

Channel 8 investigative reporter Mark Douglas on his career and the future

By: Carmel Delshad

TAMPA-- At first glance, Mark Douglas might not seem intimidating. With an easily-triggered smile and piercing blue eyes, Douglas is the kind of guy that smiles at you in the elevator, sends a friendly wave from across the room, or chats with you animatedly using playful metaphors.

Douglas is also the kind of guy who exposes consumer fraud and catalyzes judicial reform in Florida.

As WFLA-TV Channel 8's investigative reporter for the Pinellas County Bureau, Douglas has made a career in bringing down the bad guys, one story at a time.

"What I do is investigative work. And I think I'm fairly successful at it. There are a few people in prison who would probably agree with that, not that they are necessarily fans," said Douglas.

Douglas' work has sparked reforms within the state. One of those reforms was a June 2008 law pushed by Sen. Mike Fasano was approved by Gov. Charlie Crist. It made nude images of children illegal, "regardless if there was sexual activity involved" said Douglas.

Douglas exposed the web site, called True Teen Babes, and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement found Florida laws concerning the sexual exploitation of children subpar, according to the Tampa Tribune.

News Channel 8 anchor Gayle Sierens has worked with Douglas since he came to Channel 8 in 1995.

"What I love and respect about Mark is first of all, he's a great journalist. As an investigative reporter, he is so thorough, and very bright. He's never afraid to confront the 'bad guys' to get the real information for the viewers," she said.

Douglas learned the tools of the trade during his time at Florida State University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in Mass Communications, and at the University of Missouri School of Journalism where he received his master's degree.

"I went to the University of Missouri, I sought out that particular school because it was much more hands on than many other journalism schools at the time. It had a working television station, newspaper, and it was an environment where I could actually learn and work in the profession at the same time," he said.

From there, Douglas spent numerous years in the radio and television worlds. He has been working as an investigative reporter for Channel 8 for 8 years. A particular case piqued Douglas' interest in the investigative side of journalism at the onset of his career.

"Early on, when I did one of my first investigative projects, I realized that a man who may be truly innocent was almost executed by the state of Florida and he was going to be retried. When I realized the justice system wasn't working the way I had grown up thinking it worked in which the guilty were punished and the innocent went free, that was a turning point in my life. I realized that I was on that razor's edge in determining one or the other. If I had not interceded, a tremendous injustice might have happened twice," said Douglas.

Vickie Chachere recalls working alongside Douglas during her days at the Tampa Tribune as an editorial writer.

"They don't make 'em like Mark anymore," Chachere said.

Dave Kraut, a photojournalist who has been on assignments with Douglas, calls him a “model for people in journalism. He’s a photographer’s best friend. He will write very vivid descriptions of your photography, and I admire that.”

Another anchor, Yolanda Fernandez, has worked with Douglas for 13 years in the Pinellas Bureau of News Channel 8.

“Mark is very thorough. He does his reports, and many of his reports involve a lot of digging. He leaves no stone unturned, and I think that is very important in this line of work,” said Fernandez.

Douglas has very concrete ideas of what makes a journalist excel in his or her work.

“A good journalist, first of all, must be curious. You have to be aware and engaged in what’s going on around you. You have to have a sense of duty and obligation to the public,” Douglas said.

This obligation to the public has garnered Douglas critical acclaim. In 2008, he won two MegAwards for his print coverage about St. Petersburg Raytheon plant. Toxins from the plant spread underground, from schools to homes to playgrounds. In March 2009, a bill passed that would require those living within 1,000 feet of a contaminated area be notified of the contamination by or on their property.

Douglas also won the Society of Professional Journalists Regional Green Eyeshade awards in 2003 and 2004. He also won the Florida Associated Press’ first place spot for Continuing Coverage in 2002 for his piece “Troubled Bridges” about the Sunshine Skyway Bridge and the safety concerns surrounding the then-14-year-old bridge.

His success continues off the television screen and into the world of print journalism.

“This company gives out awards for the best print story of the month, company-wide. I was so proud to win last year, twice in a row. I’ve always felt a little bit deficient in my skills as a journalist because I was always a TV guy and we are always looked down upon by the print people,” Douglas said.

News Channel 8 has been a partner with the Tampa Tribune for about eight years, according to Douglas, when Media General made the decision to enter the world of media convergence. Because of this transition, Douglas has had airtime on WFLA-TV and has produced over one hundred byline stories in the Tampa Tribune, ten of which landed on the front page.

“When you do investigations, you accumulate a vast amount of information and put it into a story that is only a couple of minutes long. Naturally, there is a lot more that you would like to say and print gives you the ability to do that,” Douglas said.

His ability to switch between print and television journalism has given him attention from his colleagues.

“Mark is a great reporter, it doesn’t matter which medium he is in,” Chachere said.

His success sometimes occurs at the downfall of criminals, which has made Douglas some enemies throughout his career.

“Every now and then we have to be careful who we open the door to at the bureau. We have security guards posted because he will expose someone and there is always a concern that that person will go after Mark. It’s just the nature of the kind of work he does,” Fernandez said.

Douglas has also parlayed his dedication to journalism into a teaching career at the University of Tampa as an adjunct professor.

Chris Wagar, a former intern at Channel 8, describes Douglas as a very hands-on intern director.

“He is an ideal mentor, leader, and friend, anything you could ask for. I don’t think college students or a person in general could find a better person to guide them through their lives. He is a second father to me now,” Wagar said.

Douglas considers himself a strong family man. There is indeed a life outside chasing the bad guys.

“My hobbies are basically anything to do with my family. We ride bikes, go boating, kayaking, we travel, and my kids are involved in sports,” Douglas said.

Dean Davy’s children go to school with Douglas’ and the two have been friends for about six years. Davy admits to feeling intimidated when he first met Douglas, but that soon melted away after a few conversations.

“I knew Mark from the news before I knew him personally. I was kind of standoffish because he was a personality, he was the guy to be. I was surprised that he was so approachable,” Davy said.

Pastor Joe Glymph has known Douglas since 1999, where he attends the Prince of Peace Lutheran Church.

“[Mark] has come up with some unique ideas that he thinks would be helpful for our youth, or youth-parent partnership efforts,” said Glymph. “He is very much a part of the life of this congregation. He has served as a mentor to middle school kids, went on retreats with our younger ones. He is the “go-to” guy of our congregation. He is not one that just goes home and vegetates.”

Though successful in his career, Douglas is realistic about his job security and the converging media world.

“I think anybody who is not worried about losing their job is not living in reality. This is a glamour profession. I’m not going to be walking down the runway modeling men’s underwear anymore, used to be a good buck making that,” said Douglas with a smirk.

His coworkers believe that he is one of the few reporters that have staying power in this economy.

“There’s always room for a good reporter,” said Fernandez.

“I always try to learn new things,” Douglas said. “I hone my skills, and with this whole transition into print, I’ve embraced it wholeheartedly. That is how I protect myself from being the guy they look at and say, ‘Do we really need him around?’”

Friend Davy has a suggestion for Douglas, should he find himself unemployed.

“He does a mean Mick Jagger impersonation,” he said.