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Bijal Trivedi

OC '92 Translating Science Panelist



By Tara Santora

Bijal Trivedi is a freelance science writer who focuses on medical research, biology, and biotechnology. She graduated from Oberlin College in '92 with a Biochemistry major before working as a lab technician at the Whitehead Institute of MIT for two years. Following this, Bijal attended UCLA in pursuit of a PhD in Drosophila genetics. However, after reading Gina Kolata's article in The New York Times about the cloning of Dolly the sheep, Bijal decided to finish with a Master's degree in genetics, then switch her focus by earning a Master's in Science Journalism at NYU.

At The Synapse we publish two issues of our magazine per semester, but you cover articles over a period of months or years. What is that like?

Well, I started doing daily news stories and evolved into doing longform journalism. Originally when I was working for, say, the National Geographic News Service, I would either write a story a day or every couple of days. They were about 750 words, and you could complete all the reporting in a day or so. But with longform, you do get to delve. I started out obsessed with covering the science and thinking that the people angle was very flimsy and whumpy. Since then I have evolved, and longform has with me. I include a lot more of the human angle in stories now.

Could you give an example of that?

I'm working on a book about cystic fibrosis. Ten years ago I would have focused on the

science: the biology of the disease and the drug development. But really what's interesting and what led me to do a book was meeting a family whose son died from cystic fibrosis and following their journey and their mission to cure this disease. Everything they've done to fight this disease and to encourage research—that's what was really inspiring. While the science is fascinating the genetics is amazing, it's really the human story that ties all those disparate elements together.

Can you tell me more about your book?

I wrote a story for Discover magazine about the development of Kalydeco. Kalydeco is a drug for cystic fibrosis, but only for cystic fibrosis patients that have one particular mutation. It was the beginning of personalized medicine. Learning about how the drugs were developed—the people behind it, the foundations behind it—I discovered that the story was so much bigger than this ten-page article. But I quickly realized that each of these characters, each of these personalities had their own story. I've never felt like that before. I stayed up for three nights; I couldn't think of anything else. I wrote to the main character. I said, "I have to tell your story. Will you work with me on this?" They said yes, and here I am two years later.

It was exhilarating when I realized that I would be writing my first book on this. Because every story you write, you think that could be a book or this could be a book. But with

this cystic fibrosis story I was up for three days straight, probably completely delirious. And I knew. I knew then that this the story. This is what I have the passion to do. You have to trust your gut on some things. If you're passionate about it, if you think it's a story, it probably is. And you have to chase it.

That is so inspiring. I have to ask, maybe for my own selfishness, what advice would you give to a student interested in pursuing science writing?

Do an internship. Journalism school is great, but it's expensive. If you can intern at a good publication, that's the best way to start doing this. Read a lot; know what sort of journalism interests you; be able to distinguish why one publication is more your cup of tea than another. But I think you can get so much great experience for free as an intern. Find somebody who's work you admire, and get an interview, and get an internship. You might skip over journalism school.

How do you feel about going to school for science journalism versus starting out on your own?

I think it depends. I had been doing biochemistry and then molecular genetics. I was all science. I had not the faintest idea how to switch tracks. So for me going to school for journalism was great. I had no clue about how to be a journalist, so it was wonderful. But I think if you started as a writer, or if you are an English major or Composition major, I think it's a much easier switch. ●

