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Sylvia Chase, Pioneering Television Newswoman, Is Dead at 80

By **Sam Roberts**

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Sylvia Chase, an Emmy Award-winning correspondent whose professionalism and perseverance in the 1970s helped a generation of women infiltrate the boys club of television news, died on Thursday in Marin County, Calif. She was 80.

Her death was confirmed by Shelley Ross, a former network news colleague, who said Ms. Chase had undergone surgery for brain cancer several weeks ago.

Ms. Chase was one of a number of correspondents hired by network and local television news departments — along with Connie Chung, Cassie Mackin, Marya McLaughlin, Virginia Sherwood, Lesley Stahl and others — at a time when women were striving to be taken seriously and to defy being typecast as eye candy for male viewers.

While they had been preceded a decade earlier by pioneers like Marlene Sanders, Ms. Chase and her contemporaries were members of a freshman class still more concerned with getting into broadcast news on the ground floor than worried about being passed over for promotion later on because of a glass ceiling.

Bill Moyers, who worked with her on the PBS series “Now With Bill Moyers,” said in an email that Ms. Chase “would quit before giving in to a less-than-honorable higher-up who insisted on compromising a story, and she was a breakthrough pioneer for woman in journalism and in coverage of kids in need.”

He added, “In the internecine conflicts at either CBS or ABC — between journalists trying to get it right and brass playing it safe — she had your back because she knew you would have hers.”

Ms. Chase was an original member of the reporting team for the weekly ABC News magazine “20/20”; a correspondent for another ABC News series, “Primetime”; and the producer and host of a daytime program for CBS, “Magazine.” She also anchored the nightly news on KRON-TV in San Francisco.

She broke ground on topics like sex abuse in the workplace and in prison. She also reported on a diet pill that was linked to lung disease; a treatment program for drug-addicted musicians; an epidemic of diabetes (a disease that she endured herself) among Native Americans in New Mexico; racism in law enforcement; and publicly funded programs that provided horrific care for disabled children.

She won the Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University and George Foster Peabody awards and shared an Emmy in 1978 with her producer, Stanhope Gould, for a report on exploding automobile gas tanks. TV Guide once called her “the most trusted woman on TV.”



Ms. Chase, center, in 1983 with fellow correspondents for the ABC News program "20/20," from left: Bob Brown, Tom Jarriel, Geraldo Rivera and John Stossel. In front of them are the program's anchors, Hugh Downs and Barbara Walters. Steve Fenn/ABC

Sylvia Belle Chase was born on Feb. 23, 1938, in Northfield, Minn., to Kelsey David Chase and Sylvia (Bennett) Chase. After her parents divorced, she was raised by her grandmother in Minneapolis. The grandmother was listed in census records as the custodian of an apartment house whose tenants included Sylvia's aunt, a radio announcer.

Sylvia's first broadcasting job was reporting on junior high school doings for a show that she and her older sister produced for local radio.

"People said Sylvia was 'tough,' but in fact it was principle that prompted her to stand her ground," Mr. Moyers said. She was, he said, shaped by the New England liberalism of Northfield's founders and by its good Samaritan heritage. (The town's local hero was a banker who in 1876 refused the James-Younger gang's demand to open the vault because he would not betray the trust of his fellow citizens.)

Ms. Chase earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1961 from the University of California, Los Angeles, taking two extra years to graduate because she was working her way

through college as a receptionist. Her brief marriage to Robert Rosenstone, a history professor at the California Institute of Technology, ended in divorce. Complete information on survivors was not immediately available. She lived in Belvedere, Calif.

Ms. Chase worked for Democratic legislators and candidates in California in the 1960s until she was hired by the Los Angeles radio station KNX. In 1971 she joined CBS News in New York, where she wrote and narrated a new radio series, “The American Woman,” which replaced the on-air advice column “Dear Abby.” She was later a correspondent on the “CBS Evening News With Walter Cronkite.”

Ms. Chase was hired by ABC News in 1977 and was a correspondent for “20/20” from 1978 to 1985. KRON promoted her return to California in 1985 with billboards proclaiming, “The Chase Is On.”

“I resolve to raise public awareness about two issues,” she told The San Francisco Chronicle in 1988: “the perils facing California’s children and the growing crisis in caring for AIDS patients.”

Ms. Chase left San Francisco in 1990 and returned to ABC in New York. When her contract was not renewed after the network retrenched in 2001, she moved to PBS, where she narrated a documentary series titled “Exposé” and joined “Now With Bill Moyers” as a correspondent.

In 1973, during the Watergate scandal, Ms. Chase was determined to get an interview with President Richard M. Nixon’s younger daughter, Julie Nixon Eisenhower, who was emerging as one of Nixon’s foremost public defenders. She revealed her successful strategy to Savvy magazine.

“The basic rule is not to take ‘No,’ ever,” Ms. Chase said. “Call again and again, every day.”

Correction: January 8, 2019

An earlier version of this obituary misspelled the given name of the former colleague who confirmed Ms. Chase’s death. She is Shelley Ross, not Shelly.

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