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## PAM ZEKMAN

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# PAM ZEKMAN

*WBBM's Super Sleuth with a Soft Touch*

**By Marilyn Soltis Photography by Will Crockett**

Powerhouse investigative reporter Pam Zekman seems an enigma. In person, the redheaded, diminutive persona is in stark contrast to the competent stone-faced journalist Chicagoans have admired for two decades. She exudes a passionate concern for the victims of injustice—despite her tenure on the job and professional exterior.

Zekman's office niche at CBS is a no-nonsense set-up with stacks of files surrounding her desk: wall space is plastered with awards and photos. Her investigations of petty fraud to full-blown conspiracies are interrupted by 20 to 30 phone calls a day from unsuspecting victims who have no one else to turn to after the government and justice system have failed. They're the people who keep her going and inspire investigations.

At age 48, the two-time Pulitzer Prize winner has little to prove to herself or her audience, but she still speaks of her work with the zealousness of a '60s college student. She graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1965, calling herself a passive sympathizer in those turbulent times. Neither an activist nor a feminist, her evenings generally hosted a call from her ophthalmologist father in Hyde Park warning her not to do anything she might regret. She returned to Chicago equipped with an English major that prepared her for nothing but teaching. She opted for social work instead.

Social work was a far cry from her upper middle class childhood in Hyde Park, where the family driver escorted her to her numerous school activities and daily ice skating lessons. "I got acquainted with areas of the city I had never known before. Imagine, I was 21 years old, unmarried, and I was counselling people on how to raise adopted children," she recalls. "When I was a social worker, and I use the term loosely, we were supposed to ferret out baby-selling, but we were powerless to do anything

about it. Later, one of the first projects I did for the *Sun-Times* was about babies being sold for \$10,000 to \$20,000," she says.

In Zekman's story, "The Baby Selling Racket," reporters posed as adoptive parents and natural mothers to expose the doctors and lawyers that operated across

## **"They talked about having my tongue ripped out and things like that"**

state lines and between countries in baby selling schemes. As a result of the story, two lawyers were convicted and disbarred.

This is the payoff in her line of work—and the adrenaline that keeps investigative reporters on the hunt. As regulatory agencies bog down due to lack of funding and the private sector becomes more hazardous for unsuspecting victims, Zekman's windowless corner at CBS that she shares with producer Sandy Bergo and rotating Northwestern University Medill interns is a kind of grand central of last resort. She's still bulldogging corrupt politicians, con men, faulty manufacturers, unethical doctors, inadequate hospitals, substandard nursing homes, and dangerous child care centers. Even Zekman admits that despite her years in the business she can still underestimate how low some people will go for money.

Her work is not without hazards. In "License to Deal," Medicaid patients were sent undercover to prove that a chain of 15 pharmacies were selling prescription drugs to addicts and charging Medicaid for other drugs and nonexistent exams. "One of the pharmacy owners told people he wanted to have me killed," says Zekman.

In her investigation of a national chain of martial arts schools employing mind control and intimidation to brainwash students, Zekman again faced some fairly

unfriendly guys. "Two of the officials sat across from me and said an accident was going to happen to me—that they couldn't control it. They talked about having my tongue ripped out and things like that," she recalls calmly.

Zekman states matter of factly that every reporter faces some danger in searching out stories around the city. "Undercover work has not put me into any more of a difficult position," she says. "Unless, of course, you're caught. Sometimes I felt like CBS was written on my forehead. I was worried about playing a role while at the same time asking questions without playing it too smart. You have to strike a balance to make it productive," she says.

Perhaps her most famous undercover assignment was back in 1978 in her print journalism days when Zekman and co-workers opened a tavern to document the corruption and massive tax skimming endured by small businessmen. It resulted in the city's activation of team inspections and the state's auditing of cash businesses. It also garnered her work a segment on "60 Minutes."


CBS wooed her to television in 1981 after 13 years in print journalism with the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times*, and of course, her initiation at the City News Bureau. At this point, Zekman and her unit were the only game in town for the kind of full-fledged investigative reporting that she must now condense into three-and-a-half-minute spots. "The business has changed, but there's a tremendous need out there for the kind of work we do," she says.

The cutbacks of the '80s in regulatory agencies combined with recessionary influences have made scamming a national sport with little interference. "In terms of consumer fraud, things have gotten worse. I still get outraged by the stories I hear. One elderly woman who barely spoke English was told by a contractor that she










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needed a whole new furnace. She signed a \$6,000 or \$7,000 contract and they ripped up her basement. She had nowhere else to turn. You have to admire a lot of these people just for coping sometimes. It's not being jaded, but sometimes you just feel overwhelmed by the amount of trouble out there. In our fashion, we're able to help a lot of them because we're able to break through the bureaucracy," she says.

"Every story we do we find a regulatory agency that's understaffed, underfunded, and incapable of dealing with fraud. Also, industry and the regulators have a very cozy relationship. There's a revolving door of regulators going into industry. The typical response to that is to have more qualified people, but that's probably not going to happen because the money's not there. The question is, where do we best put our resource, because the cutbacks are going to keep coming," she says.

Despite her one-woman crusade, Zekman found time to buy her first house with her husband of 16 years, Rick Soll, a writer and editor. Their Buena Park three-story building boasted a lovely "baboon ass or Pepto Bismol pink" upper facade that Zekman says was the eyesore of the neighborhood. They figured it was the least of their problems, and soon painted it white. Zekman laughs. "We've had all the

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kinds of things go wrong--like those I've received complaints about all these years: dealing with contractors, roofers, and the basement flooding," she says.

An apartment dweller all her life, Zekman now confronts the challenges of gardening with her black thumb. "I'm trying and I have some neighbors who help, but every year I learn about things like aphids, fungus and white gook," she says. She finds time to paint and sculpt while her husband revels in a basement full of drums.

Zekman hopes to just continue on doing what she's always done--fighting for those who have no voice. When she was inducted into the Chicago Journalism Hall of Fame in 1991, none other than the acerbic Mike Royko said of her, "Pam...a pursuer of evil-doers, a defender of the down-trodden, a journalistic pit-bull, a super-star, a great: What a Babe!" □