



Winter 2018

# GRIFFIN

**FEATURING PAST STUDENT  
AND MULTI-AWARD WINNING  
ABC JOURNALIST, JASON OM**

Celebrating Diversity



**SALESIAN  
COLLEGE**  
CHADSTONE EST. 1957





# WHEN NEWS BREAKS

**Suzie McErvale**

Head of Development and Marketing

*Multi-award winning ABC journalist and Class of 1998 past student Jason Om understands not only the role of storytelling at the highest level, but also the art of listening and empathy that goes with the skill of a quality journalist.*

*With a directed, unwavering commitment to his cause of informing the public, Jason shares insight into his high school years - a difficult time in his life during which he lost his mother. He speaks candidly about his desire to get to know*

*his culture and the woman "he didn't get the chance to know".*

*In 2018, Jason is one of ten accomplished individuals who ran for the next five-year term on the ABC Board.*

*In an open and honest interview, Jason shares how journalism became his passion, and how his multi-faith, multi-ethnic background contributes to how he understands the world around him and where he is today.*

**It's wonderful to connect with you, Jason. Thank you for your time.**

**From the infancy of your career to today, you have received a variety of prestigious journalism awards which have certainly proved your worth on the broadcasting stage. What attracted you to journalism?**

I think I've always been very curious about the world, and I've always had a thirst for knowledge about why things are the way they are. As a teenager I was always hooked into world events. I would read the newspaper in the morning, watch the news, listen to the morning show on Triple J and keep in touch with what was going on in the world.

One issue that really captured my attention as a teenager was the human rights situation in Burma and the plight of Aung San Suu Kyi. I distinctly remember being at a Salesian Retreat in Daylesford where we were asked, "Who is your hero?" Many of the other boys rattled off sports stars, AFL and soccer players. I put my hand up and said "Aung San Suu Kyi". Some people laughed, and the priest was genuinely surprised at my answer. I was moved by the story and really had a sense of what was going on in Burma.

I've always been interested in world events, but it wasn't until University that I learnt more about the role of journalism and the importance it plays in democracy. The media plays a role in informing the public and keeping the powerful to account. There is a bigger picture to what we do. At its best, journalism is about shedding light on something the public doesn't already know; exposing wrongdoing and revealing injustices that need to be told. For me, I was drawn to journalism because I wanted to know things and to have the opportunity to share my storytelling.

**In a world of high rotating content and 'fake news', good stories don't always get attention. How do you stay true to this core value when the readership statistics don't always support your cause?**

I wouldn't make any judgments about what audiences are consuming in terms of what they are actively engaging with. That is really up to them, but what I will say is that there is a difference between what the public is interested in, what they find interesting, titillating or entertaining and what is in the public interest.

The public interest is about providing the information people have the right to know.

I think that even though it is a challenging environment at the moment (particularly in the digital space, competing with cat videos), people still have a desire for quality journalism.

The ABC's role is to share quality content; that is our purpose and what we are set up to deliver. Our values of fairness and integrity, of being impartial; those values will always be there, and that is our role.

The Cabinet Files, which has been one of our biggest stories of the year, generated more than 800,000 hits. The story revealed how important and sensitive information was let out into the big wide world, exposing the fact that the systems in place were not working to keep the information secret. This proves to me that people still want quality, ground-breaking journalism.

It's not about people not engaging with content, it's about how we can make those stories prominent and how we tell those stories in an engaging fashion. I'm hopeful that



*Photo courtesy of Glenn Chalk*



people are still engaging with these big issues. You look at the United States with the mass shootings, or the 'MeToo' movement. People are really passionate about those political issues. It's not a case of people switching off. In many ways, social media and the internet have really helped some of those movements grow.

**During your career, you have listened to real stories with great impact. Which ones have been the most memorable?**

The most rewarding stories and the most revealing stories are usually from people who do not necessarily want to talk to you, who are not seeking attention or publicity.

When I worked for Lateline, I came across a woman and her daughter who had taken the incredible journey from Syria to escape the Islamic State and Civil War. Escaping war torn Raqqa, Henekal made it to the Lebanese border with her daughter Elena amid a terrible war that was happening around them. Through a chance meeting with an Australian humanitarian worker in Lebanon, they were included in the next Syrian refugee intake to come to



*Henekal and her daughter Elena  
Photo credit: Brant Cumming*

Australia.

Set up with our cameraman in Henekal's front yard in Wollongong, I remember being so moved by her story that I was weeping. She revealed her hardship and extraordinary journey out of Syria. It was incredibly touching. Afterwards she invited us into her house and we had a meal, and we met the rest of the community sharing tea and sweets together. That was an amazing story that really deserved to be told.

Another story I think about over the years was when I was in South Australia during a time when the Aboriginal community there was very mistrusting of the media. I think that was quite fair because of their treatment and the way that the media told their story. At that time, a complex family dispute had spilled over from the Northern Territory to SA. There was a group of Aboriginal people from a particular clan who had fled a violent family dispute and had set up camp in the urban parklands in the central business district (CBD). There was a bit of a media circus going on around the group, but I really wanted to understand what was going on.

Already having built some rapport with the Aboriginal communities there, I had an understanding of how to approach the situation. One of the main people there was an older woman. As a rule in their culture, the women will not speak to a man, particularly an 'outsider', so that was another challenge that I had to overcome. From my previous experience, I had learnt that one of the customs is to sit on the ground next to the person, not necessarily facing the person, when communicating. This allowed me to listen to this woman and

to understand what was going on in the conflict. We talked about how she and others wanted a peaceful resolution.

That experience really touched me, that she would tell me, an 'outsider', about what was going on in her life. Again, she did not have anything to gain. She saw me as a non-Aboriginal person approaching her to come and talk to her and wanting to listen.

From what I have learnt, people just want to be listened to and to be heard. It's these stories that really stand out for me. It's not the stories where people are trying to seek attention or publicity for whatever reason. The interviews that are difficult to get, they are gold.

**The value of empathy is a great point that you make. It is building that emotional intelligence isn't it?**

Absolutely. It's about empathy, understanding where people are coming from and their circumstances. It's trying to get an idea of what makes them tick. If you're able to empathise with your subject, then you're able to connect and draw out more emotion from their personal story.

**In today's competitive environment the need for a varied skillset is as critical as it has ever been. What strategies do you have in place to keep learning?**

The expectation these days for journalists, particularly at the ABC, is that they need to be across different platforms. Journalists have to file for radio and TV, be able to present, take photos and film their own videos. For this generation and the next generation, this expectation will become more intense. Multi-skilling and having these



"We live in a world where more people are talking over each other, and not enough people are genuinely listening to each other."

*Photo courtesy of the ABC*



tools in your kit to do what you need is important. It is also about audience trends - where people are spending their time and what platforms they are moving to access this information.

Short form video is an example of a trend now that has had huge growth. At the ABC, our Facebook videos and news on the Apple platform have had spectacular growth. It is important to monitor where the audience is because it affects how content is created and how the story is told. I also recommend maintaining a presence on social media, whether that be Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram. Being across different platforms allows innovation to happen, which is critical in today's fast changing environment.

In 2017 I was part of a project under the ABC's \$50 million content fund. As part of that project, we were tasked with creating different content from what we already had. It was an exciting project to work on, because we had creative freedom to develop something that was not business as usual. We looked at delivering informative content in practical ways in everyday life, focusing on meaningful content and shareability. It's a mushroom effect, where you have one really good piece of content and it spreads on the merit of the idea, reaching hundreds of thousands of people.

#### **How have you adjusted to the pressure of live broadcasting?**

I love the buzz of being on air. There is no other job quite like it. I really love being in the moment, as part of events. Live broadcasting is unpredictable. There's nothing quite like seeing the



story develop and unfold on the day. It is a demanding role and it does require a lot of preparation, but there is only so much preparation you can do, particularly when news breaks. Personally, I always like to be across as much information as possible. It's also important that you be prepared for the long haul. A good example of this was the other day when we had rolling coverage of the Syria airstrikes, and our presenters were stuck in the studio for over six hours, with only a few breaks when they would come in and out. Another example was recently on Christmas Day when I presented nearly ten bulletins.

Taking time out is important in your personal life, whether that be heading out with friends, going to the beach, bushwalking, doing yoga or playing video games. Being able to find an outlet is important to keep the balance.

#### **What advice do you have for today's students, keen to succeed in journalism?**

The main quality you need to have is

persistence, because people are not necessarily going to tell their story to you straight away. Some journalists spend months and months on one report just to break the story, so this is crucial. People are not always going to hand to you opportunities on a plate, so you really need to keep at it.

Skepticism is a valuable quality, because there is a lot of rubbish in the world. A good journalist needs to be rigorous about the facts to interrogate what people are telling you.

Currently, a big topic is calling things out. Good examples of this are the 'Me Too' movement and the 'Tracey Spicer Movement'. Tracey is really taking up a cause and calling out things that are wrong. Calling things out is what journalists should do. It's about telling the facts as they are, to allow people in powerful positions to answer those facts.

Empathy is crucial if students want to effectively relate to and draw out people's stories. This is something I



have learnt the value of over the years. It's not something I thought about as a budding journalist. We live in a world where more people are talking over each other, and not enough people are genuinely listening to each other.

On a more practical level, I would suggest reading widely, including stories from Australia and globally. After all, we are in a global market.

Be informed about arguments and opinions that you don't necessarily agree with. Public debate is generally quite polarised. Look at Australia and around the world; everything is quite black and white. It's important to consider a variety of different views, not just one side.

I also think that there are fantastic opportunities for students on social media platforms. Students don't need to wait for established media outlets to employ them or let them tell a story; they can do that right now.

Learn to film and take photos on smart phones, because that's how many people are now telling their stories. Find journalists or writers who inspire you, look at their work and aspire to what those people are doing. Set goals for yourself and identify the next practical steps to achieving them, and start writing.

Whatever the vocation, you really just have to go for it and not be afraid. You can't talk yourself out of what you want to do. Do something you really love, what you are passionate about. There are so many opportunities for young people today. Set goals, and be absolutely single minded about achieving those goals and it will work out.

**What were the reasons behind your 'Everyone has a stake in the ABC' campaign focus?**

It was a tough field, running for the 2018 ABC Board. There were ten candidates, so I'm under no illusions about how much competition there has been. My thought process was, "I'm still young and still have a lot to contribute, and I genuinely care about the ABC". That's why I gave it a go.

The latest ABC staff engagement survey showed that staff didn't feel valued by the organisation. To me that was quite concerning, because the ABC has an important role. It's publicly funded and should reflect the people who pay for it. It has values that are worth protecting; fairness and integrity. Trust is an intangible value, and once you lose that, it's really hard to get it back. Broadly speaking, trust is being trampled in the public sphere. Look at federal politics, institutions, big corporations. Trust is being eroded, and I think trust is something you need in a democracy. The idea around the 'Everyone has a stake in the ABC' campaign is my response to the idea that if people feel excluded in the organisation, I want to respond to that thought by claiming that we all have a stake in the ABC. I was also playing on the slogan 'Yours'. When we say that the ABC is 'yours', it partly implies that the ABC belongs to one person. In actual fact, it is everyone's, because it is publicly funded by every Australian.

**How has your multi-faith and multi-ethnic culture contributed to who you are today?**

My father is from Cambodia and he is Buddhist. My mother was from Malaysia, with a Portuguese Eurasian background, and she was Catholic. On my mother's side I have cousins who are also Vietnamese and Goan because

**"Set goals, and be absolutely single minded about achieving those goals and it will work out."**

the aunties on my mother's side married outside of their racial group. I have a really diverse and complex family structure.

My half-sister, from my mother's first marriage, is Malaysian and Muslim. For many people, it's hard to fathom, but for me it's completely mundane and normal that we have a variety of different people in the same family.

What this has given me is the ability to accept people who are from different backgrounds. When I was younger, I would push my culture away, because it was a pressure in my life. A good example of this would be when my Dad was trying to encourage me to learn Khmer. I would push it away because Australia was my culture and I wanted to fit in and be accepted. There was a period of time that I drifted away, but now I'm back. I'm now more proud of that heritage and of who I am. As a general comment, I think that the acceptance of people's cultural background is becoming easier in Australia. I still think there is racism, but I think it's changing, and it will change for this generation and the next. I'm more in touch with my heritage than I have ever been, and I'm happy to be.



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**"I have a really diverse and complex family structure."**

**It's great that you have been able to come to a place of acceptance with your culture.**

**You mention your Mum. I know it was some time ago that you lost her, but I am very sorry for your loss.**

On a personal level, high school was actually for me a really difficult period. My mum died very suddenly when I was in Year 7. It was just me and my dad who had to pull through that. Growing up, you're entering teenhood and all the angst that goes with it. But I was able to find my own resilience to get through.

My half-sister was from my mother's previous marriage. We had never actually met until I was in my 20s. We are in contact now, and I was always aware of her, because my mother used to write to her, but we never met until much later in life. I have a memoir that I have been writing. The story shares how my mother, who left Malaysia, left a daughter there and really struggled with dealing with coming to Australia, meeting my Dad. It's a heartbreaking, but a very powerful story.

**No doubt, this was a therapeutic process for you (?).**

Yes, it came about because I entered a writing competition called the Vogel Prize in 2015. I wrote over the course of

six months, and through that process I found letters that my mother had been writing to my sister over the years. I travelled to Malaysia and caught up with my sister. It was an extremely emotional experience, but good to fill in the blanks. It allowed me to get to know my mum. I lost her at such a young age (12 years), and that meant I didn't really know her as a person. It was a way of getting to know the whole backstory of how my mum came to Australia, and how she was forced to leave her daughter behind in Malaysia.

**Who were the people who had the biggest influence in allowing you to reach your potential during your College years?**

On a personal level, I would single out a couple of teachers, Mr Constantine and Miss Barcellona. Those two have such a great sense of humour. We could talk about anything. They were really there to listen. I had Mr Constantine for Social Studies and Miss Barcellona for Italian. They were always good value in terms of chatting about teenage issues. In terms of turning points, Ms Apostolopoulos and Mr Reimers played a pivotal role in helping myself, my best mate Jim and a few others to revive the student newspaper, The Griffin, this magazine, right?

With the help of Ms Lawton, we also set up a Griffin contributions box in the Library, which helped students to

contribute stories. Without those people and the experience that the Griffin gave me at that time, I wouldn't have been able to get into RMIT, because I wouldn't have had anything to talk about when I went for the interview.

**Who are the mentors in your life who have helped shape your path and how have they added value?**

I have been very lucky because there have been a number of significant people during certain turning points during my life who have been quite crucial. If I look back, one of my lecturers, Doug Weller, was quite instrumental during my university years. Brian Thomson, who is a journalist at SBS, Simon Royal, at the ABC in South Australia who is now a good friend of mine, and the Team at Lateline also provided a very supportive environment.

You really need to find these senior people who will be able to give you advice, whether it be career, personal or life lessons that you want to learn. I appreciate that not everyone has had such significant mentors, and that I have been very fortunate to meet these people. When you find them, it's crucial to lean on them whenever you need help.

**Thank you, Jason - it's been an absolute pleasure.**