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Making a name for herself

In a business where longevity is a difficult assignment for women, Demetria Kalodimos '81 has been a fixture on Nashville's evening news for nearly 20 years.

**By Kent Hannon
Photos by Neil Brake**

When she was just getting started in the business, Demetria Kalodimos was told that if she wanted to be a success in television she needed to change her name. Never mind that her co-anchor at WICD-TV in Champaign was Bruce Jakubowski or that the sports guy was Mark Schanowski. Apparently, their names were fine, but the news director had a problem with Kalodimos, which means “good person” in Greek.



“I was an on-air reporter at WICD while I was getting my master’s in journalism at the University of Illinois,” Kalodimos recalls, “and when I got promoted to weekend anchor, the news director told me I needed a new name. He said, ‘Change it quick . . . I’ll give you a day.’”

Overnight, Demetria Kalodimos, whose name has a nice ring to it when pronounced correctly — Duh-MEE-tree-uh . . . Kal-uh-DEE-moce — became Demetria Kaye.

“It was terrible living with an alias . . . my parents hated it,” says Kalodimos, who has just ordered a salad at a popular lunchtime eatery in Nashville. Seated at the next table is Vince Gill, one of many country music stars she has interviewed during her almost 20-year stint as an anchor, reporter, and senior editor at Music City’s NBC affiliate, WSMV-TV.

Winner of three Peabody Awards, the broadcast industry’s equivalent of the Pulitzer, WSMV is the top-rated station in the country’s 30th-largest TV market. And Demetria Kalodimos '81, who got hooked on electronic journalism at Illinois Wesleyan’s campus radio station, co-anchors all three of the station’s principal newscasts, at 5, 6, and 10 p.m.

Chosen in a nationwide search to share the desk with popular anchor Dan Miller, Kalodimos has done much more than interview Nashville’s country music icons. She’s traveled to Eastern Europe to report on the plight of Romanian orphans. In the former Yugoslavia, she interviewed people who swore they’d seen the Virgin Mary. And in 1989, long before “60 Minutes” aired its first segment on the AIDS epidemic among hemophiliacs, her investigative report, “A Preventable Plague,” warned viewers of an impending health disaster.

“I was one of the first broadcasters in the country to report widely on AIDS and on threats to the nation’s blood supply,” says Kalodimos, who has won 14 regional Emmy awards, a pair of

National Headliner Awards, the Investigative Reporters and Editors National Award, and a national citation from American Women in Radio and Television. In 1997, she was Tennessee's Associated Press Broadcaster of the Year.

And with the exception of the 18 months she spent in Champaign using an alias, Kalodimos has accomplished all that with the same last name that her grandfather inscribed on the rolls at Ellis Island.

* * *

Preparing for three newscasts in one night is a surprisingly solitary activity, particularly given the tenor of the latest news, which on this day in late March includes the fact that a missing soldier from the 101st Airborne at nearby Fort Campbell has been confirmed dead in Iraq — the first area casualty in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

“Basically, preparation involves me sitting at a computer, writing and editing my copy,” says Kalodimos, “though there is a two o’clock editorial meeting to discuss what we’re going to cover.”

The war and continuing conflicts in Iraq have sparked considerable debate among producers, anchors, and reporters as to what WSMV’s role should be in regard to this story: national news organization concentrating on the big picture or local news organization focusing on local angles and connections to the big picture.

“We certainly have a large viewership of military people and people with loved ones deployed,” says Kalodimos, “but there’s no way we can be as timely and as correct as the networks as far as knowing what’s going on. We do have a reporter embedded over there, but we’re half a world away. In my opinion, we should err on the local side.”

It’s those kinds of instincts, says co-anchor Dan Miller, that caught the station’s attention when she came in the door, fresh from her master’s studies, prepared to do the nightly news in a big-city market.



“Circumstances caused her to serve as a weekend anchor for the first six months,” says Miller, “but it was very clear the clock was ticking and that, in Demetria, we had something that is extremely rare in television: a first-rate reporter and a first-rate anchor. And, we were thrilled to have her use the name Kalodimos because once that registers with people, they will never forget it!”

* * *

Growing up in the Chicago suburb of Morton Grove, Kalodimos was something of a bookworm. She read the newspaper aloud to her parents and watched legendary Chicago broadcaster Fahey Flynn do the evening news. She began playing the flute in the third grade and became

extremely good at it, thanks to a daily routine of setting her mother's oven timer for 30 minutes and religiously practicing her scales and arpeggios until the timer went off.

"I'm a type A-plus!" she admits, making a face. "I wanted to be better at it than anyone else."

That drive continued through her adolescent years. She went on to become drum major of her high school band, spent two years at North Park College, and then transferred to Illinois Wesleyan, which she considered a "little Ivy League school in the middle of the prairie."

Kalodimos came to campus as a music major, and one of her classmates in a music theory class was future opera star Dawn Upshaw '82, who would go on to win multiple Grammy Awards. But true to IWU's mission statement, Kalodimos wanted to do more with her life than just music.

"When I became a university trustee in 2002 and did some research on the mission statement," she says, "I was reminded that Illinois Wesleyan's goal is to develop versatile students who want to excel at more than one thing."

That certainly describes Kalodimos, an avid writer and high school thespian who thought she might end up writing about music, film, and theater.

"I loved Robert Donaldson's music history class at [Illinois] Wesleyan," Kalodimos recalls, "because he really gave us the opportunity to write. I remember putting a lot into a paper I did on Mozart and Don Giovanni."

In the end, broadcast journalism won out among her competing interests — thanks to IWU's campus radio station, WESN.

"It was a Wednesday night and if I thought about it hard enough I could probably even come up with the date," says Kalodimos, who remembers her first moments at WESN as career- and life-altering. "The station didn't have a lot of power — you might be able to get it if you had 700 coat hangers connected to the top of your stereo in the dorm — but I loved music and I went to the organizational meeting thinking I was going to be a deejay."

And for a time she did spin records — until the opportunity arose to do the station's lone talk radio show.

"We tried to do this cutting-edge, call-in thing," says Kalodimos, "only there weren't a lot of people calling in. So I'd set things up ahead of time for my roommate to call in. We thought we were very avant-garde and underground. We called our show . . . 'The Bitch Line.' In the pre-'shock radio' days of the late 1970s, that was pretty out there — and I think we were quickly asked to tone down the title of our show, or at least substitute asterisks and exclamations points for some of the letters."

While her classmates were spending their January Short Term in Europe, Kalodimos trudged three blocks through ice and snow to read the news at a local AM radio station in Bloomington.

“I don’t even remember the call letters,” says Kalodimos, “but the program director provided a lightbulb moment for me by teaching me that broadcast copy does not sound like great literature. It’s short and punchy with active, visual verbs . . . You don’t grab the thesaurus and look for every obscure word you think you want to use.”

That training served her well when she went to work for WICD in Champaign.

“There’s real, live, incredible news in small towns and college towns,” says Kalodimos, whose tenure in Champaign saw her cover bizarre murder cases, a scandal involving a University of Illinois official, migrant worker issues, and the early days of thermal transfer.

“Thermal transfer, which is about burning garbage to generate electricity, was a hot, new issue in Urbana,” says Kalodimos. “Fast-forward 20 years later, and here in Nashville we’re trying to get rid of our thermal transfer operation, which puts me on two ends — the birth and the death — of a municipal technology.”

* * *

In February 1984, Kalodimos’ post-master’s routine involved answering ads in *Broadcasting Magazine*, which she subscribed to even though it cost her roughly half her weekly paycheck. She mailed tapes of her reporting and anchor work to TV stations all over the country, and oftentimes the rejection letters would come back addressed to “Mr. Kalodimos,” meaning they hadn’t even played her tapes. But WSMV said they were interested, and that was music to her ears because in those days WSMV had a reputation for long-form investigative journalism — which is her passion, as evidenced by the fact that “A Preventable Plague” ran an almost unheard-of nine minutes.

“We called them ‘segmented documentaries,’” says Kalodimos, who was tipped off about the AIDS epidemic by a woman who ran a mail-order business devoted to getting clotting agents to hemophilia victims more quickly and more cost effectively.

Another investigative piece focused on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where researchers have a strange way of studying the decomposition of dead bodies.

“Their research is aimed at training law enforcement officials and medical examiners, but their lab is weird . . . it’s outside,” says Kalodimos. “To simulate crime scenes, they throw bodies in ponds, they leave them in the woods, they burn them in cars.” Her report questioned where the bodies came from and whether consent from family members was always given.



Kalodimos puts on her game face for an evening broadcast. Above her mirror sit her 14 Emmys.

“As you might guess,” Kalodimos says, “we discovered John Does and, in some cases, no consent forms from families.”

Titled “Last Rights,” the 1995 series ran for five nights, won an Investigative Reporters and Editors National Award, and led to changes in state law, though the controversial research continues to this day.

With current market research indicating that viewers have shorter attention spans — something Kalodimos disputes — local stations seldom run in-depth news features anymore.

“Long-form journalism has become the property of PBS and of news magazine shows like ‘Dateline,’ whose popularity flies in the face of viewers having short attention spans,” says Kalodimos. “I still believe there’s an appetite for in-depth pieces in local news, and I hope we can eventually initiate a news magazine-type program here at WSMV.”

In the meantime, Kalodimos has created her own independent documentary company to provide an outlet for her “Dateline” side.

“Some people do cross-stitch, I do documentaries,” says Kalodimos, whose Genuine Human Productions focuses on true stories about real people ([click here to read more](#)). “I’m digging into underground characters like an obscure radio evangelist named Prophet Omega and a footstomper named George Mitchell.”

* * *

The two o’clock news meeting begins with a discussion of whether the staff can confirm what AP is reporting — that, in fact, two U.S. military personnel have been killed in Iraq. Talk then shifts to the controversy surrounding war correspondents Geraldo Rivera and Peter Arnett. Rivera has been thrown out of Iraq for drawing a map of U.S. military whereabouts in the sand; Arnett, a member of the famed CNN “Baghdad Boys,” has been fired for going on Baghdad TV and saying that the Iraqis are winning the war. One member of the news team suggests that a reporter be sent to a coffee shop to sample public opinion on Rivera and Arnett, but Kalodimos has a better idea.

“This is more than a man-on-the-street debate,” she says. “We’d better call the Freedom Forum for a reaction.”

Later, having breezed through the five and six o’clock casts as though it were a slow news day, Kalodimos reflects on the future — hers and the station’s.

“Both the five and six o’clock shows are perennial No. 1s in their time slots, and we’ve got strong lead-in shows — Dr. Phil and Oprah — to keep them there,” she says. “But just lately, the 10 o’clock show has slipped to No. 2. We need to do better there.”

Currently in the final year of a lucrative four-year contract, Kalodimos says she is confident her agent in Chicago will hammer out a new deal.

“I figure I’ve got at least 10 more good years in this business, maybe more,” she says. “It’s a little bit tougher road for women, but it’s getting better. I think everyone is conscious of the fact that there are too few women in decision-making positions. And we still don’t have a woman anchoring a network evening newscast, but that will happen.”



The fact that it’s perhaps a little late in the game for it to happen to her is of little or no consequence to Kalodimos for several reasons. Unlucky in matrimony once, she’s now happily involved with Nashville singer-songwriter Verlon Thompson, whose tunes have been recorded by the likes of Randy Travis and Trisha Yearwood. She has high hopes for Genuine Human Productions. And when a big local story hits — like a recent tornado that struck Jackson, Tenn. — she gets to flex her reporter’s muscles.

“I had to drive three hours through the storm to meet a live-feed truck,” she says. “If the story is big enough, I get un-anchored from the desk.”

There’s even a thought in the back of Kalodimos’ head that she might one day go to work for PBS, doing the kind of long-form journalism that attracted her to WSMV in the first place.

And, as always, she’s determined to succeed at whatever she sets out to accomplish. Take walking, for example — or rather race walking. In 1994, she entered the Detroit Marathon’s race walking division and, never having competed in an event that big before, went out and finished first in the 26.2-mile ordeal.

“I don’t know if I’ll do that again!” she says. “But Verlon and I take a major walking trip every year. One year, it’s Spain. Another year, it’s British Columbia. We cover maybe 12 miles a day and the pickups are pre-arranged as part of a walking tour. This year, it’s a llama pack trip to Wyoming’s Wind River Range. There’ll be lots of walking and climbing, but the llamas carry the gear!”

It’s great to get away from the news of the day, says Kalodimos, but you don’t want to get so far away that they forget your name.

Kent Hannon is the co-author of Damn Good Dogs! (Hill Street Press, 2002). He lives in Athens, Ga., and is editor of Georgia Magazine.