



Bio: June Cross is a writer and documentary producer who covers the intersection of poverty, race and politics in the United States. She has been a Professor of Journalism at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism in New York since 2006. There, she founded a program in documentary that is celebrating its fifth year.

She just finished *Wilhemina’s War*, a documentary about women caring for those living with HIV in South Carolina. It aired on PBS’ Independent Lens in 2016. Her last documentary, “The Old Man and the Storm,”

followed an extended New Orleans family as they struggled to rebuild their homes after Hurricane Katrina. It aired on PBS’ “Frontline” in early 2009.

She has been a fellow at Columbia’s Institute for Research in Afro-American Studies, at Carnegie-Mellon University’s School of Urban and Public Affairs and the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Studies at Harvard. She lives in New York City with her partner, the jazz drummer Mike Clark. She received an honorary doctorate of Humane Letters from Knox College in Illinois in 2015.

An Interview with June Cross

Conducted by IWL Leadership Scholars Prerana Narahari & Pooja Seshadri, Class of 2017

Edited by Jennifer Beacham

Prerana Narahari & Pooja Seshadri : What was your childhood like growing up?

June Cross: I was born in New York City in 1954. In the fifties, when I was born, it was very difficult for my mother to be raising a brown-skinned child. She sent me to be raised by friends of hers in Atlantic City, New Jersey. I ended up going to school in Atlantic City. I spent much of my childhood commuting between New York and Atlantic City.

When I was about ten years old, my mother got married to an actor and comic who did a lot of work in the sixties and early seventies. They moved out to Los Angeles, so I started moving between Atlantic City and LA. On YouTube, if you look up “SecretDaughter,” you can find the whole story. It actually wasn’t as sad as it comes out in the documentary because the family that raised me made sure I had a very normal childhood. My extended family were also Ivy League graduates, so there was a lot of nurturing, even though I didn’t really feel like I was a part of that family.

I graduated from Atlantic City High School in 1971 and was admitted to Radcliffe, a women's college, which eventually became part of Harvard. I graduated from Harvard in 1975. I had a fairly normal childhood – privileged even. I had piano classes, ballet classes, tap dance classes, and went to summer camp, which I would say is pretty unusual for most of the kids I was growing up with. I just had the fact that my mother had this extra income coming in and that she was helping the people that raised me. I grew up privileged even though I was extremely sheltered in Atlantic City.

My mother was Episcopalian. Her husband was Catholic. I attended Quaker School, and then Friends School for my middle school years. I had exposure to a lot of different religions. The whole idea of this Supreme Being was something that I began to look at skeptically early. Now, I practice Buddhism, that was my take away from all of that.

PN & PS: What were your impressions of the women around you?

JC: My mother was always trying to find a man to take care of her. That was her whole focus in life because she was raised in an era where the woman did for the man. The woman who raised me in Atlantic City worked as a teacher. African American women have always been more independent because they have been forced to work outside of the home by nature of the economic structure that existed then. The idea that they could stay home and be moms was a luxury.

Still, my African-American aunt also believed you arranged your life around a man. My takeaway was – I am never going to arrange my life around a man. I am not going to become what both of them became. I got married for the first time for ten years. I'm divorced now, but I was 45 before I even considered the idea of getting married. Most women are grandmothers by then.

My aunt worked as a school teacher, and my uncle was a cab driver. She was the primary breadwinner of the family. They argued about money all the time. I remember at one point she wanted to be a professional photographer. She was very good at it. She was accepted to several higher level photography classes. One was here in New York, taught by Alfred Eisenstaedt. He was a story photographer who ran a program at the Museum of Modern Art. It was a six-week program here in New York. She was afraid that her husband would stray while she was gone, so she never went.

PN & PS: How was your college experience?

JC: It was really painful. We were the largest class of African Americans that had been admitted

up until that time. We were exactly ten percent. It was wonderful because it was the first time I had ever been around so many other smart African Americans. Not that everyone I was raised with wasn't smart, but when you grow up black in the ghetto, your classmates make fun of you; "Oh, you like to read? You have your nose stuck in a book all of the time." I went to Harvard where there were a bunch of people who loved to read and had their noses stuck in a book. That part of it was wonderful.

I always struggled in my major, which was English. Harvard didn't take AP credits, so I had to take a basic English course again. There is an argument that I should have done really well in that course but the truth is I got bored and I stopped going to class, so I didn't do so well. I was a lot more social once I was released from the stern grasp of my aunt. I sort of went "hog crazy". I finally settled down junior year. Then by the time I was a senior, I wish I could have relived the whole experience again.

I think the worst was trying to be within my major. Very often, I was the only black person, so I was being asked to present the black point of view. I didn't know what the black point of view was. I didn't even know what my own point of view was! I got confused and then I became militant. I found out later that almost all of the women in my class, black and white, were feeling alienated.

In class, I constantly felt questioned over whether I had gotten there on my own merit or if I was an affirmative action student. I wasn't quite sure myself either. I scored very well on the verbal language part of the Scholastic Aptitude Test and very poorly on the math portion. There were people in my class who had received these outrageous scores and I was like, "Why am I here?" As I look back on it now, I [realize] women in particular suffer from Imposter Syndrome. We are always trying to find reasons as to why we are less than.

This was during the end of the Vietnam War, the beginning of the women's movement, and probably the end, or the middle, of the black power movement. Everyone was being alienated from authority in a thousand different ways. It wasn't particular to me, but it felt like it at that time. I used to say that psychologically, it took me twenty years to recover from by Harvard education. It took me that long to put myself together again.

PN & PS: What pushed you towards journalism?

JC: I wanted to be a journalist ever since I was in the eighth grade. I think part of it has to do with this whole story that was made up during my childhood. My mother didn't want people to know that I was her biological daughter so she presented me as her adopted daughter. There was this whole story she had made up. I knew the truth, but I could never speak up about the truth.

When I was in eighth grade, a reporter from the Philadelphia Inquirer came to a school assembly. He said the newspaper would pay him to go anywhere in the world and ask people questions that were none of his business. I was like, “Sign me up!” I was always asking why, why and why? And nobody ever wanted to give me answers. I worked in high school for my town newspaper. Then in college I tried very hard to write for the school newspaper, but I got rejected four times, which all fit into the lack of confidence. I did find a secure spot at the local public television station and was able to start putting myself together there.

At one point, my mother told me that somebody in Hollywood was looking for a script girl. A script girl is the person who keeps track of what pages have been shot on a film. I got called up and they told me they had an entry level position for me if I was interested in the film industry. I had absolutely no interest in the film industry, because the film industry was all about make-believe and my entire life had already been all about make-believe. I had more interest in real life. That’s why I got into journalism.

PN & PS: Can you tell us more about an influential person in your life?

JC: Although I adored her, I never had a close relationship with my mother until I became an adult. I had all of these, sort of, “aunties”. All of these aunties were very important to me.

As I went through school, there was really nobody at Harvard that I could ever point to, which is a sort of sad statement. I had professors that I liked – Patrick Moynihan was one of them. He came up with this theory about the black family and how it had been destroyed by slavery. It was very controversial theory, and not accurate; still, I really liked him as a professor. He was one of the few that actually explained things.

When I got out of school, I was working for a local community newspaper, The Bay State Banner, and I met a man named Luix Overbea, who was a reporter for the Christian Science Monitor. He connected me to an organization called the National Association of Black Journalists. They ended up teaching me how to become a journalist.

One of them in particular, Tom Johnson, took me under his wing and let me sit in while he was doing interviews. He talked to me about how to formulate a lead. They were very important in helping me figure out how to do journalism. Then Tom introduced me to Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who later became a correspondent to what is now the PBS NewsHour. She helped me get that job at the NewsHour. Charlayne became a very important person both in my career and my life. There were periods of time when my mother and I weren’t getting along. I would [then] be living with Charlayne. You sort of find people as you go along. Judy Crichton was very influential because I was able to talk through a lot of things with her. She produced the first Earth Day, she became one of the first female documentary producers at ABC news, then went to

CBS news, and ultimately found PBS' history program, "The American Experience."

After I left Frontline, Judy sort of became a mentor. She gave me feedback on my book. She was my informal editor, and then I did the same for her. I was in my late forties, early fifties when I got offered a job at Columbia. I wasn't sure at all if I wanted to get into the academy and she basically did an intervention and said, "Yes, you are going to go to the academy. You are going to do this. Do you have any idea how hard it is to make a living as a documentary filmmaker?"

PN & PS: How has the experience been like as a professor at Columbia? How long have you been teaching there?

JC: I have been there for fifteen years. I remember three or four years ago, a visiting professor from San Francisco State said her field was critical race theory. I was like, "What is critical race theory?" She looked at me and said, "Critical race theory is what you live every day." It's hard – I'm the only black tenured professor. I'm one of four tenured women, out of twenty-two. Out of the 145 full-time faculties, there are maybe five teachers of color. And only three of us are full time. It's challenging. You spend a lot of time if you're a person of color in a white institution trying to figure out is this race or is this just incompetence and insensitivity. I spend a lot of time having conversations with myself. "Am I crazy? Or would this not have happened if I was white?" There have been three people of color that have come up for tenure since I have been tenured in 2006. None of them have been good enough. You look at that and think, what does a person have to do? Why does the bar always seem higher or different?

PN & PS: As a journalist and professor, what were the most challenging things you have faced?

JC: Every year it changes. I'm trying to build a documentary program at Columbia. Challenges take on different forms depending on where I am in my career.

As a journalist, trying to figure out what was a story and what was a lead was incredibly challenging for about ten years. I would think something was a story, I would go to my editors and they would tell me it is not a story or that it had already been done. That's a challenge – trying to figure out how to sell a story to your editors. Then, it's gathering the information for the story.

Switching from PBS to CBS, the way the story is conceptualized is completely different. Then again, I was the only black person both at the NewsHour and at CBS, so that manifests that the culture of public television is very sort close to the academy. There's the cultural aspect of it, the content of the actual job, and then actually getting the job done. Those three things remain

constant over the course of one's career, and how one engages with them as women of color changes, but the template doesn't seem to change.

PN & PS: Do you have a specific challenge that you've faced that meets at the intersection of race, class and gender?

JC: The film I just finished is called Wilhemina's War. It's about an uneducated black woman living in rural South Carolina. Wilhemina wasn't quite sure how to spell her name. She looked at me as a fair skinned, educated woman from the North and so I worked hard to establish a relationship with her. She had four members of her family that were HIV positive. You know, as a journalist, you get down in the dungeon sometimes and you end up talking about things that you wish you didn't have to talk about.

Then you have to get your film funded to the outside world. [The film industry] loves to see pathology of black people on screen. They want to see the story of the downtrodden women who takes up arms against the system. Wilhemina was none of those. So, I had to be her advocate to the foundation to get the funds to even make the film, because she wasn't fitting neatly into one of these categories. She was a woman doing the best she could in these circumstances with no help and no resources.

Then, I'm coming back from the backwoods of South Carolina to Columbia University. People in New York, not even poor people in New York, know what it's like to be poor in other parts of the country. Poor people in New York have a whole system; they have food stamps, they have healthcare, they usually have rooftops over their heads unless they are homeless.

PN & PS: How is trauma erased in the narratives of women of color?

JC: Black women are not allowed to be depressed, commit suicide or do any of that stuff. We're not allowed; we're supposed to be strong. I just sold Wilhemina's War to the distributor and one person there said, "She's so strong, she's done so much for her community," and I said, "Actually, she's not that strong. She's endured. She's enduring things and it's not like she has some paragoddess strength. She has not had a choice." She had to feed her family, get her children raised, and pay for the rent with an alcoholic husband. A 92-year-old mom who has Alzheimer's disease and she's got four people living in the family with HIV. She's just doing the best she can – that doesn't take strength. That's just getting up in the morning.

Q: What do you think journalism can do for these narratives?

JC: Ignore them. Ignore the dominant narrative. The dominant narrative about the strong black woman, the dominant narrative about teenage black boys being gangsters. Now it's becoming

everyone that is shot by the police was innocent – that’s not necessarily true either. The dominant narrative that all Mexicans in the country must be illegal. We have these boxes that we put people in and what journalism does best is explode those boxes. I’m always trying to keep my ears open and my eyes open for the complexity in the narrative.

Q: What does women’s leadership mean to you and specifically in journalism, how do you think that is evident or should be evident?

JC: Well that’s interesting, because the journalism school right now is approaching seventy percent female. But when you look at the newsrooms in the country, it’s reversed. I think that what happens is people get out and try to make a living, can’t make a living, then get married, have children, and move somewhere else, start a different career. You know the market in the United States is really hard to penetrate. The ways that we try to fit ourselves in a shoebox to try to have some power in the world is truly striking.

Q: Can you offer us one piece of advice as we are setting up our careers in media?

JC: Don’t be afraid. Try to get as much experience as possible and have faith that it will all work out in the end. I know I spent my first ten years in agony because I wanted to be a producer and I never thought I was going to get there. Then I started acting like a producer, and then I got the title. You think you’re never going to get there. It’s not about them giving it to you, it’s about you claiming the role. Just do the work and have faith. It’ll work out.