

Awards Luncheon Honors the Best and Brightest in Texas Journalism

Hurricane Harvey hit the Texas coast with a vengeance in 2017, killing more than 100 people, displacing tens of thousands and wreaking billions of dollars in damage. For journalists it was a big story – but one with enormous obstacles for those who sought to tell the story.

Four journalists who covered the devastation gave an inside account how they reported on the storm at the Mike Quinn Awards Luncheon, which honored the 15 Headliners Foundation’s 2018-19 scholarship recipients. For the winners, families and faculty representatives, it was an opportunity to hear first hand how reporters and editors tackled one of the toughest stories in Texas history.

“Looking back at that event, it as a pretty surreal thing,” said Dan Parker, news editor of the *Port Aransas Jetty*, who saw his hometown wracked by destructive winds and rain.

Dianna Hunt, who oversees the *Houston Chronicle’s* newsroom as metro editor, had been through hurricanes before. But Harvey was a different kind of beast, the worst she’d ever seen.

“We had all these crazy rains, unbelievable rains and then came the tornado, then dams and the levees were going to break. When the chemical plants started exploding, that was the moment I looked around and thought, ‘Are we going to live through this or not?’” she told a rapt audience of students, journalism contest winners and Headliners Club members. “We had people everywhere and they just did their job from where they were.”

For the panelists, their job was both to inform the general public in real time and to serve as a point of contact for panicked victims who scrambled onto rooftops and fled swirling flood waters as the hurricane battered Houston and the Gulf Coast.

Sally Ramirez, news director at KHOU in Houston, found herself in a makeshift newsroom with water rising and the storm beating down. The 911 phone system was overloaded and people were calling the TV station. Between deploying her news team, she was getting pleas for help.

“I had the cell phone number of our police chief,” she said. “I said you’ve got to help these people. We gave them pregnant women who were trying to get to the hospital. He’d say, give me the address, give me the name, and he’d sent out crews to help. We were their only life line.”

David Phillip, a senior photojournalist with the Associated Press, was one of the photographers who provided the rest of Texas and the nation remarkable pictures of Houston under water.

At the luncheon, the Foundation presented scholarships totaling \$72,000 to students from colleges and universities across the state. The scholarships range from \$750 to \$6000 for undergraduates who have demonstrated outstanding potential in the field of journalism. In addition to honoring the future journalists, foundation board members John Lumpkin and Fred Zipp presented the Showcase Awards for Enterprise and Innovation in Journalism, as well as the Charles E. Green awards honoring Texas professionals who produced the year's very best news reporting, photography and commentary.

At a time when the public increasingly wants accurate, balanced and in-depth reporting, foundation board chair Mark Morrison said the mission of the Headliners Foundation is to promote excellence through awards and academic scholarships. Morrison explained, "We view these as direct investments to encourage high-quality journalism."

-- Wayne Slater