



Beyond the Book®



Book Expo 2006 – Books of Inspiration Cholene Espinoza

KENNEALLY:

I want to turn now to Cholene Espinoza. This biography sounds like it's for several lives, but trust me, it's really just for one. Cholene Espinoza graduated from the United States Air Force Academy in 1987 and was the second woman to fly the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft in the U.S. Air Force. She logged over 200 hours of combat time, and was awarded the Air Medal and Aerial Achievement Medal for her service. Currently, she is a captain for United Airlines on the Airbus 320 and 319.

Cholene is a military correspondent for Talk Radio News Service and was an embedded journalist with the U.S. Marine Corps 1st Tank Battalion during the Iraq War. She has also reported from Syria, Gaza, the West Bank, Jerusalem, Jordan, and Kuwait. She won the National Federation of Press Women Award and was a finalist for the New York Festivals Radio Award for her coverage of the war in 2003.

Cholene is here to talk about her book from Chelsea Green called *Through the Eye of the Storm: A Book Dedicated to Rebuilding what Katrina Washed Away*. So now we've introduced yet another element in your life, which should seem to be full enough. I guess the first question to ask is, is this a Katrina book?

ESPINOZA: Katrina was certainly the catalyst for this book. It's really a book about the human spirit and the triumph of the human spirit. I had been to Iraq as a journalist during the war as an embedded journalist and I went back during the reconstruction, and from that experience I had somewhat of a spiritual malaise, I guess you would say. I went back to flying my aircraft for United Airlines, and of course we've had our dysfunction there as well, but we seem to have gotten through that for now. And I was somewhat stuck and disillusioned. But then Katrina happened, and like so many Americans, I felt compelled to act in some way. I was angry, I was bitter, frustrated with our government, but at the same time felt like it was a moral imperative for me to go down there.

And my partner Ellen Ratner, who's here today, she had met a woman on an aircraft who has an aunt and uncle on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, and they're two African-American ministers down in the South. And we asked them if they needed some help, and they said certainly. So we diverted our vacation and went down a few weeks after the storm. And literally through the eye of the storm, which is the name of the book, through working with these phenomenal, heroic Americans, where truly the African-American church and the faith-based community in general was the center of community, not a source of divisiveness, but really the first and last responder, is how I regained my faith, not only in God but in the dignity and in the human family and the human spirit.

So I was so moved by them and how they had transformed me through their love, just as Jay's *What I Believe* individual said, the transformative power of love, I want to share that. And I also wanted to raise money to build a community center for them. So I bought a piece of property in Pass Christian, and I've written this story that weaves my life in, really, with their life. And I hope that – yes, it's a book about Katrina, but just like 9/11, just like the Iraq War and Katrina today, it's an opportunity, I believe, for a transformation in this country, healing, reconciliation, and that's really what the true spirit of this book is.

KENNEALLY: I mentioned with some levity about your life and just the remarkable things that you have done and some things that have happened to you that I'm sure you think about from time to time and find hard to believe. I think that's what makes the book interesting is that it is not only a Katrina book, it really is a memoir, whether you want to admit it or not.

You brought up 9/11 and I think, if you will, the bookend experiences 9/11 to Katrina. Something didn't happen to you on 9/11. Can you tell us what that was? And then finally, how that kind of worked its way through in that period of malaise to where you felt compelled to go to Mississippi.

ESPINOZA: Yes. What Chris is referring to is I was living in New York City – I still am – at the time of 9/11, and at the same time, I was a brand new captain based in San Francisco. And I had a trip on the 12th of September in San Francisco. So about a week before I had planned to take Flight 93 on the 11th. It was to go Newark to San Francisco. And last minute, basically a few days before September 11th, the crew desk called me and said, your trip has been changed because you flew too much this week, so we'll just start you off in Chicago. So I was going to be a passenger on that flight, not actually the pilot. So I was not on that flight because my trip had been changed.

But my classmate from the Air Force Academy, Leroy Homer, Jr., was actually the co-pilot on the flight that crashed into Pennsylvania. This was a – I guess you would say a moment of – I don't know what you – a moment of truth or a moment of – a significant emotional event, as they used to call it at behavioral science at the Air Force Academy, 101 – where I just couldn't believe it.

First of all, that 9/11 had happened. Here, I'd served in the military 13 years so that this would not happen, people would not drop off their children, go to work and never come home. But I also felt like, why Leroy and why not me? He was a phenomenal man, had worked his way up from nothing, really inner-city. And we had gone to even military prep school together, and he had a beautiful wife and a child, and I'd just seen him in June. We used to run on the beach together in California. Here, me, I'm not married. I have no relationship in my life at the time.

It wasn't until a year after that, really, that I was at his memorial service. It's interesting. I didn't tell this story in the book, but I'll share it with you since you came all this way to listen our panel. But I was standing there and they were showing this picture of Leroy and all of the crew members who died, and they had let these doves go at the same time. I was just in total grief and really inside of myself, and all of a sudden, I looked down, and this dove had landed on me. And it was as though Leroy was saying, Chuck – as he used to call me, easier than Cholene – Chuck, it's OK. Go out there. Live your life and make this world better. So I feel like this Katrina book is really an opportunity to do that.

As I've said, I've had so many blessings in my life. I flew these U-2s, I got to fly upside down in instructional jets, I've gotten to go to a war zone, I've lived in Mississippi. But yet, the greatest privilege of my life is really to feel part of something bigger than myself. That's what I learned in the military. That's what they've taught me, this small community, African-American community, but yet is open to the whole group, white and black, Latino and Asian.

So this is really a narrow miss on 9/11, but by the grace of God, I feel like I can – that I'm glad now that I made it, and as much as I miss Leroy, I feel like I'm here for a purpose.

KENNEALLY: The book conveys your experiences with Reverend Rosemary from the Mount Zion Church and her husband, and for me, reading it, I was struck by the echoes of Biblical experience in Mississippi, 2005. I thought that was remarkable. Just explain that in your own terms. Did you feel that, too? Did you feel like you were living through some kind of Biblical episode?

ESPINOZA: Since then, I've definitely felt that way. There's a chapter in the book called "Amazing Grace," and it describes Reverend Rosemary's sermon, actually. She describes the exodus of the Jewish people from slavery out of Egypt, and actually, the bishop of the area also gives a sermon around those same lines.

For me, which I don't so much talk about in the book, but since then it definitely has been as though this project, this opportunity to help this community and write about them, has been sort of my emancipation, spiritually, and in terms of my own sense of who I am. But at the same time, as you get out there and you get away

from that initial feeling, that initial rush that you're making a difference and you try to raise money for a bunch of poor people in Mississippi and you try to sell a book, for those of you who have done that, and promote a book, it is a long ways from home. It's a long ways from the air, which I enjoy. But at the same time, just as Reverend Simmons said, and what I'm reminded of as they say Mount Zion every day when they have a prayer request is the Lord is able. I don't know what exactly – who God is or what God is or how I fit into the universe, but I do know that through this love, this transformative power of love and so much support that we've gotten through this, that yes, the Lord is able, that we are able, as much as I sometimes look back on Egypt longingly and wish that I was just flying my jets like I used to.

KENNEALLY: You told me that you feel that at this moment in the country there's this potential at least, and your own belief is that there's a shift that will take religious people from a kind of aggressive, crusading stance to one that's more helpful, loving. And you quoted some lines from a song that was sung in church when you were a girl.

ESPINOZA: Yes. It's interesting that the shift that I've seen, I guess. I grew up with somewhat of an eclectic religious background, born, baptized a Catholic. When my mother became a born-again Christian shortly after divorcing my father, so I sort of went to church three or four or five times a week growing up. And one of the songs that we used to sing all the time was "They shall know we are Christians by our love. By our love, they shall know we are Christians by our love."

And we were not politicized in any way. Yet I've seen, if you read the newspapers, certainly in my (inaudible), how I grew up and very much counter to what I saw in Mississippi. Not just in the African-American community, but in the tens of thousands of volunteers who still go there today, and desperately needed today to rebuild is this sense of community and love, that we're all part of the human family, whether you're whatever race or whatever religion or whatever sexual orientation, you're welcome, that God's grace is sufficient. And I believe – It's interesting. I was running yesterday morning before the conference, and I was running on the Mall, and I never noticed this about the Mall before, but there was President Lincoln. And I realized that he's really at the end of the Mall presiding over our nation, presiding over the institutions that can either bind us or divide us. Yet he was the unifying force in probably the most perilous moment in our history.

And I believe that perhaps, yes, it may seem that we're at that again, that divisiveness, but that the spirit that I experienced in Mississippi and that I see as I travel around the country and people are pouring out their support for this project, I believe in the common goodness of Americans and our sense of hope and possibility and unity over the divisiveness of a political argument, whatever that might be, of the particular day.

KENNEALLY: If I can, just to conclude our discussion, is to emphasize that the proceeds from the book are to go to construction of a community center in Pass Christian, and that's important to you. It's not the reconstruction of the church there, it's the reconstruction of a community center, which clearly would accept anyone, right?

ESPINOZA: Yes, and it's interesting, because when we first talked about this, Reverend Williams had this vision of an educational center. She'd been a teacher for 33 years. She graduated high school at 16, certified as a teacher at 19 in 1965 in Mississippi, and she's recently become an ordained minister. So I had intended – I bought this piece of property and I had intended to deed it over to the church and then they could build this community center. And she said, let's keep it separate from the church, because I want all to be welcome and I don't want any particular denomination to feel like they own this, and this is really for everyone.

So, yes, it certainly has the leadership of Reverend Rosemary Williams, but it is definitely a very open and welcoming community down there. And right now, there's nothing. There's no community center, there's no place for the fire department, no place for the even Chamber of Commerce to meet. And of course, the kids, fortunately, are just walking distance from this piece of property. We hope to break ground right after hurricane season. This center we're designing so that it will be a shelter for future storms. It is on high ground and received very little damage during the storm.

KENNEALLY: Can I ask you to conclude, then, with reading something from a very early section of your book that sort of touches on passages from the Bible that have inspired you.

ESPINOZA: Yes. This is from the first chapter, called "Storms."

"One morning, after another sleepless night, I opened my Bible. I hadn't opened my Bible since returning from the War in Iraq. I still carried it in my suitcase on every trip and kept it next to my bedside at night as though it was a good luck charm, but it had lost its status as my compass for life.

I opened it to the following passage. 'Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.' Romans 14:13.

This passage cooled my anger, but I was still frustrated. I flipped through a few more pages and found the parable of the mustard seed. 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown, it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.' Matthew 13:31.

This parable turned my thoughts toward the tiniest of Katrina's survivors, the children, the mustard seeds, the smallest and most vulnerable. But if we did right

by them, we could give them a new opportunity and help them grow to become the leaders and protectors of their communities.

Finally, I turned to the words, ‘So the last will be first and the first will be last.’ Matthew 20:16. Throughout my life, I have found strength in this passage. It carries a message of hope into worlds filled with injustice and suffering.”

KENNEALLY: Thank you very much. And thanks to Jay, Reverend Simmons, and Cholene Espinoza.