

Team Stanley

For almost a decade Charlene and Eddie Stanley have been the face of eNews in central South Africa. **Willemien Marais** discovers what drives the team that made a clean sweep of the television awards in the 2008 Vodacom Journalist of the Year competition.

It was their love of stories that led Charlene and Eddie Stanley to television news.

Charlene studied law at the University of the Free State. "Although journalism was at the back of my mind, I had to make a choice. I had a bursary to study at Kovies (the University of the Free State) and at that stage the university did not offer a dedicated course in journalism." Because law students had to attend evening classes, Charlene had some time on her hands. This she spent at the SABC, where she worked as a part-time production assistant. Working at the SABC was the catalyst for two important events in Charlene's life: she was introduced to television news, and she met Eddie Stanley.

Eddie – also not originally trained for what he is doing so brilliantly today – has the Defence Force to thank for his decision to change careers. "I was a career soldier for five years, but decided to leave when they wanted to send me to war. At that stage I became a Christian and had serious religious objections to what was happening in our country." Eddie resigned and joined the SABC, where he specialised in the recording of classical music. "Music is my other great love," he explains. In the end, his true passion won, and Eddie became a news cameraman, and husband to Charlene.

"We left the SABC in 1999 to join newcomer e.tv," says Charlene. And adds with a slight smile: "Everybody warned

us against the move, saying e.tv wouldn't last three months!" Today, a decade later, e.tv boasts an independent, 24-hour news channel, which has not only changed the face of television news in the country, but also the way in which Team Stanley operates.

While Charlene is the journalist of the outfit, Eddie must have an in-depth understanding of journalism. "Out of respect for the profession I will not call myself a journalist, but I do understand it. However, I prefer a different method of storytelling. I'm a tradesman."

The Stanleys are drawn to different aspects of the craft. Charlene explains that there are many similarities between law and journalism. "Both are based on the search for justice. However, the wheels of the justice system turn slowly, while with journalism your story can be on the evening news that very same day." Eddie, on the other hand, loves the power of video – the movement, the sound, the emotion. And he is adamant: "Television is not just radio with pictures." Both refer to a recent story (for which they won a 2008 Vodacom Journalist of the Year award in the television feature category) on poverty at a farm school in the Free State. They agree that no other medium would have had the same impact.

The loss of expertise in local journalism is a problem that needs to be addressed urgently, say the Stanleys. Eddie explains: "A couple of years ago, I was fortunate to attend the BBC's most advanced course in camera work. While it was an amazing experience, I also noticed that a respected senior cameraman at the BBC is often 65 years old. In South Africa, people do it for three or four years before moving on. It's this loss of knowledge; of people who are able to do their work with precision – especially on the technical side – that worries me."

Charlene believes that learning to write a basic television story is not that difficult: "TV news is short and punchy and not impossible to learn. However, that is where most people stop. Of course many new TV journalists think it's a glamorous job. They quit very soon when they realise that most of the work is done off camera. The difference between satisfactory and great is in attention to detail."

Much has been written about the so-called juniorisation of newsrooms following a 2002 skills audit by the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF), and while attempts



Charlene and Eddie Stanley, with their son, Jesse

Charlene on...

Eddie: "He has an amazing ability to think on his feet, and he is a technical perfectionist."

Work ethic: "It must be about the truth."

Their audience: "Feedback is what makes it worthwhile. When someone tells you that they've been touched by a story you've done five years ago – that is what it's all about."

The industry: "Experience remains the only true way to learn. You must put in the time."

Stories: "We specialise in *klein dorpie* stories – those remarkable stories that are often not told because no-one pays attention."

Eddie on...

Charlene: "She puts in a lot of planning, and aesthetically she is so much stronger than I am."

Work ethic: "You never arrive."

Their audience: "People are more intelligent than we give them credit for."

The industry: "We sorely lack true icons."

Stories: "I really dislike doing court stories."



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Speaking of plans, how does Team Stanley operate? "We're a team born out of necessity," says Eddie.

But it still works very well, as is evident from the impressive collection of award certificates on the wall of their Bloemfontein office. "It's difficult to explain what we do or how we do it – it just works for us," says Charlene. They agree that planning is important. "You must have a concept, but at the same time we're not working with actors. You must be able to adapt to the situation," says Eddie.

Here, Eddie's ability to think on his feet is an advantage, says Charlene, who tends to think a lot more about a story. "Eddie's experience enables him to work with what he finds – sometimes I will change my plans because of a great shot that he managed to find."

Being married does not influence their work. "We discuss everything we do – sometimes these discussions can get heated, but we don't fight a lot. We usually agree on what must be done, and how to do it," says Charlene. They're candid about religion and their dependence on what they believe in. They pray about their stories. "People laugh when they hear that, but that is our approach and it works for us," says Eddie.

Perhaps the secret to their success is that their work and lives are intertwined. "We're always working, and in a sense we never work. That's a state of mind you can only achieve when you truly love what you're doing," explains Charlene. The last word on their success belongs to Eddie: "Our work is an absolute joy."

The team's next decade in storytelling has started with the addition of a new Stanley. Since his birth in November last year, son Jesse has been accompanying his parents in their quest to tell those stories that few others are aware of – let alone telling. ✍️

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have been made at correcting this imbalance, the problem persists. "At the BBC you'll only often be allowed to film a story after some five years of training," says Eddie. A contemplative break in the interview confirms that this is not the case locally. Some of the reasons for this are obvious: a lack of resources, for one. But Eddie believes that a lack of training by truly experienced professionals is a stumbling block that we can overcome. "People leave the industry too soon. After five years, they want the top positions."

Training is a passion for Team Stanley. Eddie, in particular, strongly believes in solid training – a fact that was underlined by the presence of e.tv's new Free State news team, Palesa Matshane and Charlé Lombard, who sat in on the interview with *The Media*. While setting up for their interview, Eddie and Charlene took the time to explain what they were doing, or to elaborate on comments made during the interview.

The appointment of Matshane and Lombard provides another hint at a change in direction for Eddie and Charlene. "The station's decision to become involved in 24-hour news has led to us being able to focus on what we really love – specialist documentary work."

Once the new team is able to function independently, the Stanleys will slowly move into the production of documentaries. "Of course we'll still do current affairs, but a documentary offers so much more in terms of storytelling and making a difference," explains Charlene. Their first wildlife documentary on Kimberley's flamingos is all but done – "it's going to be entered into a film competition in Japan," Eddie adds excitedly – and there are plans for many more to come.