

A bullet and an orchid

Wendy Bacon, a winner of the Walkley Award, exposed corrupt activities by some New South Wales police officers and also foreigners implicated in the Fiji coups. Now an academic, Associate Professor Bacon assisted University of PNG's new investigative journalism course.



By SOPHIE KUASI

ON VALENTINE'S DAY one year a bullet was sent to Wendy Bacon in a box with an orchid, saying: 'Have a nice day but avoid the barber's shop.' Barber's shop? At the time, Ms Bacon lived near a barber's shop. And given the gory barber's shop scenes in the *Godfather* movies, you can imagine the rest. This and many other threats over the phone and through letters have made Ms Bacon not only famous, but a strong, outspoken and persistent investigative journalist.

Ms Bacon, a winner of Australia's prestigious Walkley Award, is renowned for exposing corrupt activities by the New South Wales police and also exposing foreigners implicated in the 1987 Fiji military coups. The coups attracted journalists from all over the world.

'One of the things I remember was that this event was like a race where I was swimming against the tide of media opinion,' Ms Bacon says. The second coup happened just three days after they arrived in Suva. While most journalists in Fiji were covering the day to day events of the coup and chasing exclusive interviews with coup leader Lieutenant-Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, Ms Bacon and her SBS television crew were digging for the story behind the story. As a result, she and her team were arrested and held for three hours when filming at Empire gold mine. Much of their filming was done under cover.

Their 50-minute documentary, 'Fiji', was shown on SBS *Dateline*, and again three days later on ABC *Four Corners*. This controversial program showed how much of the other news media had failed to expose the 'truth' about the coups. But it also led to legal actions against her and harassment.

'One thing I learnt from the Fiji coups which is most important — protect your sources no matter what,' Ms Bacon says.

Back home in Australia, most of the cases Ms Bacon has worked on have involved bribery, corruption, drug trafficking, prostitution and money-laundering. One of the major cases cracked by Ms Bacon was corruption in the legal system in New South Wales. She was then charged with contempt of Parliament. Another case involved NSW detective Roger Rogerson who was suspected of being involved in killings and drug trafficking. Partly through Ms Bacon's published articles, he was dismissed from the police force and imprisoned.

At the age of 48, Ms Bacon is an associate professor and director of the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology in Sydney. Ms Bacon has been in Port Moresby for the past two weeks as a consultant for the South Pacific Centre for Communication and Information's new Certificate of Investigative Journalism course. She has been running workshops and giving seminars on investigative journalism, ethics and research techniques. Her visit has been funded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and she has been building links between journalists at the University of Technology and University of PNG.

Journalistic 'safe haven'

The aim of her centre is to be a 'safe haven' for publishing investigative, in-depth and independent journalism. The centre also teaches students to improve news coverage, holds seminars and undertakes projects such as writing about issues affecting the people and the country. Two projects currently being worked on are:

❑ **ABORIGINAL DEATHS in custody.** Although deaths are increasing and more Aboriginal people are going to prison, the media are not paying enough attention to this issue.

❑ **ABORIGINAL WELFARE.**

The centre also produces magazines such as *Reportage*, a quarterly about media issues, and *Snoop*, a biennial investigative journalism publication. Both magazines publish sensitive issues about multicultural affairs and dealing with Aborigines. The centre is one of the top journalism schools among 13 in Australia. This year it won four out of six awards presented by the Journalism Education Association — two for the best feature story, one for the best news story and shared another for the best student journalist publication.

Despite being a working mother, Ms Bacon likes to find time to spend with her children, Emma, 6; and Luke, 5. She lives with her partner Chris Nash and their children in the cosmopolitan inner Sydney suburb of Newtown. Her partner is also an associate professor at the University of Technology.

Ms Bacon started her career as a journalist in the 1970s. She started off as a student editor. She also became a lawyer by profession after gaining a law degree while pursuing a career as a freelance writer. She worked at Channel 9 in Sydney where she started working on corruption cases in New South Wales for *60 Minutes* and the *Sunday* program. A wide variety of jobs have helped Ms Bacon develop a more confident, investigative and outspoken character.



Wendy Bacon ... outspoken.

One of the most important thing Ms Bacon says about the Pacific is that there is little coverage in countries such as Australia. For example, the upheaval in the past few weeks over the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Papua New Guinea.

‘Journalists should work together to support each other because their role is to ask questions that the ordinary people cannot ask,’ she says.

Papua New Guinea’s constitution declares freedom of expression. However, last month’s Government ban on Radio Kalang’s talkback program on the provincial reforms was an ‘illegal’ act, according to Ms Bacon. Even intellectuals such as Sir Paulias Matane and Professor John Nonggorr have been vocal but no action was taken against the Government.

Ms Bacon describes the ban as a ‘warning sign’. The public suffers by being deprived of their freedom of expression. She says: ‘Journalists need to ask more questions because if the Government gets away with the action to may be encouraged to try it again and this will lead to more censorship.’”

□ *Sophie Kuasi is a first-year Diploma in Media Studies student at the University on PNG. This article is reprinted from Uni Tavor, 4 August 1995.*