

Matthew S. Mungai

When looking at the diverse issues and places covered by journalist Christopher Lett, you'd never know that his desire to impact others started as a kid watching Rod Serling in "The Twilight Zone."

Lett, 35 from Atlanta, is a former producer and researcher for CNN, and currently a 2018-2019 Ted Cripps Fellow in Environmental Journalism at the University of Colorado Boulder. Chris previously covered stories on Chicago's gun violence, flooding and fires in Ghana, Louisiana's Cancer Alley, Tulsa's Black Wall Street Massacre and most recently, the results of women gathering fuel wood at a mass scale in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. As a journalist of color, and one with a background different than that of the mainstream, Lett would be the first to tell you that creating a ground-breaking story is not about being a social activist, rather, it is about combining the most important pieces of a story with characters that speak to issues so uncovered but so broadly received.

"What led me to become a journalist was not news, it's shows like that, because the reason I got into news and TV was to have an impact, and this show had such a social impact at that. Even though it was a scary show, he brought the fears of society to a head through abstract forms."

Society itself still tends to classify the perspectives of people based on their race. When many newsrooms hire a journalist of color, they often want someone to represent the role of an activist when that is simply not their job; "you're constantly swimming upstream to make sure your voice as a journalist is heard, and to make sure you're doing justice to both sides of the story," Lett said.

Born the youngest of four in Atlanta, Georgia, Lett grew up in rural South-Central Virginia in the town of McKenney. Here, the shy boy found solitude and tranquility in the equally quiet wilderness. Apart from working at his parents' funeral home, by the time he reached 8-years-old Lett started working on political campaigns with his father who was a political organizer. Chris became ever more socially conscious thanks to his dad and his dad's friends who were civil rights lieutenants. They became father figures to Lett in a way that influenced his own desire to make an impact in the world around him.

After graduating from Guilford College in 2006, Lett volunteered for AmeriCorps VISTA: a national service program designed to alleviate instances of societal poverty across the country. In 2008, Lett earned a spot working at CNN's global headquarters in his hometown of Atlanta. He started as a Tour Guide before working his way up to a researcher and then ultimately to a field producer in 2014. Lett says that he always felt the need to impact people and it just so happens that being a journalist became the best way for him to do that. Amidst all the issues he covered, Chris says that the people have remained the most influential to the stories themselves.

"People are your story, and yes, there are issue stories, but it is the people that give face to those issues that then give the most impact," he said.

Genevieve Belmaker, a contributing Forests Editor at Mongabay, worked with Lett in the recent article about women and fuel wood in Ethiopia. She recently spoke highly about Lett's ability to connect to those he is covering.

"Chris cares deeply about people, and is particularly sensitive towards discrimination issues, and those whose voices are underrepresented," she said.

Lett has always been aware of environmental and societal concerns within America, but in being a field producer, he can show stories of those concerns to a wide audience. When asked if being a journalist has affected his bias towards society, Chris said, “I think I have always seen America as a chaotic place. Field producing has simply given me a platform to explain the chaos from a recognizable perspective.”

When Chris is not being a field reporter, you can find him hiking to a nice yoga spot, painting with oil pastels, or enjoying his greatest passion in photography; which he showed the world in his latest article on Ethiopia as well as in his earlier work with Ghana’s flooding and fires.

Christopher Lett currently works at CU with the Ted Scripps Fellowship. The program allows him to further his learning in the areas of environmental and economic sustainability, along with history. He remains focused on creating stories that deal with issues relating to oceans, coastal people, overfishing and other climate related stories. Lett continues to work on stories that are underrepresented in order to make sure they’re told with the proper level of sensitivity. Why? Because that is the job of a journalist.