USU journalism professor reports from the world’s murder capital | Journalism

09/16/2015

September 16, 2015

Newspapers across the greater Los Angeles area on Sunday featured articles from Utah State University journalism professor Matthew LaPlante, who recently returned from a reporting trip to El Salvador.

LaPlante spent two days in late August embedded at the Institute of Legal Medicine in El Salvador’s volatile capital city. The institute, which includes the San Salvador coroner’s headquarters, medical examiner’s office and a forensic anthropology department, has been overwhelmed over the past year by a surge in violence that has made El Salvador the murder capital of the world.

His first day at the institute happened to be on a day that, according to some reports, set a new record for homicides across El Salvador. The coroners were so busy on that day that some bodies were left in the streets for hours awaiting pick-up because there weren’t enough trucks available to collect the dead.

“You would absolutely never wish for something like that,” LaPlante said. “But as a reporter, if something like that has to happen, you do hope to be present for it so that you can tell the story.”

That story — along with LaPlante’s photographs — was featured on the front pages of all of the publications of the Los Angeles Newspaper Group on Sunday. It was also featured on those newspapers’ websites, which included a short video LaPlante produced about the toll the violence is taking on the institute’s staff.

Los Angeles was the right place for the stories, LaPlante said, because El Salvador’s two most powerful gangs – which are responsible for much of the killing — were both founded in Southern California.

“Essentially what happened is that refugees from the Salvadoran civil war, which was essentially a Cold War proxy battle, fled there in the 1980s,” LaPlante said.

“These people essentially went from one war zone to another, though, because L.A. was in the midst of rampant gang violence at the time.”

To protect themselves, some Salvadoran youth grouped together to form gangs of their own. When these gangs turned violent many members were deported back to El Salvador, where they regrouped and, before long, were challenging the Salvadoran government for power. Now, LaPlante noted, those gangs have become intricately involved in the Central American drug trade, which services the United States’ insatiable appetite for illegal narcotics.

“What I was hoping to show, in a visceral way, was that the rampant violence in this very small country is at least in part — and perhaps in large part — because of what has happened in our nation,” LaPlante said.

LaPlante — who has been reporting on global crises for more than a decade and follows a “one-part-pain-to-one-part-joy” philosophy of balancing his reporting projects — also produced an article and photographs for The Salt Lake Tribune about how a soccer team in the Salvadoran city of Santa Tecla has helped protect its town from much of the nation’s violence. That article was published in The Tribune’s sports section, also on Sunday.

In producing the articles, photos and videos for these stories — which were sponsored in part by a travel grant from the Department of Journalism and Communication — LaPlante is hoping to demonstrate to his students that they can be well-rounded multi-media journalists.

LaPlante — who returned from El Salvador the evening before fall semester classes began — noted that he had just two days to report the stories.

“I was keeping notes, making photographs and taking videos. I was working through translation, reporting in a country I’d never visited, and going to places that could be unfamiliar at best and dangerous at worst,” he said.

“For a long time I bucked against the notion that journalists should be jacks of all trades, but the truth is that this is the very expectation many media employers have for their new hires — and I want to show my students that it is possible.”

LaPlante, who has taken students along on reporting trips to Ethiopia and Cambodia, said he quickly decided not to bring any students along on this trip.

“I’d be very proud if a student wanted to do this sort of crisis reporting work eventually,” he said. “But these
sorts of projects can be professionally complicated and emotionally challenging.”

Still, he said, he’ll continue to encourage students to pursue stories of global significance — and to take on the challenge of reporting those stories in as many different ways as they can.