GEOGETOWN’S NPR REPORTER

Traditional journalists often say covering a war is the most glamorous aspect of the business. Linda Gradstein (C’85, G’85), the chief Jerusalem correspondent for National Public Radio (NPR), would beg to differ. It’s not reporting on a war that she finds so stimulating—it’s uncovering characteristics about people.

“What people are thinking about, what issues are important to them, how they make decisions about their lives, I just find all these things very interesting,” says Gradstein, who holds an undergraduate degree from the School of Foreign Service and a master’s in Arab Studies from Georgetown. “What is journalism but sitting down and getting little glimpses of people’s lives?”

Her beat is the Israelis and Palestinians, two societies she says are proud of their language and culture, warm and hospitable, and not reticent about sharing their deepest feelings—unlike the more guarded approach usually taken by Americans. She speaks both Hebrew and Arabic.

“It’s fascinating that you can interview a man on the street, you can go into peoples’ homes and sometimes they’ll tell you the most intimate details of their lives,” she says. “You can show up at someone’s house, whether it’s in the West Bank, Gaza or in Israel, and just knock on the door, and they’ll invite you in.”

The human touch aside, Gradstein spends most of her time illustrating a broader picture that shows the deadly effect of two long-term enemies. She has reported on Palestinian suicide bombings in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities, as well as Israeli forces carrying out offensives against Palestinian militants in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By May, about 1,400 Palestinians and more than 450 Israelis had died since the latest intifada, or Palestinian uprising, began in September 2000.

Human suffering, carnage, terror and destruction have been common sights for Gradstein, who often holds a front-row seat to the bloody confrontation. She nonetheless finds a way to keep her emotions in check and concentrate when reporting on chaotic scenes, almost going on “automatic pilot,” as she puts it.

“In other words, you go into these situations, and no matter how bad it is, you know what your job is, you know who you’re looking for,” she says. “You don’t let yourself feel it. It’s only afterward that you really do.”

In May, the Committee to Protect Journalists, which strives to protect press freedoms, rated the West Bank—where Israelis began staging a military offensive in late March to root out terrorists—as the most dangerous place in the world to be a journalist.

But Gradstein, in her 12th year as NPR’s Jerusalem’s correspondent, says she usually doesn’t feel scared when reporting in the West Bank. She wears a flak jacket and helmet when entering danger zones, and seems unflappable despite having had Israeli soldiers shoot over her head as a warning to leave a military zone closed to the media.

Her most harrowing situation occurred in a closed military area in the West Bank city of Ramallah. She was interviewing a Palestinian gunman when an Israeli tank came around the corner and headed toward them. She knew she wasn’t supposed to be there and, though she was marked “press,” she thought the tank was going to open fire because of her contact with the Palestinian. The tank held back, though, and she walked away.

Her days can last from 7 a.m. until 1 a.m., if she broadcasts for NPR’s “Morning Edition,” and its afternoon show, “All Things Considered.”

Despite her schedule, she and her husband, Cliff Churgin, the Jerusalem bureau manager for Knight-Ridder newspapers, manage to raise their three children, Rafaeila (8), Uriel (5) and Netanel
(16 months). The family lives in a neighborhood called Talpiot in southern Jerusalem about five minutes from Bethlehem.

Broadcast journalism was nowhere on Gradstein’s radar screen when she entered Georgetown in 1980. She enrolled in the School of Foreign Service, which has a language requirement. Jewish and fluent in Hebrew, she heeded advice from her father, who said she should study Arabic because of her interest in the Middle East. She thus chose Arab Studies, learned Arabic and worked on her degrees simultaneously, graduating in 1985.

After spending a year at the American University in Cairo, she moved to Jerusalem and began working for journalists, translating interviews in Hebrew and Arabic into English. One such journalist was Glenn Frankel, The Washington Post’s Jerusalem correspondent. They made a deal.

“He said, ‘You teach me about Israel, and I’ll teach you about journalism,’” she recalls. “That’s how I started.”

She began freelancing for American print media with bureaus in Jerusalem and eventually met John Hockenberry, NPR’s correspondent in Israel. He left the position in 1990, and she took over with no on-air news reporting experience.

Gradstein has since honed her skills to become a renowned broadcast journalist. She was part of the team that won the Overseas Press Club award for its coverage of the 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. She also contributed to the team that won Columbia University’s Alfred I. duPont Award for Excellence in Broadcast Journalism for its coverage of the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

What makes someone a superb international correspondent?

“You have to be empathetic to people who might be from very different backgrounds, cultures, languages,” she says. “You have to be willing to work hard. ... As a foreign correspondent, your editors are 6,000 miles away, and you have to be very self-motivated and say, ‘This is my goal for today, this is what I want to accomplish.’”

Michael Richman

Blood Pressure Research Funding

Researchers at Georgetown and the University of Virginia have identified three abnormalities in a single gene that are linked to developing essential hypertension, the most common class of high blood pressure.

Their study, the result of an 18-year, University of Virginia-Georgetown research collaboration, appeared in the March 19 issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The researchers report that these gene variations, also called polymorphisms, are associated with hypertension in several populations: Caucasian American, Ghanaian and Japanese.

The presence of these gene variations can be determined by a simple genetic test developed by the researchers. This test assesses an individual’s risk of developing high blood pressure based on detection of inherited gene variations that encode for a protein called G protein coupled receptor kinase type 4 (GRK4).

“Patients with even a single GRK4 variation have a significant lifetime risk for developing hypertension,” said Pedro A. Jose, professor of pediatrics and of physiology and biophysics at Georgetown, the senior author of the paper.

Identification of this leading cause of hypertension should lead to improved medical treatments for the disease, according to Jose. The University of Virginia and Georgetown teams, in collaboration with Fukushima University in Japan, also have reported on the use of a technology to correct the biochemical error in human kidney cells that leads to high blood pressure. The research teams have produced human kidney cell lines that may be useful in discovering other therapeutic methods to treat high blood pressure.