



**National Association  
of Hispanic Journalists**

October 18, 2007

**Kathy Saunders**  
Vice President and General Manager  
KDFW-TV Fox 4  
400 N. Griffin Street  
Dallas, TX 75202

Dear Ms. Saunders:

We have learned that KDFW Fox 4 general assignment reporter Rebecca Aguilar was suspended indefinitely Tuesday for aggressive but, in our estimation, professional conduct. NAHJ, a 2,300-member-strong organization, strongly urges you to reinstate Ms. Aguilar immediately for the sake of good journalism and maintaining your newscasts' credibility in the local community and national journalism community.

Hundreds of journalists across the country have seen Ms. Aguilar's story that aired Monday, October 15 in which she interviewed James Walton, a 70-year-old man who, within three weeks, fatally shot two burglars coming onto his junkyard business, where he also lives, and wounded a third who was standing nearby, all in separate incidents.

What she did was obtain an exclusive interview for your station in a professional manner. This was a far cry from the "ambush" that has been portrayed in the blogosphere:

\* She approached Walton at his car as he was coming out of a store where he bought another rifle to replace the one confiscated by police.

\* She knew where he would be because he told her where he would be.

\* He got in his car and she stood at the car as they had a conversation. The car was never started, he made no attempt to leave and he kept talking to her.

\* Though he requested not to have his face shown, his face had already been shown on your station and on others in the area prior to the interview.

\* When he decided he didn't want to talk anymore, he said goodbye, she did the same, and they parted ways.

The questions asked were those any reporter would ask to elicit answers from someone. Mr. Walton's response to the question was passionate and eloquent and never would have been obtained had she not asked the question. We note that while she was criticized for asking whether he was "trigger happy," the fact that she asked whether he was in fear for his life goes unmentioned by Ms. Aguilar's critics. That is unfortunate and unfair.

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The truth is that Mr. Walton's initial response to Ms. Aguilar's appearance was good natured and humorous, joking about having to use his new shotgun on her. It was not her presence that drove him to tears, but rather the entire situation he found himself in. It's hardly the first time that a subject being interviewed lets his emotions come through and cries on camera, sometimes precisely because he is compelled to tell his side of the story or relishes the chance to do so.

Any reporter should and would question him. It's our job. If someone shoots a burglar as he is climbing through the window of his place of business and home, shoots a second person to death three weeks later under the same circumstances, and in between, shoots and wounds another person standing nearby, wouldn't any reporter or editor want the viewers and readers to see what he has to say about it?

So her suspension certainly mystifies us. The only explanation we can think of is that the news director, Maria Barrs, let herself be unduly influenced by the emails and calls being received at the station from a certain segment of the viewers who apparently have other agendas and not journalism principles as their main concern. The speed and methodical response against the story strikes us as an organized or coordinated campaign and Ms. Barrs apparently succumbed to it.

More importantly, we are mystified that if this was such a great professional infraction that it warrants suspension and supervised removal from the premises, why was no one other than the reporter reprimanded? We understand that the producers, executive producer, photographer, managing editor - no one else who had a hand in assigning, producing or authorizing the piece to go on the air have been suspended or reprimanded in any way.

Ms. Aguilar received the Broadcast Journalist of the Year Award this month from the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, a prestigious honor that recognizes her strong journalism, investigations and advocacy, particularly on the issues of foster care, child abuse and domestic abuse. Her back-to-back Emmy awards for your station and many other awards are a testament to the quality of her work, to her leadership in the Latino community, and to her commitment to journalism that is making a difference. Many in the general Dallas community say so and they are quite aware of this suspension.

The unceremonious and humiliating way Ms. Barrs walked Ms. Aguilar out of the station before the astonished looks of her colleagues on Tuesday adds insult to injury. Even more shocking to us, Ms. Aguilar has received death threats by phone at your station as a result of this story, yet has not received support from her supervisors or management.



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The station's handling of this matter sends the wrong message to journalists throughout the country that news managers will bow to the pressures of segments of the public with special interests instead of standing up for the principles of journalism. Worse yet, it signals that journalists stand alone and without defense by the news media companies they work for when their lives are threatened for doing a job so essential to our society and democracy.

Iván Román, NAHJ's executive director, tried to reach you and Ms. Barrs Thursday to discuss the situation and express our concern. His calls were not returned. If you'd like to reach him now, respond to this letter or issue a public statement, you may contact him at (202) 662-7178 or at [iroman@nahj.org](mailto:iroman@nahj.org).

We strongly urge you to right this wrong by leaving Ms. Aguilar's suspension without effect and reinstating her immediately.

Sincerely,

Rafael Olmeda  
NAHJ President

cc: Maria Barrs, News Director, KDFW-TV Fox 4, Dallas