

# GLAMOUR

## Global Diary...Mexico

***She stands up to the toughest criminals Mexican thugs and corrupt politicians hate Lydia Cacho – and fear her exposes. Mariane Pearl talks to a woman who hasn't let jail or threats of rape and death stop her from writing the truth. Watch the video at (<http://www.glamour.com/news/videos/2006/10/30/mexico>) .***

**By Mariane Pearl**



Lydia Cacho, with her constant companion —an armed bodyguard

When I first heard about Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho, I knew I wanted to meet her. This remarkable woman created an international uproar last year after she wrote a book claiming that local power brokers were tied to a pedophile ring in the popular resort town of Cancun. But she, and I, had a problem: Too many people wanted Lydia dead.

For the past two decades, this beautiful 43-year-old has given a voice to Mexico's women, children and victims of abuse. She has written about everything from domestic violence to organized crime and political corruption. As a result, she has been jailed and threatened with rape and death. Now she travels with bodyguards almost everywhere she goes.

Clearly, if I planned to see Lydia, I had to be willing to take a risk. I considered this as I sat in my apartment in Paris one evening and watched my four-and-a-half-year-old son, Adam, play by my side. He was wearing a Superman cape on top of a Zorro outfit, and was chasing bad guys with his water gun. Adam never met his father. I was five months pregnant when my husband, Danny, a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, was murdered in Pakistan as he was investigating Islamic terrorists after 9/11.

I thought about the many journalists around the world who have been killed since Danny's death. Iraq has been especially dangerous for reporters, but so has Mexico, where more than a dozen journalists have died in the last few years for writing about the

drug trade and other criminal activities. I started to worry that reporters could become an endangered species. And so I decided to fly to Mexico.

At Lydia's suggestion, we agreed not to meet in her home base of Cancun, but in the capital, Mexico City, which was in the midst of its own ordeal during my visit in August. Following the country's recent presidential elections, thousands of protesters had transformed the city's main avenue into a vast camping site. People demanding a recount of the votes had come together to shout slogans, wave signs or gather signatures. Everywhere I walked, I felt men's eyes upon me. Some of the stares were harmless, but others were lecherous, making me feel like one of those scary sex dolls with a round mouth. Such a testosterone-filled atmosphere made me appreciate why Lydia has focused her work on women.

When she and I met, Lydia struck me as incredibly composed for someone who is forced to consider that every morning might be her last. I sat by her side in the car as we inched along the busy streets of Mexico City, on our way to a quiet suburb. Lydia talked constantly on her cell phone. Each time she hung up, the phone would ring again, and she would reassure the worried people on the other end.

She began to tell me how she got her start in this business. "At first," she said, smiling, "I wasn't sure my writing could make a difference." In fact, when she moved to Cancun in her early twenties, Lydia didn't intend to change the world in any major way. "I am a melancholic at heart," she said half-jokingly. "I pictured myself living by the sea, writing novels and painting." But Lydia had come from a family of strong women who were feminists before the term became trendy. Her French grandmother opposed the Nazis in Europe during World War II, then married a Portuguese man and eventually moved to Mexico. Lydia's mother, who grew up in Mexico, became an activist for women's rights. She felt strongly that it was better to expose her children to the world than to protect them from it, and so the family lived in a poor neighborhood, even though they could afford better. Lydia's mother used to tell her, "Once you have witnessed something, you bear a responsibility for it."

No wonder that soon after Lydia moved to Cancun—a paradise of lush beach resorts—she began to feel a sense of unease. "This was a man-made heaven built solely to make money," she told me. "It was a city without a heart. Nobody had bothered to think much about schools or social services or even culture." Her journalistic instincts began to kick in, and she set out to find local residents who had been displaced by the builders. She discovered a handful of them in an impoverished community two hours from the tourist zone. "There was no running water. No food. I saw a malnourished woman whose baby had just died of hunger," she said. She decided to write a column about it for a local newspaper. "The reaction was extraordinary," Lydia said. Readers were so moved that they donated supplies and medicine. Thus she changed the course of her own life for good.

When Lydia and I finally made it out of the traffic jam in Mexico City, I realized that there were no bodyguards following us. "I lost them!" she said with a childlike smile,

and for a moment we felt free, as if we were in one of my favorite movies, *Thelma and Louise*.

Later, as we walked together along the suburb's cobblestone streets, an old man on crutches approached me. "Is that Lydia Cacho?" he asked. I nodded. "Please tell her to be careful," he whispered. "There are evil people."

Lydia continued to tell me her story, explaining how she made waves again early in her career by writing about the proliferation of HIV in the Cancun area. The local governor called her at 11 P.M. the night the story ran, she said. He told her, "There is no AIDS in my province." She replied, "In yours maybe not, but in mine, yes!" The next day she appeared on a radio show and talked about the call. This very public act surprised her fellow journalists. "Even my colleagues didn't understand me," Lydia said. "Sadly, many Mexican journalists are easy to buy. Some of my counterparts live on bribe money, and those who won't give in to bribes usually get killed."

Lydia kept writing, mainly about government corruption and domestic violence, but soon the phone calls she received threatened her life.

In 1998 Lydia was brutally beaten and raped in the bathroom of a bus station. Despite suffering a concussion and broken ribs, she got herself to a hospital. Lydia does not know whether the attack was related to her work.

This experience made her even more determined to stand up for women. At the same time, Lydia decided that reporting wasn't enough. So she raised money to build a center for battered women. "Women had no rights, and if they stood up for themselves, they could be beaten or killed," she said. Women now come to the shelter from all walks of life: wives of drug dealers and farmers, as well as American girls who get assaulted on spring break. The center provides health care and schooling for children.

In 2004 Lydia set off the biggest firestorm of her career with her book about the pedophile ring in Cancun, *Los Demonios del Eden (The Demons of Eden)*. She was arrested on libel charges a year later (under Mexican law, Lydia explained, reporters have to prove that they didn't intend to damage the reputation of their subject). She said she was driven by police to a jail 20 hours from Cancun, while the officers hinted at a plan to rape her. She was released unharmed. Then, last February, the media got hold of a tape on which a businessman named in her book appeared to be plotting with a Mexican governor to have her arrested and raped. (The men dispute the legality of the tape.) Amnesty International filed protests on her behalf, and Lydia talked about it on shows such as ABC's *Nightline*. "This is my strategy," Lydia said. "Each time someone threatens me, I talk about it publicly."

Lydia, who still faces some libel charges, said that Mexico's Supreme Court is investigating whether her civil rights were violated during her arrest. She is continuing to work as a reporter while also teaching journalism workshops. "Reporters are not world-peace missionaries," she said. "But by conveying people's struggles, we create awareness, which is the first step to bringing about change."

When I left Mexico City, I feared for Lydia's life, but I also felt inspired by her mission. I understood her humble sense of triumph. Knowledge and responsibility bring hope, while ignorance feeds on fear. If Lydia stopped halfway, she would be like someone who sees light at the end of a tunnel but chooses to remain in the dark.

Back in Paris with Adam, I thought about what I would say to my son if he ever wanted to become a reporter. I would tell him that journalism was the cement of my relationship with his father. I so believe in the importance of this profession that I could never oppose the same ambition in my child. As we were having dinner one night, Adam asked me about my trip to Mexico. He wanted to know if I had caught any bad guys. "No," I answered. "But wait a few years, and I'll tell you about a woman named Lydia."

*Mariane Pearl is a documentary filmmaker and the author of A Mighty Heart: The Brave Life and Death of My Husband, Danny Pearl.*

**Photos: Adriana Zehbrauskas/Polaris**

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