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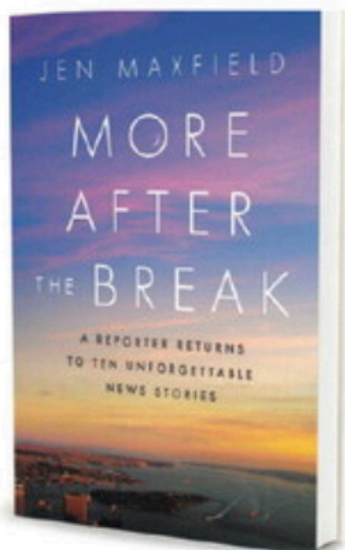
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Tenafly resident and WNBC-NY reporter and anchor Jen Maxfield

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ON THE COVER

Paramus native and political commentator/contributor Tara Setmayer



ANOTHER DRAFT OF HISTORY

In her new book, Jen Maxfield delves deep into 10 local news stories she covered for WNBC

WRITTEN BY MIKE KELLY

Emma-winning TV newscaster Jen Maxfield has spent the last two decades telling stories in 90-second bursts of airtime, with scripts that rarely exceed 300 words. For her latest project, she stepped away from the camera and turned her storytelling into a book.

Maxfield's *More After the Break: A Reporter Returns To 10 Unforgettable News Stories*, her first book, is part memoir and part history lesson. It also offers a pull-back-the-curtain look at how TV news is assembled amid intense deadline pressure.

The stories in Maxfield's book crisscross a broad journalistic landscape — with a particular focus on North Jersey. There is her account of a Paramus girl who survived a fatal school bus crash and the heartbreak of a New Milford family after their son was killed by an alleged Islamist terrorist in lower Manhattan. In between are tales of an Ivy League undergrad who was sentenced to prison, an athlete fighting lung cancer and a young man who lost both legs in a ferry crash.

Such diversity in subjects is not unusual. Maxfield, 45, who reported for WABC *Eyewitness News* for 10 years before jumping to WNBC-NY in 2013, has specialized in covering a wide range of events during her two-decade career.

She was dispatched to Mississippi in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina rolled in. She also chronicled the devastation from Superstorm Sandy in 2012, the shocking resignation of New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey in 2004 and the 2004 Republican National Convention. In 2012, when President Barack Obama won a second term, she reported from a bar in Newark.

Maxfield won a local news Emmy in 2018 for her live coverage of a plane crash in Teterboro, New Jersey. And in 2021, her anchoring and reporting were part of NBC-NY's COVID-19 coverage that received the Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Award, the broadcast equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize.

Maxfield grew up in Tenafly, the oldest of six children. Her father, Roger, is a noted pulmonologist at New York's New York-Presbyterian Medical Center. Her mother, Carol, manages her husband's medical practice. Maxfield credits her ability to inject questions early at news conferences to trying to get a word in edgewise at the boisterous Maxfield family dinner table.

At Tenafly High School, Maxfield excelled on the track team as a high jumper and held the girls' team high jump record — 5 feet, 2 inches — for 26 years. After graduating in 1995, Maxfield enrolled at Columbia University anticipating a career in sports medicine.

But she caught the journalism bug after regularly writing for Columbia's student newspaper,

The Spectator, and reporting on the United Nations during a junior-year internship with CNN. She later earned a master's degree from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, where she now teaches when she is not on the street covering news or behind an anchor desk.

Maxfield lives in Bergen County with her husband, Scott Ostfeld, their children, Trevor, Vivian and Evelyn, and their dog, Rocket. Maxfield and Ostfeld met as Columbia University undergraduates while taking an Italian Renaissance sculpture class.

Ostfeld, a partner and portfolio manager at a New York investment firm specializing in shareholder activism, traveled to Poland and Ukraine in March with Trevor as part of a humanitarian mission to deliver medical supplies and other items such as diapers to war refugees. The trip was sponsored by Temple Emanu-El of Closter.

Besides her work as a journalist, Maxfield is active in several area charities, including the Women's Rights Information Center, the Bergen Family Center and the Center for Food Action, where she started volunteering in high school.

More After the Break was released in July with Maxfield also embarking on a series of book signings.

The following interview was edited for length and clarity:

MK: Journalists are often accused of just moving on after covering a story. Why did you want to return to some of your stories?

JM: It's true that the news cycle does move quickly, and I rarely spend more than a day reporting a story. But that doesn't mean I forget about the people I meet on assignment. Part of what motivated me to write *More After The Break* was genuine curiosity about what happened to the people at the center of stories I never stopped thinking about, and I suspect viewers are still wondering about them, too.

MK: So how did you choose these 10 stories for your book?

JM: I estimate I have interviewed 10,000 people on the news over the last 22 years. The book looks very organized now that it's done, but that is not how it started! I have a long list of stories that I continued to think about, even dream about, long after I left the breaking news scenes. I reached out to families one at a time, and I was simultaneously writing one chapter and researching another.

MK: Your book's subtitle describes these stories as "unforgettable." Was there a common thread that made them so?

JM: The triumph of the human spirit. All the people profiled in my book have faced challenges and adversity. But each of them has emerged stronger. I think we can all learn from their experiences: to appreciate the blessings of our lives, to find hope where we didn't know it existed, and to reach out to help other people who are suffering.

MK: What did you learn about yourself by looking back?

JM: I was humbled that so many of the families remembered me. I've always taken my role seriously at these news scenes, and it was rewarding to know that people remembered I treated them with dignity and respect. The process of writing the book also highlighted to me that as hard as it is to knock on someone's door and ask them to share their story, it is even harder to leave them to make my deadline.

MK: Did going back to these stories change you?

JM: I think covering news in general these past two decades has changed me.

MK: How so?

JM: I have seen so many things firsthand that hearing about another person's need or struggle does not seem theoretical. It has made me more invested in helping people through some of the incredible charities in our community. I also think being a witness to so much heartache has made me deeply appreciative of my life and the people I love. Local news reporting is not a job for a perfectionist, and there is a great quote that says, "News is the first rough draft of history." I don't expect perfection from myself or anyone else, but I do really value showing up for people.

MK: I was struck by how emotionally intimate these stories became for you.

JM: My parents raised me and my five siblings to treat other people the way we wanted to be treated. >



I approach every news story and every person I interview with that mindset. I do think it's hard — if not impossible — to not get emotionally involved on some level when you are spending time with people and they are sharing intimate details of their lives with you.

MK: So how do you approach such delicate assignments? It's a balance between empathy and staying true to the facts, right?

JM: The tension when you are reporting news for as long as I have — and as long as you have, Mike — is that while we empathize with the families, we need to also maintain some distance to allow us to keep telling these stories and serving the viewers. As I wrote in my book, "We dip our toes in the pool of your grief, but never jump in for fear of drowning."

MK: That's so true. At the same time, feeling the story is what makes you a good journalist.

JM: I am a contagious crier, and it's hard for me to not cry when I see someone else crying. I don't even fight it anymore, I just switched to waterproof mascara. I do not see this as a weakness; I think empathy is a strength when you have the privilege of telling other people's stories.

MK: Let's turn to two stories from your book that resonated here in North Jersey: the crash of a bus with students from Paramus and the young man from New Milford who was killed by a terrorist in lower Manhattan. (I also covered both.) Two very different stories, and yet both involved tragic death. How did you approach them?

JM: The Paramus school bus crash hit home for me, as I know it did for anyone who has young children. That could have been any of our kids on the bus that day. The chapter of my book about the Paramus crash and one of the young survivors, Zaina Matahen, highlights how chaotic these breaking news events are.

MK: Your style in telling Zaina's story fascinated me.

JM: I wrote the narrative in parallel, explaining how Zaina's parents were trying to piece together what had happened to their 10-year-old daughter, and how my photographer and I were trying to discern what had happened on Route 80 that morning. Obviously, Zaina's parents had an exponentially more serious situation to cope with, but readers will get a sense of what happens behind the scenes of those "breaking news" banners that you see on TV or on your Twitter feed.

MK: And the death of Darren Drake of New Milford?

JM: The story of Darren Drake is an example of how little we know on the first day — and often, the only day — that we report these news stories. Darren was such a bright and interesting person, and his murder in the 2017 lower Manhattan terror attack is a tragedy. His mother, Barbara, and his cousin Kristen were not emotionally able to speak with me the day I came asking for an interview. Now, almost five years later, they were ready to tell me their stories, and they added so much depth and complexity to



ON THE JOB (Top) Maxfield anchors the WNBC-NY news desk; (middle) reporting on the scene; (above) on her way to teach a class at Columbia University.

Darren's story. Darren's father, Jimmy, did speak with me back in 2017, and my experience sitting with him less than 24 hours after his only child was killed is exactly what I meant when I said sometimes it's hard to pull myself away from these families when I'm working on deadline.

MK: You're obviously a TV newscaster. Yet you decided to tell this story as a book. Why?

JM: Time is a luxury. I carefully craft each of the 250-300 words that make up most of my TV news stories. But one of the reasons I continued thinking about these families is because I knew there was more of their stories to tell. Researching *More After The Break* confirmed that.

MK: Really? In what ways?

JM: I was astonished at how much had happened since my original stories aired on the news. Being able to sit with families without the pressure of a same-day deadline was liberating, and it allowed me to immerse myself more deeply in the stories. I also enjoyed the challenge of writing without the aid of video to back up what I was saying. But I should add that writing a book after two decades of writing 90-second news scripts was a major adjustment.

MK: You now teach at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. How are today's journalists different from your generation? How will journalism change?

JM: One of the biggest differences is that today's journalism students have grown up with easy access to a video camera (on their smartphones) and are more comfortable being on camera. This leads to a more authentic visual storytelling style and a willingness to take creative risks in covering the news. They aren't trying to copy what they have seen on TV before, they are trying to forge a new style. This is critical now, as we navigate the many different ways people are consuming news. I write in my book about some of the cuts that have happened in local news, but I think the public is engaged and wants to know what is happening in their communities. I love working with students, and I like saying that my Columbia Journalism students teach me more than I teach them.

MK: You're also a wife and mother with three school-age children. How do you separate these parts of your life?

JM: My husband, Scott, and my children, Evelyn, Vivian and Trevor, are my world. And I am also proud of the work I do outside of the home as a reporter and adjunct professor. I don't necessarily think I separate these two parts of my life — I think being a mom helps me as a reporter, and I think being a reporter helps me as a mom and wife. Also, my family has been on board and incredibly supportive when my job required strange hours, working on holidays, and leaving to go to work on snow days. I would add that I try to leave my work devices on the chargers and really be present for my husband and kids when we are together. Because as hectic as my schedule may seem, I always leave time for fun! ■