Billings news director thwarts a suicide plan, showing values of community journalism

For Diane Casanova, doing right by the people of her community comes before getting a scoop or breaking a story.

The KULR-8 news director was recently recognized with an award from the Billings Police Department for her help intervening when a woman showed up outside the local NBC affiliate with a knife, threatening suicide.

On Sept. 19, a director came into the newsroom to alert staff that a woman in the parking lot was threatening to kill herself and had given him a note and a chihuahua in a carrier, Casanova said. At around 2:45 p.m., police were sent to the Nonstop Local News station on Billings' West End.

"Before our first officer arrived, Diane took it upon herself to sit with the subject and simply listen to see what she could do to help," Police Chief Rich St. John said.

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As more law enforcement arrived, he said, the woman became frightened and held the knife to her neck and chest, refusing to cooperate with officers or drop the weapon.

Despite their efforts, officers were unable to de-escalate the situation. St. John said negotiators were called to the scene, but their attempts to intervene were also unsuccessful.

At that point, he said, they had to find another way to stop the woman from harming herself or becoming a threat to the public.

"You won't often hear me say that a large presence of law enforcement is too much of a good thing at any critical incident," the city's longtime chief said. "However, in this case it was. And, in fact, it was quite the opposite of what was needed. While working on options, it became clear that Diane had developed a rapport with the subject that officers could not match."

Casanova worked with them, explaining her earlier conversation with the woman, who told her she wanted to tell her story on camera before ending her life.

After law enforcement attempted to reason with the woman to no avail, the news director agreed to step in again to see if she could help.

“I could tell she just wanted to be heard,” Casanova said.

So, she set up her camera equipment and convinced the woman to put down the knife so they could talk.

“She was compassionate and offered the subject support and assurances that she would listen,” St. John said.

Within minutes, he said, the woman relaxed and soon she agreed to accept help from officers who had been on scene for about two hours.

As promised, Casanova listened to her before she was taken to a local hospital.

“Honestly, I still don’t understand what her story was,” Casanova said. “She just needed to get it off her chest.”

Lt. Matt Lennick nominated Casanova for the citizen hero award for her extraordinary bravery and compassion during the incident

“I watched Diane's true professionalism and her desire to help a fellow citizen in need. This could have easily been breaking news, watching a police standoff with an armed subject,” said Lennick, who works closely with local media as the department’s public information officer. “But instead of having a crew standing behind a camera waiting for something to happen, Diane respectfully waited for her turn to help.”

He also credited her work during recent years to build her newsroom’s partnership with city law enforcement and her dedication to serving the people of Billings.

Casanova bootstrapped her way into the top ranks of management in Montana's news media. Shortly after moving to the state, she went to a job fair and noticed an opening for an evening news producer at KULR-8.

With no experience or education in journalism and without knowing what she was getting into, she said, she joined the newsroom in 2017.

“I came for an ex and stayed for the job,” said Casanova, who had previously worked as a receptionist and researcher at a Dallas law firm.

Within a few years, she worked her way up to executive producer before taking the helm as the station’s news director in 2022.

She credits her parents, both Colombian immigrants, for demonstrating a strong work ethic and giving her the opportunity to build a career in journalism.

“They raised me to see people as just people and to recognize when someone is in need. And to be a decent human being,” she said. “That’s all I was doing. It wasn’t anything special and it was nothing that our other neighbors wouldn’t do. That’s the power of this community and I’m really proud to be a part of it.”

Alfredo and Gloria Casanova, of Houston, Texas, joined their daughter when St. John presented her with the award during the Billings City Council meeting on Nov. 25.

“Her effort made a significant difference in this case and serves as a powerful reminder of the positive impact one individual can make on the lives of many,” the chief said.