

+ FEATURE STORIES

# MARIANA ATENICIO

Leading the Path to a Socially Just World

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Bringing stories to light is not always the easiest task. Some stories are muffled and crushed by overpowering voices, but investigative reporter Mariana Atencio fights for the voices of thousands of refugees and victims of social injustice.

**BROOKE ALLEN**





**A**tencio, a 34-year-old hailing from Venezuela, is a journalist and news reporter working for MSNBC and NBC News. In 2012, she was one of four reporters who received the Peabody Award for investigative reporting.

When she discovered her passion for journalism, she decided to attend school at Columbia University where she obtained a master's degree in journalism. Before attending Columbia, she went to a Catholic university in Venezuela. While there, the college was "clamping down on free media." Experiencing this censorship helped mold her into a journalist. "I went out and protested as a student for free speech and freedom of the press and I said, 'This is what I want to do.'"

Admitting to herself she wanted to be a journalist was difficult. "It took me a lot of guts and courage to say it out loud. The first person I confessed this to was my father, and that was after already being in college and majoring in advertisement because I thought that was going to be a safer path for myself... And it took sort of a crisis in my country to also be that lightning rod, if you will."

Through her career, she has continued to focus on social injustice, and also the grueling lives of less fortunate. With thousands of stories pushed to the side, Atencio demands

attention for the horrors she witnesses. "[It's] a demonstration of how passionate you have to be [while] pushing for these stories because you're competing with all these other headlines," she said. "You have to have your heart and soul poured into everyone's story so you can fight for them in the editorial meeting."

Atencio joined the migrant caravan during their journey to capture hundreds of stories from the exhausted refugees. As an immigrant herself, her reporting provided a different perspective. She said, "I was in the thick of it, walking with these thousands of people for five, six days." A lot of her time in the caravan was spent fact checking President Trump's Twitter feed.

Trump claimed there were Middle Easterners in the caravan, but Atencio said "I have not seen or heard anyone of Middle Eastern descent in this caravan, but I'll tell you who is here — people from Honduras." During her investigation, she stayed close with the caravan in order to capture each bit of factual information she could.

Stories surrounding the hardships of immigrants hit very close to home for Atencio, which is why she focuses so much of her energy on giving these people a platform to speak on. One issue she brought to light is the fact when immigrants come to the United States illegally and have children, their children are then safe from deportation, but they aren't. "There has to be fear on the ground from so many of these undocumented folks who say, 'What if I am deported,'" she said, "And I ask myself, 'What are these parents thinking about when they say, 'I could get deported and my child can come home and not find anyone there.' What is their backup?'"

When researching backup plans for these unique issues, she came across a woman in Miami who is referred to as "the guardian angel of immigration." Atencio said, "She is the legal guardian of over 1,000 children of immigrants — of undocumented immigrants. Basically, what they do is they sign over legal guardianship of their children to her as a plan B, in case they get deported. So, you have these little kids who you speak to, [and] you ask them, 'If you get home and Mommy's not there? What are you supposed to do?'"

The "guardian" houses the children while their parents make other arrangements. However, the "guardian" actually adopted two children, and some children stayed in her care for years. "She lives in a big house in Homestead, Florida. She keeps the kids for a couple days or sends them to Auntie or Uncle in Chicago or in Houston, so the kids don't fall into the foster care system."

Atencio brought attention to the "guardian" so people would understand "the fear of all these families, and these

American children at the end of the day who are just innocent bystanders in the middle of this whole thing.”

Her own home in Venezuela is experiencing a major healthcare problem. Atencio said, “85 percent of basic medicine is not found” in Venezuela. Her own father struggled with the lack of healthcare when he became ill with the flu. “You know, it’s one thing to tell people on a report like, ‘Oh, there’s no medicine — people are begging on social media for medicine,’ and it’s quite another to be in the hallway of a hospital where doctors are telling you we don’t have anything to give [your father] and you having to beg people for medicine on social media or to have to resort to the black market.”

As she watched the flu consume her father, she took detailed notes of her experience in the Venezuelan hospital. “My father, after three weeks, unfortunately passed away. I wrote absolutely everything that happened in this little journal, like, literally on the floor of the hospital day in, day out, in what is possibly the most powerful op-ed that I will ever write about the health crisis down there — and he gave me the freedom to do that.”

Her ethics were blurred when the desperation to save her father occurred. “You are faced with, ‘Do I resort to the black market or not?’ The lines between right and wrong in these countries get really blurry when literally the person you love the most in your life is dying. It really created such an impact because people didn’t know how bad things were. I got e-mails, people stopped me in the hallways and said, ‘It really hit home — what you wrote.’ So, I think that it was a way to honor my father. And [it was] the most personal thing I’ve ever had to put out.

Even with her powerful op-ed dedicated to her father, conditions in Venezuela are still deteriorating. “Things unfortunately down there — they’re getting worse by the day — it’s not remaining the same. But a couple of months later, it was my father’s birthday and I said, ‘What are we going to do to honor him?’ And I basically raised donations to be able to deliver a thousand meal supplements for a thousand children in a public hospital, and I went down there and delivered them myself. And it’s something that I don’t think would have come about without reporting it.”

Atencio also reported on the food crisis in Puerto Rico after the relentless natural disasters the inhabitants endured. “I think our reporting was critical, and I don’t mean only NBC. When I was down there, just to stay on the story and to give a voice to people, like the mayor of San Juan, who was sounding the alarm very early on, I was literally on the port reporting on all those containers of food that were going bad and that

weren’t being delivered. We were live on MSNBC as that was happening and it just made all of the authorities become accountable for what happened.”

With Puerto Rico being a territory of the United States, the lack of help from government officials inspired Atencio to give the victims a voice. Six months after Hurricane Maria, students were still going to school without power. “[The kids are] in school where [they] are not able to use computers, don’t have air conditioning, don’t have lights — where they use a whistle because they don’t have a school bell — and teachers telling you these kids are back in the 1970s.” However, “they are American citizens.”

Atencio brings countless traumatic stories to the surface and gives thousands upon thousands of victim’s voices. With each story she uncovers, a new opportunity for change within social injustices arises. These difficult stories constantly change her views and opinions, but she wants readers to know that’s ok. “I always say the most important image is the one in front of the mirror. And that’s something that you sort of redefine every day and that’s ok. It’s impossible for me not to be changed by so many of these stories that I cover by so many of these people, and it’s ok to [change]. And it’s good to look back and see the path that you’ve charted to guide you on your way for what’s next.”

Her authenticity to herself steers her along her own correct path. “At the end of the day, if you are authentic and if you just dig deep and just kind of show your real self, that is what ultimately will make an impact and will chart your path to success.”

