On the night of Saturday, Sept. 12, 2020, Huang was reporting on the story of two Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department deputies who had been shot in an ambush. She covered a press conference outside the St. Francis Medical Center in Lynwood, and after it ended she heard shouting. As she recounted on Twitter, she went to investigate. She was filming an arrest when, suddenly, deputies advanced on her. Although she was wearing a lanyard with press credentials, she was thrown to the ground. She spent five hours in custody. The uproar from KPCC, other reporters, journalist organizations, and even some politicians, was loud and instantaneous. An investigation into the deputies’ conduct was demanded. The District Attorney declined to press charges against Huang.

It was a moment that no reporter expects will ever happen to them. But it is also one that reminds every journalist about the importance of press freedom. Attacks on press freedom are too often attacks on holding power to account. Journalists the world over saw their lives complicated by the pandemic, and Huang was no exception. As COVID-19 roared she began working weekend shifts, allowing her to dedicate her time at home to her young children. Then came the murder of George Floyd, and Huang says she covered “dozens” of protests for Black Lives Matter and against police brutality and racism. She took care to ensure that the immediacy of the moment was presented to her audience across multiple platforms.

“I felt a real commitment to showing what was happening across Southern California—I reported from Palmdale to Beverly Hills to Downtown L.A.—as many other people were confined to their homes. I tried to do this through radio, audio and video that I shared on social media,” said Huang. “Despite what happened with my arrest, I’m still grateful that I was able to report on a historic time in our country.”

The historical impacts of the time-frame were felt in other ways, too, and Huang reported extensively on the rise in anti-Asian violence. Yet her coverage was also layered, and she delved into varying responses to the attacks to reveal political and generational differences among members of the Asian American Pacific Islander community.

Huang, who is married to a reporter, has seen the job grow more difficult over the years. That involves both shrinking newsroom budgets, as well as pressure on the press.

“Journalists are more than before, the target of online threats and harassment. Those covering protests, increasingly, face actual danger to their physical safety,” she said.

That she is not deterred by what occurred last fall, and continues to deliver powerful, impactful reporting, won’t sur-

On the Front Lines of Press Freedom

Josie Huang, recipient of the L.A. Press Club’s inaugural Guardian Award, holds power to account every day

By Adam Rose

Josie Huang has been a reporter for more than 20 years, starting as a writer for her college newspaper. She has racked up awards in a career divided between old-fashioned print outlets and public radio. These days she’s the Asian American Communities Correspondent for KPCC and its companion site LAist. If you’ve spent time in a parked car, listening to the station until one of her stories finishes, you’re not alone. But nothing could have prepared Huang for what unfolded one night last fall. It was an event that reminded the entire Los Angeles journalism community that heavy-handed tactics and attempts to muzzle a free press do not just happen in far-flung corners of the world, but can occur, unprecedented and out of the blue, in our own backyard.

That Huang emerged from such an encounter with grace and dignity will not surprise anyone who over the years has listened to her stories—reports that reveal, for example, the pervasive impacts of hate crime, or the rise of a restaurant empire. Obscure concepts come to life as Huang amplifies voices that might have gone unheard.

Tonight, the Los Angeles Press Club is proud to present Huang with the inaugural Guardian Award for Contributions to Press Freedom. As problems have come to the fore, so have the voices that might have gone unheard, the eyes and ears for the public. “Reporters are the eyes and ears for the public,” Huang said. “We try to unearth the truth and help the public better understand their community and how it connects to the larger society. Attacks on press freedom are too often attacks on holding power to account.”

The Los Angeles Press Club is proud to present Huang with the inaugural Guardian Award for Contributions to Press Freedom.
Statistics show that the world remains a dangerous place for journalists and media workers, with nearly 100 losing their lives since July 2019 as they covered stories. The Los Angeles Press Club traditionally honors journalists and media workers who perish while braving dangerous conditions in the effort to keep the world informed.

From July-December 2019, 15 journalists and media workers were killed. Another 49 fell in 2020. So far in 2021 (through August), 29 have died.

In addition, at least 274 journalists and media workers were imprisoned as of January 2021, with another 66 missing.

A white paper by the International Federation of Journalists found that a total of 2,658 journalists and media workers were killed from 1990-2020. It lists the most dangerous countries for journalists as Iraq, Mexico, Philippines, Pakistan and India.

Recent Developments: With the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on Sept. 1, the Los Angeles Press Club and other media organizations are concerned about the arrests and beating of journalists, as well as the future of Afghan media.

American journalist Danny Fenster has been detained in Myanmar since May 24 on unproven charges that he reported false information. Myanmar was taken over by the military in February. Fenster’s family members, who are working with the United States government to free him, have said that he had contracted COVID-19 and was denied medical care. In a Sept. 7 Washington Post opinion piece, Jason Rezaian, who received the Press Club’s Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism in 2016, urged the Biden administration to “restore the United States’ long-standing commitment to upholding free expression” by working to free Fenster and protect Afghan journalists.

The Press Club remains thankful to all those journalists and media workers who risk their lives daily to bring truth to the world, and we will continue to work to preserve a free press.

Thanks to the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders for providing information about those killed. While there are discrepancies in the total statistics among these sources, the L.A. Press Club has done its best to determine and provide the best available information.

"I wanted to support the journalist community in L.A. County because too many were experiencing assault, detention and arrests for simply doing their jobs."

"She’s a masterful storyteller in a very understated way," says Deepa Fernandes, who previously worked at KPCC and now covers immigration for the San Francisco Chronicle. "She’s not coming at you with the story. She lets the story seep into you so you’re gripped."

Adds Huang’s KPCC/LAist colleague, and Press Club board of directors member Emily Elena Dugdale, "I started at KPCC as an intern. I remember Josie going out of her way to make me feel welcome, showing genuine interest in me as a person and a journalist. Years later, she hasn’t changed. She continues to look out for her peers—especially the young journalists—and while she isn’t the loudest voice in the room, she commands a deep respect that leads to better outcomes for everyone."

That effort to create better outcomes was exemplified recently when Huang turned in a different direction. She momentarily put down the microphone that comes with covering Los Angeles area government, and instead spoke into one as she addressed local lawmakers.

That came as the L.A. County Board of Supervisors was considering a motion to endorse Senate Bill 98, state legislation which preserves the right of journalists to enter contested areas, such as where protests are occurring. Attempts to require reporters to first get permission from law enforcement command- ers to do their job was shot down.

Huang urged the members of the powerful panel to support the bill.

The Board of Supervisors unanimously endorsed SB 98 in June. Huang reflected on why she needed to speak.

"I wanted to support the journalist community in L.A. County because too many were experiencing assault, detention and arrests for simply doing their jobs," she said.

After that, it was back to work, and time for another story.