to that of Ma Joad, the backbone of the family, in John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" and encouraged people to see the movie.

NAM also helped place an Ethnic Media Desk in San Francisco's City Hall. Just nine years ago, San Francisco had no such media desk. "With a city whose population is one third Asian, can you believe that?" Close asks. She set out to change that situation, and succeeded in the year 2000.

As strong a supporter as she is of ethnic media, Close is just as passionate about youth media. She founded YO! (Youth Outlook), a collaboration of writers and young people, and co-founded The Beat Within, a weekly newsletter of writing and art by incarcerated youth. Online writing workshops are provided in juvenile halls in Northern California.

"When these youth come out

of the system, many of them write for our publications. We give a voice to young people who typically do not have a voice," Close says. She realized that some of the youth culture is a "culture of alones," and wanted to help change that.

Close's humanitarian contribution to the world of media has been recognized the MacArthur Foundation that presented her a "genius grant" for her work in communications.

"She is a woman of great modesty in an enterprise where male inflated egos are the norm," Rodriguez says.

"Years ago, I remember, when she was named as a winner of a MacArthur 'genius' grant, she phoned me in tears, not in delight, but in fear that the distinction might distract her focus and connection with the real world."

Close is supportive in helping others reach success, as well. In 1996, she encouraged Jessica Yu to direct a documentary about

Berkeley poet and journalist Mark O'Brien, who contracted polio at the age of six and spent his life in an iron lung. O'Brien wrote poetry and essays with a pencil held in his teeth. Close and Yu won an Academy Award in 1996 for co-producing the best documentary short film, "Breathing Lessons: The Life and Work of Mark O'Brien."

Close has had a successful relationship for over 40 years with her partner, Franz Schurmann. He is a linguist, author, historian, and was a professor at UC Berkeley for 30 years. They have two sons, Mark and Peter.

With everything that she has accomplished, Close is extremely modest. When requested for an interview, she seemed embarrassed, saying, "I want to do the story, not be the story."

It will be interesting to see what lies ahead for Close. Another trip, maybe, to what has always been for her the Great Destination.