In this episode, Dr. Abraham Kim interviews Larry Abramson, the Dean of the University of Montana’s School of Journalism, and discusses transitioning to life in Montana, the fast-paced world of journalism, Dean Abramson’s vision for the School of Journalism, and much more.

Abe: Welcome everyone to the Mansfield Global Leadership Podcast.

Allen Sangster: You know Abe, I can’t really think of a more intimidating podcast interview to do than with someone with the background of our next guest, Larry Abramson. I mean before becoming the Dean of the University Of Montana School of Journalism, the guy spent three decades as a professional journalist doing radio stories for NPR. Tell me, how was it to do that interview with him?

Abe: Well, it was kind of interesting turning the tables on him and interviewing him about his life and his experience. I thought it was a fascinating discussion with him, I think. What I didn’t know was that he was Ira Glass’ boss; This American Life is one of my favorite podcasts that I listen to. But I thought it was also interesting just about the transitions he’s going through in his life from the news room to the university life. And then we were able to dig a little deeper into his past and especially when he was a journalist during 9/11 when he was in Washington D.C. He reminded us during that time that it was not only the terrorist attack on New York and Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania, but around the D.C. area, they had the Anthrax scare and also the sniper shooting which was fascinating.

Allen: Despite the intimidation factor I think you’ve captured some great content here and I think it’s probably best prefaced by giving a short history of Dean Abramson’s accomplishments. As I mentioned earlier, Dean Abramson came to the University of Montana from National Public Radio or NPR where he began his work as a tape cutter on the graveyard shift of Morning Addition and ended his radio career as the Pentagon Correspondent. Dean Abramson ran NPR’s national desk, he won numerous awards for covering big stories like the 1992 LA riots and the Waco Siege. Over the course of his career he covered the FBI, the Federal Communications Commission, the Defense Department; he spent five years as NPR’s education correspondent. It goes without saying that Dean Abramson has a wealth of experience and knowledge that’s pretty incredible. So let’s listen in as Dean Abramson talks about moving to Montana and transitioning into his role as the Dean of the School of Journalism here at the University of Montana.

Larry: I dreamed about coming to work at a university because a lot of people at this stage in their careers do that. I didn’t think about Montana until my wife actually sent me the announcement that the school was looking for a Dean. This was like a year and a half ago. So it was kind of a shot in the dark; you know something that I didn’t really think would come true. I wasn’t working on coming out here, but the more I got to know the place and once they actually brought me out here, I became really intrigued with the possibilities. Both because it’s a wonderful place and because it was going to be one of the biggest changes I would ever get to make in my life. We don’t often get opportunities to go to a new place, start a new job, meet all new people, and I love that kind of stuff.

Abe: Had you come to Montana before you applied for this job?

Larry: Not much, I think I’d been here a couple of times, really briefly, mostly driving through. I had some pretty good references, I mean I know some people here, and I have good friends who have spent time in this state and assured me that the quiet that I was looking for, the outdoors, and the
nature of the people here would be a really good fit. But I didn’t really know for sure whether it would be able to work out, and I was nervous because you come out and you interview for a few days and you don’t really know whether you’re seeing the real city. I came out in March so it was still winter pretty much and people were hunkered down and there weren’t that many people on the street, and I couldn’t tell whether it was a place where I would want to hang out. That’s your biggest concern, I think, it’s nice to be comfortable professionally and everything, but you want to know am I going to have friends? Will I be comfortable going out to dinner here? Will I be able to find seafood? That’s pretty much been a no, but on all other counts I think it’s been a great surprise.

Abe: How has the transition been for you so far? You’ve been here for about a year?

Larry: Three months. It’s still ongoing. I still feel like I’m having new experiences all the time. Some of those experiences are great. Learning my job is still a massive undertaking. When I was a reporter, my job was very much focused narrowly on what was in front of me each day, and I had the blessing of having very short deadlines, usually a few hours. So each day I had the satisfaction of completing something and going home and feeling like at least I got my story on the air. Here the timeframes are much longer, you’re talking about years. I’m adjusting to that. It takes a little bit longer concentration span to figure out what you want to do, what your goals are. You have to slow down a little bit, I think, and not be in that 90 miles an hour mode that I was in before.

Abe: I’m very familiar with that as well, coming from Washington D.C. It’s a very fast-paced place and everything moves as fast as they say a news cycle right, 24 hours and moving very quickly. Speaking of years and goals, you also come in at a very interesting time at the School of Journalism, which is their 100th anniversary. What do you hope to do as the new Dean as you look ahead at the next 100 years; I’m sure you won’t be here for the next 100 years.

Larry: I don’t think I’ll make it that long at this rate.

Abe: But in terms of, what’s the vision for the Journalism School in this next century?

Larry: Right now, one part of that vision is keeping the school’s traditions alive, because it really has a lot of strong history that we need to make sure we don’t abandon. We just had a chance to meet many, many of the alumni who came into town. Very moving for me to see 300 people who had gone to the school over the last half century, even further back I think we had some from the class of 57, and seeing their attachment and how fond their memories were. It was almost like peoples’ memory of having been in combat or something like that, it was still very present for them. I want to keep that tradition alive. I want the students who go through the program now to have the same intense personal relationships with their instructors and the same hands-on experience at the workplace that they get, which our program is really known for. Doing journalism right there in the real world.

But as you know Abe, our profession is facing some really profound challenges. This program for example is really heavily print oriented right now, has been for decades. That’s not something that I think is problematic in and of itself, but I think giving what’s happening to the newspaper industry, students need to be competent in any platform, whether it’s online, broadcasting, or print. So I’m very interested in making sure students have an open mind about what they’re going to be doing, not assuming they’re going to go work at a local newspaper. And I think that has been an assumption, based on experience that many of our students have had in the past. I want them to be more adept at different skills. I also want to work on the diversity issues. Which as you know, is a big challenge in a state like Montana, which has good representation at the university when it comes to Native Americans, but really has very little in the way of traditional ethnic groups that I’m accustomed to dealing with from
the East Coast. Our students are going to be working in news rooms in Newark, Tallahassee, and Austin, and they need to be comfortable dealing with racial and ethnic issues that they’re going to confront in those work places. So I’m organizing events, trying to get a start in making this a bigger part of our program. I think it’s also something that we need to fundraise around, make sure that they have a more diverse experience when they go in.

And finally, I think another big issue for us is just technological. Technology is changing very rapidly. Our school struggles to pay for some of the costs of having the equipment that we need to respond to some of the technological changes. So we need to come up with new solutions for that and raise more money around it so that we can say we are a cutting edge school, which is what we’ve been known for, for a hundred years.

Abe: Of course you’re training our journalists of the future, and folks who are going to be in the news room, become feature editors, and do significant publications. From your perspective, what makes a good journalist?

Larry: I think that for a young journalist trying to go out and get a job, I think being dependable and being steady is one of the first things that news room hiring officials are going to be looking for. There is nothing more important in our profession, and this goes for everything from Buzzfeed to the Newshour, nothing more important than making your deadline. Understanding that those time posts that are part of our job really don’t move and so being dependable is a really critical skill. I think also that being curious about the world is essential. I think that’s why I got into this job because I was a literature guy first. I found that the further I got in literary studies, the more narrow my focus was getting. You needed to become more specialized. You needed to write a PhD, a dissertation on a very narrow topic that maybe only a few dozen people in the country would be interested in. I switched to journalism because it broadened my scope. I could do stories on underwater salvage operations or on a Pentagon weapons system, or on kids in the New Orleans schools. I got to do an astonishing array of topics. If you’re curious about the world, it’s kind of like flipping through the pages of the encyclopedia, which I know people don’t do anymore, but that’s how I kind of viewed my job. So being curious, I think, is essential. If you’re just interested in one thing, this is not really the best profession for you. So I think those are two key characteristics. There are many more.

Abe: You mentioned when you were in college you were a comparative literature major. Did you dream about being a journalist early in your career?

Larry: Nope. Nope. It was another one of these; I want to do something different moments in my life. Some of it was probably laziness on my part not wanting to finish the PhD, because I had to learn all kinds of obscure foreign languages and things for that. Some of it was, like I said, just the desire to make a change and do something different. I knew I loved to write, and my comp lit life had given me a chance to do that quite a bit. I wanted to write for a more accessible audience and write in a more accessible style. So I looked around and had a couple of lucky breaks. I ended up in radio. I think it ended up being a really good fit for me, but it wasn’t planned. It’s hard when you’re teaching young people, and you want to give them advice on how to plan their careers, but a lot of these things really do happen by accident. They depend on people you bump into; you know, somebody offers to help you. That can be a really moving experience in and of itself, and that often moves you in directions that you didn’t think you’d go in.

Abe: Was that a professor or maybe an internship you did?

Larry: I did. I had a professor in journalism and he got me an internship at the Voice of America, which a lot of people in this country aren’t familiar with, but it has trained many, many journalists over the years since it was started at the end of the Second World War. That turned out to be a
great experience for me, and I was pretty good at it. I was a good radio reporter, and when you’re
good at something that encourages you to keep going, to try to move forward. So that accident of
meeting Bill Drummond, who’s still at the UC Berkley School of Journalism and was an old NPR
reporter from years back, that helped point me in a direction. Like I said, a few more accidents later I
ended up at NPR, and that ended up being my home for almost thirty years.

Abe: Did you have a role model during those early years, maybe someone you looked up to,
or maybe a giant in the field that you always said, I would like to be like him or her?

Larry: I keep finding new role models all the time. Some of my role models are a lot younger than I
am. They’re young people who come up and get started. When I started, Susan Stamberg was still
hosting All Things Considered. I definitely considered her a role model. She and I became pretty
good friends over the years. I think that getting to know her made her even more of a role model for
me because she’s a wonderful person. She and I have shared a lot of experiences together, and
she’s just very strong and a lot of fun to be with. I respect that the most about her. I think as a
broadcaster she was a pioneer, she was really the first woman to host a national broadcast
program. That takes a lot of chutzpah, to go into a position like that that is brand new.

Ira Glass was another journalist that I worked with who actually worked under me for a
while when I was editing. He and I had so much fun together. He’s just as much fun in person as
he sounds like he is on the radio. And I’m so impressed by what he’s done with himself since he
left the nest and went off and started his own program.

There are lots of people, Wade Goodwin, is another radio reporter that I kind of came up
with. I hear him all the time and I’m always impressed by the kind of work that he does. And you
know, I also find role models reading the paper and reading articles online, of bylines of people who
I find myself drawn to. I think it’s an iterative process, finding people who you want to imitate.

Abe: Are there things that in your career as a journalist, what were some of the things that
inspired you as a journalist? Are there things that you do just to keep yourself fresh as a journalist
and to keep you going? Since as you’ve already mentioned, this is a deadline to deadline to
deadline lifestyle. Sometimes when you’re kind of faced with your life running at such high pace it
becomes very tactical rather than big picture. Are there things that you do or maybe people you
talk to or things that keep you fresh and keep you focused on the long term things?

Larry: You know, I used to, I did a lot of interviews and I had the pleasure of doing a lot of
interviews with teachers when I was covering education. And they inspired me every day because
they worked really in some of the most difficult circumstances you could possibly imagine. I think
that the people on the other end of my microphone kept inspiring me to keep going. As you said, the
environment the journalists work in, even just in the office, in the news room, is not always very kind
to them. It’s not a place where somebody takes you by the hand and tries to guide you through your
career. It’s pretty Darwinian. That isn’t what keeps people in the profession. I think what keeps you
in there is the people that you get to meet who are taking time out to tell you their story. They don’t
have to talk to you, and they know that they can’t control what you say about them. So there’s a lot
of trust involved there, and I think that is very humbling, to have somebody place that trust, and I
tried not to abuse it.

Abe: There’s significant criticism among certain segments of society that media tends to be liberal or
biased toward perhaps progressive political positions. Do you find that a fair assessment?

Larry: I don’t know that it’s fair, but it’s not wrong in that journalists I think tend to look for, or look at
the world as a series of problems to be solved. So if somebody comes in and solves a problem,
that’s news. That often is the government or philanthropic organizations. I don’t think it’s intentional
that we cast these people in a positive light, but I think it does often happen. So if you’re a libertarian who believes that people should take care of themselves and that government is not out there looking for your best interest, I can see why you might feel, I don’t know again if it’s a question of fairness, but it’s a rather a question of emphasis, that a lot of attention is paid by journalists to initiatives that government takes. I don’t know many serious reporters who don’t have as their chief goal being fair and giving a voice to all sides. That’s what they articulate to me all the time. I don’t know anybody who’s out there proselytizing, propagandizing, you know, pushing their point of view. But it’s impossible to be 100 percent objective, and it’s a lifelong process of trying to be as fair as you can. I would just hope that people would know that that is our goal, just as it’s the goal of people in private industry to produce the best products and make the most profit without hurting people. That’s basically what we’re after, but there is no 100 percent perfection in that quest.

Abe: The media world has changed tremendously over the course of your thirty year career. People are beginning to consume, or have already started consuming news in very different ways, from different channels. And you’ve already mentioned, via web, and mobile devices, and the boom of social media, and now with a single person’s access to the web can make them a self-declared journalist. How have these trends and other changes in your profession, are these changes things of concern to you, or are they encouraging to you, or do you view them as a double edged sword?

Larry: Well I try not to judge history, you know because it’s sort of pointless, these things are happening. In my personal life I have my own discomforts. My wife and I talk about whether we should not allow cell phones in the bedroom or to interrupt our conversations and things like that. Everybody wrestles with those kinds of things. But as far as what’s happening to our profession, I think that I have to by and large accept the fact that this change is upon us, and that it’s dynamic. You know, I think that good journalism is going on all the time, and so is bad journalism. I can’t really say that I see more or less of either of them now that we’re doing a lot of things on social media. I’m concerned by the same thing that other people have pointed out. The shorter attention span and whether or not people are reading through to the end of long pieces about complicated subjects. Social media is a disruptive technology, and it encourages grazing, hopping around to different places. There’s nothing wrong with that, and I think you can become a really smart person by getting things referred to you by your friends. But I think that becoming a serious individual, somebody who understands topics, you also have to read deeply in something. You may also have to read books. I’m not sure about that, but it’s something that I can’t imagine living without. So that’s the part that makes me most concerned when I look at our students, is whether or not they are getting deeply into a subject, reading to the end of a really long investigative piece. Whether they’re looking at a documentary series and following all the way through to the end. That’s an experience everybody should have and I hope it’s a cultural value that we’ll keep alive.

Abe: What are some of the most memorable stories that you’ve covered in your career as a journalist? Are there any shocking news or maybe emotionally draining stories that you had covered in your life?

Larry: I would have to say, I’ve thought about this from time to time, and two things at different stages of my career were stories that I felt personally moved by. The Berlin Wall came down in 1989. I had lived in Berlin actually on and off for years, and I was sent over by NPR the day that the Wall came down. Witnessing such a tectonic change and upending of the social order in my lifetime was very moving. I’d also become close to a lot of Germans and getting to see the German people going through this event was very moving to me, and I felt really privileged to be a part of that.

And 9/11 was devastating to everybody in this country just as a citizen. Covering that story as a journalist was hard because my family was in Washington at that time. I was concerned about them; I was concerned about the entire city. We were attacked, and we were almost attacked more seriously than we were. I’m not sure that people remember but the 9/11 attacks were pretty much
coincident with the sniper, the Washington area sniper, and the anthrax attacks happened right around the same time. I think it was like a six week period. All of those things affected me and my family directly. We were wondering whether we could open our mail. My son could not go to school because he had a glass wall inside of the school and they were worried about the sniper going after him. So that whole period was very traumatic for us. I was working at that period because it was a very busy time. It was painful to have to leave your family behind; it was painful to be at work wondering if everybody was okay. It is one of the harder parts of being a journalist; you basically have to set your own personal involvement aside while working on a story. You don’t have the, I don’t know if it’s a luxury, but you don’t have the opportunity to grieve, you know to mourn over the 3,000 people who died in New York City because you have to process that information and put it out to the public.

Abe: So where were you in 9/11? Were you in the studio? Were you at your office?

Larry: I was in the office. I came in early that day to work on a story that never got on the air but I thought it was going to be important that day. People started turning on televisions in the news room and somebody came over to me and said, “I think you’re going to have to drop your last story on water quality and cover this.” I was immediately sent to the Washington Hospital Center where they thought we were going to see a large number of burn victims coming from the Pentagon. It took me half a day to get there. It was three or four miles away but the city was in such a state of chaos. Of course once I did get there, there were very few burn victims brought there because most of the victims of the Pentagon attack died. So I ended up working on different things, but I stayed in town for most of the time. Like I said, these other events came on so quickly that we were moving back and forth from story to story throughout that entire fall.

Abe: Of course from 9/11, from that point you were covering the Pentagon correct?

Larry: I wasn’t covering the Pentagon. I only started covering the Pentagon in I think 2012. Before that I was doing lots of different things. National Security, I think at that time when this happened, I think I was on the Science Desk temporarily, and I ended up covering the Anthrax attacks. I don’t know if you want the whole timeline, I can barely remember any this stuff, Abe.

Abe: But just looking back now from that point of 9/11 to now. As a journalist, and I know you covered the Pentagon later in your career, did you imagine where we are today in terms of still being involved in the Middle East?

Larry: No, and it’s not just that, it’s not just the fact that we’re back in Iraq and still in Afghanistan, but the fact that homeland security became such a preoccupation by this country that civil liberties issues, which were one of my focuses when I was reporting, that those have still been so front and center twelve years afterwards, I think is definitely a surprise to me. It completely changed our profession, the stories that we covered, the agencies that we covered were constantly shifting and evolving all because of 9/11. I think it would have been hard to imagine what a profound effect that had on us and on the entire city.

Abe: As a final question, what do you want your legacy to be, how do you want people to remember you?

Larry: I don’t know that’s kind of a strange question; it presumes that I’m going to die someday. I’m not quite there yet. I hope that they’ll remember me for having been a creative leader of the Journalism School and somebody who was inclusive who made the students feel at home. I’m a big believer in being student centered. I don’t know most of the students in the school right now but I hope to get to know them better. I’m a big proponent of taking strong measures to ensure student success. The university is very focused on recruitment right now, I hope that there’s a similar focus
put on helping students graduate. I think that somebody who helped people get through their studies would be the top of my list. I'd also love to raise money and expand the School, but I'd first like to know that people had a good experience here, that they bonded with the School, and that they have the same strong memories that people who graduated fifty years ago have been telling me that they have.

Allen: That was Larry Abramson, Dean of the University Of Montana School Of Journalism. A big thanks to him for sharing his story with us. If you liked what you heard, leave us a five star review on iTunes and help others discover the show. The Mansfield Global Leadership Podcast is produced by the Mansfield Center on the University of Montana campus. I'm Allen Sangster. Thanks for listening.