

Argus Leader (Sioux Falls, South Dakota)

October 9, 2009 Friday

Honoring Katie Couric

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SECTION: NEWS; Pg. NaN

LENGTH: 772 words

CBS news anchor Katie Couric accepted the Al Neuharth Award for Excellence in the Media on Thursday even as Al Neuharth himself admitted he once thought she wasn't up for the job.

As the first woman to fill the evening anchor position, Couric's choice for the position was hotly debated even by Neuharth himself. But Thursday, Neuharth admitted he was wrong.

"Katie's proved she has made the switch from morning interviews to hard news," Neuharth said. "I'm glad to say I was wrong, and she was right."

Couric is the 22nd person to be honored by the University of South Dakota and the Freedom Forum since the Neuharth Award program began in 1989. She accepted the award wearing USD red before an estimated 4,000 people at the DakotaDome.

The theme of Couric's acceptance speech was about having persistence, "Don't let the turkeys get you down," she said.

Couric said that a love of writing, an outgoing nature and an inherent curiosity about the world led her to a career in television news.

She began by demonstrating her resourcefulness and gumption by knocking on newsroom doors asking for jobs.

"To do well in this business, you have to have moxie," she said.

She landed a job as a news assistant at ABC. Before long, she moved to the nascent cable network CNN.

There she got her first on-camera break: to read the president's schedule in front of the White House.

In her earpiece, Couric said she could hear the producers asking, "Who is that girl? She looks like she's 12 years old."

It did not go well, and the producer told her he never wanted to see her on the air again.

"He was the first in a long line of naysayers," said Couric, with her irrepressible grin.

Couric also discussed the relevance of network news programs in a 24-hour, digital, cable news world where many viewers come to the television having already heard or seen the headlines during the day.

"Gone are the days when dad comes home and puts his hat on the rack and mom has dinner ready and the whole family sits around the television to watch the news," Couric said.

But there is still a place for evening news, she said.

"What we can provide is context and perspective to the headlines that people were able to read all day long online."

In addition, the format of the news has become more flexible, she said, with an entire half-hour being devoted to a single interview, as with her interviews with Gov. Sarah Palin, or a single topic, as with a three-part series about Afghanistan that ran this past week.

The Al Neuharth Award, recognizing lifetime achievement, is named after Neuharth, a South Dakota native and 1950 USD graduate.

The recipient each year is selected by a small group of people at the Freedom Forum, the nonpartisan, international foundation advocating free press that was founded by Neuharth, and by the Freedom Forum advisory board.

Neuharth said that Couric's interviews with vice presidential nominee Palin during the 2008 presidential campaign contributed to her being selected this year.

"One thing that she didn't get the chance to do was moderate one of the debates," Neuharth said. "If she had done that, too, she would have been a shoo-in."

Couric's evening newscast consistently has come in third in ratings among the three network news programs, although this year, it has shown some improvement over the year before. Last week, NBC led with 8.3 million viewers, followed by ABC with 7.6 million and CBS with 5.6 million viewers.

Neuharth pointed out that in the southeast South Dakota television market, Katie Couric and CBS lead all networks.

Many in the audience professed to watching her regularly.

"I've been watching Katie Couric since she was on the 'Today Show,' and now I watch her on the news every evening," said Deb Thiessen, a nurse in Omaha who took the day off from work to be in the audience Thursday night with her son, who attends the university. "Her personality is more serious on the evening news, but I think it needs to be more serious."

The 90-minute award ceremony program will be rebroadcast on South Dakota Public Broadcasting television at 1 p.m. CDT Sunday.

Reach reporter Anna Bahney at 271-0113.

PAST RECIPIENTS

Recipients of the Al Neuharth Award for Excellence in the Media:

1989: Walter Cronkite
1990: Carl T. Rowan
1991: Helen Thomas
1992: Tom Brokaw
1993: Larry King
1994: Charles Kuralt
1995: Albert R. Hunt and Judy Woodruff
1996: Robert MacNeil
1997: Cokie Roberts
1998: Tim Russert and Louis D. Boccardi

1999: John Seigenthaler
2000: No award
2001: Jim Lehrer
2002: Tom Curley
2003: No award
2004: Don Hewitt
2005: Garrison Keillor
2006: Bob Schieffer
2007: John Quinn and Ken Paulson
2008: Charles Overby
2009: Katie Couric

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