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Our Supreme Court Reporter Sets a Personal Record and Hopes for a Break

By Adam Liptak July 1, 2015 4:45 pm

Anthony Lewis, the legendary New York Times reporter and columnist, told me that the key to covering the Supreme Court is to prepare diligently, for months, in an effort to be ready for a few days of relentless activity at the end of June. But no amount of reading briefs, attending arguments, consulting law professors and interviewing lawyers and litigants could ever quite prepare you for the way this term ended.

The justices surprised us by releasing the term's two blockbusters a little earlier than expected, with the health care decision arriving last Thursday and the same-sex marriage ruling on Friday. The opinions were clear and vivid, and on both days I was able to get early stories online quickly, then write more comprehensive and analytical versions in short order. On Friday, I wrote a second piece looking at Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr.'s votes in the two cases.

My stories were just a part of a package that included articles, blog items, excerpts, data, interactive features and video. The paper's coverage of the same-sex marriage case, in particular, was inspiring.

But the fun was only beginning. On Monday, the court released three major decisions, on lethal injections, redistricting and the environment. That same morning, it agreed to hear a challenge to affirmative action in higher education. In the afternoon, a ruling allowed 10 abortion clinics in Texas to stay open.

I filed early versions of four articles from the court's press room, where I have a cubicle. In the middle of the afternoon, I took a cab across town to the Washington

bureau, which had just moved to temporary and very tight quarters while it undergoes much-needed renovations. I borrowed an editor's desk and finished what turned out to be a fifth story, establishing a personal record, and with two running on the front page.

I had a ton of help. Editors made sure that my logic tracked and that my assertions were backed by evidence. They tightened my prose. They saved me from careless errors. Other reporters, notably Coral Davenport, Robert Pear, Manny Fernandez and Fernanda Santos, pitched in.

I wrote two more stories the next day, including a look back at the term. I hope the byline on the piece is the last one of mine you see for a while.