

Signing Off

Longtime TV reporter Cheryl Chodun prepares for final broadcast on Channel 7.

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Sitting at the kitchen table in her tidy Huntington Woods home, Cheryl Chodun reflects on more than three decades of impassioned, dedicated, tireless work as a journalist in one of the most dangerous cities in America with a smile and a few tears.

There was the day she shouted back and forth with Detroit's fiery former mayor, the late Coleman Young; the time she bonded with the grieving families of two Westland teenagers found murdered in Detroit; and the chaotic moment when she was part of the media frenzy during the arrest of Timothy McVeigh after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. Chodun flew on a campaign press plane with future President Bill Clinton; she was there when South African President Nelson Mandela visited Detroit.

You name it; she's covered it. First as a freelance newspaper writer, then as a news writer at WXYZ-TV (Channel 7), then as a radio reporter for WCXI and WWJ, and finally as an on-air reporter at WXYZ, a job she's held for the last 25 years. But on Friday, July 26, Chodun will sign off for the last time. She's retiring and leaving the job she loves because she says it's time for a new phase in her life.

"There is no question I will miss this," she wrote in an open letter to viewers posted on Channel 7's website. "Looking out at all of our viewers every night and often in the afternoon, telling them what's going on ... covering breaking news and getting answers; I can't imagine not doing that. I will miss walking into the newsroom and seeing everyone. This is like a second home to me. But, all good things, as we all know, must come to an end."

It's early afternoon on a weekday, a few hours before Chodun is scheduled to arrive at the television station in Southfield for the 3-11 p.m. night shift she's worked Monday through Friday for the last decade. Her hair and makeup are already done. She's petite and full of energy; warm, open and sincere, just the way she appears on the news — traits that have no doubt contributed to her success and staying power.

"Cheryl is the quintessential broadcast journalist," says WXYZ-TV news director Tim Dye. "She comes to work each

day ready to chase the biggest stories. She always responds to breaking news. She always has a source that's better than every other reporter. She always brings a sense of historical perspective to her story. She always looks out for the people of Southeast Michigan, and she always lends a hand to a new reporter or an old colleague."

Chodun is one of the last remaining veteran TV news reporters in Detroit. She has a reputation for being tenacious, fast and first, but also compassionate. She earned her stripes chasing the facts, reporting on court cases, police investigations and unsolved crimes, and sharing people's personal stories, all while standing in the heat and humidity, the sun, the rain, or the ice and snow.

Much of her time is spent riding around in a news van, going from city-to-city and door-to-door, wherever the story of the night may lead. She travels with a videographer who does the camera work and editing, but Chodun has also done it herself. She's proud to point out she's changed with the times and technology.

"I'm on Facebook and Twitter," she says. "When I started, we had typewriters and I had to race to a payphone to call in my report. Now, people can watch us on their phones."

She adds her job is challenging and not "glamorous," like some people may think. She describes it as "nonstop, intense and deadline-stressful," but says it's never gotten old.

"I could keep doing this because I love it that much," she says. "I'm as passionate today as I was at the beginning."

Lucky Break

Chodun did not set out to become a reporter. At age 19, she married her husband, Stan. After graduating from Wayne State University, she briefly taught grades 5-6 in Royal Oak. Then the couple had two children, Scott and Pam, now in their 40s. One day, Chodun recalls writing a press release for the children's nursery school and dropping it off at a local newspaper (with pigtails in her hair and a child on each hip). She told the editor she'd like to come back without the pigtails or the children to interview for a freelance writing position.

She got the job in 1978, and as luck (or fate) would have it, she was given an

assignment to write about TV anchorwomen. Former WXYZ-TV anchor Diana Lewis was so impressed with Chodun's writing skills, she urged her to apply for a writing job in the newsroom. Without any previous TV news experience, Chodun got that job, too. She later left the newsroom to hone her on-air skills in radio, but in 1988, Channel 7 invited her back to work in front of the camera. She's been there ever since.

"I want to thank everyone who has watched all these years," she says. "I so thank those who have allowed me into their homes literally during the most difficult times in their lives. I feel so fortunate, really, to have been able to do this, to meet so many interesting people, to tell everyday stories and incredible, even unbelievable stories."

In her letter, Choden also thanks her co-workers and even her competitors, who she says kept her on her toes. During her career, she received two local Emmy awards, including one for individual excellence in reporting. The National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Michigan chapter also honored Chodun with a Silver Circle award for 25 years of outstanding work.

She has a box full of other awards (from the Associated Press and other organizations) and mementoes; various head shots over the years with different hairstyles, thank-you letters from people whose stories she's told, even a copy of Coleman Young's autobiography with the inscription: "To Cheryl Chodun who is too nice to be in the media." She's filling a new box now with cards, letters, emails and messages from fans sad to see her leave.

Off camera, Chodun says it can be hard to unwind after working the night shift; she believes learning to relax will be one of her biggest challenges in retirement. Late at night, she's often wide awake and online, checking Facebook, sending emails or playing Words With Friends. She also enjoys reading fictional crime novels (even though she covers the real thing). In the car, you might catch her singing along to rock or country music CDs. But her biggest escape is camping.

"We have a pretty cool trailer that we



WXYZ-TV reporter Cheryl Chodun will retire on July 26.

keep in a beautiful campground on the west side of the state," she says. "We go there and our children and three grandchildren (ages 5, 12 and 15) join us."

Chodun works out with a trainer at least once a week and walks to stay in shape. She's walked the 60-mile breast cancer three-day four times and raised at least \$20,000 for breast cancer research. Over the years, she's emceed countless events for various organizations. She plans to continue doing that and public speaking in the years to come.

So what's next for this on-the-go news-woman? Chodun has plenty on her "to-do" list. It includes teaching journalism classes to up-and-coming reporters and writers, volunteering (she and her husband deliver food for Yad Ezra and are members of Temple Beth El in Bloomfield Hills) and spending more time with their children and grandchildren. She also wants to share her wisdom with young people "so they don't end up in the news."

"I've seen so many stories where teens make bad choices that land them in jail or prison just because they 'went along,'" she says.

Chodun also expects her phone to keep ringing with tips from trusted sources and questions from co-workers who could use some extra help with their stories.

Like any skilled storyteller, she appreciates the value of a good ending.

Chodun admits her departure from WXYZ has been difficult and emotional at times, but believes it's a fitting finale to a whirlwind career.

"It's going to be different," she says. "I like the adrenaline rush of getting out there. But this is a good ending. It's my decision — and I'm going out still pretty much at the top of my game." □