NARRATIVE SWEAT AND FLOW:
THE CHALLENGE AND FULFILLMENT OF COVERING SENSITIVE SOCIAL ISSUES

A Project Presented to the Graduate Faculty
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Master of Arts

by

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the family, friends and mentors I’ve been blessed to have in my life, especially Jacqui, Carmen and my mother, Silvia. If I ever learn how to wear my wings, it’s because of you three.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This master’s project would not have been started, nor finished, if it hadn’t been for the guidance and support I received along the way from my committee. I admire and love you all deeply. Thank you. My gratitude also goes toward *The Oregonian*’s wonderful breaking news team. Working alongside these talented journalists for three months made for the most intense professional experience of my life. I also want to thank the seven long-form narrative writers who agreed to talk to me for my professional analysis. Your patience in answering my questions about journalism, and life, I hope will make for valuable reading for journalists of all ages.
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Chapter One: Introduction

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” -- Joan Didion

In order to explain why I chose this project, I would need to ask you to join me back 22 years to my native village in western Romania. I learned to read when I was 3 by watching over my older sister’s shoulder as she was trying to decipher the alphabet. I had a slew of illnesses as a child, and I was afraid of a kindergarten bully, so I spent most of my pre-school years at home or at my grandfather’s house, reading: the Bible, Romanian folk tales and fairytales, and later on, novels by Alexandre Dumas, Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

I learned to see the world through stories. I believe reading Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” when I was about 8 or 9 has taught me empathy as much as anything else.

I started journalism school in Bucharest in 2006 because I wanted to tell stories about real people. I had a vague instinct that real stories might somehow have the same effect of revealing worlds and making people feel and care as the literature I loved, though I didn’t have clear examples of that. The post-communist Romanian media was producing mostly underreported and poorly written news articles and opinion pieces. Not much has improved since.

During my sophomore year in college, I was incredibly lucky to end up in the narrative writing class of Cristian Lupsa, a Romanian journalist who had gotten his master’s degree at the University of Missouri and had returned to Romania with hopes to create a better journalism environment. Lupsa introduced us to classic American long-
form narrative stories such as Gay Talese’s “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” Michael Paterniti’s “Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy” and Tom Junod’s “The Falling Man.”

I was blown away to discover that journalism could be told in narrative form, that it could take readers along on journeys and introduce them to new worlds and to characters they could ultimately care for.

Lupsa held our hand as we, a group of mostly young undergraduate students, told our own deep-dive stories. We published them in various magazines, including the one we launched ourselves, called Decat o Revista.

Wanting to become better at telling these stories is what brought me to the United States as a Fulbright scholar in August 2011. At the University of Missouri, I took all the reporting and writing courses I could fit in my four semesters of classes. I studied some wonderful long-form narrative work and learned from the masters themselves. I also gained hands-on experience as a reporter and then assistant city editor at the community newspaper Columbia Missourian.

In the summer of 2012, as a reporting intern at The Wichita Eagle newspaper, I met a Roma family with deep historical roots who was going through cultural changes, such as trying to embrace higher education. I started working on a story about them, which led me to the opportunity to tell stories about Roma in the United States through the University of Missouri’s postgraduate O.O. McIntyre fellowship.

Of the stories I’ve told in the past six years, while in Romania and the United States, the ones I cared most about were deep-dives about people struggling to overcome something: a woman working to defeat breast cancer and change her life, two young
resident doctors studying French in order to emigrate in search of a living wage, a man wanting to climb mountains and overcome loneliness, an American university professor battling the Food and Drug Administration, a group of four college-aged girls in Missouri struggling to break the poverty cycle they were in, and a released convicted murderer in Oregon hoping to earn people’s trust.

Through most of this time, I worked as a newspaper reporter covering beats such as business, education and government.

I realized, over time, that the stories that really mattered – for me and for the readers – had three things in common. First, I had allowed myself time to do extensive reporting and get to know the people and the issues I was writing about. Second, I tried to use narrative writing techniques to engage the readers and tell a good story. And third, the stories happened to be about people who were disadvantaged or struggling to overcome a burden, and about the system that put that burden there in the first place.

Whenever I felt like the readers could empathize with the characters and also learn something useful about the system, I felt that my work was worth it.

This relates to what I was trying to accomplish through my master’s project: become a stronger journalist, on one side, and then understand how people who are doing at a high level the type of journalism I love most relate to their work.

I know that, on the long term, I want to make life better for people in Romania through journalism. I can’t get more specific than that because I’m still trying to figure out a life plan (my master’s committee has surely born witness to these searches).
Thus my master’s project was designed to serve two intermediary steps: become a better reporter, and understand how long-form narrative writing about sensitive social issues might fit in the long term in one’s life frame.

I tried (and hopefully succeeded) to become a stronger reporter through the professional experience component of my master’s project. I worked for 14 weeks on the breaking news team of The Oregonian newspaper in Portland, Ore, covering an array of topics, including rescue operations, wildfires, cops and courts. I wrote breaking news stories, daily features, and long-form narratives. I became comfortable with quick deadlines and with parachuting myself in the midst of events, and maybe more importantly, finding stories there.

All in all, I had the time of my life. This project report includes clips and weekly field notes from this amazing summer.

The professional analysis component of my master’s project tried to answer a question close to my heart: Do long-form narrative writers who cover sensitive social issues — such as poverty, race, illness and trauma — consider themselves happy and fulfilled people?

In framing the interviews, I used the psychological theory of optimal experience, or “flow,” described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as the state in which people are so absorbed by their work that nothing else seems to matter.

I looked into whether the writers experience flow, what drives them to persevere despite difficulties and what meaning they assign to their work.
I approached seasoned writers whose work I enjoyed as a reader, was grateful for as a member of the public, and hoped to emulate as a journalist.

The seven writers I interviewed are Amy Harmon of The New York Times, Anne Hull and David Finkel of The Washington Post, Lane DeGregory of Tampa Bay Times, Tom Hallman, Jr. of The Oregonian, Chris Jones of Esquire and freelance writer Paige Williams.

This question was important to me because doing these types of stories over the past years has made me happy, has helped me connect to people, learn about life, feel like I have a positive impact and that I can do something as beautiful and important as telling a story. It’s helped me taste the magic of stories, and it has left me thirsty for more. I wanted to know how all this changes over time and how this type of journalism might fit into the overall life frame.

I also hoped that if I wonder about all these things, other people are, too. I believe the windows into these writers’ inner lives will prove valuable for students and journalists of all ages.

The writers have been incredibly generous and candid and have talked to me about everything from selecting stories, immersive reporting, angst over talent, depression, coping strategies, responsibility to sources, balancing work with family life, sense of mission and accomplishment.

The interviews are at the basis of the professional analysis article (Chapter Five), and full transcripts are included in the appendix. I hope you’ll enjoy reading the project report, and maybe even get “into the zone.”
Chapter Two: Weekly Field Notes

As part of the professional experience component of the master’s project, I worked for 14 weeks, between June 3 and Sept. 6, 2013, on The Oregonian’s breaking news team. The Oregonian is a regional newspaper covering the Portland metro area, Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

My goals were to gain experience reporting breaking news, and also write at least one long-form narrative story.

I got to write a wide range of stories, including briefs on fires, car crashes and rescue operations, context pieces, news features and mini-profiles. I covered cops and courts, and I wrote two in-depth pieces. One documented several Portland community organizations’ quest to prepare as many people as possible for the General Educational Development test, a high school diploma equivalent. The other looked into a released convicted murderer’s attempts to convince people to trust him.

Over the summer, I lived with one of the reporters on the breaking news team, Kimberly A.C. Wilson. I walked into a rather difficult period for The Oregonian because in mid-June management announced it would lay off about a quarter of the newsroom and reduce the paper’s home delivery from seven to four days a week.

During this time, I also worked on my professional analysis, for which I interviewed long-form narrative writers covering sensitive social issues about the long-term satisfaction they’ve gotten from their work. One of the journalists I interviewed, Tom Hallman, Jr., was part of The Oregonian’s breaking news team.
Below are weekly field notes detailing my experiences at *The Oregonian*, what I’ve learned from the breaking news team and from interviewing the long-form narrative writers.

**Master's project weekly note #1**

**Jun 12**

Dear committee members,

Greetings from Portland!

This is my first weekly note documenting my master's project experience. Here it goes.

The first week at *The Oregonian* was intense and great. Now that I look back at it -- and I only have a few of days of distance -- I think my biggest challenge was refraining myself from drowning into a pool of insecurity and worry. I don't know why that often happens when I begin something new or when I end a period that was dear to me (most have been). Maybe I can call it change-related anxiety.

In this case, I had a big rope to pull me out: Jacqui was in Portland last Tuesday, on my second day on the job. She was invited to give a talk about storytelling at the University of Oregon. It was wonderful to have her here.

That said, I almost didn't have time to worry because the editors put me to work. I had my first story published on my first day at the job (which was also orientation day until around 3 p.m.) It was a brief about a man who got four years in prison for growing
too much medical marijuana. I remembered that my first story at The Wichita Eagle last summer was about the Catholic Church. I'm obviously not in Kansas anymore.

Apart from crime stories and briefs, I was assigned mostly "intern stories" last week -- little things that could have or could have not turned into something. For example, my editor sent me to check out an Occupy Portland gathering to show support for Turkey. On another day I went to see a woman who was planning to swim across the Willamette River and back for 75 times in order to promote the river as a recreational place. I wasn't expecting much of either assignment, but I stumbled upon some gems of situations and people, which allowed me to write micro-narratives on deadline and, I hope, with meaning. Here are the links to those two stories and to some crime briefs:

http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/06/willamette_river_swim_in_portl.html


http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/06/turner_high_school_graduate_se.html

http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/06/southern_oregon_martial_arts_t.html

The story I worked on the most last week was about young men dying in rivers around Portland and authorities telling them to stop it. Two boys, one who was 25, the other who was 15, had died in the rivers early that week. My story was supposed to be a
cautionary tale about the weather getting warm and the rivers staying cold, with lifeguards and authorities, but we couldn't ignore the boys who had just died. So I talked to friends of the 25 year-old and to authorities involved in both cases (the 15 year-old died the morning before we published the story, after a few days in the hospital), but I also talked to lifeguards, hydrologists, officers in the river patrol. It was a weird combination of a story because the last thing I wanted to do was use the recent victims as "anecdotal leads" for the "cautionary tale." I wrote the story of the two boys and boys drowning separately from the drowning tips & tricks part. We kind of blended them together during editing. I'm not convinced either solutions were right, and I wish I knew of a better approach.

http://www.oregonlive.com/outdoors/index.ssf/2013/06/water_safety_concerns_ri

sing_a.html

All in all, it was a great, intense week, with adrenaline and frequent publishing. The editors I work with, John Killen and Steve Suo, are great. On my first day on the job, I talked to Killen over lunch about my interest in narrative. He already assigned me two exciting, longer-term stories. But I'll tell you more about them in this week's note.

Oh, and you'll never believe this: Sunday, as I was walking on my new street in the opposite direction than I usually take, I passed by a man and a woman preparing to leave their home, who were dressed in what I think were traditional Roma clothes (!!) - big hat, big flowered skirt, everything. I stopped involuntarily and looked at them. The woman said hi. I didn't know what to tell them without being too weird, so I said hi back and continued to walk. I'm planning to go back to their house and introduce myself this
weekend (Professor Hudson, I'll send you a note on the progress of the Marks story later this week).

Thank you so much for reading this; I'll try to send my next notes before the end of the respective weeks. I'm also planning to start work on my professional analysis this week. I'm still dizzy with the change, the new place and the new people -- or maybe this is my natural state.

I hope you're all well. I miss you all.

Simina
Master's project weekly note #2

Jun 23

Dear committee members,

Please find below my note for the second week of my master's project (June 10-17). I'll follow up shortly with my note for week #3.

This week marked a first in my professional life: After living in Missouri and Kansas for two years, I got to cover a tornado in Oregon. It was a small one, which touched down in McMinnville, half an hour south of Portland, and took away the roofs of a few buildings. I helped the breaking news "weather reporter" with the coverage. I basically found a witness on Twitter, interviewed him over the phone and wrote up a few paragraphs to add to the story: http://www.oregonlive.com/weather/index.ssf/2013/06/tornado_touches_down_in_mcm.html

A funny thing: When I was interviewing this man over the phone, I asked him whether the alarms went off. He said they don't have tornado alarms in McMinnville. I was like, "Oh, I'm from Missouri, and we have alarms there." I bet my accent didn't confuse him at all.

So, surprisingly enough, now that I'm here, Missouri has become a sort of a home. And as I'm getting to explore more of Portland and being charmed by it, this is becoming home as well.
Back to business: I also worked on several other news stories, especially crime and accident briefs, and a couple of quick-turn news features.

But this week I also started working on two longer-term stories.

The first one is about a community campaign started by a woman who leads Multnomah County's Gang Task Force. She's trying to involve small community organizations, churches, and even the Portland police, in getting people to finish their GEDs before the end of the year. Starting in 2014, the exam will change and become more difficult and computer-based. Some small groups from around Portland, who have traditionally addressed crime, poverty and immigration, but not education, are now starting to teach GED classes. I've been meeting with a few of these organizations and going to their opening classes (of which some remained unattended).

The second story started from the case of a newborn girl who was found dead in late May at a recycling center in North Portland. My editor, John, asked me to poke around and see if I can make it into a bigger piece. I started gathering data about abandoned babies in Oregon, and I'm trying to talk to people who are involved at different points in the process -- people at the Department of Human Services, case workers with the child protective services, police, state medical examiner, etc. The process is at a very beginning stage; my editor talked to Tom Hallman, Jr., to mentor me on this story, so I'm excited about it.

In my last note, I was telling you about my neighbors who looked like they might have been Roma. I went and talked to them last weekend. They are not Roma, just hippies, part of a "Butterflies" group, but they have worked with the main Roma family
in town, the Ephrems, who are, of course, relatives of the Marks family in Wichita. They own the biggest car dealing company in town, and the clan leader, Bobbie Ephrem, was sent to prison two years ago for filing a false tax return.

I'm planning to talk to my editor about approaching the Ephrems next week, after we get the GED story ready for publication.

As for my professional analysis, I started reading Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's book "Random Family." I've realized that work at the paper is intense, and the hours are sometimes long, so I need to set time aside on some evenings or during the weekend to focus exclusively on my professional analysis.

Thank you,

Simina
Dear committee members,

Sorry for the rapid succession of my weekly notes, but with this I'll be up to date.

This was the week of June 17-23. The week when around 45 people in the Oregonian newsroom found out they would lose their jobs as part of the "exciting plans for the future" announced by management.

A few people in the newsroom told me something along the lines of: "It's probably better that you were here when this happened because this way you'll understand where journalism is heading."

I would have rather skipped this lesson. Last summer at The Wichita Eagle, I was there when the publisher announced that everyone had to take two weeks of unpaid leave. And when I worked at the business daily in Romania, we had four rounds of layoffs and cuts over the two years following the recession. It was painful to see friends losing their jobs. But most of them were people in their 20s. Most of the people who lost their jobs at The Oregonian this week are middle-aged and have worked at the paper for decades.

Some of the people who lost their jobs were in their 60s; some of them had been battling cancer, and some had spouses who had recently died. I know these are not business arguments, but it was sad and frustrating to see it happen.

It was also frustrating to not have a sense that the management had a good plan for the future, other than abstract notions such as "more emphasis on the online."
It was good to see folks band together, sad to see them cynical. A colleague told me that, even though she has never worked 8-hour days in journalism before, now she makes a point out of leaving the office after eight hours because "they're getting exactly what they're paying for."

Jacqui told me in a note that the best thing I can do in a situation like this is do the best journalism I can. That's the only thing that makes sense to me because otherwise people can get into this spiral where management is cutting costs, people who stay are producing lower-quality journalism, which leads to even fewer readers and more cuts and so on.

I have no real conclusions, and I don't feel like this "lesson" has taught me a lot. I am excited to be here, and I look forward to the stories I'll be working on next week.

Thank you.

Simina
Dear committee members,

Happy Fourth of July!

This is the note for the week ending June 30, another great week of learning and living in Portland, Oregon.

Among the highlights:

• I turned in the GED story, which is scheduled for publication on Sunday. While reporting, I took time to meet with some of the people involved in the GED closeout campaign. John, my editor, appreciated that the story brought readers into the worlds of three groups of people -- an NGO addressing gang activity, a group of refugees, and a single mom of four and recovering drug addict and her friends at a learning center.

• I went on an assignment with one of the writers I admire: Pulitzer Prize winner Tom Hallman, who is part of the breaking news team. He offered to drive me to a press conference held by the wife and surgeon of a hit-and-run victim and the police spokesman. We stayed and talked to the victim's family after the TV reporters left, and Tom got the wife to describe in great detail the night before the conference. His questions were so enthusiastic and fast that the woman wouldn't stop talking. When we got back, Tom offered to Tweet and write a brief for the online, while I wrote a more detailed version for the online and print (The story ended up being edited quite a bit, but it was a

• I filled in for the transportation reporter and covered a board of directors meeting for TriMet, Portland's transit agency: [http://www.oregonlive.com/commuting/index.ssf/2013/06/trimet_crime_stats_fewer_assau.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/commuting/index.ssf/2013/06/trimet_crime_stats_fewer_assau.html)

• This was probably the most difficult assignment of the week: I covered the funeral for a newborn girl who was found dead at a recycling center in North Portland. The funeral was emotional, and that casket was really small. When I got back to the newsroom, I tried to write a straightforward account of what happened: [http://www.oregonlive.com/Portland/index.ssf/2013/06/baby_previous_funeral_tries_to.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/Portland/index.ssf/2013/06/baby_previous_funeral_tries_to.html). I'm also working on a larger story about this girl and other abandoned babies in Oregon.

• I scheduled my first interview for the professional analysis for next week with Tom Hallman. I'm planning to send requests to five other writers next week. I feel I'm already behind on this (which probably means I am), so I'm trying to make progress faster.

• I started reading "The Good Soldiers," by David Finkel. So far, it's been phenomenal.

Thank you all. Hope you're enjoying the fireworks and the beautiful evening.
Dear committee members,

I hope you are having a wonderful, adventurous summer.

This is the note for the week ending July 7.

This week I got to fill in for the day cops reporter, Maxine Bernstein, who was on vacation. I wrote more crime briefs than usual and got familiar with police, sheriff's and state courts websites and PIOs. I also worked on some exciting breaking news stories. Here are some of the week's highlights:

- My favorite assignment this week was covering an acid spill at a fruit plant in Northeast Portland. I jumped in a car with a photographer only minutes after we heard about the spill on the scanner. At first, firefighters didn't let us approach the building, but we eventually got to the area where the employees had been evacuated. I got to use my limited Spanish to interview workers in the production facility, which had been the most affected by the spill. It was an all-around good experience. Here's the story: http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/portland_hazmat_crews_respond.html

- On another day, I was sent out to a community park by the Sandy River, where a boy had just drowned -- the first drowning in 14 years, since the city hired lifeguards at the park. It was a story that fell into place quickly. In general, I feel like I've become faster at reporting and writing, which was one of the things I hoped to improve this
summer. [http://www.oregonlive.com/gresham/index.ssf/2013/07/troutdales_glenn_otto_park_a_m.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/gresham/index.ssf/2013/07/troutdales_glenn_otto_park_a_m.html)

- The story about the GED closeout campaign got published. Several people called the paper or community organizations for more information, so I hope it has helped. [http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/portland_groups_join_hands_for.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/portland_groups_join_hands_for.html)

I also had my first interview for the professional analysis. I interviewed Tom Hallman for about an hour (we're planning on a follow-up interview next week). It was fascinating. Among the things I found most interesting were:

- Tom has described experiencing "flow" while working (yay!) He said he is absorbed by his stories and finds pleasure in the work itself. His favorite part, which is also the most challenging, is weaving emotion into stories. I believe this is what stands out the most in Tom's stories -- that as a reader you often feel like you're about to start crying, either with sadness or joy, and you feel connected with the characters and want to know what will happen to them. Tom said his purpose in storytelling is to make people feel emotion, either positive or negative. That will remind them they're alive, and, in the case of positive emotion, will help readers connect with characters, thus leading to higher empathy, tolerance and care for others.

- He said the key in conveying emotion is identifying pure human moments and then including them in the story as simply as possible. He said in order to be able to identify these moments you have to live a lot outside of the newsroom and of journalism.
• Tom said his biggest life accomplishments are definitely his children and his marriage of more than 30 years. He said the good thing about stories is that they will keep him alive through readers long after he's dead. That's why he's trying to write stories so that they will read the same and resonate with readers decades from now.

• He said stories suck a lot of his energy (while also charging him sometimes), and in order for him to have been able to do this for such a long time, he has had to replenish his energy reserve by enjoying life: spending time with family, riding his motorcycle, dancing, meeting people. He said the more time you spend outside the newsroom, experiencing life, the better journalist you are.
Dear committee members,

Please find below the note for the week ending July 14. Among the highlights:

- I started shadowing the state courts reporter, Aimee Green. She'll be out on maternity leave starting Aug. 1 or even earlier, and I'll fill in for her through the end of August. I'm really excited about it. I've already learned so much by spending time with her at the courthouse. It feels like there's a story behind every door in that building. I've also covered a few cases myself, among which the case of two boys, ages 15 and 17, gang members, who shot a man in a Gresham park to death: [http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/gresham_park_shooting_15-year-.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/gresham_park_shooting_15-year-.html)

- This week I wrote my most popular Oregonian story yet: a breaking news piece about a woman, two police officers, and a man who was getting ready to jump off a highway overpass. I was lucky to get to interview the woman and one of the police officers. I wrote the story chronologically, and the response was amazing: readers shared it on Facebook and Twitter and sent me dozens of emails and voicemail messages. [http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/portland_woman_polic e_officers.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/portland_woman_polic e_officers.html)

As for the professional analysis, I've set an interview next week with Chris Jones of Esquire. I also had an email exchange with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the author of the "flow" theory. He directed me toward Susan Perry's *Writing in Flow*, which looks at how
fiction writers and poets experience flow. He said he wonders how the experience is different for people who write about real events. I'm planning to send out requests in the next couple of days to Katherine Boo, Isabel Wilkerson, David Finkel and Adrian Nicole LeBlanc.

Thank you so much. I wish you a wonderful week.
Dear committee members,

Please forgive my silence in the past weeks. I got lost in a lot of work and some soul searching, but I’m back. My internship at The Oregonian ended last Friday, and I hope to use the next couple of weeks to finish my professional analysis and catch up on my weekly notes.

I look forward to hearing from you, including your (gentle) criticism.

This is the report for the week ending July 21. It includes a reflection on professional analysis interviews with writers David Finkel and Chris Jones.

Among the highlights of the week:

- I covered a parole board hearing at the Oregon State Correctional Institution for two Portland men convicted of aggravated murder. [http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/portland_killer_kevin_a_roper.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/portland_killer_kevin_a_roper.html) It was an intense, five-hour hearing during which one of the men was interviewed in detail about his crime. The most interesting part, though, was that both men were part of a group of 30 aggravated murderers who were considered for parole after serving 20 years instead of 30 after the Supreme Court in 2010 ruled in favor of an inmate who had sued the Oregon Board of Parole.

The bigger story of the 30 men, especially the one who filed the lawsuit, would become my main project for the remaining weeks of my professional project.
Another interesting story I got to work on this week was about a woman who fled Oregon 15 years ago after being accused of a DUII that killed another woman. Authorities found her in a small town in Manitoba, Canada, after she bragged at a bar about getting away with her crime. I contacted local and Canadian authorities and people in the small town of Minnedosa, Manitoba, for information about the woman’s life in Canada. It was the most read story for several days on The Oregonian’s website. (Plus, I got to be interviewed by a radio station in Winnipeg). http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/07/milwaukie_woman_who_fled_orego.html

David Finkel of The Washington Post and Chris Jones of Esquire were both amazing and generous with their time. Below are some highlights from our interviews.

David Finkel:

* We talked mostly about “The Good Soldiers,” a phenomenal book that Finkel wrote after he spent eight months embedded with a battalion in Iraq. Finkel, who won a Pulitzer for explanatory reporting in 2006 for another story, described “The Good Soldiers” as the crucial work of his writing time. “It mattered to me more than anything else I had done,” he said.

“It was almost like, this seems silly, but the previous 30 years had led me to this assignment, this place, this moment, this chance to write a big story.”

* He said the story was valuable because he stayed there long enough to “inhabit” it. One of the challenges, Finkel said, was that he didn’t know from the get-go what the story would be. He needed to wait and see how the events developed and how
they affected people. Another challenge was transmitting emotion that was true to the soldiers’ experiences, not his own.

- Despite the tragedies it portrays, the book is funny at times. Finkel said he did it on purpose so that it would reflect reality but also to make it more bearable for readers.
- He said he got feedback from soldiers who had read his book and said it had accurately portrayed what happened in Iraq. He said soldiers gave the book to their loved ones to read because they didn’t want to talk about the experience themselves.
- Finkel said he wanted people who read his book to be able to associate real characters to the impersonal headlines they saw every day, such as “Three killed from roadside bomb in Iraq.” He wanted people to understand “the transformation of these young, eager men into the men they became by the time this was over with.”
- Finkel didn’t seem to experience “flow” or any kind of joy while working on this story, just gratitude for being able to tell a story he felt was deeply important.

“I wasn’t prepared for it, and it was hard. It was physically frightening. But at the same time I was guided by the thought that this is a consequential war in my lifetime, and for whatever reason, I’ve been given a good seat to observe it and to write about it, to add to the archives of the war. So don’t complain, don’t screw it up. Just go do the work.”

- Finkel said he feels lucky to have been a journalist. He’s traveled to five continents, has seen people “at their very best and their very worst and their very middling,” and has lived an engaged life, “full of being able to consider things, think through things, see things, ask questions, see life unfolding, with pretty limitless, go
places, go pretty much where I’ve wanted to go and stay as long as I can and figure stories out and then tell stories. I mean, that seems like a pretty good deal.”

Chris Jones:

- Jones said his favorite part of his work is reporting. He likes digging for information, doing “detective work,” but also meeting people and discovering “nuggets” that will become important moments in the story. He said these moments, discovered through reporting, make stories memorable to readers. In “The Things That Carried Him,” the story of a soldier killed in Iraq, one of these moments was when the soldier’s mother told Jones her other son wanted to place his ring on the dead soldier’s finger only to discover that underneath the white glove there was a piece of cotton, not a finger.
- His duty is to make justice to these moments through writing, Jones said. Writing is usually a struggle and hard work for him. Nevertheless, he said he sometimes experiences flow while writing, when “everything kind of falls into place,” when “it just comes.” He said these moments are pleasurable, and he’ll pursue them like a drug.
- Flow is a direct consequence of thorough reporting, Jones said, though solid reporting doesn’t always result in flow. Invariably, stories written under flow have been better and also loved by readers, he said.
- Jones said one of the most important conditions for good reporting is caring about the story and the people in it. “I will take the reporter with the biggest heart in the room every single time,” he said. Reporting takes skill for gathering information, but a reporter who cares will be willing to put in the time and to listen closely.
• He said he’s been emotionally affected by some of the stories he’s written. “I don’t try to maintain distance; I think that’s a shitty way to treat people,” he said. “If you’re asking them to open up to you, I don’t see how you return that favor by being a wall.” Without the emotional involvement, you won’t get the best story, he said, so you have to decide whether the story is worth the emotional toll.

• Jones said he temporarily worked as a paramedic on an ambulance and helped revive people. He said the experience made him wonder why he should keep writing if he can save lives. He came to the conclusion that stories can affect people’s lives, can bring them comfort, can change their views, can make them act.

• And then, great stories are worth pursuing for their own sake. “When you got one on the line, there’s an adrenaline rush,” Jones said. “It becomes primal almost when you got a good story (...) I spent my life trying to have those moments, pursuing those moments, and when you get them, you kind of become blind to anything else.”

• Jones sees this passion for stories as a natural gift that won’t last forever. Even though he’s only 39, he believes at some point he’ll stop caring about storytelling and stop doing it. Until then, he said he’s grateful for every story that still engulfs him fully.
Dear committee members,

Please find below the report for the weeks ending July 28 and August 4. Among the interesting things I got to cover were court appearances and rescue operations in mountains outside of Portland. I also wrote a feature story as a follow-up to the Canada fugitive story.

• In late July and early August I covered courts somewhat regularly. We were talking in a previous note about how there’s a story behind every courtroom door. These two weeks proved that in full. Just two examples: the family of a man who died after his friend passed out while driving drunk showed up for the driver’s sentencing and hugged him. [Link](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/duii_fatal_family_of_man_kille.html)

In another case, a man was sentenced to prison for trying to run a cop over during a chase. He was all smiles during the appearance, and so was a woman in the room. They were about to get married that day. [Link](http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2013/07/portland_man_pleads_guilty_in_1.html)
Not all court appearances are as spectacular as these two, but I’ve learned that a bit of extra reporting and interviewing family, friends or the district attorney, can make the difference between a dry news brief and a short, compelling story.

- I also got to cover two search-and-rescue operations on Mount Hood and Mount St. Helens. People getting lost or injured in the mountains are about as common as people drowning in the rivers around Portland during the summer. As with the court stories, you try to report and write as well as you can in a short time.

The first story was about a woman from Texas who got lost on Mount St. Helens with her daughter. Rescuers found them, but on their way back, the woman decided to order a private helicopter to get down faster. There was little information and many assumptions related to the story. I called dozens of helicopter companies in Oregon and Washington state until I reached the pilot who flew the women down, and who could give us specific information, including how much the woman had paid. On this story, I got to share a byline in print with Tom Hallman, one of my heroes. http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/07/texas_woman_being_rescued_off.html

• Finally, I got to do a follow-up to the Canada fugitive story. A LexisNexis search showed the woman who had fled to Canada with her children 15 years ago after being accused of a fatal DUII, had been married in Salem. I contacted and met with her ex-husband. Turns out, he was the father of the children, and had been trying to find them for the past 15 years. He also shared with me some adoption documents he had received from Canada a couple of months earlier. The documents had interesting and detailed information about the case. Readers loved the story and sent back a lot of feedback, including offers to help the man. http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/07/salem_man_whose_ex-wife_ran_fr.html

I learned that mystery stories about fugitives and, let’s say, Romanian princesses accused of operating a cockfighting ring in Oregon, are a big hit with readers. But more about that in a later note.

Thank you much,

Simina
Dear committee members,

This is the report for the week ending Aug. 11. It includes an overview of some of the things I’ve learned about covering breaking news in the three months working with The Oregonian’s wonderful breaking news team.

- In early August I helped cover the Oregon wildfires. Oregon had one of the worst wildfire seasons in recent years. On Aug. 1, a firefighter died -- the first firefighter to die in an Oregon wildfire since 1994. When the second firefighter died, a few days later, I was the main reporter assigned to cover it.

This story was my main focus for two days. On the first day, I worked on getting confirmations and more details, updating the story online as soon as I had something new. I tried to get background information about the firefighter: he was a 19-year-old college student. [http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/08/second_oregon_wildland_firefig.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/08/second_oregon_wildland_firefig.html)

The second day, I got more in-depth information from investigators, OSHA and the Bureau of Labor and Statistics; we checked labor laws and the firefighter’s credentials, driver’s license type, etc. But I was truly lucky that, toward the end of the day, I got to interview the firefighter’s mother and younger brother, and write a “life story.” [http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/08/teenage_firefighter_died_on_th.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/08/teenage_firefighter_died_on_th.html)
I read it again now, while preparing this note. I noticed that the firefighter’s mother left a comment two weeks ago, almost a month after the story was published. It said, “Thank you.”

Lessons and best practices from the breaking news team:

• **Tweet first, but make sure it’s accurate.** In many cases, Twitter is the first step in reporting breaking news. On one hand, it’s an increasingly important medium for gathering leads -- many organizations, including public safety agencies, tweet their updates before using any other channel. As a reporter, you need to confirm the lead from Twitter with “a real person.” On the other hand, The Oregonian expects its reporters to tweet before anything else: tweet from the courthouse, tweet from the scene of a crash or fire, tweet from a press conference. Just make sure it’s accurate.

• **Tandem reporting can be smart and efficient.** Usually on breaking news, The Oregonian sends a reporter on the field and has another reporter make phone calls from the newsroom. The reporter from the field calls in, and the reporter in the newsroom meshes all the information into a news story, publishes it and updates it.

• **Write fast; update as you go.** “Iterative reporting” is one of the new directions set by Advance Publications, The Oregonian’s owner. Reporters are expected to publish something as quick as possible, then add information as they collect it.

• **Make sure you have a smartphone that takes good pictures and video.** I’ve had pictures published in the newspaper that were taken on my not-so-new, not-so-smart Blackberry. It’s not ideal. I’ll probably need to invest in an iPhone soon.
• **What sets you apart and brings value to readers is the extra information you offer them.** Technology aside, the reporter’s role is to go the extra mile to get more information, reach more sources, and add context to the daily story. Readers appreciate when you do that and call you up when you don’t.

• **Always keep an eye on the “investigative angle” of the story.** The Oregonian’s breaking news team has a librarian, Lynne Palombo, whose role it is to access databases, run background checks, and come up with ideas of in-depth reporting. She has been of great help, and she’s reminded me of what Professor Mark Horvit used to say, that investigative reporting is a frame of mind; it’s about challenging yourself to ask smart questions and to look for documents. One of my editors, Steve Suo, was also great that way.

• **Interview exhaustively.** One of the reporters on the breaking news team, Lynne Terry, takes great, in-depth phone interviews (colleagues call them “Terry tears”). She asks surprising questions and religiously asks sources where they got their information from.

• **When you don’t get answers, rephrase the questions.** Early on in the first firefighter death story, I was trying to get the sheriff’s deputy to confirm the incident. He wouldn’t give me any information because he said he couldn’t reach the rescue team, which was out on the field. My editor told me to ask about the reason why he sent the rescue team out in the first place. I did, and the deputy started answering almost all the questions I had.
• **Always look for alternative sources.** If you’re not hearing back from someone on a breaking news story, while you’re waiting, try to figure out who else might have the same information.

• **Look for the “story:” characters, scenes, chronology, narrative arc.** Some breaking news stories have great narrative potential. You look for the same things as in long-form narrative stories -- scenes, characters, narrative arc. You just need to move faster.

• **The Missourian’s “life stories” were valuable experience.** There’s nothing like being (somewhat) comfortable when having to call people whose loved ones have died recently. Having done that at the Missourian was very helpful.

• **Adrenaline will get you through.** Sometimes, the list of people you need to call and the amount of information you need to gather in a very short time might be overwhelming. But you just start doing it, and adrenaline will get you through it. Once you pick up the phone and dial the number, reporting will happen. Also, once you get on the field, reporting will happen.

• **A team who can “plug in and play” is invaluable.** It’s been a gift to see The Oregonian’s breaking news team work together. One of the reporters, Helen Jung, said what sets them apart as a team is that they all know how to play different parts -- they all know how to cover cops, courts, fires, weather -- and they’ve worked together for such a long time that they know one another well and have each other’s back. They can plug in in any role at any time and play, she said.
Great journalists also have to deal with uncertainty. Apart from the layoffs that were announced in June, The Oregonian is going through a series of other changes. For example, the editors’ role will change into “content managers,” which implies less story editing and more interacting with audiences; also, the newspaper will relocate, and at the new place, reporters are said to not have a desk of their own, but to “check in,” take a seat in the room, or work from “within the community.” Some changes come with uncertainty and frustrations. But I believe some of these people, who love their profession, will make it work and will shine no matter what.

I have no progress on the professional analysis to add to this report.
Master's project weekly notes #11 and #12

Oct 13

Dear committee members,

As I’m making slow but steady progress toward completing my master’s project, please allow me to catch up on the last two field reports I need to send you -- for the weeks 11-12, and 13-14, respectively.

This is the report for the two weeks ending Aug. 25. It includes reflections on professional analysis interviews with Lane DeGregory of the Tampa Bay Times and Amy Harmon of The New York Times.

These two weeks were a lot of work, but also a lot of fun.

Here’s why: The Oregonian’s federal courts reporter, Bryan Denson, and I broke the news that Romanian princess Irina Walker, daughter of Romanian King Michael I, and her husband, a former Coos County sheriff’s deputy, were arrested on charges of operating a cockfighting ring and illegal gambling at their eastern Oregon farm.

Denson and I were stunned to realize that Irina was a Romanian princess, and we tried to make the most of it. The night after we published the initial story (http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/08/romanian_princess_oregon_husba.html), I came back to the newsroom and started making phone calls to Romania -- which is 10 hours ahead of Oregon. My journalist friends from back home were great with helping me with contacts; I interviewed Romanian historians, got an official reaction from the Romanian Royal

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House, and by morning I had a short profile of princess Irina ready to be published

The next day, I covered the princess’s arraignment in federal court
(http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/08/romanian_princess_and_oregon_h.html). A few days later, I followed up on the European media’s reaction to the news

The stories took off like crazy, as expected. I gave an interview for the biggest Romanian TV station (my mom got to listen to it in the news bulletin), and got requests from several other Romanian TV stations, and from BBC Radio.

That’s it for the Kafkaesque experience.

Lane DeGregory and Amy Harmon were both amazing and candid interviewees. Below are some of the interviews’ highlights.

- DeGregory described experiencing “flow” by being completely absorbed by a story, sometimes for long stretches of time. For example, she would go see a baseball game with her husband, and couldn’t stop thinking about how the ending of a story would go. Or she would surprise herself by not paying attention to her teenage boys while they were talking to her; instead she would be thinking of a story.

- She writes mostly at night, after her kids go to bed. She always does laundry, dishes and gets the house in order before she starts writing.
DeGregory said she writes about “people in the shadows” because she wants to show how policies and social programs affect them and wants to give them a voice. She recently realized most of her subjects are women; she said she hasn’t been doing it consciously.

She said she’s still nervous, sometimes to the point where she feels like throwing up, whenever she’s preparing for an interview (winning a Pulitzer Prize hasn’t changed that). One of her concerns is whether she’s worthy to tell people’s stories. “Am I good enough to do this? Gosh, they gave me this amazing access or insight; I don’t know if I’m magician enough to pull off this trick.”

She deals with this anxiety by trying to be as empathetic as she can with her characters. When she was younger, she used to build her stories a lot around what other people said about her characters. Now she tries to know them well, “inhabit their minds,” before she lets others weigh in.

DeGregory talked about trying to balance her work with raising children. She said her editor, a man, brings his lunch to work every day neatly packaged by his wife in a lavender box. Meanwhile, she has “a carrot” in her fridge at home most of the times, and she doesn’t have time to cook for her family as she would want. She’s missed family events, including her own birthday party one time, because she was out on assignments.

On the other hand, she believes being a mother has helped her as a journalist. “Before that, I was a news reporter. I was ‘Lane the reporter.’ I wasn’t ‘Lane mom’ or ‘Lane, 30-year-old woman.’” After having children, she found it easier to relate to people, and wanted to write more feature stories.
Amy Harmon

- Harmon, a narrative science/medical writer, says she always tries to include three things in her stories: the science aspect, a personal story, which becomes the “narrative vehicle,” and a larger view on the impact on society.

- She sees it as a matter of public service to inform people about the science that impacts their lives in a way that is emotionally gripping, so that they stay with the story.

- She described experiencing “flow” first while reporting -- by becoming absorbed either by the lives of people she’s observing, or by the science she’s trying to decipher -- and then, sometimes, while writing. “It’s not exactly that I lose sense of time; it’s just that I want to be doing it all the time. I feel like I have something important to say.”

- The most “fun” writing happens when she finally feels she’s done enough reporting to be authoritative.

- Among the pressures she perceives are time -- “like editors are breathing down my neck: ‘What exactly are you spending all of this time on?’” -- and online comments.

- Harmon has a 9-year-old daughter. She says she hasn’t been as present of a mother as she would have wanted, and recalls tucking her daughter in and writing by her bedside while waiting for her to fall asleep. “On the other hand, she sees me doing something that I love to do and that I think is important and that gets a lot of reactions and hopefully makes a difference in the world. So I like to think that I am actually being a good parent that I’m modeling that for her.”
Dear committee members,

Please find below the report for the two weeks ending Sept. 8. It includes reflections on professional analysis interviews with Anne Hull of The Washington Post and freelancer Paige Williams.

[Later note: Jacqui and I started to talk about potential dates for my defense; I'm working on sending her a complete MA document and a second draft of my professional analysis by next week. So how does your schedule look for the week of Nov. 11 and the first three days in the week of Nov. 18? Could we schedule the defense in one of those two weeks? Please let me know. Thank you!]

The Oregonian extended my 12-week internship by almost two weeks so I could finish a longer-term story I was working on.

It was a story about a man who had served 27 years in prison for killing his parents when he was 18. In 2005, he sued the Oregon Board of Parole so that he would be considered for parole after serving 20 years instead of 30. He won the case before the Oregon Supreme Court. The decision affected 30 other people convicted of aggravated murder.

At the time I wrote the story, 11 had been released because of the Supreme Court decision, 6 had been denied and others were waiting for their hearings.

I'll spare you more details (you can read the story here:

http://www.oregonlive.com/pacific-northwest-news/index.ssf/2013/09/life_after_prison_for_killer_k.html), but I'll share this with you:
Janowski told me something that uplifted me during one of our long interviews. He had explained how as a teenager, he thought everyone was bad and deserved to have bad things happen to them. In prison, he had gone through cognitive classes, where he learned to challenge his beliefs. But it was after a victims' awareness meeting that he first felt compassion. A young woman talked about how she experienced the robbery and murder of her father. Hearing her story made Janowski relate to her and eventually helped him develop empathy... Talk about the power of stories.

And the interviews:

**Anne Hull**

- Hull said she writes about “people at the outer edges of society” because of a social justice mission but also because she loves reporting in those environments. “I have always felt at home in that world.”

- She said her sole purpose is to get readers in touch with how other people live, “peel the curtain back” on a world they don’t usually see.

- Hull said she gets enjoyment and loses sense of time when she can immerse herself in other people’s worlds.

- On reporting in difficult places, such as New Orleans after Katrina: She tries to keep an emotional distance from her subjects and focuses on what she needs to get for her stories. When it’s all over with, a few days after the story has been published, she goes through an “emotional collapse.” This is also true for most longer-term stories.
· She said she’s never wanted to quit journalism, even though she’s gone through “periods of extreme struggle,” when “you’re just like hitting the wrong chords, and everything you try doesn’t quite work out, and it’s really depressing.” She said writing has a lot to do with confidence.

· Hull said her most recent period of struggle was last year, when she was living in Berlin. She said she suspects some of it was caused by the fact that she was away from home and was starting to see the world differently, from a more global perspective (this made me feel just a little bit better about my own “periods of extreme struggle” since I’ve moved to the U.S.)

· “But I never wanted to quit. I never wanted to not work. I just wanted to beat it.”

Paige Williams (this interview was through e-mail)

· Paige said she usually gets into “the zone” either when reporting is engrossing, for example when she’s reading a document, but also when she’s trying to figure out how to say what she really wants to say.

· In order to create the conditions for “flow,” she needs silence; she turns off mobile devices, gets away from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

· She says she thinks about quitting journalism all the time, but she knows she couldn’t do it because at this point she’s programmed. “It’s my identity at this point, which is kind of depressing to admit.
“Journalism is like a masterful tattoo: painful, pretty, symbolic of something that matters, and superfreakinghard to get rid of.”

Thank you,

Simina
Chapter Three: Evaluation and lessons learned

During the three months I spent working on *The Oregonian’s* breaking news team, I produced about 100 stories. They varied in scope from quick briefs about car wrecks to iterative coverage of wildfires, to longer-term stories about changes in the General Educational Development test, and a convicted murderer’s life after being released from prison.

One way to evaluate my work was through the feedback I received from editors, colleagues and readers, which was frequent and almost always positive. I worked closely with the breaking news team editors, at the time John Killen, Margaret Haberman, Steve Suo and Kay Mitchell. I also worked on deadline stories with other members of the breaking news team, who trusted me and let me know they regarded me as a colleague.

I felt this experience made me a better reporter and faster writer, and helped me become more comfortable with being parachuted in the midst of breaking news events and reporting on deadline. I enjoyed it a lot, which is another important measure of this project’s success. A more detailed overview about the lessons I’ve learned follows later in the chapter.

For the professional analysis component of my master’s project, I interviewed seven seasoned long-form narrative journalists about the satisfaction they got from their work. I approached journalists who use in-depth reporting and narrative writing techniques to shed light on sensitive social issues such as poverty, race illness and trauma. I looked into whether they experience “flow,” a state in which people are so
immersed in their activities that nothing else seems to matter, what drives them to persevere despite difficulties and what meaning they assign to their work.

I believe the interviews are valuable for students and journalists of all ages because they offer a rare insight into the life experiences of these writers. From my experience reading books about journalism and attending conferences, these people – Pulitzer Prize and National Magazine Award winners who serve as models for other journalists – often share insights about their craft but rarely about their personal fulfillment.

For me, it was important to understand how this work that I love – long-form narrative writing on sensitive social issues – plays out in the general life frame. Also, I was curious to know whether these people I admire consider themselves happy and fulfilled.

All in all, I’m mostly satisfied with the content of my stories and professional analysis. However, I’m disappointed in myself because I encountered repeated delays in finishing up my professional analysis and project report. I underestimated how challenging it would be to finish up my master’s project work while also holding a full time job. One of the lessons learned was that, as one of my committee members said, “You can have it all, just not all at once.”

Thus transitioning into lessons learned, I think the biggest learning curve I’ve experienced this summer was related to breaking news. In my previous work experience, except for the occasional general assignment shifts at the community newspaper Columbia Missourian, I mostly covered beats or worked on long-form feature stories.
was a business reporter in Romania, an education reporter and an assistant city editor for public safety and public life at the *Missourian*, and a general assignment reporter at *The Wichita Eagle*.

But *The Oregonian* experience was “pure” breaking news. I learned to report and write faster, to file from the field, to cover cops and courts, to do follow-up stories and gather context over a few hours or a couple of days. I got to work in teams with other reporters, and I understood how valuable a team of experienced journalists who can “plug in and play” is. Everyone was able to quickly take on any aspect of a developing breaking news event, such as a fire or an officer-involved shooting, and also follow up where another reporter left it by covering court appearances and requesting public documents.

I’ve also gotten a taste of the changes the industry is going through. About three weeks into my professional experience, *The Oregonian* announced it would lay off about a quarter of the newsroom and reduce the paper’s home delivery to four days a week. I saw great, experienced people disappointed and confused. And then I saw them carrying on and continuing to produce great work. I learned that if you care about your work and feels that it serves other people, you’ll find a way to keep going even when you might want to give up.

From the people I interviewed for my professional analysis I learned that passion is essential for a long and meaningful career. That it is possible to experience “flow,” joy, nervousness and emotion when telling stories even if you’ve been doing it for decades. That some of the journalists I admire have a deep respect and care for the people who choose to share their stories with them, and for the stories themselves.
I’ve learned that science writer Amy Harmon always tries to build her stories to include three levels: the science, the individual story of her characters, and the larger social conflict.

I’ve learned that David Finkel wanted to represent the true emotions of a battalion of soldiers he was writing about, and not his own, so he spent as much time as he could with them, in Iraq.

I’ve learned that Chris Jones makes a point out of caring about his subjects because he believes it leads to great stories.

I’ve learned that Tom Hallman, Jr., throughout his career, has left the office after roughly eight hours so he could have a varied and balanced life. He believes every good storyteller needs to live a lot of life.

I’ve learned that Lane DeGregory is still nervous every time she documents someone’s story, and gets over that by trying to be as empathetic as she can with her subjects.

I’ve learned that Anne Hull has had periods of “extreme struggle” in her profession, and has beaten them with the help of her writer friends.

I’ve learned that these people still believe stories can make the world a better place.

All in all, this project fueled me up at an important, beginning stage of my career and got me excited about going out and doing good work.
Chapter Four: Abundant Physical Evidence

For the professional experience component of my master’s project, I worked as a breaking news reporter at The Oregonian newspaper, covering the Portland metro area and the Pacific Northwest.

I wrote a variety of stories, ranging from police briefs to news stories about fires and rescue operations, news features, court reports and deep dives. This chapter includes a selection of approximately 25 stories published in The Oregonian and the affiliated news website, Oregonlive.com, between June and September 2013.
Water safety concerns rising along with Portland-area temperatures

A group of young men play in the High Rocks area of the Clackamas River near Gladstone. A lifeguard checks in with them from a paddleboard. (Brittany Greeson/The Oregonian)

Print

By Simina Mistreanu | smistreanu@oregonian.com
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on June 06, 2013 at 6:18 PM, updated June 06, 2013 at 9:16 PM

Jason Endicott, 25, had moved to Los Angeles about a month ago to pursue a career in acting.
"You just knew he was going to make it, from the talent he possessed, but also from the effort he was putting into it," David Levy, who played the role of Endicott's father in the Neil Simon play "Broadway Bound," wrote in an email.

Last Sunday, Endicott was visiting Oregon when he and three other young men jumped 75 feet off Punch Bowl Falls in the Columbia Gorge, one of the most popular natural attractions in the area.

Endicott was the only one who didn't rise to the surface.

His death -- one of two water-related fatalities in the past week involving young men -- was a painful reminder that once the weather turns warm in the Portland area, dozens of people get hurt or die in water-related incidents.

Many of them are men in their teens and 20s, according to a database maintained by The Oregonian. And with a warm and beautiful weekend in the forecast, local authorities are reminding people to be careful when they dive or swim.

Tragedies often happen when people overestimate their abilities, are in an adventurous state of mind and don't know the area well enough, said Lt. Travis Gullberg of the Multnomah County Sheriff's River Patrol.

"In the case of a person being young: 'Hey, I can swim across the Columbia River,'" he said. "That's not the case. Even though it's 80 degrees outside, the water is still cold, still rapid, and people can fall victim quickly."

Endicott grew up in Cincinnati and graduated from the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Los Angeles. He went back to his hometown after graduation, where he performed in plays and worked a day job to save money and move back to L.A.

After he didn't surface following his jump at the Punch Bowl, a dive team searched for his body that evening but couldn't find it. Gullberg said divers went back the next morning and found Endicott in about 12 feet of water, close to the place where his friends last saw him.

A similar tragedy played out near Newberg a day later.
Drowning isn’t what you may think

A Slate magazine article by a former Coast Guard rescue swimmer, which explains the dynamics of drowning, is getting a lot of national attention.

Monday evening, a group of teenagers including 15-year-old Cesar Campuzano, went for a swim at a nearby park. Campuzano jumped in but didn’t know how to swim, according to Captain Tim Svenson of the Yamhill County Sheriff’s Office. The water was cold – 62 degrees – and deep so that boats could pull by the dock in the park. Campuzano’s friends jumped after him. The boy was struggling, and he eventually went under.

A Newberg dive team found Campuzano and performed CPR, but by then he had already been submerged for about 30 minutes. The boy was taken to the hospital Monday night in critical condition. He was pronounced dead Thursday at 7:35 a.m.

The beginning of summer is especially dangerous for swimming, said Andy Bryant, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service in Portland. Rivers, fed by melting snows from the mountains, have some of the coldest water of the year. The snowmelt also raises the water levels, making it more difficult for people to stay in control against the currents.

Taneka Burwell-Means, a rescue program coordinator with American Medical Response, on Wednesday pointed toward an island in the middle of Sandy River by Glenn Otto Community Park in Troutdale. The island had been submerged two days earlier, but water levels had dropped four feet since.

A day earlier, lifeguards based at Glenn Otto rescued two men in their mid-20s who had ventured toward the center of the river, Burwell-Means said. That day, the river flowed at 2.3 knots, the equivalent of about 200 pounds of force against the body.

"Way too often we see people who underestimate the current and overestimate their swimming abilities," she said.

Burwell-Means expects several hundred people in the park this weekend, which is expected to bring temperatures as high as 78 degrees. Her lifeguard team, along
with deputies from sheriff’s offices in the area, are preparing for the water season with patrols, warnings and "loaner" life jackets.

Meanwhile, in Cincinnati, actress Tracy Schoster, who played Jason Endicott’s mother in "Broadway Bound," is rehearsing for a new production, "Duck Hunter Shoots Angel." This weekend, the performances will be dedicated to Endicott.

"The message of the play is truly fitting," she said. "Angels are everywhere in our lives. We just need to open our eyes to see them. Jason was a very special young man."

-- Simina Mistreanu
Aumsville teen seriously injured in crash two days after high school graduation

By Simina Mistreanu, The Oregonian

Email the author | Follow on Twitter

on June 07, 2013 at 12:35 PM, updated June 13, 2013 at 1:06 PM

Lindsey R. Magnusson's car was struck on the driver's side by a pick up truck. Marion County Sheriff's Office

An 18-year-old girl from Aumsville suffered life-threatening injuries in a car crash in the community of Turner southeast of Salem Friday morning, police said.

Lindsey R. Magnusson, who graduated from Cascade High School in Turner on Wednesday, had just dropped off her younger brother, a freshman, at the school when the accident happened around 8 a.m. Classes for the lower grades continue through Tuesday.

According to the Marion County Sheriff's Office, Magnusson was turning onto 70th Avenue SE in front of the school when a southbound pickup truck hit her 1989 Honda Accord on the driver's side.
Turner Fire Department deputies extricated Magnusson from the car. She was taken to Salem Hospital, the sheriff’s office said.

Sheriff’s Chaplain Todd Pynch notified Magnusson's mother of the crash.

The driver of the pickup was Audrey V. Briggs, 31, of Lafayette. She was traveling with two young passengers in the back seat of her 2003 Dodge R2500. Briggs was also taken to Salem Hospital, but deputies said her injuries are not thought to be serious. The passengers were uninjured.

The high school exit is marked by a stop sign, the sheriff’s office said. Magnusson was facing east, into the rising sun, as she drove out of the parking lot.

Deputies said Magnusson, Briggs and her passengers were all wearing seatbelts. The older Honda didn't have airbags.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Willamette River swim in Portland highlights recreational opportunities -- and the power of friendship

View the Slideshow >>

(Gallery by Motoya Nakamura, The Oregonian)

Print

By Simina Mistreanu | smistreanu@oregonian.com
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on June 07, 2013 at 8:15 PM, updated June 07, 2013 at 8:41 PM

Email
Making her way through joggers and bikers who were crossing Hawthorne Bridge Friday afternoon, Debbra Palmer kept her eyes on the water.

Below, two people – one in a fluorescent-green kayak, the other in a simple black swimsuit – were doing laps across the Willamette River. Palmer was there to encourage the swimmer, her friend Michelle Macy, who had set out to swim 19 miles, or 75 laps, in a 10-to-12-hour stretch.

"She challenges herself," Palmer said. "She is my hero."

Macy was swimming to promote the river as a recreational resource together with Human Access Project, a Portland nonprofit. She started about 6:10 a.m. and kept at it for several hours on the warm, partly sunny day in water that reached 68 degrees at the shore, with colder patches throughout.

Supporting her during the early afternoon were Palmer from above and, in the kayak, David Radcliff. Together, the three formed a team that not only took on the challenge presented by the river but also showed the power of friendship.

Palmer met Macy about five years ago, when they worked together at Nike. For months she didn't know her colleague was an experienced athlete who swam some of the world's biggest channels, including the English Channel, the Strait of Gibraltar and Japan's Tsugaru Channel.

Macy is humble, Palmer said. She's also shy, has a dry sense of humor and is a devoted friend. She has inspired people around her to make changes in their lives.

"She swam with sharks and jellyfish," Palmer said. "She can't really see what's in there, but she goes (in the water) anyway. She inspires us to face our fears."

Palmer's big fear is losing her mother, who has been diagnosed with breast cancer.

Macy's own mother died of cancer a few years ago. Swimming incessantly was a way in which Macy has dealt with the loss, Palmer said.
"When people ask me who my favorite athlete is, I don't have to think," she said. "I say Michelle Macy."

Macy, 36, grew up in Chaska, Minn., and has been a competitive swimmer since she was 9. She moved to Portland in 2007 for work. Because at first she didn't have friends in the city, she spent a lot of time swimming. In October 2007, she swam the English Channel, and since she has raised support and money for marathon swims around the world but also for donations to cancer research.

Whenever she swims long distances, someone accompanies her in a kayak. Friday afternoon, that person was Radcliff. At 79, he is Macy's role model.

"He lets me know that there are possibilities," Macy said. "If we really work and put in the effort, we can achieve big things."

They met at swimming practice, where Macy was surprised to see Radcliff swimming faster than she was. Radcliff, who competed in the Olympics in 1956, now swims in the U.S. Masters Swimming program. He competes in the 75-79 age bracket, and said he looks forward to turning 80 so he can be "the young kid" in his age group. Radcliff accompanied Macy on some of her local swims. He and his wife even went to New Zealand to encourage Macy during her swim at Lake Taupo. They call her their "Minnesota daughter."

By the end of the day Friday, Macy had completed 45 laps, said Will Levenson with the Human Access Project. She stopped when she felt too tired to continue.

Radcliff said he admires how Macy sets her goals so that they serve other people, too.

"Swimming long distances at times can get monotonous," he said. "She's herself and the ocean, and she keeps grinding it out, and grinding it out and sticking with it."

-- Simina Mistreanu
Portland ceremony welcomes 20 new citizens

A video projection of a waving American flag towered over a crowd wearing saris, hijabs, kufi caps, high heels, simple shirts and dress pants in the gym of the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization in Northeast Portland.

Interpreters in Burmese, Hindi, Arabic, Somali, Spanish, Russian and Dzongkha, among others, worked to keep up with the upcoming speeches on the stage and the polilingual roar that filled the room.
Seated on one side of the room were the guests of honor: a group of people who, starting today, would become U.S. citizens.

The Portland office of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service held a naturalization ceremony on Thursday for 20 people who sought better lives away from their homes overseas.

The 20 came from Ukraine, Russia, Somalia, Cuba, Liberia, Cambodia, Togo, Turkey and Haiti. Thirteen were refugees. Their journeys to citizenship took five years or more from the time they were admitted to the United States. An estimated 76,000 people sought to be admitted as refugees last year.

The future citizens rose and sang the national anthem. They recited the Oath of Allegiance and the Pledge of Allegiance. Finally, they shook hands with four officials presiding over the ceremony and received a certificate and a small flag.

With that, they were U.S. citizens.

A video of President Obama, projected on the wall, welcomed them. Another video displayed Mt. Rushmore, a bald eagle, Lincoln's statue, children running, Minnesota lakes and Tennessee hills.

By the time the video was over, Maude Marsh Dennis' eyes were full of tears. A 71-year-old refugee from Liberia, she waited for this moment 13 years. She escaped a civil war in her country and spent eight years in a refugee camp in Cote D'Ivoire before coming to the United States in 2000. She moved to Portland a year later to be with her daughter and found a job as a caretaker for seniors.

Life in the United States has been "very, very, very good," she said. She loved her work. Old people are funny and good to you if you show them you care, she said.

"Everyone seems to be equal," she said. "You speak what you want to speak, and do what you want to do. As long as you don't break the law, you're super here."

Dennis wore a blue, pink and silver kante skirt from Ghana and a pink-and-gold headscarf. She matched the outfit with a turqois necklace and earrings that she bought from Kentucky.
Diana Gensitskaya, 23, came to the U.S. as a 1-year-old with her family as refugees from the Ukraine. She went to public schools here, and now works as a manager at a Camas hotel. This country is all she's known, yet she said she's always felt like an outsider, "a guest of 22 years."

She looks forward to being able to vote, get a passport and travel outside the country. The first destinations on her mind: Panama City, Spain and Seychelles.

Amina Arab, 49, arrived five years ago as a refugee from Somalia.

Arab's 23-year-old son, Abdifatah Ahmed, translated that his mother missed home and all her family members in Somalia. What she likes here, he said: "peace and security."

This story was altered to reflect the following correction: Of the 20 people who were naturalized at a ceremony Thursday afternoon in Northeast Portland, 13 were refugees. A story in Friday's Metro section mistakenly stated otherwise.
Oregon City man arraigned in connection with fatal U.S. 30 crash

Mark Alan Thomas, the driver in the U.S. 30 crash that killed a Scappoose man on June 18, was brought in on a wheelchair for his arraignment Monday morning at the Justice Center in downtown Portland.

Thomas, who was seriously injured in the crash, was placed in a security booth, from where he talked briefly to his lawyer. He blew kisses and showed the peace sign to members of his family, seated in the room, before being rolled out.

He was scheduled for a pre-trial conference on July 2.

Thomas, 39, faces charges of second-degree manslaughter and drunken driving.

He is being held at Multnomah County Detention Center. Bail has been set at $250,000 on charges of second-degree manslaughter and $2,500 on charges of driving under the influence of intoxicants.
According to the probable cause affidavit, Thomas told investigators he drank alcohol and took a series of drugs, including meth, marijuana and Xanax, before attempting to drive from Portland to Astoria for drug rehab on the morning of June 18.

At 12:24 p.m., his Mazda Tribute crossed the center median and crashed into the side of a Buick Century driven by Wayne Harvey McCormick, 65. The crash happened three miles south of Scappoose on U.S. 30. McCormick was pronounced dead at the scene. Thomas was taken to Legacy Emanuel Medical Center with serious but non-life threatening injuries.

His blood tests came back positive for methamphetamine, cannabis and benzodiazepine, according to the affidavit.

He has been held at the hospital under police custody. Previous court appearances scheduled on Thursday and Friday were cancelled because he was recovering at the hospital.

-- Simina Mistreanu
TriMet crime stats: Fewer assaults but more theft in 2012

The Gateway Transit Center park-and-ride lot saw 23 motor vehicle thefts in 2012, according to TriMet's latest crime statistics. Second on the list: Parkrose with nine. (Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian)

TriMet saw fewer assaults on its buses and trains last year.

But more electronics were stolen from passengers and more cars were taken from its park-and-ride lots.
"The target was not necessarily the person, to cause harm, but rather their belongings," said Harry Saporta, TriMet's executive director of safety and security, who presented the transit agency's crime report to its board of directors Wednesday morning in the Portland Building.

Altogether, there were 578 incidents reported in 2012, compared to 496 in 2011. Almost 80 percent were thefts – instances when people steal while the owner is not paying attention – and robberies – confrontations that result in stealing.

Thefts were more frequent (364 compared to 347 in 2011), but robberies saw the bigger increase (98 last year, up from 56 in 2011) of the two.

"We saw a lot of confrontational taking of belongings," Saporta said. "That was quite alarming."

However, aggravated assaults have decreased from 28 in 2011 to 21 last year.

Authorities and commuters have been calling electronics theft "Apple picking," a practice that skyrocketed with the increase in smartphone and tablet usage in past years. After seeing a spike in smartphone snatches in the first half of 2012, TriMet deployed a special investigation team, which checked security video and rode trains. The officers eventually tracked down a group that was behind most incidents but also had extensive regional reach, Saporta said. Their arrest led to "an enormous drop-off in the number of thefts," he said.

For example, from a high of 19 smartphone robberies in May 2012, only one was reported in April 2013.

Nevertheless, Saporta said, most TriMet crimes are not the work of organized groups.

Another rising issue was car thefts in TriMet parking lots, which increased by more than a half: from 59 in 2011 to 92 in 2012. Most happened at four highly used lots: Gateway Transit Center (23 incidents), Parkrose Transit Center (nine incidents), Gresham City Hall (eight incidents) and Sunset Transit Center (five incidents). Thieves often went after older Hondas and Toyotas, which are easier to steal, Saporta said.
The increase in car thefts is consistent with the overall situation in the Portland area, Saporta said. According to the Portland Police Bureau, vehicle thefts have increased from 3,013 in 2011 to 3,404 in 2012.

Officers have used decoy cars in some of the TriMet lots. One led to the arrest of a man in Beaverton who, according to Saporta, was not only stealing cars at the transit center but also on the streets.

As for this year, TriMet has recorded an 11 percent decrease in the number of reported crimes in the first quarter compared to the same period last year.

"We fully expect the trend to continue," Saporta said.

To keep the crime on decline, Saporta plans to maintain the number of supervisors and police officers on trains and platforms; TriMet now has 74 supervisors. The transit agency will also continue its awareness campaign, which reminds people to keep track of their belongings and to keep an eye out for problems.

The report notes that of the 364 thefts reported last year, 61 were actually cases where people lost or left items behind.

More than 26,000 items came into TriMet's lost and found last year, including more than 2,800 phones and electronic devices, more than 2,300 wallets and more than 2,000 umbrellas.

Only about 20 percent of these items were eventually claimed by their owners.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Baby Precious: Funeral tries to find meaning in tragedy of baby found at recycling center

Soft piano tunes filled the room as about 50 people sat on the benches of Maranatha Church in Northeast Portland.
Facing them was a tiny light-pink coffin decorated with pink roses and carnations. On its lid, among the flowers, was a pink teddy bear.

They came together Friday to acknowledge Baby Precious and try to pull meaning out of the tragedy that brought the girl to them. The newborn had been found dead at a recycling center in North Portland last month.

"One lesson I want you to take from here today is let's not judge," Joyce Harris of the African American Alliance told those gathered. "Just in being here you are making a commitment to embrace this child because we know that she deserved to be loved as do so many of our children."

Harris was among a group of women, including Portland Police Officer Marci Jackson and Antoinette Edwards of the city's Office of Violence Prevention, who organized the funeral for Precious. The women also chose the baby’s name.

As they were preparing the girl for church, the women bought two bags of clothes, a blanket and a teddy bear. They couldn't decide what to dress her in until they saw a little white dress that was perfect. They added a hat and sewed a pink flower on it.

Harris had told the others she didn't want to see the baby. But as Precious was being dressed, she peeked in. A few moments later, without realizing what had happened, she found herself holding the baby.

"I felt relieved that we had come full circle from when we found her," she said.

**Tips**

Police ask anyone with information about the case to call 503-823-4357, text CRIMES (274637) or leave tips online at [www.crimestoppersoforegon.com](http://www.crimestoppersoforegon.com).

While facing the room at the funeral, Harris pulled out a piece of paper and read out loud the words she found on an old card: "If I could, I’d make an invisible coat for you. I’d stitch together hundreds of pieces, and each piece would be something wonderful like hope, self-esteem, independence and all the things that make you strong. Then I’d take this coat and wrap it around you, Precious, so you could wear my love as a shield to protect you and keep you safe."
The Rev. T. Allen Bethel talked about how God is present even in tragedies, and called on the baby's parents to come forward.

"We came across many lines today," Bethel said. "Different parts of the city, across our racial divides, across our belief divides, all because we wanted to celebrate a new kid, our baby named Precious."

Listen to a song from the service:

Or download MP3 here.

By the end of the service, people were clapping and shouting. Then they quietly walked to the coffin to pay their respects.

The room emptied. Funeral home employees carried the flowers away. Dwight Terry, owner of Terry Funeral Home, placed the coffin in the back of a black Cadillac Escalade.

Terry, Jackson and Harris regrouped in the baby garden of River View Cemetery. Two men used rainbow-colored ropes to lower the coffin into the ground.

While they were working, Clara Bentley, 89, a longtime caretaker who joined the women at the cemetery, kept asking: "Can you see her with the wings?"

The men put soil on the coffin and placed pieces of sod on top of the plot.

As people were leaving, the sod blended almost seamlessly with the rest of the lawn. On top, there stood an arrangement of pink roses, pink carnations and a pink teddy bear.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Portland hazmat crews respond to acid leak at Northeast Portland fruit plant

A hazmat team heads inside Pacific Coast Fruit Co. in Northeast Portland to clean up a spill of Perasan A, a sanitizer. The plant was evacuated during the cleanup. (Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian)

Print

By Simina Mistreanu | smistreanu@oregonian.com
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on July 02, 2013 at 6:35 PM, updated July 03, 2013 at 10:10 AM

An acid spill at Pacific Coast Fruit Co. in Northeast Portland injured one person and led to the evacuation of about 150 employees Tuesday.

Fire and hazmat crews responded to the spill about 11:30 a.m.
Firefighters directed the workers to an area under the I-84 overpass, north of the factory, so that they would be less exposed to the toxic vapors blown south by the wind. One man was taken to the hospital with a hand burn.

The spilled substance, Perasan A, contains peroxycetic acid and is used as a wash to sanitize fruit and vegetables, said Kieran Collins, operations manager with Pacific Coast Fruit. When overheated, it becomes a stinging vapor that can irritate the eyes and lungs.

The substance is usually diluted – 10 parts per million – before employees have contact with it. The concentrated form of the acid is kept in 50-gallon tanks in a storage loft on the second story, Collins said, and that is where it spilled.

Grant Afterbuffalo, who works in the company’s production department, remembered seeing a supervisor come down the stairs saying something had spilled. Then he felt it.

"It's one of the types of smells that hits your senses," he said. "It burns. It feels like it's harder to breathe. Like when you cut fresh onions but worse."

Afterbuffalo then saw the acid leaking through the ceiling and dripping down the walls in a hallway that leads to the main production plant. He said he works with the acid every day, and it is usually clear, but the substance dripping down the white walls was burgundy colored.

Leticia Reyes was working inside the production plant when she suddenly noticed the chemical smell, which at first she mistook for onions. She started tearing up, and so did her colleagues.

Those in the production plant were told to wait inside while the spill in the hallway could be isolated, she said.

"The smell was too strong," she said, and in 10 to 15 minutes, everyone was evacuated.

The firefighters, who arrived first, made way for the hazmat team, said Lt. Rich Chatman, spokesman for the Portland Fire Bureau. Altogether, seven units came
to the scene. Firefighters closed Northeast Second Avenue between Burnside Bridge and I-84, and advised people working at nearby businesses to stay inside.

Chatman estimated about two gallons of acid were spilled. The hazmat crew was investigating the cause of the leak.

Outside, general manager Tom Brugato acknowledged that the period before July Fourth is usually the busiest for the company, but that the produce is in temperature-controlled rooms and should be safe.

Employees used their long, white coats as blankets and waited on the grass under the I-84 overpass. Around 1:30 p.m., they were brought water, soda, sandwiches and chips.

Pacific Coast Fruit Co. has had three Occupational Safety & Health Division inspections in the past 10 years. Each resulted in a fine between $105 and $195 for safety or health in manufacturing issues.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Portland groups join hands for mass 'shout-out' to beat GED deadline

Monica Criteser, a volunteer teacher with IRCO, leads a class at Africa House, one of the community organizations helping people get their GED ahead of a Jan. 1 deadline. (Benjamin Brink/The Oregonian)

By Simina Mistreanu | smistreanu@oregonian.com
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on July 06, 2013 at 11:00 AM, updated July 09, 2013 at 10:14 AM

Email

From Gresham to downtown Portland, from Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard to 102nd Street, the word is beginning to get out.
Eguy Idy, 20, a refugee from Chad, sat at a desk in Northeast Portland to learn about it.

Lakeesha Dumas, 36, a former gang member and recovering drug addict, was teaching it.

Brandy Hofmann, 31, a single mother of four, sent her young ones to school and rushed to prepare to finish it.

They're all part of an unprecedented effort by community organizations in Portland to persuade 650 people who haven't finished high school to get a GED by the end of the year. The groups have historically addressed poverty, gang activity and immigration – not education. Now they're stepping in to help people get their certificates on a deadline.

The GED, the equivalent to a high school diploma, will change in January 2014. The new test will be more difficult, in line with the Common Core Standards. People who haven't completed the test will have to start over.

Before then, Oregon's Department of Education is trying to push 14,000 people through the five exams toward a certificate that can help them get better jobs or enroll in college. The effort has only recently trickled down to street level.

"This is more of a mass callout, a shout-out," said Antoinette Edwards, director of the city's Office of Youth Violence Prevention. Edwards is planning to push the GED closeout message right under people's noses: in church bulletins, on TriMet, in fast food restaurants, on grocery bags.
At a recent Gang Violence Task Force meeting, Edwards talked about her plan to have community groups reach out to people — and offer tutoring. The community organizations took the idea and ran with it.

The first step was to get tutors. Portland Literacy Council sent out a notice, and within 72 hours, about 40 people volunteered to be instructors. On June 1, a sunny Saturday, 36 people showed up for the instructor training at Londer Learning Center.

Each tutor has been assigned to one of the community organizations involved in the campaign: Rosewood Initiative in East Portland, Africa House in Northeast Portland and Straightway Services and Portland Opportunities and Industrialization Center in North Portland.

"Officially, (the new test) is not more difficult; it’s more complex," said Carole Scholl, manager of the Londer Learning Center. It will have a higher level math section and a stronger focus on analytical thinking and writing.

"There is an urgency that adults should really have to finish from now until December," Scholl said. "It’s a community effort."

***

On a warm Monday evening, Cassandra Minnieweather and Lakeesha Dumas began to set up a classroom at the McCoy Academy, 3802 N.E. Martin Luther
King Jr. Blvd. King's portrait, painted among stars, adorns a fence outside. Inside, classroom walls are covered with bookcases full of colorful texts.

At a wooden table in the center of the room, the women arranged piles of sample tests and instructions for each of the exams: reading, writing, science, social sciences and math. Then they waited.

GED contact

Anyone wanting to sign up for GED classes or get more information about earning a GED may call 503-319-1899.

Straightway Services is a community organization started by Rev. Dwight Minnieweather, Cassandra's husband, to offer "wrap-around" support to families struggling with crime, addiction and poor access to education.

It involves youth in several programs, including summer employment, in an effort to motivate them and keep them off the streets when school is out. It also feeds homeless people under the Burnside Bridge every week, and Rev. Minnieweather regularly goes out on the streets and talks to youth who might be involved in gangs.

The Minnieweathers and Dumas were excited to become part of the closeout campaign when they heard Edwards talk about.

Abubaker Yusuf, 47, a refugee from Somalia, brushes up on his algebra during a class at Africa House. He's among those trying to get his GED before a Jan. 1 deadline. While instructors say math is often the most difficult class for GED
students, not so for Yusuf. "Class is cool," he said. "In three hours I learned so much."

Dumas got her GED in 1996, when she was 18, and worked as a GED instructor at Portland Community College for a few months. She then struggled with addiction while trying to raise her son, but got clean two years ago and wanted to reach out to troubled youth. She is now one of six volunteer instructors for Straightway's closeout campaign.

The main challenge will be to persuade people to come to classes, Cassandra Minnieweather said. She plans to promote the program in church, at the food bank, at the clothes closet ministry, through fliers, Facebook, Twitter, at low-income housing facilities and out on the street.

"Sometimes it takes incentives, maybe a meal, to bring them here," she said. People need to see success stories. They also need to understand that timing is key, and they'll have access to tutors and other free resources.

"Just to diminish the costs, that's half the battle," she said.

Of the 650 targeted by the campaign, Straightway Services hopes to assist 100, Cassandra Minnieweather said.

The pastor was hopeful when several people asked him at church about the GED classes.

"I'm looking for an overflow of people," he said.

But two hours after Dumas and Minnieweather neatly arranged the piles of workbooks on the table, no one had showed up.

***

According to the American Community Survey's five-year estimates (2006-2010), there are more than 271,000 Oregonians (age 18-64) without a high school diploma or GED certificate. Of those, the people who held jobs earned on average $471 a week in 2012, compared to $652 for high school graduates and $749 for those with some college or an associate degree.
"We're talking about dropouts who become adults that get caught in a cycle of low-wage jobs," Scholl said. "Ever since recession, they've had a harder time finding work because the recession put the higher-skilled workers into low-wage jobs and bumped out further people who haven't graduated."

And the trend will continue. The Oregon Employment Department projects that between 2010 and 2020, of about 728,000 job openings, 30 percent will have no educational requirement. About 68 percent will require a high school diploma or an equivalent, said occupational economist Brenda Turner.

So the odds of getting a job might double with the GED.

***

On a Tuesday afternoon, Abubaker Yusuf took time between his job cleaning a bank and dinner with his family of 12 children for a taste of algebra.

Yusuf, 47, a refugee from Somalia, sat on one of the blue chairs in the Africa House office at 621 N.E. 102nd Ave. and tried to absorb everything.

The first class at Africa House was three hours long and focused mainly on math, often considered by instructors the most difficult subject. But, for Yusuf, it was wonderful.

"Class is cool," he said. "In three hours I learned so much."

Ever since he came to the United States in December 2008, Yusuf has been trying to get a job as an auto mechanic, his profession in Somalia. But employers always asked about a high school diploma or a GED and a mechanic's certificate.

Yusuf graduated from high school in his home country, but he only studied in the Somali language. He took English classes at Portland Community College, and now he's looking forward to brushing up his math and getting his GED.
recently graduated from the GED program after taking classes at the Londer Center for Learning. She is holding up her 8-year-old daughter, Jasmine, who supported her mom all the way through the program. Motoya Nakamura/The Oregonian

Africa House manager Djimet Dogo said 22 had registered but only 10 showed up. He said several could not come because they had work between 2 and 5 p.m., so he is considering rescheduling to accommodate more students. He said holding the classes at Africa House might help immigrants feel more at ease.

Dogo has been inviting people. Among them was Idy, the 20-year-old Chad native. When Idy came to the United States he could barely speak English, yet he was enrolled in the junior class at Madison High School. He felt overwhelmed and dropped out after two months.

He got a job at a produce-delivery company in Portland, where he spends a lot of time cutting produce in refrigerated areas. He's not crazy about the cold or the task. The GED holds the promise for a better job or maybe even college.

***

More than 16,000 Oregonians are currently enrolled in the GED process but haven't finished, said state GED administrator Marque Haeg. The current version was introduced in 2002, and since then, between 9,000 and 10,000 people have received their GEDs in Oregon every year.
In 2001, before the former test changed, 14,000 people got their certificates. Haeg is expecting a similar turnout this year.

But starting in January, those going for their GED will probably have a tougher time completing the course.

For example, while the current version requires applicants to write a five-paragraph essay, the new test will ask people to summarize a text, build arguments based on it and then select portions in the text that support those arguments.

The new GED will also be computer-based.

"That is a lot different than a five-paragraph essay," Scholl said. "It's an important skill, but it's a big leap, so we're pretty worried about that."

***

Brandy Hofmann's oldest child goes to his high school at 8:30 every morning. Two other children need to be at school at 8:45, and the fourth starts shortly after 9. Four days a week, after she sends everyone off, Hofmann rushes downtown to the Londer Learning Center for classes, which start at 10.

She's a single mother who dropped out in sixth grade. Since then, she has struggled with drug addiction, depression, and trying to provide for her children while taking jobs that didn't last more than six months each. She enrolled in GED classes several times but got discouraged and gave up.

Last fall, she was incarcerated for assault. While visiting her probation officer, she saw signs promoting the Londer Learning Center's GED program – which is geared toward people on probation, parole or recovering from addiction – so she thought she'd give it a try.

Among the colleagues she meets with regularly at the center are Michelle Newell, 38, and Alvin Prather, 59. Although the three of them started classes at different times, they had similar achievements – passing four exams out of five – and have run into the same hurdle: the math test.
Last Tuesday morning, the three of them gathered at the Londer center, 421 S.W. Fifth Ave. They sat and practiced tables, charts and graphs.

"I always knew math was going to be my downfall," Prather said.

"And they say in January it's going to be much harder," Hofmann answered.

But by the time the new GED rolls in, the three of them are planning to be long done with it and enrolled in classes at Portland Community College.

They encourage one another and get reinforcement from tutors. But the process itself, with all its difficulties, is proving to be the biggest reward, they said.

"Before coming here, I suffered from manic depression, I was suicidal, I have bipolar disorder, I can go really downhill," Hofmann said. "But since I started school, I started proving myself that I can do it, my self-esteem, my self-confidence, everything has skyrocketed."

-- Simina Mistreanu
A 15-year-old boy has admitted to firing the gun that killed one man and injured another at a Gresham park on Friday, according to a probable cause affidavit filed in Multnomah County Circuit Court.

Reynaldo Antonio Ceja is being held at the Donald E. Long Juvenile Detention Center in Portland on murder charges.

Also incarcerated is Brian Hernandez-Cardona, 17, who told investigators he gave Ceja the gun and was at the shooting. The boys are scheduled to be arraigned next Monday.

The teenagers, who are members of the Playboys gang, were among a group who "fronted" what they believed to be a rival gang at the Red Sunset Park in Gresham. "Fronting" means, according to Hernandez-Cardona's statement, confronting and insulting rival groups.

Gresham police responded to a shooting about 9:45 p.m. and found Paulino Venancio-Lopez, 33, of Gresham, dead from a gunshot wound to the back of his head. They learned that a second victim, Omar Merenio-Lopez, 22, was at Mount Hood Medical Center with a gunshot wound to his leg.

Merenio-Lopez told officers he was playing basketball at the park when seven people passed by. A smaller group returned and asked the players what gang they
ran with. Merenio-Lopez said he and others ignored them, but shortly after he heard gunshots and ran.

About 10:30 p.m., a Beaverton police officer noticed a maroon Toyota Corolla in the parking lot of Elsie Stuhr Park in Beaverton. The park is closed from dusk until dawn, so the officer decided to investigate. He said he found four people in the car with open alcohol containers. Three were underage.

The officer searched the car and said he found a backpack that one of the passengers, Hernandez-Cardona, said was his. The officer found a .357-caliber revolver inside the backpack with six spent casings in its cylinder. He noticed the three males in the car had gang-related tattoos.

The car’s driver told officers she had picked up Hernandez-Cardona earlier from Gresham.

Hernandez-Cardona told detectives he was at the Gresham shooting but he was not the shooter. He said he had given the revolver to Ceja, whose gang name is "Scrappy," and told investigators Ceja had fired the gun. Hernandez-Cardona said it was the first time he had seen someone killed.

Officers arrested Ceja at his girlfriend’s home in Estacada around 3 p.m. Sunday. His girlfriend told police she dropped Ceja off in Gresham on the afternoon of the homicide and picked him up around 10:30 that night.

Ceja admitted to investigators he fired the revolver at the park. He said he didn’t mean to kill anyone and wanted to apologize to the victim’s family.

Detectives noted the revolver’s hammer had to be pulled back before the gun could be fired. To fire six shots, Ceja had to pull the hammer back and pull the trigger six times. Detectives said they believe the shooting was intentional.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Bonnie Holtgrew hadn’t ridden her bike since last fall. The 49-year-old woman suffers from diabetes, and two months ago she had a surgery that amputated her toes and part of her left foot.

But Wednesday around 6 p.m., she was thirsty and out of cigarettes, so she hopped on her bike and headed to the store. On her way back to her home on Northeast 92nd Avenue off Glisan Street, she took a detour onto the I-205 overpass to avoid a closed sidewalk.

Suddenly, she saw something that made her stop.

A man was standing outside the bridge railing, his back turned toward Holtgrew. He was alternately grasping the railing behind him, then letting it go, all while looking down onto the loud highway, his lips moving.

Holtgrew approached the man and started talking to him, but he didn’t seem to hear her. She reached out and touched his arm, a thousand thoughts rushing through her mind: "What if he jumps the moment I touch him?"

The man turned his face to her.
"Lady, leave," he said in a soft voice. "Leave me alone."

Holtgrew looked at him. A man in his 50s, she thought, 5-foot-6 to 5-foot-7, tanned, with short, blond hair that looked freshly cut. He was wearing a light-blue T-shirt with the picture of a band, gray jeans and tennis shoes. He looked sad and on a mission.

The man reminded Holtgrew of her husband.

"Come home with me," she said. "Talk to my husband. Nothing can be this bad."

People on the freeway below were honking their horns. The man didn't talk back. He just looked at her and shook his head a little. She kept begging and crying.

A police car stopped right behind them, and Officer Tyrone Willard stepped out. The 29-year-old had just cleared from another call. He felt urgency in the dispatcher's voice, so he rushed over. A few blocks before reaching the overpass, he turned off his siren so it wouldn't stress the man out. As Willard stepped out of the car, he knew backup was coming.

"How are you doing, sir?" the officer asked. "What's your name? What's going on?"

The man turned around and looked over his left shoulder. It was the kind of look Willard didn't see every day – depressed, sad and determined.

The man didn't answer. He looked away, leaned forward above the highway and let go of the railing.

In that moment, Willard jumped, grabbed the man's left forearm with both hands, dropped his body weight to the ground and pushed against the railing.

It was a leap of instinct, but it felt safe.

"It felt good," Willard said. Not for a moment did he feel something might happen to prevent him from getting home that night to his four children and beautiful wife.
Holtgrew also grabbed onto the man. Officer William Johnson, who had arrived as backup, ran to help.

The two officers pulled the man over the railing, to the sidewalk, and handcuffed him. People had stopped on Glisan and were clapping and cheering – a type of noise Willard wasn't used to hear on his job.

"As police officers, we don't get a lot of that," Willard said.

As he started to talk, the man told the officers he was hearing voices that convinced him there was an arrest warrant in his name and he was about to spend the rest of his life in jail. Willard checked his name and found him clear.

"I had to convince him, 'You're not going to jail. You're going to the hospital to get help,'" Willard said.

The man seemed to gradually realize what had happened. About 15 minutes later, he broke down and cried. At the hospital, he thanked Willard for saving his life.

"I felt very honored and blessed," Willard said, "to be at that place at that time."

-- Simina Mistreanu
Portland killer Kevin A. Roper denied parole in 1987 murder of friend

SALEM, OREGON - July 16, 2013 - Kevin A. Roper gets a visit from his mother, Leni Roper of Roseburg, while waiting for the news from his parole board hearing in Salem. The Board announced that he would not be released. His next chance to be released will be in February 2016. Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian

By Simina Mistreanu | smistreanu@oregonian.com
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on July 16, 2013 at 7:16 PM, updated July 17, 2013 at 9:52 AM

SALEM -- Convicted killer Kevin A. Roper of Portland will remain in prison for at least another 2 1/2 years after the state parole board decided in a split vote Tuesday to deny his release, saying he poses a threat to society.
Two board members said Roper's "emotional disturbance" makes him a continuing danger, but one board member believed Roper was no longer a risk.

Roper was among 30 killers affected by a 2011 Supreme Court ruling that determined they had been in prison too long before being considered for parole.

Roper was 19 when he pleaded guilty to aggravated murder in exchange for a life sentence in the 1987 death of Eddie L. Gibbs, 20.

On Tuesday, he choked up several times as he recounted what he did before the state Board of Parole and Post-Prison Supervision. He acknowledged, under questioning from board members, that he had murder on his mind when he went to rob his friend.

"Now I know from the time we left the apartment, there was no other option," he said. "That was our plan. We planned on beating him and leaving him in the field."

He said his rage was fueled by "all of the past injustices, all of the things I felt I had no control over in my life. I was trying to regain control." He described a difficult relationship with his father, who allegedly abused Roper's sisters. When Roper was 15, he said, he also abused one of his sisters.

District Attorney Traci Anderson said Roper has had time to prepare more sympathetic answers since he last appeared before the board two years ago, but he remains a danger to the community.

An April psychological evaluation found that Roper suffers from antisocial personality disorder with narcissistic features, Anderson said by speakerphone set up in the hearing room at the Oregon State Correctional Institution.

Board members recognized Roper had "made some strides," said Chairwoman Kristen Winges-Yanez, but they decided to keep him in prison for now, setting Roper's next potential release date for Feb. 14, 2016.

The Supreme Court decision affected convicts serving life terms with minimum 30-year sentences for aggravated murder. The court ruled that once the parole
If the board finds an inmate fit for rehabilitation, it must move to release the prisoner regardless of the sentence imposed by a judge.

Under Oregon law, the board must conduct a hearing for an inmate who has served 20 years of a life sentence. The hearing determines whether an inmate is "capable of rehabilitation within a reasonable period of time."

The board said that even when it has found rehabilitation possible, it hadn't considered releasing murderers until they have served the minimum 30-year sentence.

On March 6, 1987, Roper and his roommate, Scott Wickee, had run out of money, and the power at their Southeast Portland apartment had been shut off because of unpaid bills.

Gibbs offered to buy the men drinks that night out of a $1,200 paycheck he had received that day. Roper and Wickee planned to rob Gibbs by knocking him out, like they saw "in the movies," Roper told the board.

They led Gibbs through the hole in a fence of a drive-in movie theater, attacked him with a hatchet and knife, though Gibbs offered them his wallet, and then strangled him and left him tied to a pole at the theater.

Roper kept his eyes closed as the sister, brother and mother of the man he killed testified.

Gibbs' sister, Teresa Robins-Doern, said Roper might kill and molest again if released. "You cannot fix him," she said.

"I have a doubt they murdered (Gibbs) for money," said Patricia Hanley, the victim's mother. "I think they murdered him for kicks."

The board also reviewed a psychological evaluation of Wickee. He was denied parole at a board hearing in 2012 and then requested a new psychological evaluation. The board discussed the new evaluation Tuesday and said it would announce a decision on whether to parole Wickee in the next two weeks.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Milwaukie woman who fled Oregon 15 years ago built new life under fake name in Canada

Jean Terese Keating, now 54, fled Oregon 15 years ago while awaiting trial in connection with a fatal traffic accident, was tracked down in Canada in April. She was back in court in Oregon Friday afternoon to face charges that she killed Jewel Oline Anderson in the April 1997 wreck. (RCMP)

By Simina Mistreanu, The Oregonian
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on July 19, 2013 at 7:53 PM, updated August 01, 2013 at 5:24 PM

The Milwaukie woman who fled Oregon 15 years ago while awaiting trial in a fatal crash along Interstate 5 had built a new life for herself and her children in a small Canadian community.
For the past decade and a half, Jean Terese Keating had been living in Minnedosa, Manitoba, a rural town of about 2,500, said Corporal Miles Hiebert with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Manitoba is the province north of North Dakota and Minnesota. Minnedosa is about 280 road miles northwest of Grand Forks, N.D.

On Friday, Keating appeared in Linn County Circuit Court for arraignment on charges of first-degree manslaughter, driving under the influence of intoxicants, reckless driving and reckless endangerment.

The charges stem from the April 1997 crash near Albany that killed Jewel Oline Anderson, 65, of Dexter.

Keating, then 38, was driving with her two young children when her station wagon sideswiped a two-door car on I-5 near milepost 237, police said. That car, driven by Anderson, then careened across the center median and into a Lincoln Continental driven by Noel Kuzma.

Kuzma and his passengers survived the crash but Anderson died. Keating was arrested and charged.

On Friday, a judge set bail of $5 million and a pre-trial meeting on Sept. 16, said district attorney Ryan Lucke. Keating is being held at Linn County Jail.

While on bail and awaiting trial in 1998, Keating stopped contacting her attorney and apparently crossed the border to Canada with her 3-year-old daughter, Morgan Jean, and 1-year-old son, Alexander Marcus. At some point, she took the name "Jean McPherson" and started a new life in Minnedosa.

A Facebook profile shows that Morgan Jean graduated from high school in 2012 and is part of a Minnedosa trading group. There was no information available about Alexander Marcus, Hiebert said.

A woman who answered the phone at the Minnedosa Inn, which also serves as a community bar, said Friday that McPherson was "just your average person" and well known in the small town. The woman would not give her name, however, and didn't want to elaborate.
Others reached by phone in Minnedosa declined to talk at all.

It was at a bar that Keating's new life appears to have begun to unravel.

She apparently was in a bar when she boasted about getting away with a suspected drunken-driving fatal crash, according to Oregon State Police, and in early 2013, someone tipped a Royal Canadian Mounted Police constable stationed in the town.

He followed up on the rumor that a local woman named Jean McPherson was actually an American citizen who was in Canada illegally, and that she might be a fugitive.

He sent an email to an investigator with Red River Integrated Border Enforcement Team, which confirmed there was no record indicating "Jean McPherson" to be a Canadian citizen.

Investigators learned the woman had been arrested several times in Canada, including on impaired-driving charges. They compared the fingerprints with those on record for Keating in Oregon and found a match.

Investigators alerted immigration authorities. Officials don't know how she entered Canada, said Lisa White, a spokesperson for Canada Border Services Agency, but in the late 1990s, it was not usually necessary for U.S. citizens to show a passport when crossing into Canada.

Immigration authorities arrested Keating at her Minnedosa home on April 4 and issued a deportation order two weeks later. She was detained in Winnipeg because of flight risk until June 12, when she was deported. Keating has been barred from ever entering Canada again, White said.

Keating was brought into the United States through the Pembina border crossing in North Dakota, where she was taken into custody by U.S. Marshals, said chief deputy marshal Dan Orr. The marshals booked her into the Grand Forks jail, where she was picked up by Oregon authorities and brought back to the state this week.
Keating’s arrest brought to an end years of searching by Linda Anderson, the 51-year-old daughter-in-law of Jewel Anderson.

Periodically over the past 15 years, Anderson had logged on to resume a methodical online hunt for the woman accused of killing the Anderson family’s matriarch as she drove to church.

Linda Anderson had turned to Ancestry.com and other "be your own detective" websites in hopes of finding Keating.

"I’d type her name in, type her children's names in to search. There would be other Jean Terese Keatings, but they wouldn't line up," said Anderson.

But on Father's Day weekend, Oregon State Police investigators called to say Keating had been arrested in Canada. She was astonished.

"It was just too much," Anderson recalled.

Anderson attended Friday's court appearance and said she asked prosecutors and the judge to hold Keating accountable for the life she took and her years on the run.
She said Keating "looked like she had been through the wringer" and that she had a "smirky grin" on her face."

Anderson said she got to read a statement on behalf of the Anderson clan.

"I'd say we as the family feel the justice system has failed us already," she said. This time, she said, she doesn't want to hear that Keating is out on bail at any point.

"I'm asking that Jean remain in jail until her sentencing."

– Simina Mistreanu and Kimberly A.C. Wilson
Texas woman, being rescued off Mount St. Helens, decides to upgrade to helicopter

Rescue crews were bringing an injured woman down Mount St. Helens on foot early Wednesday when she decided she wanted to go the rest of the way by helicopter. (Bruce Ely/The Oregonian/2010)
A Texas woman hired a private helicopter to pluck herself and her daughter off the south side of Mount St. Helens early Wednesday after she was injured while hiking.

Nancy Allen, 48, climbed the mountain with her 18-year-old daughter on Tuesday, but they got lost on the way back and called 911, according to Skamania County Sheriff's Office. A search-and-rescue team was dispatched and found the women early Wednesday, but Allen couldn't walk, so the rescuers started carrying her down the mountain.

Part way down, however, at the 6,100-foot level, she told them she wanted to call a helicopter to take her the rest of the way, said Undersheriff Dave Cox.

One of the rescuers placed the call for her.

"I've never heard of this happening," Cox said. "I don't know how much it cost her, but I'm sure it was a spendy proposition. I know I wouldn't be able to afford it."

Cox said his department was notified Tuesday night that a woman on the mountain had called 911 for help.

Allen told authorities that she and her daughter had climbed to the top of the 8,365-foot volcano, but got lost on the way down. She said she had fallen over an outcropping and was unable to descend to the trail.

A Skamania County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue Coordinator and the Volcano Rescue Team from Fire District 13 at Yacolt responded to the call, Cox said, and found the women early Wednesday.

After Allen told her rescuers that she wanted a helicopter, one of them reached Peter Emerson, who flies a Bell JetRanger for the Boring-based JL Aviation Inc., about 5:15 a.m.

The company frequently collaborates with the North Country Emergency Medical Service in Yacolt, Emerson said.
He said that once he reached the group, rescue workers loaded Allen and her daughter onto the helicopter.

"She was very grateful to all the EMS who spent the night up there," Emerson said. "She said her whole body was very sore and she felt like she had been hit by a truck."

Emerson said Allen's arms and legs were cut up, and both she and her daughter were complaining about the cold. Both women were wearing T-shirts and shorts, he said. The temperature at the 3,300-foot level Wednesday morning was in the 50s, said meteorologist Chris Collins with the National Weather Service.

Emerson said he deposited Allen, her daughter and a member of the rescue who accompanied them at Climber's Bivouac, which is at the head of a trail that goes up the mountain. Paramedics were waiting for Allen there.

Emerson said the company's rate is $1,000 an hour and that this trip cost $1,300.

Emerson said he goes on five to seven similar trips a year to help people who get lost, injured or tired on the mountain.

-- Simina Mistreanu and Tom Hallman Jr.
Aloha father-and-son adventure ends in fall, agonizing wait

Cole Hancock, 10, was hiking on Mount Hood with his father Tuesday when he tumbled down a steep slope and suffered multiple injuries. (Kim Hancock)

By Simina Mistreanu, The Oregonian
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on July 25, 2013 at 4:56 PM, updated July 26, 2013 at 7:54 AM

It was supposed to be a boys' adventure.

Kim Hancock's wife and two daughters were spending three days on the Oregon Coast, and he and 10-year-old son Cole were hiking Mount Hood with the
intention of camping overnight. Cole really wanted to find snow to camp in, Hancock said.

But on their way back to their campsite from exploring a waterfall, around 9 p.m., Cole tripped and tumbled 150 feet down a steep, sandy hill scattered with rocks.

After almost five hours, the boy was admitted to the hospital in serious condition, with three skull fractures, cuts on his arms and legs and internal bleeding. It was an agonizing wait, said Hancock, who spoke publicly about the accident for the first time at a news conference Thursday.

"I didn't realize we were so far" from help, Hancock told reporters at OHSU Hospital in Portland. "It was just a misinterpretation in my brain of how long it would take to get home: 'All you have to do is wait 10 to 15 minutes.'"

Hancock said he is extremely grateful for the rescuers' help. But he described a succession of delays in getting his son to safety that were almost impossible to prevent and that brought him to despair.

After the fall, Hancock ran to the boy and found him unconscious. He carried him to their tent and campfire, which was about a quarter mile away, then called for help.

Cole was alternating between rest and vomiting blood. Hancock waited with his arms wrapped around the boy's chest and prayed for his heart to not stop.

The first rescuers, two Hood River Crag Rats, arrived around midnight, about three hours after Cole fell.

"I thought they were going to be on quads," Hancock said, referring to all-terrain vehicles. "To hear that they're on foot, it was heartbreaking."

A helicopter was sent in, but the pilot couldn't land at the campsite because the aircraft stirred a sandstorm when approaching the landing. Instead, rescuers had to carry Cole on foot to a Sno-Park base, where he was airlifted to OHSU. When the boy was loaded onto an ambulance, Hancock said he felt immense relief.
At the hospital, he has been monitoring his son's condition while fighting back remorse because he feels responsible for the accident.

Cole is slowly getting better, Hancock said. Although it is possible the portion of the boy's brain controlling speech was affected by the fall, it is too early to tell.

About 20 minutes before the conference, his most recent neurological test results showed improvement.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Lindsay Butler looked at the man who had pleaded guilty in the drunken driving crash that killed her brother.
"Your selfish act has taken him from me and the rest of my family," she told John Edward Martin during his sentencing Thursday in Multnomah County Circuit Court.

And then she did something unexpected: She asked Martin for permission to hug him.

Butler and other members of her family took turns embracing and consoling Martin.

Martin, 49, was sentenced to four years in prison after pleading guilty earlier to negligent homicide and DUII in the Jan. 23 death of his close friend, Lion Gabriel Langan, 37. Martin said he blacked out while driving home from the bars with Langan as a passenger.

On the night of the crash, Langan had been concerned about Martin driving after drinking and offered to join him in the car, according to a probable cause affidavit. Their car hit a pole while heading east on Southeast Division Street in Portland, and Langan died at the scene.

Langan's mother, Kerry Smith, also addressed the judge. She placed several pictures of Langan on the table in front of Martin, while the man was crying.

"I can't help thinking of you as my son," Smith told Martin. "I have prayed for you and cried for you every night."

Before delivering Martin's sentence, Judge Eric Bergstrom said he has presided over more DUII cases than he cares to remember. "They are just so awful," he said, "but I don't think I'll ever forget this particular proceeding."

-- Simina Mistreanu
Salem man whose ex-wife ran from justice hopes to get life, children back

Gino Bagley, former husband of fugitive Jean Keating, says he has been searching for his children for the past 15 years. Keating took off with their 3-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son in early 1998, while awaiting trial for a crash in which she was accused of driving drunk and causing the death of Jewel Anderson. (Bruce Ely / The Oregonian)

In late May, a man knocked on the door of Gino Bagley's house in Salem and placed a stack of papers in his hands. Then he left without a word.
The papers revealed enough.

Bagley, 48, read that his ex-wife, Jean Terese Keating, from whom he hadn't heard in 15 years, had been living in a small Canadian town. Keating fled the United States in 1998 while awaiting trial in connection with a fatal drunken driving crash.

He read that Keating had been living in a common-law union with a Canadian citizen, Norman Leonard McPherson, of Manitoba.

He read that the Canadian wanted to adopt his 16-year-old boy, whom Bagley hadn't seen since he was eight months old.

And he read that the boy wanted McPherson to be his legal dad because he was the only dad he had ever known.

When Keating allegedly drove drunk and crashed into a Dexter woman's car, killing the driver, she made many more victims, Bagley said.

"It's not just this family," he said. "She's hurt me, she's hurt my parents who never got to see their grandchildren grow. She's hurt a lot of people."

Another piece of information included in the documents was that Bagley's daughter, Morgan Jean, 19, was now living in Springfield.

So sometime soon, Bagley said Monday, he hopes to reunite with the daughter he hasn't seen in 15 years.

"I still want my kids to know I'm their father," Bagley said. "I want my son to come here and live with me, and I want to have a relationship with my daughter.

"But I doubt they know who I am."

***

In April 1997, Keating was driving with her two children on I-5 near Albany when her station wagon sideswiped a two-door car driven by Jewel Oline Anderson, 65, of Dexter. The impact caused Anderson's vehicle to careen across the center
median and hit an oncoming car. The driver and passengers of that car survived, but Anderson died.

Keating faced charges of first-degree manslaughter, DUII, reckless driving and reckless endangerment. She was out on bail when she skipped a March 1998 court appearance and disappeared.

Keating was brought back to Oregon in mid-July after apparently bragging at a bar in Manitoba that she had gotten away with a crime in Oregon. While living in Canada, Keating had assumed the name "Jean McPherson" and was arrested several times, including on impaired-driving charges, according to Oregon State Police.

Canadian authorities received a tip in early 2013, looked up Jean McPherson and found she was not a Canadian citizen, and eventually matched her fingerprints with the ones on record in Oregon.

On July 19, Keating appeared in Linn County Circuit Court, where a judge set bail of $5 million and a pre-trial meeting on Sept. 16.

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Bagley said he wants to address the court in Keating's trial, but he cares more about reaching out to his children.

After he received the stack of papers, he scrambled to send his reaction to McPherson's intent to adopt his son. Bagley said he called the court in Manitoba but was sent from one clerk to another and didn't know to whom to address the documents. He said he can't afford a lawyer.

***

Keating and Bagley met in 1990 or 1991. He was working as a chef at the Tahiti restaurant in downtown Salem. She was hired as a hostess, and two weeks later, they started dating.

The relationship was tumultuous from the start, Bagley said. The couple was drinking -- mostly wine -- but at one point bottles of vodka started appearing
randomly in the house, he said. They changed jobs, then moved to Eugene. They got married at the Lane County Courthouse.

During their marriage, they filed several restraining orders against each other, which were eventually dismissed.

Bagley admits he made many mistakes in those days. He has been convicted for second-degree burglary, but his record has been clean for the last 10 years.

The couple had Morgan Jean in 1994. Bagley said he started to back away when he felt Keating’s drinking got out of control. He recalls getting home one night and finding his wife passed out on the floor and the toddler close to the baseboard heater, with popcorn spread everywhere.

"I cleaned up the child but left (Keating) to lie there," he said.

They filed for a divorce but continued to see each other. In 1996, they had another baby, Alexander Marcus.

Alexander was only a few months old when the crash happened. By then, Keating had started seeing McPherson. The two of them lived in a trailer park north of Eugene with the children, Bagley said.

Bagley and Keating shared custody of their children, and Bagley usually had them over the weekend. When Keating stopped showing up with the children after the crash, Bagley went to the mobile home park to discover that Keating and McPherson’s trailer had disappeared. Bagley said he filed a report with the police, and then he waited.

***

"Rather than face the charges and risk the incarceration of Jean Terese Keating at a time when she was mother of two children, both under the age of 3 years, Jean Terese Keating and I fled to Manitoba, where we established a new life with our children," says the document filed by Leonard McPherson with the court in Manitoba.
McPherson goes on to describe how he, Keating and the children have been living in or around the community of Clanwilliam, Manitoba, until 2013, when Keating was arrested and booked into the Headingley Correctional Institution in Manitoba.

Keating had already been arrested when she and McPherson started the process that would offer McPherson custody of Marcus Alexander, who is enrolled as a junior at a Minnedosa high school.

"It's our fear that if I do not move quickly to secure an order of guardianship," McPherson wrote in the court documents, "that Alexander will not have legal status to remain in Canada and will be deported to the U.S. where he has no family that he knows, no friends and no support system."

McPherson, 65, told The Province newspaper in British Columbia that even though he realizes he might face criminal charges for helping Keating flee the United States, he doesn't regret it. He said he had been in love, and Keating has been a good wife and a good mother.

Corporal Miles Hiebert with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police said he could not confirm whether McPherson is subject to an investigation.

Ryan Lucke, the prosecuting attorney handling Keating's case in Linn County, said the state has not, as far as he knows, filed charges against McPherson, but that OSP is investigating the circumstances in which Keating fled the country.

***

In 1999, Bagley decided to try to find the children himself. Keating had told Bagley's parents that the man she was seeing was from Quebec. So he boarded on a plane to New York, with the intention to cross the border to Canada.

"Nothing was planned," he said. "I was totally stupid."

One night in New York, he bought a pack of cigarettes at a convenience store. He said the last thing he remembers is opening up the pack before being hit in the head, robbed and left unconscious. He lost his eye, his sense of smell and
partially lost his sense of taste. He woke up weeks later in a hospital. Eventually, his parents flew him back to Oregon to continue recovery.

After losing his taste and smell, he couldn't work as a chef anymore, so he started working as a carpenter, which is his profession today.

He continued to think about his children, but lost hope of seeing them again. He said he didn't want to have other children afterward.

***

Bagley said he'll drive to Springfield after Aug. 1. Meanwhile, he has obtained a phone number that was listed under his daughter's name, but the calls haven't been going through.

"I'm trying to do more work," he said. "I might cash in my IRA. It kind of kills my retirement, but I'll do what I need to do to find my son and reconnect with my daughter."

-- Simina Mătreanu
PORTLAND, OREGON - July 31, 2013 - Cole Hancock's head injuries make speech difficult at this point in his recovery from three skull fractures he sustained in his fall. Kim Hancock and his son, Cole, talked with the media at OHSU Doernbecher Children's Hospital about Cole's progress since his fall on Mt. Hood. Doug Beghtel/ The Oregonian
The 10-year-old boy who tumbled down Mount Hood a week ago sat on his father's lap Wednesday and tried to talk.

"I'm Cole, and I'm alive," Cole Hancock said softly as he faced reporters at OHSU Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland. "I can't believe I'm alive."

The boy is still regaining his ability to speak, but his recovery has been "phenomenal," said his father, Kim Hancock of Vancouver.

Doctors worried most about Cole's speech last week after he was admitted to the hospital with three skull fractures and internal bleeding. But speech therapists report Cole is doing great, Hancock said. He's expecting the boy to go back to school in the fall.

Cole **tumbled 150 feet** down a steep, sandy hill scattered with rocks on Mount Hood. The boy and his father had been hiking July 23 above the White River parking lot, with the intention to camp overnight.

The fall knocked Cole unconscious, and his father carried him to their campsite, about a quarter mile away.

Hancock called for help, but it took about three hours for two rescuers with the Hood River Crag Rats to arrive at the site. **They carried the boy** back to the parking lot, where they put him on an air ambulance.

"He's pretty bummed" that he couldn't remember the ride, Hancock said. "We've shown him pictures of the helicopter."

With violet circles under his eyes and bruises on his arm and back, Cole was looking "like a million dollars," his father said.

Cole will probably be transferred to Legacy Emanuel Medical Center today for further treatment, Hancock said. Doctors said it would take him at least a year to fully recover.

The boy arrived at the news conference in a wheelchair, then walked to an armchair with his dad holding his right arm.
At one point, the 10-year-old talked about an old rock that he and his dad had found on the mountain shortly before the fall.

"I might be the only person that ever touched it," he said.

His father had split the rock open and found a smaller rock inside, which Cole grabbed and put into a pocket of his jeans. When he woke up at the hospital, he remembered the rock. It was still there.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Second Oregon wildland firefighter dies in line of duty

By Simina Mistreanu, The Oregonian
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on August 06, 2013 at 4:11 PM, updated August 08, 2013 at 5:28 PM

2013 WILDFIRES

• Radio problems factor in deaths of 19 firefighters
• Oregon's wildfire season: deadly, expensive, ignited by lightning
• 2 new wildfires flare in Northwest, with lightning expected Thursday
• Yosemite wildfire: Blaze near national park burns into fourth week
• New fires flare in Northwest but all contained

A 19-year-old firefighter died after the water tender he was driving rolled over an embankment near the Big Windy complex of fires in southwest Oregon.

Jesse Trader, of Albany, was driving back from a night shift around 7:20 a.m. Tuesday. His water tender hit an embankment on the Bear Camp Road near Soldier Camp and rolled over, said Joel Brumm, a public information officer with the Bureau of Land Management.

Other firefighters stopped immediately to assist, and Trader was loaded onto an air ambulance shortly after, Brumm said.

Josephine County Sheriff Gil Gilbertson said it was unclear from the crash site why the truck left the road and overturned. “He was coming down the hill,” Gilbertson told the Associated Press. “(The truck) was heading down to get a relief driver.”
Trader was driving a water tender owned by Ace Earthmoving and utilized by County Fire and Security, a private fire-suppression company which serves the Merlin area, Brumm said.

The 19-year-old was enrolled for the fall term at Chemeketa Community College to study fire science, said Greg Harris, a spokesman for the Salem-based college.

Trader was a graduate of West Albany High School, where he played baseball for the Mid-Valley Rockets, according to the Albany Democrat-Herald.

Gov. John Kitzhaber released a statement saying: "Even at such a young age, he was already contributing mightily to his community, and we owe him our gratitude for his commitment to helping protect his fellow citizens."

Oregon State Forester Doug Decker sent a message to all employees, expressing sadness at Trader’s death and noting the earlier loss of 19 hotshot crew members in Arizona and a timber faller in the Deschutes National Forest.

"It is vital that we look out for ourselves and those around us, and that we operate at a pace that will bring us safely and successfully through a long, challenging fire season," Decker wrote.

About 1,100 firefighters are helping contain the fires at the Big Windy complex, Brumm said. The fires, which were engulfing 10,841 acres on Tuesday, were started by dry lightning on July 26. The fires are burning about 25 miles northwest of Grants Pass and, as of Tuesday afternoon, were zero percent contained.

Trader is the second firefighter to die in the line of duty in Oregon in less than a week. On Aug. 1, John Hammack, 58, died while felling trees in the Deschutes National Forest.

Hammack was part of a contract crew hired to clean an area of standing trees so that other firefighters could get access to the flames. Hammock and 48-year-old Norman Crawford were struck by a dead tree, or snag, said Jean Nelson-Dean, a spokeswoman for the Deschutes National Forest. Crawford, who suffered a shoulder injury, was airlifted to the hospital.
Nearly a dozen big fires have spread over more than 164,000 acres in Oregon and Washington. The biggest Oregon fire, scorching more than 38,000 acres, is the Douglas complex north of Glendale.

The Whiskey complex east of Tiller was scorching about 7,000 acres Tuesday morning, and the Labrador fire northwest of Cave Junction was at just over 2,000 acres. In southern Oregon, the Brimstone fire northwest of Merlin had spread over 2,500 acres.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Teenage firefighter died on the third day of his first firefighting season

Jim Whittington, BLM fire information officer, left, chokes up during a news conference about the death of Jesse Trader, 19, a water tender truck driver who died in a roll-over on Bear Camp Road Aug. 6, 2013. (AP Photo/The Daily Courier, Timothy Bullard)
Jacob Trader was 6 when his older brother, Jesse, taught him how to throw a curveball: Grip the ball, come back and follow through.

"I couldn't believe it worked. I was so grateful, so happy," Jacob Trader said Wednesday. "He was a big brother and a role model to me. He taught me how to be strong, and sports, and everything."

Jesse Trader, 19, of Albany died Tuesday while driving a water tender back from a night shift fighting wildfires in a hard-to-reach area north of Grants Pass. Around 7:20 a.m., the truck hit an embankment and rolled over.

Trader was the second Oregon firefighter to die in the line of duty in the past week. Tuesday was the third day of his first firefighting season, his 15-year-old brother said.

Trader had wanted to be a firefighter since he was 9, said his mother, Gigi Trader. His uncle owned a fire-suppression company in Merlin called County Fire and Rescue and hired the teenager for the summer, she said.

The company was helping contain the Big Windy complex of fires, started by dry lightning July 26.

Trader had just worked more than 12 hours and was driving back to the fire camp in Merlin along a narrow, winding road above steep canyons, said Jim Whittington, a spokesman for the Pacific Northwest Incident Management Team.
He was among a group of about 170 people who were heading back to the base from the fire lines. The night shift workers typically start at 5:30 p.m. and finish about 7 a.m.

The water tender tumbled at an altitude between 3,500 and 4,000 feet, on Bear Camp Road.

Oregon law does not cap the hours a firefighter can work within a 24-hour period, said Charlie Burr, communications director for the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries.

The Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Administration is investigating the case, said spokeswoman Melanie Mesaros. The agency will look into supervision, training and safety protocols, among other things, and might interview witnesses and other employees.

Trader had a valid commercial driver's license to drive the water truck, state records indicate.

He had finished his freshman year studying fire science at Western Oregon University, where he had an academic scholarship, his mother said. He had transferred to Chemeketa Community College, where he was going to study to become a paramedic and firefighter.

"He was an awesome kid," she said. "Inspirational to others, very athletic, an all-around great kid."

He loved water skiing, boating and snowboarding, his mother said. His younger brother and 16-year-old sister looked up to him, and he had many friends.

Jacob Trader, who dreams of becoming a professional baseball player, recalled playing football, basketball and baseball with his older brother.

Although Jesse Trader played baseball in high school, he reassessed his priorities to focus on firefighting, his brother said. Jesse Trader's dream was to one day join the Albany Fire Department.
"He found his calling in firefighting," his brother said. "He's been edging to get out there and start helping."

-- Simina Mistreanu
Polish climber who died summiting Mount Hood wanted to plant flag, authorities say

Shakul Tandon, of Hillsboro, said he and friends were climbing on the Cooper Spur Sunday when they spotted a fellow climber matching Kinasiewicz’s description. Kinasiewicz was about 90 minutes ahead of Tandon’s group. Tandon said he used a high-powered zoom lens to take this photograph. (Shakul Tandon)

Print

By Simina Mistreanu, The Oregonian
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on August 13, 2013 at 2:05 PM, updated August 13, 2013 at 7:17 PM

Email
The Polish climber found dead on Mount Hood Tuesday was there to plant his nation's flag next to one left by other Polish climbers a year before, a spokesman for the Hood River County Sheriff's Office said.

Sgt. Pete Hughes said a four-person Oregon Army National Guard crew on a Blackhaw helicopter spotted the body of 32-year-old Sebastian Kinasiewicz around 10:15 a.m.

The man's lifeless form was on a level area at the 9,100-foot elevation. Hughes said officials believe Kinasiewicz fell there from the summit, about 2,000 feet above, based on the fact crew members could see boulders continue to fall from the mountain's peak.

The falling rocks made it too dangerous for search and rescue teams to recover the body, Hughes said, adding that they might have to wait months for temperatures to drop and the rocks to stabilize before heading back up.

Kinasiewicz, whom Hughes described as an inexperienced climber, was a part of contingent from the Polish military sent for training at a Columbia River Gorge drone manufacture.

The man told a roommate around 8 a.m. on Sunday that he was heading off for the summit. Hughes said when Kinasiewicz failed to show up for training Monday morning, his fellow trainees reported him missing to InSitu. The company then contacted the sheriff's office.
Search and rescue teams looked for the man on Monday without success.

"Our thoughts are with Sebastian's family at this difficult time," the company said in a statement released early today.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Romanian princess, Oregon husband arrested in bust of suspected two-state cockfighting ring

PRINCESS IRINA

- Romanian media reports explode over princess accused in cockfighting ring
- Feds: Romanian princess served tacos and beer at eastern Oregon cockfight derbies
- Romanian princess, Oregon husband to be freed while facing cockfighting charges
- Romanian princess charged in alleged Oregon cockfighting ring known for childhood love of animals
- Romanian princess, Oregon husband arrested in bust of suspected two-state cockfighting ring
A former Coos County sheriff's deputy and his wife, a Romanian princess, were arrested Thursday as federal agents swept through eastern Oregon and southcentral Washington to upend a suspected cockfighting ring.

John Wesley Walker and **Irina Walker, the third daughter of Romania's King Michael I**, staged at least 10 cockfighting derbies at their ranch near Irrigon between April 1, 2012, and last May 19, government prosecutors allege.

The accused cockfight hosts, with a supporting cast of 16 other suspects in Oregon and at least 10 in Washington, were charged in a conspiracy to violate the federal **Animal Welfare Act**.

The indictment alleges that the derbies featured dozens of cockfights in a ring, much like a fight card in a night of boxing. But the combatants were roosters, each with knives, gaffs or other cutting instruments attached to their legs, fighting to their deaths in a blood sport now outlawed in all 50 states.

"Besides being a barbaric practice, cockfighting jeopardizes public health and safety and facilitates the commission of other criminal acts," said U.S. Attorney Amanda Marshall, Oregon's top federal prosecutor. The "fairly large-scale cockfighting venture" also supported illegal gambling, she said.

A referee supervised the fights as concessionaires sold beer and food, and those managing the action took a 10 percent "house" cut, prosecutors allege.

John and Irina Walker -- along with Irrigon neighbors David Sanchez, 29, and Aurelia Garcia Mendoza, 33, and Hermiston friends Mario "El Cuba" Perez, 62, and Jose Luis Virgen Ramirez, 48 -- were charged with operating an illegal
gambling business and unlawful animal fighting ventures at the Walkers' Morrow County ranch.

Each of the charges carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a $250,000 fine.

Federal agents searched homes and arrested people accused of participating in the cockfighting in eastern Oregon and Yakima, Wash. Some of those rounded up in Oregon are scheduled for arraignment before a federal magistrate in Portland's U.S. District Court on Friday.

Ten other suspects, all men, were arrested in Washington's Yakima Valley, about 68 miles northwest of Irrigon. They will appear before a magistrate in the William O. Douglas U.S. Courthouse in Yakima.

The busts come five years after a massive federal crackdown on cockfighting in the Pacific Northwest. The government accused 63 people of taking part in staging a dozen cockfight derbies that began in Molalla in March 2006 and stretched to Grand Ronde, Warm Springs, Woodburn and Sunny Valley in Oregon and up into the Washington towns of Wapato, Sunnyside and Prosser.

Top purses in the earlier cockfighting case sometimes reached into the tens of thousands of dollars, authorities said.

The government alleges that the Walkers' horse ranch, on a flat patch of irrigation circles about two miles south of Irrigon, is subject to federal forfeiture because it was used in a criminal enterprise. The ranch's dwellings were valued at $170,360 in 2011, according to public records.

John Walker, 67, served as a sergeant in the Myrtle Point Police Department before going to work on Aug. 1, 1998, with the Coos County Sheriff's Office. He left that job in June 30, 2003, according to the county's Department of Human Resources. It's unclear what kind of work Walker might have performed in the last 10 years.
Walker in 2007 married the former Irina Kreuger, the middle of five daughters born to King Michael I and Queen Anne of Romania. A published account says the Walkers married in the Heart of Reno Chapel, in Reno, Nev.

Princess Irina, 60, is fifth in line to the throne, following her older sisters, Margareta and Elena, and Elena's two children, Nicholas and Elisabeta Karina. She was born and raised in Switzerland and moved to Oregon in 1983.

Irina Walker has never been a visible member of the royal family, which owns four castles in Romania. She has visited the European nation only a handful of times, said historian Filip-Lucian Iorga. Her biography is largely unknown to the Romanian public, he said. The royal family is popular, but largely uninvolved in local politics.

In 1944, King Michael led a coup against a pro-Nazi government. His family lived in exile for more than four decades after the country fell under communism after World War II. The king was forced to abdicate in 1947 by communists threatening to kill more than 1,000 young Romanian prisoners. The king and queen have lived modestly in Switzerland and the United Kingdom, maintaining a chicken farm and a carpenter's shop.

-- Bryan Denson
-- Simina Mistreanu
Romanian princess charged in alleged Oregon cockfighting ring known for childhood love of animals

John Walker and Irina Walker in Romania. (Courtesy of MediafaxFoto)

By Simina Mistreanu, The Oregonian
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on August 16, 2013 at 10:51 AM, updated August 20, 2013 at 3:25 PM
Irina Walker, the Romanian princess accused of operating a *cockfighting* ring on her Oregon ranch, was known as a child for her love of animals and has spent decades raising horses in the United States and Canada.

Walker's background provides a stark contrast to the picture painted in the federal indictment against her and husband John Wesley Walker: that they hosted a series of suspected cockfighting derbies on their Morrow County land where roosters equipped with gaffs on their legs fought to the death.

**The two were arrested Thursday** and are to appear in U.S. District Court in Portland on **Friday afternoon**.
The Romanian royal family released a statement, saying King Michael I "has taken notice with profound sadness of the events concerning Princess Irina of Romania, his daughter. His Majesty and the entire Royal Family hope that the American and Oregon state justices will solve this case in the fairest and quickest manner possible."

Princess Irina, now 60, "was never in the limelight," said Romanian historian Filip-Lucian Iorga. She has visited Romania only a handful of times, and the public knows little about her.

She was born in Switzerland as the third of five daughters of King Michael I and Queen Anne of Romania. As a child, she was shy and kept to herself, said her oldest sister, Princess Margareta, in her biography, "Fatherland and Destiny. The Crown Princess of Romania."

**Romanian royals**

Princess Irina is the fifth in line to the throne, following her two older sisters, Margareta and Elena, and Elena's two children, Nicholas and Elisabeta Karina.

Before her, other Romanian royal women have settled or traveled in the United States. The Maryhill Museum of Art in Goldendale, Wash., displays clothes, art and other objects related to Queen Marie, King Michael I's grandmother, the first Romanian royal to visit the United States, in 1926.

"Queen Marie is the most beautiful feminine historical myth Romanians have," said historian Dan Falcan. She was a central figure in World War I, insisting that Romania fight alongside France and Britain, encouraging soldiers in the battlefield and caring for the wounded.

Princess Ileana, Marie's youngest daughter, a feminist, social worker and sailor, founded an Orthodox monastery in Ellwood City, Pa.

Irina showed an early affinity for animals, her sister said. "Ever since she was little, she would care for the wounded birds that she found, for the abandoned cats," Margareta said. "Over the years, Irina gathered around her guinea pigs, hamsters, exotic birds, turtles, fish."

The girls had a difficult childhood, said royal historian Diana Mandache. They were aware of the hardships their father was going through and how life could have been different for them, she said.
The king raised the family in exile, after he was forced to abdicate in 1947 by a group of communists who threatened to kill 1,000 young Romanian prisoners. Three years earlier, the king had led a coup against a pro-Nazi government and led the country to join the Allies.

He then worked several jobs in Switzerland and the United Kingdom, including as a test pilot and running a chicken farm and a carpenter's shop.

"The children were somehow sheltered even though the king had difficulties," Mandache said.

Princess Irina studied in France and Great Britain. In 1973, she worked at a purebred horse ranch in Alberta, Canada. She worked in the same field in Virginia, and in the late '70s she returned to Switzerland, where she was a saleswoman at Christie's auction house.

In 1983, she married John Kreuger in Arizona, where the couple had a horse ranch. They had two children, Michael and Angelica.

In 1989, when the communist regime in Romania was overthrown in a revolution that killed more than 1,000 people, three of the five Romanian princesses were living in the United States. Princess Sofia was studying fine arts and photography in North Carolina, and Princess Maria was working as a child psychology and development specialist. All the sisters visited Romania in the early 1990s, Mandache said.

King Michael regained his Romanian citizenship in 1997. Now, the king and queen regularly visit the European country, but haven't moved back. The family is popular, but largely uninvolved in local politics.

Princess Irina divorced in 2003 and four years later married John Wesley Walker, a former Coos County sheriff's deputy. They live on a horse ranch about two miles south of Irrigon, in an area cultivated with corn and potatoes.

The two were charged in a conspiracy to violate the federal Animal Welfare Act. They face allegations of operating an illegal gambling business and unlawful
animal fighting ventures. Each charge carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison and a $250,000 fine.

The indictment explains what happens in a cockfight: "The fight is ended when one rooster is dead or refuses to continue to fight. If not killed during the fight, the losing rooster is almost always killed after the fight."

"A mature gamecock ... has been surgically altered, trained and conditioned for fighting," the indictment says. "Gamecocks also generally receive vitamins, drugs and other supplements to boost their strength and endurance."

-- Simina Mistreanu
Romanian princess, Oregon husband to be freed while facing cockfighting charges

John Walker and Irina Walker in Romania. (Courtesy of MediafaxFoto)

By Simina Mistreanu, The Oregonian
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on August 16, 2013 at 3:05 PM, updated August 20, 2013 at 3:26 PM
A member of Romania’s royal family and her husband, a former Coos County sheriff’s deputy, are to be released Friday pending trial on charges they operated a cockfighting ring in eastern Oregon.

Irina Walker, 60, known in Romania as Princess Irina, and husband John Walker, 67, pleaded not guilty to all charges against them in U.S. District Court in Portland.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Stephen F. Peifer argued against the release, saying the couple might flee, seeking asylum in Switzerland or Romania.

But U.S. Magistrate Judge John V. Acosta decided to allow John and Irina Walker to be freed, ordering that they wear GPS bracelets and remain in Morrow and Umatilla counties while awaiting a two-week jury trial, which has been set for Oct. 15. The couple must also turn over their U.S. passports.

The Walkers, with 16 other suspects in Oregon and at least 10 in Washington, face charges under the federal Animal Welfare Act for their alleged

Princess Irina, known for her childhood love of animals, was born in Switzerland as the third of five daughters of King Michael I and Queen Anne of Romania. The royal family left Romania in 1947, forced to abdicate as the nation became part of the Soviet bloc.

The king supported the family working various jobs in Switzerland and the United Kingdom that included running a chicken farm.

Peifer, the federal prosecutor, said investigators found 24 large marijuana plants and 24 firearms at the Walkers' home. John Walker has a medical marijuana card, Peifer said.

Five co-defendants also appeared in court. Aurelia Garcia Mendoza, Mario Perez, David Sanchez, Apolinar Munoz Gutierrez and Arturo Olmedo Silva pled not guilty to similar charges and were scheduled for trial Oct. 15.

Eleven other people charged in the case are to appear before a magistrate in Yakima, Wash.

-- Simina Mistreanu
Life after prison for Oregon killer
Kenneth Janowski: 'I don't want to forget what I did'

By Simina Mistreanu, The Oregonian
Email the author | Follow on Twitter
on September 21, 2013 at 1:25 PM, updated September 23, 2013 at 5:32 PM

The day Kenneth Janowski was released from prison in March 2012, he went home with his wife, picked up the kids and dogs, and went straight to John Neal Memorial County Park in Lyons, where he's pictured. Beth Nakamura/The Oregonian

Every morning at 5:15, Kenneth Janowski wakes up to the beeping of his black travel alarm clock.

He sits with his wife as she prepares for the day. He feeds the family's six cats, and he watches the news on TV. He drives the 25 miles from his home outside of Stayton to Albany, where he works as a janitor and parts runner at a truck-repair shop.
For much of the past 10 years, the same alarm clock roused Janowski in a different place: the prison cell where he served the remaining time of a 27-year sentence for killing his parents.

Janowski, 47, is the first of 11 aggravated-murder convicts to be released from prison so far under a 2010 Oregon Supreme Court decision that allowed them to be considered for parole after serving 20 years instead of 30. Three others are scheduled to be released next year.

The ruling capped an appeal filed by Janowski and another inmate. The Oregon Board of Parole and Post-Prison Supervision determined that Janowski and the other released men no longer constitute a danger to society.

**Supreme Court case**

Under state law, aggravated murder convicts who have committed their crimes before June 30, 1995, can request an initial meeting with the board of parole -- known as a "murder review hearing" -- after serving 20 years. (The period goes up to 25 years for murders committed between June 30, 1995, and Oct. 22, 1999, and to 30 years for murders committed after Oct. 23, 1999.)

The Oregon Supreme Court ruled in the Kenneth Janowski case that if the board decides during review hearings that inmates can be rehabilitated, they can be released before their minimum sentence is up.

Then the board sets a projected release date. Three to six months before that date, the parole board holds an "exit interview hearing," where members discuss the inmate's recent psychological examination and conduct an interview.

Janowski became the first of 20 aggravated murder convicts so far to go through exit interview hearings over the past two years. The parole board deferred the release of six inmates, but approved the release of 11, with other three inmates scheduled for release next year.

-- Simina Mistreanu

Nine more men have parole hearings coming up under the Supreme Court ruling, and six remain in prison after psychological examinations and lengthy interviews with the parole board.

Earlier this month, Janowski was discharged from parole. He is now a completely free man. He agreed to talk to The Oregonian in an attempt to convince people they don't need to be afraid of him or the other men who are knitting their lives back together on the outside, he said. Many have families and are settling in at workplaces.
In prison, everything is like Groundhog Day, he said. You're locked with a group of people who don't want to be there. Everything is gray, made out of concrete and steel.

Outside, each day may come with challenges such as getting used to crowds or even navigating your new house, but it's always a good day.

"People can't understand," he said. "You can live under a bridge and be happy."

Yet he has chosen to start every good day outside with a noise that reminds him of life inside. That's why he brought his alarm clock with him.

"I don't want to forget this place," he told the board of parole in November 2011, when he was still an inmate, "and I don't want to forget what I did."

**The past**

Janowski started his prison term in 1985.

In February that year, he had borrowed a rifle from a friend and promised insurance money to another friend, 17-year-old Steve Wilson, to shoot his parents.

Wilson shot Arlene and Dickson Janowski as they lay in their bed at their Cedar Mill home. But Dickson Janowski didn't die, so his son repeatedly shot him in the head while Wilson was out crying in the yard.

Janowski called police the next day and told them he had just discovered the bodies after being out the night before. He and Wilson were arrested three months later.

Janowski said that at the time he believed people were evil, didn't care about one another "and whatever you did to them was no big deal."

**Other inmates**

Inmates affected by the Oregon Supreme Court decision and their status:

**Released**

Kenneth F. Janowski: March 9, 2012
Delbert K. Rothermel: April 4, 2012
Melvin R. Norris: April 5, 2012
Ricky L. Douglas: April 24, 2012
Robert P. DeWaal: May 4, 2012
Michael Meehan: Sept. 19, 2012
Steven R. Wilson: Dec. 12, 2012
Bryan L. Mikesell: Jan. 15, 2013
Troy L. Stewart: Feb. 4, 2013
Thomas C. Jones: May 16, 2013

**Scheduled to be released**
Douglas R. Miller: March 11, 2014
Charles A. Potter: March 29, 2014
DePaul E. Jackson: April 28, 2014

**Parole delayed after hearing, with new release date set:**
Michael D. Lissy: April 12, 2014
Scott Wickee: April 16, 2014
David L. Lahnala: April 29, 2014
Pepe G. Rivas: June 3, 2014
David L. Atkinson: June 28, 2015

(Every new release date requires another hearing. Parole can be delayed again.)

**Awaiting hearing for release date:**
Charles S. Pope: July 21, 2014
Brian S. Madison: Aug. 27, 2014
Terry R. Zion: June 29, 2015
Tyrone Washington: July 22, 2016
Gerald L. Byrns: Oct. 20, 2017
He hadn't interacted much with his parents growing up. A family friend told The Oregonian after the crime that Dickson Janowski was drinking heavily, had difficulties communicating with his children and had told others he was disappointed in his son.

The closest to Janowski was his sister, Katy, who was two years older. Katy taught him how to tell time and tie his shoelaces, and allowed him to hang out with her and her friends.

Then she died in 1980. "It was like some part of me was gone," he said.

For a while, Janowski thought her death was caused by abuse from their father. He later learned Katy's ruptured spleen was a complication from mononucleosis.

Janowski pleaded guilty to aggravated murder. He and Wilson were sentenced to life terms with minimum 30-year sentences.

He was "scared, hostile, angry," said psychologist Rex Newton, who met Janowski shortly after the teenager entered the Oregon State Correctional Institution in Salem. "He was just a kid who had to grow up."

Janowski recalls feeling guilt and regret instantaneously. But it took about a year and a half for his anger to subside and remorse to sink in as he realized he was responsible for his actions, he said.

"I always try to think of something to fix it," he said. "It was the same mentality: What can I do now that you can't bring them back to life? I can't change how the end of their life went; it's overwhelming to realize how much damage it caused. It came to a point where I figured, what do you do? You kill yourself? Do you chalk it all up and be an animal, because basically what else are you if you can do that? It was like, I want to try and do right."
**Prison rehabilitation**

His "big moment," as Janowski calls it, was when he decided he would live to honor his parents' memory. He started signing up for all the available in-prison rehabilitation classes. Among the first he took was Newton's cognitive class.

The class taught inmates to question their beliefs and build a value system, Newton said. Usually, people build value systems in their early teens as they observe and interact with adults. If they lack positive role models, they might skip the "lessons" of sensibility and empathy, and become vulnerable to criminal behavior, he said.

Kenneth Janowski says he learned empathy and a value system while he was in prison for killing his parents in Washington County.
Janowski would come to one-on-one meetings with a list of questions about what a young man might ask a parent figure, Newton said. He paid attention and took feedback well. Newton noticed Janowski was going through a process common among inmates who begin to define who they are, adopt values and live up to those values.

Janowski also attended an awareness group organized by inmates that would bring in crime victims and their advocates to talk to men convicted of murder or robbery.

He recalled a woman who told the prisoners how she waited for hours outside her father's store in Canby for police to finish investigating his killing.

"You just feel bad for the person who's talking because you can relate to them," he said. "And then later on, that's when it hits you that you did that, too."

Janowski said hearing people's stories helped him develop empathy. Sometimes, people who commit crimes, because of their own pain, don't have the ability to see how someone else would feel, he said.

"I think crime is a choice, but I don't think everybody sees that they do have choices," he said. "They feel like there's no way out."

By the early 2000s, Janowski appeared at peace and in control, said Mike Meehan, another aggravated murder convict released on parole after the 2010 under the Supreme Court decision. The two men became friends in prison, where Meehan was serving time for the beating death of a Hermiston man.

"It almost seemed like he didn't belong in prison," Meehan said. "He had done a lot of work on himself."

Janowski surrounded himself with people who wouldn't get him in trouble, said Scott Cannon, a former cellmate who met Janowski in the mid-2000s.
Janowski helped Cannon deal with his successful fight to vacate a triple-murder conviction.

"I thought he was a very calm spot in the middle of a very chaotic place," Cannon said.

**Supreme Court case**

Janowski started writing letters to another inmate’s sister in the late 1980s. They met face to face and started a relationship in 1992. They married in 1995.

She declined to be interviewed to avoid potential backlash from friends and colleagues.

She visited him in prison twice a week for almost 20 years while she was raising two children from a previous marriage. They would meet in the visiting room, where they would be allowed to hold hands. They played cards and board games and became friends with other long-term visitors.

She also supported him in his effort to become free.

In 2005, after 20 years in prison, Janowski requested a meeting with the parole board. The board members agreed he was capable of rehabilitation and set an exit interview for 2015, at his 30-year mark.

Janowski lost a bid for an administrative review of the board’s decision, then filed an appeal, which ended up before the Oregon Supreme Court.

The court ruled that even though Janowski hadn’t served 30 years, the board’s finding that he was "likely of rehabilitation" overrode his minimum sentence and he could be considered for parole after 20 years.

**Parole hearing**

Janowski met with the parole board on Nov. 30, 2011. His wife, Dianna, stepdaughter and 12 other friends, including prison employees, came to support him. No one was there to speak against his release except for Washington County prosecutor Roger Hanlon.
The board asked detailed questions about the murder, the events leading to it, Janowski’s state of mind before and after the crime, his rehabilitation in prison and his release plan.

He talked about the moment he changed: "I started to think about was there anything ever good about me, and I tried to remember anything I’d ever done for anybody but myself. It was hard to even think about anything. That night I cried for my mom and dad."

He talked more about his parents: "As soon as I agreed to testify (against Steve Wilson), that’s where I knew that they didn’t deserve what they got."

"What should they have gotten?" a board member asked.

"They should have had a better son," Janowski said.
He talked about the future: "I honestly believe there's no way in the world that I can ever pick up a gun and shoot another human being in my life."

When Hanlon's turn came, the deputy district attorney presented three main arguments for why Janowski should be kept in prison:

Janowski tried to convince several other people to kill his parents and then tried to get away with the murder; the most recent psychological evaluations had diagnosed him with "antisocial personality disorder in partial remission"; and the crime wasn't caused by circumstances, but "by something deep in Mr. Janowski" that was still there, Hanlon said.

After that, it was Janowski's wife turn. She said her husband had done a lot of work to prepare for his release. They had already discussed the house rules, including a ban on alcohol. During the 20 years they were married, she said, he had helped her deal with disappointments, death and illness in her family.

The board reached a split decision; two members voted for and one against Janowski's release. They set his parole date in March 2012.

**His release**

In the first few weeks after his release, he and his wife traveled to central Oregon and to the coast, which used to be one of his favorite places as a child. His family owned a cabin together with two other families. Janowski remembered spending summers there.

On the trip last year, he walked off the sand and into the ocean. He dove in "and it felt like a cleansing almost," he said. "And when I popped out I saw two big eyes looking at me. I was right in the middle of a bunch of seals."

But while he relished his newfound freedom, he also ran up against the reality of his record.

He was crushed when his 10 years working as a certified car mechanic in prison didn't land him interviews at the places he applied. He got his first job, at a tow-truck company, through a friend and former inmate.
He arrived to find out that the management had told the employees about his crime. The husband of a woman who worked at the business complained that his wife was no longer safe with Janowski around. Other employees said they would stop bringing their children over.

Eventually his colleagues became friendly, he said. But at his current job, he decided not to tell everyone about his past.

**The future**

On an afternoon in August, a woman who was pushing a shopping cart full of groceries in a parking lot in Albany dropped a six-pack of beer bottles. Janowski jumped to help her clean up the shards of glass.

He joked, trying to make her feel less embarrassed: "It's under warranty, isn't it?"

He left her smiling, but later thought: What she would have said if she'd known he was a convicted murderer?

Janowski can't help wondering, and worrying, about what people think. He doesn't blame them for being afraid of him and sees it as a consequence of his actions.

"I was screwed up in the head, and I regret it. Every day I regret it," he said. But he doesn't try to convince people to trust him. He leaves it up to them, he said.

Yet if you ask, he'll tell you that he's changed. He gained empathy, values and friends in prison. And then he gained freedom.

Shortly after he got out, his godparents wanted to meet Janowski and his wife for dinner. He felt overwhelmed with shame because he realized they had known and loved his parents. It was difficult for them, too, to see him, he said. He thinks they won't meet again.

That night, his godparents offered him a gift: a mug that belonged to his mother from college and his father's wedding band.

He took them home. -- Simina Mistreanu
They have written powerful stories about life and death, illnesses, cures, poverty, discrimination, trauma and hope.

To do that, they embedded with soldiers in Iraq, rode buses across the Mexico border, tracked a corpse over continents, delved into conflicts in Africa, and lingered around Boston hospitals and Florida orchards.

They gave their subjects time and their full attention for months in a row.

They put everything into narrative form, strewn with emotion, so that readers would want to follow the characters’ journey toward a resolution. Along the way, they intended to illuminate social dramas and build empathy.

Narrative writers covering social issues have produced some amazing work in the past two to three decades. Their stories, published in newspapers and magazines, have stood out, revealed truths and gained appreciation from readers and the industry.

The best of their stories read as easily as page-turning fiction where the reader gets caught up in the characters, is moved through a compelling plot and is drawn into vivid, intimate scenes. To produce these stories takes months of immersive reporting, in-depth interviewing, context gathering and then often painful writing and rewriting.

This work often takes a toll on their lives and relationships, ranging from depression to a perceived imbalance in their personal lives.

Yet for many of them, reporting and being part of other people’s lives triggers what psychologists refer to as “flow” – a state of being “in the zone,” completely absorbed in the activity, when work comes along easily and time seems to expand. People from different backgrounds and professions have said these experiences were among the most meaningful of their lives. Some of the best creative work is done while people are in the zone, psychologists say.

Moreover, these journalists find purpose in shedding light onto difficult, often heart-wrenching issues. Telling true stories is a privilege, they say, and a basic instinct.

“When you got one on the line, there’s an adrenaline rush,” says writer Chris Jones of Esquire. “It becomes primal almost when you got a good story (…) I spent my life trying to have those moments, pursuing those moments. When you get them, you kind of become blind to anything else.”

Seven writers, all who are either Pulitzer Prize or National Magazine Award winners, talk about the sweat, tears and joy of writing narratively about social issues such as poverty, race, illness and trauma. They talk about flow, stalemates, the power of stories and how, in the end, they care about the story so much that they’ll just find a way to get it done.

In seven years of doing journalism in Romania and the United States, and working on stories ranging from breaking news and business briefs to deep-dive narratives, I realized the stories that mattered most to me and my readers had three things
in common: First, I had allowed myself time to do extensive reporting and to get to know the people and the issues I was writing about. Second, I tried to use narrative writing techniques to engage the readers and tell a good story. And third, the stories happened to be about people who were disadvantaged or struggling to overcome a burden, and about the system that put that burden there in the first place.

Whenever I felt like the readers could empathize with the characters and learn something useful about the system, I felt that my work was worth it. The work was enjoyable and rewarding, even if painful at times, and I felt like I was offering something meaningful to the world.

I wanted to explore the question of motivation, satisfaction and meaning with the masters themselves and get a glimpse into what might await me down the road if I follow their path. I took a final master’s project at the University of Missouri as an opportunity to explore that question.

**Flow**

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, now at Claremont Graduate University, has spent the past half a century studying “flow” -- the state in which a person is so absorbed in what he or she is doing that nothing else seems to matter. Csikszentmihalyi grew up in Transylvania during World War II noticing how most of the adults around him were overwhelmed by the war’s tragedies and unable to live happy, satisfied lives. He became interested in understanding what contributes to a life worth living, and that led him to psychology.
Csikszentmihalyi believes people achieve happiness by being fully involved with every detail of their lives, whether good or bad. The best moments occur, he says, “when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.”

Such experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time they occur -- the swimmer’s muscles might ache during the race, or his lungs might feel like exploding -- but people end up describing them as some of the best moments of their lives.

There are two main prerequisites for flow: one’s attention must be invested in realistic goals, and skills need to match the opportunities for action. Thus, the person concentrates his or her attention on the task at hand and momentarily forgets everything else.

A mountaineer cited in Csikszentmihalyi’s research described it like this: “When you’re [climbing] you’re not aware of other problematic life situations. It becomes a world unto its own, significant only to itself. It’s a concentration thing. Once you’re into the situation, it’s incredibly real, and you’re very much in charge of it. It becomes your total world.”

Flow is experienced in similar ways by people of different occupations and backgrounds. Csikszentmihalyi’s studies have included surgeons, physics Nobel Prize winners, farmers in the Italian Alps, teenagers in Tokyo, and factory workers in Chicago.

Innovators and people who work in creative fields have also described doing some of their best work in “flow” conditions.
In the long run, these optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery, or as Csikszentmihalyi puts it, “a sense of participation in determining the content of life,” which he posits comes as close to happiness as anything else.

Moreover, people use these experiences to reinforce a meaningful pattern, a life theme. “When that is accomplished, and a person feels in control of life and feels that it makes sense, there is nothing left to desire,” Csikszentmihalyi wrote in his book *Flow*.

Journalists have been studied before in a context somewhat related to flow, for the book *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*, written by Csikszentmihalyi, Howard Gardner and William Damon. The authors described good work as something that is both of excellent quality and socially responsible, and found that journalists tend to produce good work when they pursue a moral mission such as informing the public, supporting democracy and creating social change.

That connection – between mission and joy – was echoed by seven accomplished writers who use long-form narratives to cover sensitive social issues. They described situations in which they experience flow, where they encounter difficulties and how they overcome them, and ultimately, how journalism has led them to live fulfilled lives.

When talking about flow, journalists sometimes even used the word itself or the expression “being in the zone.” Often, it comes in the form of intense concentration.

Lane DeGregory is a long-time feature writer who started writing daily news stories in *The Virginian-Pilot*. Now at the *Tampa Bay Times*, her series “The Girl in the Window,” about a feral child who had been raised in a closet, won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Her subjects are often people living on the fringes of society.
DeGregory talks about her work occupying her mind even when she’s not literally working. “It’s a blessing and a curse that I can’t turn it off,” she says.

For example, in the middle of a reporting project, she might take time to see a baseball game with her husband. But all she could think about was how to end her story and whether she needed to call one of her sources for one more interview. Or her teenage sons would talk to her about a football game or a band concert, and she would realize that she hadn’t been listening to them but instead thinking about a story. She says she shuts people around her off sometimes without meaning to.

Harmon, a *New York Times* reporter who uses long-form narratives to illuminate how technology affects people’s lives, also talks about being absorbed by her stories. She says she doesn’t necessarily lose track of time when work is going well, but rather she wants “to be doing it all the time. I feel like I have something important to say.”

**Reporting +/- writing = Joy**

Most writers in this study take delight in one or both of two separate parts of their work: reporting and writing.

Long-form narrative writing often requires the journalist to spend long stretches of time with his or her subjects. So it’s not surprising that most writers said they love being able to inhabit other people’s worlds in order to tell their stories.

Anne Hull of *The Washington Post* points out that it’s a very specific type of reporting that might seem boring to journalists who are used to a different rhythm; for example, reporters churning out the grind of daily news. Her reporting method is both
more luxurious and more demanding. “You’re watching hours and hours of nothing happen. And you just have to be prepared for when that moment happens,” she says.

Hull spent several months in 1998 documenting the journey of a group of Mexican women employed as crab pickers in North Carolina. Part of her reporting involved hours of just watching them pick crabs. Hull, who writes about the “non-majority class” -- she’s written extensively about immigrants, gay youth in the Bible Belt, and war veterans recovering in substandard medical facilities -- chose these subjects because she loves reporting in these “niche” environments.

“I just have always felt at home in that world,” she says.

Harmon, who writes science-heavy stories, says that though she likes the challenge of deciphering the science, she gets most enjoyment from being part of other people’s lives and acting as a “fly on the wall.”

Chris Jones, a writer-at-large at Esquire, talks specifically about a certain part of reporting: discovering “nuggets,” special moments that will play an important part in the story. One of them happened when he was reporting “The Things that Carried Him,” the story of a dead soldier’s journey from Iraq back to the United States. Jones remembers clearly when the soldier’s mother told him how her other son was trying to put a ring on the soldier’s finger only to discover that the glove was stuffed with cotton because the finger was missing.

In another instance, Jones was reporting a story about the Zanesville Zoo massacre, when 50 exotic animals from a private Ohio zoo were released by their suicidal owner and then killed by authorities. Jones remembers a local sheriff describing how a
piece of fur on a tiger’s back fell off, revealing its spine, when it was shot. Jones is excited about these moments because he believes they’ll make the story memorable to readers. Such discoveries, horrible as they are, also are pleasurable, he says.

“I think a great story has to have those scenes or those moments that really catch in people,” he says. “And what happens invariably is when you’re reporting those moments they’re catching you. I can remember the moment I got them. It’s often crystal clear.”

When the journalists move beyond the reporting to talk about writing, their experiences with flow seem to become more fickle: sometimes, words seem to flow, everything just pours out and falls into place. Other times, it’s a struggle.

The nights when it goes well are like being on drugs, Jones says. “I live for those.” He tries to provoke that mood by listening to music; he’ll choose a track for every story and play it on repeat. When he was writing the Zanesville massacre story, he was listening to “East Hastings” by Godspeed You Black Emperor. Jones told blogger Brandon Sneed during a 2012 interview that he liked the track’s creepy feel and wanted to evoke it in the story. When he was writing a profile of late movie critic Roger Ebert, Jones listened to “Little Motel” by Modest Mouse.

Other writers have other rituals to help them get “in the zone.” DeGregory only starts writing after she has taken a shower, done laundry, washed the dishes and put her house in order. All this time, she’s thinking about the story, but she’s doing all these little tasks instead of staring at a blank page on her computer screen. It helps her clear her mind and be more focused when she actually starts working.
Freelance writer Paige Williams manages the Nieman Storyboard. She has spent a decade in newspapers and then free-lanced long-form narratives for various magazines. Her *Atlanta* magazine story “You Have Thousands of Angels Around You,” about the people who helped a young refugee girl from Burundi to settle into her new life in the United States, won the 2008 National Magazine Award for feature writing.

Williams says she needs “silence and solitude” – a period of time untethered to incoming messages of all sorts and when she abstains from texting, tweeting and sharing through Instagram or Facebook – in order to allow herself to be absorbed by her work.

Another prerequisite of flow in writing goes back to thorough reporting, journalists say. Jones says he tries to report a story to the point when he can just tell it, when he knows it “back to front.”

Harmon says: “The fun writing comes from when you finally reach the point where you feel like you are authoritative. You can answer any question, you’ve done all the research.”

**Purpose as a condition of flow**

Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, who wrote the book on good work, discovered that journalists tend to produce quality work when they are pursuing a moral mission.

All seven award-winning journalists reinforced that finding. They believe they are serving readers by helping them connect emotionally to characters in their stories, and thus become aware of larger social issues or human conditions.
Harmon sees it as a matter of public service to inform people about the science that impacts their lives in a way that is emotionally gripping. Earlier in her career, she was doing straightforward news and features about science developments for *The New York Times*. In 2000, she was part of the paper’s project “How Race is Lived in America,” which won a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting, and wrote her first long-form narrative story about two business partners of different races in the dot-com boom era. She discovered the power of narrative, and now she tries to address three levels in every story she writes: the science, the individual story of a character, and the bigger story of the social conflict.

Hull says she’s always been interested in people at the outer edges of society, the “non-majority class” who is sometimes marginalized. The daughter of an inner city schoolteacher, Hull has followed an unusual track herself, dropping out of college after her freshman year, and working various jobs at *The St. Petersburg Times* (now *The Tampa Bay Times*) before she became a reporter.

She says her purpose is simply to peel back the curtain on a world readers don’t usually see, without scolding them or pointing a finger at flawed social policies. She just wants to get readers in touch with how other people live.

For Tom Hallman, Jr., of *The Oregonian*, stories of trauma, illness and race came naturally from a decade of covering the police beat as a young reporter. He carved a role for long-form narrative at a daily newspaper and ultimately won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for his series “The Boy Behind the Mask,” which described a disfigured teenager’s quest to undergo surgery to improve his appearance.
“The police beat had such a drama, such characters, such a lingo, and the way we were writing it was sterile,” he says. When he started incorporating those scenes into his stories, he got positive reactions from readers, so he kept at it. He realized this type of writing got readers more involved with the story and the characters.

*Tampa Bay Times’* DeGregory, who likes to write about “people in the shadows,” and especially women, says she sometimes hopes her stories will help those featured in them and bring positive changes to their lives. Other times, she hopes policymakers will regard an issue differently. But with many stories, she just wants people to reflect on their own lives or slightly change their perspective on something.

She gives the example of a story about a 99-year-old man who still goes to work at a fish factory every day. “Nothing happened in that story. There was nothing at stake, there was no movement, but everybody was talking about that story,” she says. She posits that people reacted because they could relate to this man and found meaning in his story.

Stories that have emotion make people stop, think and feel, Hallman says.

“In that moment, I take this stranger and this stranger, and I bring them together,” he says. “And that’s the goal, to make them connect and feel something, or read something and be changed, even if it’s for a minute.”

He gives the example of a story he wrote about a black maid who moved to Portland from a sharecropping farm in the South. She cleaned homes for 55 years and raised five children. They became accomplished professionals, including an attorney, a school teacher, a businessman and a nurse.
Hallman believes a story like that can change someone who has never gotten to know a black person and might be a “borderline racist.”

“When they start (reading the story) they think, ‘Oh, I don’t want to read another story about an African American. I’ll bet they’ll be complaining about something’,” Hallman says. “And by the time they get to the end of the story they’re weeping. And they have been in the presence of grace, and courage, and wisdom. And it changes their life.”

Sometimes, the writer’s aim is to help people see beyond the headlines they read in newspapers or see on TV and understand how major events impact people’s lives.

David Finkel, now an editor at The Washington Post, has pursued long-form narrative journalism since he started his career at The St. Petersburg Times. In 2006, he won the Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting for a piece about American efforts to expand democracy in Yemen. He also won the MacArthur “genius” grant in 2012, becoming one of only six journalists to have had that distinction.

Finkel considers “the crucial work of (his) writing time” to be the book The Good Soldiers, which he wrote after spending eight months embedded with a battalion in Iraq. He says he wanted the readers of his book to have specific people in mind whenever they heard something about Iraq or any other war or read a headline about another roadside bomb exploding in Afghanistan.

“I wanted them to walk away with a fuller understanding of what was going on,” he says. “And I don’t mean just in terms of a war, but in terms of the transformation of these young, eager men into the men they became by the time this was over with.”
**Overcoming difficulties**

Flow, joy, satisfaction and all the good things have alternated in the writers’ lives with periods of struggle, which varied from deadline stress to deep depressions. Like marathon runners in training, the writers have learned to put their feet down step after step, when it feels great, and when it feels awful.

Harmon says she constantly feels a time pressure, “like editors are breathing down my neck: ‘What exactly are you spending all of this time on?’”

Hull refers to the “new angst” reporters have about exposing the people they write about to merciless online commenters. “It’s so mean and ugly, and I almost feel bad for the people I’m going to put through that,” she says.

DeGregory talks about a concern she’s had since she started in this profession: that she’s not worthy to tell people’s stories. That makes her nervous, sometimes to the point of being sick to her stomach, whenever she embarks on reporting a story.

“That’s a huge responsibility to get someone to open up to you and trust you to tell a story about them to thousands of strangers,” she says. “Am I good enough to do this? Gosh, they gave me this amazing access or insight. I don’t know if I’m magician enough to pull off this trick.”

DeGregory gets over these concerns by trying to be empathetic with her subjects. When she was younger, she used to build her stories around what other people would say about them. Now she tries to know her subjects well, “inhabit their minds,” before she lets others weigh in.
Hull says she’s had periods of “extreme struggle,” the most recent last year, during a fellowship at The American Academy in Berlin. “It’s hard to describe. You’re just hitting the wrong chords, and everything you try doesn’t quite work out, and it’s really depressing.” She worked through and beyond those feelings by talking to other journalist friends, whom she calls her “little tribe.”

But Hull says she has never wanted to quit journalism, no matter how difficult the roadblock. “I never not wanted to work. I just wanted to beat it.”

Jones suffered from depression, with suicidal thoughts, after he finished the story about the soldier killed in Iraq. He posits that he fell into depression, in part, because he had ended an important project and didn’t know what was next. Another reason, he says, was that he had been immersed for months, mind and heart, in a tragic subject.

Getting fully involved is a “deal” you need to make to be able to tell powerful stories, he says. Caring is crucial.

“I will take the reporter with the biggest heart in the room every single time,” he says. If a writer cares, he or she will be willing to put in more time and show empathy toward the people he or she writes about. Jones doesn’t believe in journalistic “objectivity.”

“I don’t try to maintain distance; I think that’s a shitty way to treat people,” he says. “If you’re asking them to open up to you, I don’t see how you return that favor by being a wall.”
Jones is concerned that, one day, his passion for stories will disappear. That he won’t want to be sent out on assignments, and he will simply stop caring. He hopes that if that happens, he’ll stop doing journalism.

One time, he volunteered as a paramedic and helped revive someone. It was a transformational experience for him, which made him wonder why he should write stories when he could start people’s hearts back up.

“But stories can still change people,” he says. “You can make someone feel better; you can make someone think about things a little differently. You’re not changing a life in the sense that you’re saving it or ending it, but you can make small changes. And that’s a lot to ask from a job.”

Family

While all the journalists believe in the value of the work they do, they also talk about the price they pay to do it – long hours, brutal deadlines, the emotional toll of witnessing grief and tragedy. That price can also cost their personal lives, and is shared by family and friends.

The married writers say they are grateful to spouses for picking up the slack in raising children. Both Jones and Finkel said they weren’t very present as husbands and fathers while they were working on their soldier stories. They feel bad about it and see it as a sacrifice that came with the process.

The women, especially, expressed mixed feelings about their work’s impact on their family life. DeGregory said that while her editor, a man, brings his lunch that his
wife had packed with him to work every day, she usually has “a carrot” in her fridge. She doesn’t get to cook for her teenage boys as she would want, and ends up writing late at night, after she drives them to after-school activities.

Harmon, who says she hasn’t been as present of a mother for her 9-year-old daughter as she would have wanted, recalls instances when she would tuck her daughter in and write by her bedside while waiting for her to fall asleep. She says her husband has picked up the slack in raising the child.

“On the other hand, she sees me doing something that I love to do and that I think is important and that gets a lot of reactions and hopefully makes a difference in the world,” Harmon says. “So I like to think that I am actually being a good parent that I’m modeling that for her.”

Similarly, DeGregory believes her sons are more aware of the world because they’ve had the opportunity to travel with her on stories and be exposed to people and situations ranging from a group of sex offenders living under a bridge in Miami to an art gallery dedicated to foster children.

Hallman was an exception in this regard. He says he’s always put his job in perspective. He usually starts work at 7:30 a.m. and tries to leave the newsroom at 4 p.m. He spends the rest of the time with his family and doing things that “renew his spirit,” such as dancing, riding his motorcycle or listening to music.

He found that allowing himself that space was essential for his writing. “If you don’t have the balance, you start to become jaded with the world, and you can’t see
stories in the world if you look at it as jaded,” he says. “If you’re sitting in the newsroom 12 hours a day, you have nothing left to give the world.”

**What journalism has offered them**

Of all the journalists included in this analysis, Finkel has probably risked the most, physically and emotionally. In the eight months he spent in Iraq, he was exposed to many of the dangers the soldiers faced, including mortars, rockets and roadside bombs.

Finkel says he doesn’t know if he would have embarked on this assignment had he known in advance what was waiting for him. But once he was there, he focused on his responsibilities as a reporter.

“I wasn’t prepared for it, and it was hard. It was physically frightening,” he says. “But at the same time I was guided by the thought that this is a consequential war in my lifetime and for whatever reason, I’ve been given a good seat to observe it and to write about it, to add to the archives of the war. So don’t complain, don’t screw it up. Just go do the work.”

Finkel felt an immense responsibility to tell the story of how a group of young men were changed after being sent to war. While doing that, he wanted to make sure he wasn’t telling his own story, but accurately capturing the soldiers’ experiences and emotions. To achieve that, he did a lot of “staying and staying and staying” (which in Jones’ interpretation would be “caring and caring and caring”).
“Underneath everything I felt fortunate to be there,” he says. “If I’m going to be a journalist and I’m going to be a storyteller, well, this is the great story, so shut up and tell it.”

The same kind of gratitude for being able to tell stories was expressed by all seven journalists.

This is ultimately why they go through the difficult parts, and what gives them the sense of purpose necessary to experience flow. The stories they’ve told and the experiences they’ve had along the way added up to fulfilled lives.

Stories keep the campfire alive and offer journalists a place at the campfire, says Williams of the Nieman Storyboard. They offer an awareness of the world at large and our place in it, and responsibility to it.

Journalism lets you do something with your curiosity that’s productive, Hull says. It offers you the ultimate privilege of telling someone’s story.

At its best, journalism doesn’t feel like work; it feels like you’re stealing money, Jones says. You are paid to go meet interesting people and watch amazing things. He also sees a “minor magic” in being able to write something that gets printed on a piece of paper and is shipped all around the country and the world for people to read.

Finkel says he feels very lucky to have traveled to five continents, to have seen people “at their very best and their very worst and their very middling, trying to figure life out,” and to have lived a life that’s engaged.
“It’s pretty damn luxurious to be able to live a life that feels full of being able to consider things, think through things, see things, ask questions, see life unfolding, with pretty limitless, go places, go pretty much where I’ve wanted to go and stay as long as I can and figure stories out and then tell stories. I mean that seems like a pretty good deal.”

Or, as Csikszentmihalyi would say, a sense of participation in determining the content of life, which comes as close to happiness as anything else.
Optimal experience for narrative journalists covering social issues

Master’s project proposal

Presented to the faculty of the Graduate School at the University of Missouri-Columbia

By Simina Mistreanu

Committee Chair: Professor Jacqui Banaszynski

Committee members: Professor Mary Kay Blakely

Professor Berkley Hudson

Professor Tom Warhover

May 2013
I. Introduction

I got into journalism because I wanted to tell stories and change the world. In the almost eight years since I’ve made that decision, a lot of things about the way I see journalism have changed. Not those two.

I’ve had enough time for trials and errors, for a lot of bad writing, but also for epiphanies, for falling in love with stories — and for getting my heart broken — and, in a few cases, for telling stories that I felt really mattered. I realized, over time, that those special stories had three things in common. First, I had allowed myself time to do extensive reporting and get to know the people and the issues I was writing about. Second, I tried to use narrative writing techniques to engage the readers and tell a good story. And third, the stories happened to be, more often than not, about people who were disadvantaged or struggling to overcome a burden, and about the system that put that burden there in the first place.

Whenever I felt like the readers could empathize with the characters and also learn something useful about the system, I felt that my work was worth it. These stories are one of the forms that I hope to explore further in which journalism provides public service.

This master’s project is an opportunity for me to do two things I’m really excited about. Through the professional analysis, I’ll have the opportunity to interview people who have done great narrative journalism on social issues for decades about the satisfaction they got through their work and what made them persevere through difficulties. Through the professional practice component, I’ll get to work at The
Oregonian, a newspaper that has been recognized for providing public service, reporting on social issues and producing great narrative journalism.

I believe this master’s project will bring me a step closer to my dream of telling good stories that lead to change, either on a macro or a personal level. But first, please allow me to take a few steps back and explain how I came to love narrative, underdogs and newspapers.

I grew up in Transylvania, and after high school I moved to Bucharest to go to journalism school. While in my sophomore year, I stumbled into the narrative writing class of MU alum Cristian Lupsa. It was unlike anything I had learned about journalism. We were not practicing how to organize information into an inverted pyramid, but instead we were reading long, long stories by American writers. The mighty “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold,” by Gay Talese, the incredible “Long Fall of One-Eleven Heavy,” by Michael Paterniti, and “The Things That Carried Him,” by Chris Jones, were all on the required readings list, and they all made me fall in love with long-form narrative writing.

I started doing long-form features for Esquire Romania, where Lupsa was an editor, in the free time from my job as a reporter at an online business daily. In the fall of 2009, together with Lupsa and some friends, we launched our own magazine, Decat o Revista. So when I came to Missouri as a Fulbright student in the fall of 2011, I wanted to learn more about magazines. Funny enough, I fell in love with newspapers.

My four semesters working as a reporter and assistant city editor at the Columbia Missourian helped me understand newspapers’ role and potential in serving communities, both with immediate news and in-depth stories.
The two years I spent at the Missouri School of Journalism have taught me, among a million other things, to see journalism as a vital service to the community. As the providers of that service, journalists must constantly search for ways to become better, more engaging and more useful.

This is one of the reasons why I’m thrilled to be working at The Oregonian this summer. The paper has repeatedly been acknowledged for service to its community. Moreover, it has a great tradition of narrative writing, with Pulitzer Prize winner Tom Hallman, Jr., still in the newsroom and writing coach Jack Hart in town. Investigative reporters Bryan Denson and Steve Suo are also at the paper, adding to the list of people I hope to learn from. Finally, the paper has an award-winning breaking news team, which is exploring new ways to engage the public with the news.

I’ll be part of The Oregonian’s breaking news team from June 3 to August 23, 2013, working 30 hours a week. I’ll be covering news on multiple platforms, which is something I look forward to getting better at. I’ll also write news features, and my goal is to report and write one or two long-form stories.

I’ll send my master’s committee weekly field reports, detailing my work at the paper and the progress of my professional analysis. My direct supervisor will be John Killen, The Oregonian’s breaking news editor, who will write an evaluation at the end of my work experience. His written agreement is attached to this proposal.

The professional analysis will explore how narrative writers covering social issues such as poverty, race, illness and trauma get satisfaction from their work on a long term, and what motivates them to persevere through difficulties.
It will consist of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five to seven long-form narrative writers whose coverage on social issues has been appreciated by the field through awards or other types of recognition. The interviews will look into whether they experience “flow,” a state of bliss when people are doing the work for its own sake, studied by psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. The analysis will also look into what makes them persevere through difficulties, and what they hope to accomplish through their work.

Professor Mark Kramer talks about how “exciting narrative journalism” is the one that explores the subtleties of social dramas, “of poverty, political anger, the bureaucratic class, sectarian, regional, race and gender-related fences inside which we dwell.”

Intensive, contextual and investigative reporting is paired with the art of discovering and describing people so that readers can empathize with them, and thus care about issues they would probably not relate to otherwise. This type of journalism requires high skills and dedication.

Whenever I tried to do these types of stories, they proved to be the most challenging but also the most satisfying. While in Romania, I wrote about a young woman fighting breast cancer and the broken Romanian health system; I told the story of a young couple of resident doctors who were trying to emigrate and escape the $300 monthly stipends. And here, in Missouri, I documented four girls’ quest to graduate from college, get out of the Ozarks and the poverty they grew up in.

In the fall of 2013, after I will have defended my master’s project, I’ll start a year-long project telling stories about Roma families around the U.S., as part of the O. O.
McIntyre Fellowship. The project stemmed from my experience in the spring of 2013 documenting the life of a Roma family in Wichita, Kan., and it’s the type of work I hope to continue to do in the future.

To some extent, this professional analysis is a selfish pursuit. I want to understand how people who are far along on this path and who have been appreciated by the field are happy and satisfied with their work, and what meaning they derive from it. The domain can benefit from the recorded experiences of professionals who do one of the most difficult types of journalism, yet rarely reflect on it. And, hopefully, the results of this analysis might motivate and inspire others who might want to follow this path.

II. Theoretical framework

The concept of “flow” was used by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p.4). The experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it for its own sake, even at great cost.

This state of consciousness is at the basis of what Csikszentmihalyi called “the theory of optimal experience.” Optimal experiences occur when “a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (p.3). These experiences are not necessarily pleasant at the time when they happen, as they are often struggles to overcome a challenge. Nevertheless, people end up describing them as some of the best moments in their lives.

Whereas flow can occur in various instances in people’s lives, including playing, practicing sports and intimacy, it is often associated with intense creative work.
This happens when attention — or what Csikszentmihalyi calls “psychic energy” (p. 33)— is invested in realistic goals and when skills match the work that needs to be done. The person invests his or her full attention in the task at hand, momentarily forgetting everything else, including self-consciousness.

A mountaineer explained: “When you’re [climbing] you’re not aware of other problematic life situations. It becomes a world unto its own, significant only to itself. It’s a concentration thing. Once you’re into the situation, it’s incredibly real, and you’re very much in charge of it. It becomes your total world” (p. 59).

Creative work has to be done in a context where challenges are higher than average and skills are higher than average so that flow can take place.

A study on 8,000 diverse people reveals seven conditions to enter "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2004):

1. Completely involved in what you are doing — focused, concentrated.
2. A sense of ecstasy, of being outside reality.
3. Great inner clarity, knowing what needs to be done and how well you are doing.
4. Knowing that the activity is doable, that your skills are adequate to the task.
5. A sense of serenity — no worries about oneself, and a feeling of going beyond the boundaries of the ego.
6. Timelessness — thoroughly focused on the present, hours seem to pass by in minutes.

7. Intrinsic motivation — whatever produces flow becomes its own reward.

A condition of flow is good work, described as something that is both of excellent quality and socially responsible (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon, 2001).

There are three sources of strength journalists can draw on in their efforts to do high quality work: the tradition of standards and practices of the domain (which are related to truthfulness and fairness); journalists’ personal sense of mission; and the “pockets” within the field that still support good work (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon, 2001, p. 153).

Journalists tend to have optimal experiences in their work when their main motivation is to pursue a moral mission. Of more than 100 top journalists interviewed at length by Gardner et. al, half said their primary commitment is to informing the public about events important for their lives; another third said their mission was to support democracy; the remaining ones talked about purposes such as empowering the powerless, airing unorthodox points of view and creating social change.

**III. Professional analysis questions**

Q1: Do narrative writers who cover social issues have an optimal experience, and if so, how do they describe it?

Q2: What motivates narrative writers to persevere in front of difficulties?
IV. Literature review

Narrative journalism

Narrative journalism is one of the many forms people employ to tell true stories. Journalist and author Jon Franklin (1994) describes a story as “a sequence of actions that occur when a sympathetic character encounters a complicating situation that he confronts and solves” (p. 71).

Stories are natural to humans, who have told them since they learned to write on the rocks, and might continue even after they learn to write on the stars (Banaszynski, 2012).

Franklin (2007) says: “We like stories because we think in stories. It’s how we derive meaning from the world” (p. 111). Stories, in the way the author perceives them, have “beginnings, middles and ends,” or otherwise a complication, a plot development and a resolution (Franklin, 1994, p. 25).

Mark Kramer (2001) says narrative journalism describes events as they take place over time. The form uses some of the techniques of fiction, such as building a central narrative, deploying characters, and setting scenes, “to deliver the news in the form of an unfolding drama” (p. 107).

Other phrases used to describe this type of journalism have been narrative storytelling, intimate journalism, creative nonfiction, New Journalism and literary nonfiction. (Giles, 2002; Royal & Tankard, 2004; Wolfe, 1973).
David Abrahamson (2000) placed literary journalism at the “intersection between literature and journalism.” Tom Wolfe (1973), author of “The New Journalism,” said it is journalism that reads like a novel. Thomas Berner (1986) described it as “the marriage of depth reporting and literary techniques in newspaper writing” (p. 22).

Among the techniques he mentioned are narration, scene, point of view, drama, chronology, rhythm, foreshadowing, metaphor, dialogue — “all girded by good reporting” (p. 22).

Learning how to master all these techniques while doing intensive reporting fully mobilizes journalists’ skills and judgment. Kramer (2001) says narrative journalism appeals to the reporter’s artistry. “Narrative invites reporting beyond the least common denominator because it acknowledges complex emotions, human situations and consequences, moving conversation with readers beyond simple shared sentimentality” (p. 3).

Good narratives highlight universal human themes that make real events relevant to all of us (Hart, 2000, p. 20).

“Narrative hugs and holds readers,” said Kramer (2002), a proposer of the revival of narrative as an antidote to the decrease in newspaper readership in the last decade.

Kramer’s hypothesis is that newspapers might both improve coverage and retain more readers by employing storytelling techniques for news. “In this age of mega-corporate media saturation, Web sites and workaholism, readers still are attracted to stories in which people's lives and decision-making are vividly portrayed” (p. 3).

Research by Northwestern University's Readership Institute has found "strong evidence that an increase in the amount of feature-style stories has wide-ranging benefits" (Stepp, 2005, p. 60). A more narrative approach to both news and features can raise reader interest, especially among women, in topics such as politics, sports and science. "Newspapers that run more feature-style stories are seen as more honest, fun, neighborly, intelligent, 'in the know' and more in touch with the values of readers" (p. 60).

Lewis Donohew (1982) also suggested that narrative in newspapers could lead to more engaged readers. Participants in his study found stories in the inverted-pyramid format to be rather boring and dull. On the other hand, the narrative form generated more interest and arousal, and kept readers with the stories for longer periods of time.

Franklin (1994) contends: “The popularity of the new technique lies in the fact that it combines the appeal, excitement and reading ease of fiction with the specific information content of nonfiction” (p. 26).

Franklin, the first journalist to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, in 1979, describes narrative journalism as the break he and others in his generation found themselves in during the late 1960s and early 1970s while they were trying to become novelists. Journalism gave them the occasion to practice the “nonfiction-short-story form,” which ultimately became an established form.
The New Journalism movement that Franklin and his peers were part of started in the 1960s as a reaction to “the rigid reportorial style of the 1950s” (Geert, 1998, p. 8). Among the early defining works of the movement are Truman Capote’s “In Cold Blood,” a nonfiction novel about the murder of a family of four in rural Kansas; John Hersey’s “Hiroshima,” an account of the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombings, published in an entire issue of The New Yorker; Hunter S. Thompson’s “Hell’s Angels,” for which he embedded with a motorcycle gang; and the articles, essays and books written by Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese.

Nevertheless, the form can be traced further in history to the works of Daniel Defoe, Jack London, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck (Hartsock, 2000; Franklin, 1994).

Writers have tried to identify common traits of exemplary works of literary nonfiction, whether they were done by members of the “Lost Generation,” in the surge of the 1960s and 1970s, or in modern newsrooms.

Chip Scanlan from The Poynter Institute singled out immersion reporting as the most important requirement for doing fine narrative journalism. By being there and immersing herself, the writer “inhabits” a story and is able to give the story a sense of authority that every good narrative has (Nieman Reports, 2002, p. 7).

Jacqui Banaszynski listed five things any good piece of narrative needs: a character the reader can hold on to through the story; a larger theme readers can relate to; discipline so that writing is not a “self-indulging rant” but honors the reader; “enormous detail, specific, telling detail”; and complete immersion in the subject.
Pulitzer Prize winner Tom French listed joy, stubbornness and having faith in “the power and importance of tiny, tiny moments” (Nieman Reports, 2002, p. 7).

Writer Isabel Wilkerson said good narratives need a sympathetic protagonist, “who is flawed and hopefully recognizes it since that will make it easier in the end, who is caught up in the sweep of something bigger than him or herself” (Nieman Reports, 2002, p. 8). It’s the writer’s responsibility to make the readers see the protagonist’s complexity and care about what happens to him or her.

Mark Kramer stressed the importance of good writing, with short sentences and active verbs.

Being able to explain the larger theme of a story is essential, according to The Oregonian editor Therese Bottomly. She talked about a story “we never got to tell,” about the double obituary of an 83-year-old mother and her 64-year-old daughter who had Down’s syndrome. The mother cared for her daughter until the day the daughter died. The next day, the mother died as well. They were buried in the same casket. “The obituary had those simple facts, but you immediately saw the larger, more compelling story. It was about motherhood. It was about a mother's work finally being done, and it was time to rest. It was about infinite love. Seeing those larger themes is what makes all the difference” (Hallman Jr., 2003, p. 18).

Radio producer Ira Glass said good stories are about “very basic human drama,” such as relationships between parents and children, and husbands and wives; expectations
set too high, and expectations set too low. “It’s kind of hard to turn away from that stuff” (Butler, 2006, p. 28).

Gene Weingarten of *The Washington Post* boiled it down even more: all good stories are about death. “Death informs virtually all of literature. We lust and love so we can feel more alive. We build families so we can be immortal. We crave fame, and do good works, so both will outlive us. The Gods of our choosing promise eternity. This is the big mystery of life, and any good narrative can be made to grapple with some piece of it, large or small” (Weingarten, 2010, xiv).

Kramer emphasized the ability to provide context, which reporters can achieve through immersion and study. The writer should go back and forth between action and “just the right” background information, which will deepen readers’ concern and comprehension. Narrative will “hug and hold” the readers through crucial stories about education, politics, race and pollution. “Gripping narrative—that portrays the subtleties, the life-corresponding quick of social issues, of poverty, political anger, the bureaucratic class, sectarian, regional, race and gender-related fences inside which we dwell—takes high-level craft skills, and then it’s exciting narrative journalism” (Nieman Reports, 2002, p. 9).

The journalists whose work and motivations are the aim of this research are doing exactly what Kramer is talking about: they are using incredible amounts of reporting and narrative writing techniques to engage readers in exploring crucial social issues such as poverty, race, illness and trauma.
Research, as well as common knowledge, shows these are some of the most difficult areas to cover — and especially to cover well. The disadvantaged, the minorities and those who have suffered from illness and trauma are often underrepresented in the media. When they do take up space or airtime, their stories are often sentimental, promote stereotypes, and fail to explore the issue’s larger context and how it relates to the culture.

**Social issues**

Although there is little literature connecting narrative writing to the coverage of social issues, journalists have long used immersion reporting and narrative writing techniques to tell stories about people who are facing difficulties (Kelliher, 2004; Parisi, 1998; Goldenberg, 2012). This professional analysis will look specifically into the optimal experiences of narrative journalists who cover social issues such as poverty, race, illness and trauma.

Dan Froomkin (2013) points out that while 16.1 percent of Americans are living in poverty, only 0.2 percent of the coverage in 50 major news outlets in the past five years was primarily about poverty.

Poverty is not considered a beat at most newspapers, and poverty coverage is episodic, mostly triggered by events such as the Los Angeles riots and Hurricane Katrina (Froomkin, 2013; Rendall, 2007). Stories are almost always enterprise work and require time and dedication on the part of the reporters without sparking much enthusiasm from editors and advertisers.
Yet, persistent poverty is “the ultimate accountability story” because, according to author Sasha Abramsky, poverty exists in wealthy countries largely as a result of political choices, not as a result of pure economics (Froomkin, 2013, p. 42).

Nevertheless, scholars cautions against “sob stories.” A 1990 study by political scientist Shanto Iyengar found that episodic television news coverage of poverty, especially of black mothers, led white middle class viewers to blame the individuals rather than the system.

The solution lies in reporting, according to journalist and professor Susan Brenna. The stronger the reporters’ facts, “the more vivid their detail, the less reliant they are on the poetry” (Brenna, 2006, p. 28).

Poverty stories don’t have to be grim. E. J. Dionne, Jr. (2008) says journalists don’t write enough about programs and agencies that work, and explain to readers why they work.

Context is also vital for poverty coverage. As Michael Moss (1987) noted, “we are far better at simply discovering the poor than we are at explaining the causes of poverty and exploring the solutions” (p. 43).

A study analyzing 300 news articles about pollution, poverty and incarceration written between 1995 and 2000 showed the stories “overwhelmingly indicated no specific cause, effect, or responsible agent for each problem” nor did they discuss the likelihood that these problems could be solved (Kensicki, 2004, p. 53). At the same time, coverage was often based on false assumptions and stereotypical portrayals of those affected.
News media are often criticized for reducing social issues to individual-level problems (Sei-Hill, Carvalho & Davis, 2010).

Among these issues is race. As with poor people, racial minorities are underrepresented in the media, both as characters in the news and as sources (Owens, 2008; Josey, Dixon, Hurley & Hefner, 2008). And when they do appear, non-whites are often made into stereotypes (Mercurio & Filak, 2010; Parisi, 1998; Josey, Dixon, Hurley & Hefner, 2008).

Parisi (1998) analyzed the New York Times three-part series “Another America: Life on 129th Street,” published in 1994. The series portrayed several people who lived on a block in Harlem. Although the editors contended the series was intended to activate readers’ empathy, Parisi stated that the “sonorous, dignified, almost mythic terminology,” along with grand abstractions such as hope, decay, poverty and despair, were creating standard stereotypes (p. 241). The author didn’t allow the characters to reflect on social life, transforming them into “objects, who embody social problems,” and failed to capture the community’s social cohesiveness (p. 242).

Josey et. al (2008) cite Cedric Clark’s theory of the four stages of minority portrayal in the media: non-recognition, ridicule, regulation and respect. The first three categories revolve around the feeling of novelty and stereotypes. The fourth, respect, takes place when a minority group is portrayed in a balanced and nuanced matter. The authors maintain that “no historically subordinated minority group in the United States has achieved stage four” (p. 6). 
The focus on the individual as opposed to the system is a trend scholars identified in illness coverage as well (Shin & Cameron, 2006).

Stephanie Shapiro (2006) of The Baltimore Sun argues that newspapers “have fallen in love with long narratives about fatal illnesses and disfiguring ailments, particularly when they involve children” (p. 50). Readers respond powerfully to these emotional stories, which Shapiro compares to the work of sob sisters from years ago.

She calls them a “subgenre of narrative journalism” that competes with hard news for the A1 page of the country’s most prestigious newspapers. She quotes Moore and Lamb (2005), who say that “although the stories are highly readable and beautifully written, readers learned nothing new” (p. 55).

Relying only on “brutal facts and high emotion” is an easy trap to fall into for journalists who cover trauma as well (Hale, 2009). But stories also have to address the cultural meaning of trauma, the lesson or revelation, and readers’ relationship to the survivor.

As with poverty or race stories, readers need context to trauma in order to create meaning from it (Lifton, 2009; Reynolds, 2009).

Another aspect journalists need to pay attention to is the potential trauma to culture. Larry Blumenfeld, who studied cultural recovery in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, said: “In New Orleans people told me what they fear and are experiencing is erasure. That they are being erased, and their history is being erased” (Nieman Reports, 2009, p. 43). Blumenfeld said reporters did a good job covering the immediate effects of
the hurricane, but not the “continuing trauma,” as it related to “race, poverty, inequity and urban ills” (p. 43).

Journalists need to find people who understand the culture and “the emotional landscape” of a place, be they the psychiatrist or the emotional leader (p. 27). Another requirement is intensive reporting and gathering details that “ground true stories” (p. 58).

“As with any good investigative reporting, there's the need for physicality—a physical effort that has to take place to be able to successfully complete the story for the reader, the viewer, and the listener,” according to investigative reporter Paul McEnroe (p. 29).

Author Katherine Boo waded through garbage every day for weeks, with a painful autoimmune disease, while documenting the story of a young Indian trash seller. Adrian Nicole LeBlanc took 10 years to document “Random Family,” the nonfiction account of the struggles of a family in Bronx, because she wanted to understand how time cycles affected her characters. Isabel Wilkerson retraced one of her characters’ journey from Monroe, Louisiana, to Los Angeles, 30 years after it happened, so that she could understand how it felt to drive that long without being able to check into one of the white-only hotels along the way.

McEnroe argues that the willingness to pay attention to details and do the work comes more naturally once journalists feel a connection with the people they write about. “So when we talk about narrative arc—the presentation of the problem, the conflict, the meaning, the character development—one thing that's missing in that writing formula is
if you're not emotionally tied into people whom you're writing about. You need to plug into your emotional partnership with the people” (p. 29).

If transposed in journalism, emotion makes people pay attention to stories and helps them relate to the characters (Fuller, 2010). It helps them understand, as in the case of Edward R. Murrow’s work, “the economic and political forces that kept migrants sleeping on piles of straw and their school-age children toiling in the fields” (Moss, 1987, p. 43).

V. Methodology

The research method for this professional analysis will be semi-structured, in-depth interviewing.

At its best, the qualitative interview is “an event in which one person (the interviewer) encourages others to freely articulate their interests and experiences” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 170). The purpose of this study’s interviews will be to encourage long-form narrative writers to talk about their work experiences and motivations.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing is the most appropriate method for the purposes of this study because it allows writers to describe freely their work experiences and the meaning they assign to them. The structured component of the interviews — the pre-determined questions — will set a framework that will guide the discussion, but the interviews will be flexible enough to cover an array of previously unplanned topics (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).
Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997), the author of the theory of optimal experience, or “flow,” which is the theoretical framework of this study, has used semi-structured, in-depth interviewing to research his book, “Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention.” He interviewed more than 90 people from fields ranging from arts and literature to engineering and marketing, including 14 Nobel Prize winners. Csikszentmihalyi’s theory has also been applied to specific fields, such as genetics, journalism and education (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon, 2001; Fox, 2000).

Compared to Csikszentmihalyi’s research of creativity, this project will be much smaller, aiming to include interviews with between five and seven long-form narrative writers.

The semi-structured interviews used for this study will have an “interview guide,” which consists of groupings of topics and questions that the interviewer will use. The interview guide does not dictate the order or the phrasing of the questions. Moreover, the interviewer has the freedom to ask follow-up or spontaneous questions and change the direction of the discussion (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195). The questions will be open-ended and the structure of the interview will be flexible, leaving room for unplanned discoveries.

The interviewer will follow the traditional approach for interviewing, which resembles an informal conversation with the respondent, while remaining close to the guidelines of the topic of inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The interviewer will start off with general questions, moving to more specific ones.

The interview guide will include questions such as:
- How do you choose the stories you want to write?
- What is your favorite part of your work and why?
- What do you need to pay attention to in order to do this work well?

(Maybe ask about specific issues highlighted in the lit review, such as the importance of context, culture and complex characters)

- What motivates you to do this type of work?
- How has this motivation changed with the years?
- What effects do you think your work has on people? What would you want it to accomplish?
- Why do the type of stories you do matter?
- Why do stories, in general, matter?

The interviewer will try to gain access to long-form narrative writers by sending semi-formal queries, through which she will explain the purpose of her study and the need for access. She will also try to find personal connections that will help her approach the subjects.

Specifically, the subjects of the interviews will be narrative writers who have done persistent and excellent work in covering social issues such as poverty, race, illness and trauma. Among the writers who might be approached for this study are Katherine Boo, Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, Isabel Wilkerson, Tom Hallman, Jr., David Finkel, Chris Jones and Michael Paterniti. The list might change during research and include other great journalists.
The interviews will be conducted over the phone, via Skype, or in person, if the interviewees live in or close to Portland. The interviews will be recorded, and the transcripts will be added to the project report.

Finally, the professional analysis including highlights and conclusions of the interview will be written in a journalistic style and pitched to media journals such as Columbia Journalism Review or American Journalism Review, or to journalism.missouri.edu.
VI. References:


Lane DeGregory

First of all, how do you choose the stories you write?

We have a meeting every Monday where we sit around the table and pitch ideas. And another editor and about four writers… An idea, writing and edit… If there’s a different way to do it that hasn’t been done before. In probably like 75-80 percent of the cases I come up with the idea rather than being assigned to me.

What kind of stories do you choose? What makes something become interesting to you?

I’ve been doing this for 25 years now, so I want to do something that I’ve never heard of before or at least a way of doing something that’s not been done. I’m really particular about not wanting to rehash the same story that people have read before, and I try to find a different way to do it.

I’m definitely drawn to narrative; I want something that is going to happen as I follow it rather than recreate something that happened completely in the past. If there’s something that I can be there to witness or some kind of a turning point in a life, then I want to be able to be there if that happens, not to just have somebody describe it as it already happened.

My editor pointed out, and I hadn’t really realized this, but that I’m really drawn to stories of women and girls. More than half of my stories, you know, the demographics, I tend to be drawn to stories of motherhood or sisterhood or girlhood, or some kind of theme stories about murder and poverty. I tend to write through women’s eyes.
Interesting. And that was something you were not aware of?

No, I didn’t intend to do that, I didn’t really even think about the fact that I did that. It’s certainly not exclusive female, but he said to me last year, he said, “I’m going to enter your Pulitzer packet this year as a story with women and girls.” And I was like, “What?” He said, “I’ve noticed this really nice theme in your work, your stories have some emotional connection to feminine characters.” And I was like, “Really?” Like I hadn’t really thought of it that way, but then I went back and looked at my work. It was true, I mean there was an imbalance to the gender that I covered.

I noticed in the short presentation you have on the Tampa Bay Times website, that you said you write about people who aren’t in the spotlight very often. Is that something you made a point out of doing?

Yes, that’s definitely true. The two stories I’m working on now are about these really prominent, famous women. One woman who’s about to run for governor and the other one is a woman who is the chair of the journalism department. They are the first two people of any kind of public figure that I’ve written about in a long time. I usually don’t find myself stories about people who are already in the news. I like to find people that are in the shadows, and that have been maybe been overlooked by the rest of the media or the community.

Why do you feel it’s important to write about these people, the people in the shadows?

Because they are a lot of the ones who are being affected by a lot of our social programs, and reporters do a really good job about covering, OK, x number more people went on
welfare this year, or x-number of people are on food stamps this year, or x number of people left their children because of poverty this year. So I let them look for numbers and trends like that. I’m not as interested in the money people are throwing at us… but who are those people who are being affected by these programs that we’re making? You know, so when we had a news story about how many more people were getting food stamps for the first time, I went out and found a young mother who was signing up for food stamps for the first time.

When there was an issue in Miami where they had all these people that had been convicted sex offenders. And actually these were men not women. But the sex offenders had served their time, they were let out on probation, they were living under a bridge because the city had issued this ordinance that they couldn’t live within 200 yards of a school or a playground or a library if you were a convicted sex offender, and because the community was so densely urbanized, there was no place like that for them to live. So I heard this news story on NPR about there’s this bridge now where all these people are living, and I went down with a photographer, and we spent three days under the bridge living with them, writing about what that was like.

So trying to paint sort of the side of the people that are being affected by policy or economic downturn, or, you know, I’ve made some calls today to try to find some Syrian refugees, but they’re being relocated by Catholic Charities. Sort of the people who are in these news events that we don’t usually get as far as the individual. You know, you hear numbers or trends or whatever, but I like to see the people that are being affected by that, and give them a voice.
So your purpose, basically with these stories is to give them a voice.

Give them a voice and put a face on whatever data-driven policy, law debate they’re having. Put a voice, give a voice to the people that are being affected.

**When did you start doing these types of stories?**

I came here in 2000. And I had been at *The Virginian-Pilot* for 10 years before that. I did some of these when I was at the Pilot, but I was mostly a news reporter there and I worked from a bureau for my first seven years, so I was covering, you know, two-three-four stories a day, and two towns and a school board and the court system, and all that other stuff you have to do as a news reporter. So I became a feature writer in 1998, and for two years at the *Virginian-Pilot*, I kind of learned how to do that. I kind of learned how to go from being a news writer to a feature writer. But my stories at the *Pilot* were a little more soft. They weren’t as issue-driven. They were more like, “Oh, I met an interesting person,” or there was a cool profile. You know, I wasn’t seeking out issues or necessarily trying to highlight anything that was going on; I just was looking for interesting stories. So that changed more… In 2000 I came here, I’ve had the same editor since I came here; I love him.

But the way the paper operates has changed in the last 13 years, too, because when I came we had a daily feature section. So every day there would be four or five feature stories. Then we went to one day a week. And now one day a month, we have a magazine. So there’s a lot less room to do sort of the traditional here’s a good story, or here’s a human interest story, and a lot more emphasis in the last three or four years on enterprise. So make it mean something, find a bigger context for this, or more of a...
connection to an issue. Just because the story’s a good one, it’s a page 1 a lot more than it used to go in the feature section. It’s a different vent on what kind of stories they want. You know what I mean?

So they have to be more newsy or more related to the news even if they’re human stories.

Yeah, I think the most part I would say. That’s not always true, there are still stories that don’t have anything to do with news at all, but I think in terms of what we’re looking at bigger-picture wise term, my team of reporters to do, it’s definitely something more newsier.

(Tom sends his regards. Tell him I say hi. It’s wonderful you get to work with him.)

What are your favorite parts about your work? What do you enjoy the most about your work?

I was just talking to my husband last night. He’s got a new job, and he’s not used to it yet. And I said, one of the things that I love about my job is the dichotomy. Some days you’re out there talking to strangers and in a situation where you’re in a public place or you’re at an event or something’s happening. And you have to suck up everything around you and be 100 percent on call while you’re out there doing that. And convince this person to let you in and trust you and share this intimate stuff. But the other half of the job, you know, I’m sitting in my T-shirt in my house with no make-up on looking out the window writing by myself with my computer. And that’s kind of hard, too. You know, it’s a very public but also a very private profession. And I like that there’s both ends of that.
I feel the dread, and I’m afraid, I still get nervous, and I have butterflies in my stomach before I have to go meet somebody. I get that adrenaline, and I’m worried, and what am I going to say, and how is this going to go, and you try to coin up the whole letter of an interview in my head. And then I get to get in my car and go home and be by myself and turn the radio off and just think for that whole drive, “What just happened?” “How do I process this?” I turn everything off, I try to be in my cave to make a sense of what it was that I just witnessed. But then I’m home, and the next day… I write almost entirely at home. I have a little, tiny office with a big window. I love that. I love that I get to go home and be at the total opposite end. The dread and the fear of looking at the computer and being alone with your thoughts and in your head.

I like the opposite ends of the profession that allows you both to be as public and as private as you could possibly be.

So you are still nervous and excited about interviews, after more than two decades of doing this?

Oh, yeah. When I went to interview a woman the other day who’s a doctor and runs for governor, I was about to throw up, I was so nervous. And I was thinking, why, why am I nervous? (You’re a Pulitzer Prize winner). Yeah, and I think that maybe part of it is that; oh, I’m supposed to be at a certain level now. What if I can’t always live up to that, you know? And the other kind of concern is the one I had when I was your age: Am I worthy to tell people’s stories? That’s a huge responsibility to get someone to open up to you and trust you to tell a story about them to thousands of strangers. And I always have that: Am I worthy? Am I good enough to do this? Gosh, they gave me this amazing access or
insight or whatever; I don’t know if I’m magician enough to pull off this trick. You know?

**What do you try to do to make sure you live up to this responsibility?**

I try to think about myself in their shoes. I try to put my head where I think their head is, and how would I see the world if I was that person. I think when I was younger, I felt people through others; you know, if I was going to do a story, I’d interview other people around you and that shaped who I decided you were. But I think now I try much harder to get to know that person and inhabit their mind and their life before I let other people weigh in.

**Is that what you’re trying to do with your stories as well, help readers see the world through your characters’ eyes?**

Definitely. That’s my intention always. And maybe that’s one reason I like to write about people that are sort of, I don’t know, controversial, or maybe that’s not even the right word. People that other people might look down at, you know. So that you can say, look, I’d love to be able to share an ordinary part of extraordinary people, or the extraordinary part of ordinary people. I think humanizing a bad guy or vilifying a good guy is so important because it’s not ever black and white. You know what I mean?

**How would you describe your objectivity toward your sources? Do you consider yourself objective?**

Every journalist is going to say that they try to be objective, but I don’t really think there is such a thing in people stories. You can’t help whether you like somebody or you don’t
like somebody. It happen even if you try not to. You know, I just try to find the other side of that. Sometimes … that person helps, like even the most egregious people that I write about, if I can find something human or something that makes that connection with the readers, I think that’s important. My editor is really good about it, too. I’m a lot more sappy than he is. I fall in love with my people I write about more easily. I’m a lot less cynical than most journalists. So he always says his hardest job is to “un-Hallmark me” 😊 Take some of some stuff, it’s Hallmark. I think that’s a good balance. Emotionally he and I are at different places in our personalities, so it helps to have him sort of… weed stuff out that might be too, I don’t know, emotive.

I mentioned that I’ve been looking at the concept of flow. Creative people, when they work, they sometimes get into this zone where they lose track of time, they are completely absorbed by their work, the work becomes the main purpose of their actions more than anything else. Do you ever experience that while reporting or writing?

All the time. All the time, especially when I’m writing. You know, I can turn off the recording and get some fits a lot easier than the writing. I think it’s a blessing and a curse in a way that I can’t turn it off. Like if I’m in the middle of a story, I’ll go to a baseball game with my husband, and all I could think about was how the ending was going to go. You know, we’re watching the baseball game, our team is about to go to the playoffs, and I’m like, should I end it over here, or should I end it over there? And do I need to call this person? “Are you there, hello?!” I’m checked out. I’m trying to adapt. I have two teenage boys, and they’ll be talking to me about, you know, whatever football game or band concert, or whatever they’re doing, and I realize I’m really not listening. I’m thinking
about my lead, or I’m thinking about how I’m going to transit from the big idea back into
the narrative. I just, I shut them out sometimes, you know, and those aren’t purposeful. In
those two situations with my husband and my kids, I don’t try to do that, and it still slips
(?) into it.

You know, but when I’m home and I’m writing, I want to put myself in that zone, and
sometimes I can’t get there. I only write after I’ve already done my laundry and washed
my dishes and got my house in order. You know, some people can get out of bed and
start writing. I have to shower, I have to… you know, do something. Usually the laundry
and the dishes are the physical thing that I want to do between the time I take a shower
and the time I start writing so that I’m kind of getting my house together doing these
minor tasks. I’m thinking in my head about my story. You know, rather than sitting at
the computer, looking at a blank screen, thinking, Oh my God, what am I going to do, I
find a great satisfaction out of getting my house in order at the same time I’m getting my
head in order.

But I have to go into the office and write without my notes. I leave my notes in my car or
in my kitchen. I leave my phone, I won’t turn on Facebook or Twitter, I just write in a
Word document because I don’t want anyone messaging me from the office. So, yeah, I
very much go into this cave when I’m actually doing the writing part of it, where
everything has got to be shut off.

Do you get into the zone when certain conditions are met?

I got to set it up. And I write at night a lot. My kids, you know, they go to bed at 10 or 11,
and my husband is a drummer, and he doesn’t get home until 2 or 3 in the morning, so a
lot of the writing that I do is between 10 at night and 2 in the morning, when the house is quiet and dark, and the kids and the dog are asleep and my husband is gone. And then he comes home, and we’ll have a glass of wine at 3 in the morning, or something, and how was your day? How was your day? The timing is weird. And I think some of that is actually some of that is carried over from college and grad school because I was the editor of both my high school and my college paper, and we would finish the paper at midnight, that was the deadline, and then I’d have to go to the library and do my homework and write my papers. So a lot of the writerly piece of my life has always been late, late at night.

**Have you ever thought about doing something other than journalism?**

No. I mean I knew I wanted to be a reporter since I was 5 years old. I grew up in Washington, D.C., during Watergate, and I thought that was the coolest thing. My dad read *The Washington Post* while we ate cereal every morning. He would read the paper out loud to me and my sister. I just thought that was the coolest thing ever. My mom was an English teacher and a frustrated novelist, and my dad was just one of these totally gregarious, you know, he’ll talk to every waitress, like “What’s your dream, honey?” He just wants to know everybody’s story. And I think the combination of my parents and my time of my life growing up in Watergate during the height of D.C. journalism. Other than babysitting I never had a job that wasn’t journalism. I sold car ads, I took classified ads over the phone, I pasted up pages, I designed pages, anything you can think of that has anything to do with journalism I did since I was about 15 years old.
What did you father do for a living?

He’s a nuclear physicist. He works for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

So you never had a moment where you felt like the profession has let you down. The Oregonian, cuts, anger, people reconsidering, getting jobs outside of journalism?

Yeah. I’ve certainly lost a lot of my friends in this profession. I would say at least half of my friends that started out after grad school with me are now doing something else. Of course I’ve thought about trying to sustain myself. I’m 46 years old; I need 20 more years, you know? And I’m tired. In the last couple of years, I’ve been writing more stories off the news, meeting more deadlines, less time to take your time with writing. So, yeah, did I think at this age that I would be making this little money and working as hard for it? But is there anything else I want to do? Not really.

I’m going to teach. This spring semester I’m going to teach a class at the University of South Florida. I’m trying to get a book done; I’m working on an anthology book with a publisher. Some things like that on the side, but in terms of having another profession, no. Every time I think about what to do is teach journalism, and I think, I’d rather keep doing journalism for now. As tiring as it is, and as much as like right before you called I found out that I’ll work on Sunday, which I didn’t think I was going to have to work on Sunday. You know, crap like that still happens. I’m making 5 percent less money than I did when I won the Pulitzer Prize. In these four years we got our salary cut, and they stopped paying our 401k, and they stopped paying our insurance. So I told you my husband had a new job; he had to go get another job. Our kids are about to go to college, you know, and we’re broke. And that sucks. To feel like I’ve made it to a certain level of
my profession where I aspired to be, and still not be able to put a full tank of gas in your
car sucks. But the satisfaction and the joy of still getting to meet all these really
interesting people and be a part of all these walks of life, and be in the middle of a group
of smart and … colleagues. And, you know, then seeing my name in the paper and
having 300,000 people read it. I’m not willing to give all that up just because I’m broke.

So mainly the enthusiasm has been maintained by the people you get to write about,
by the stories, the colleagues?

All of the above. I can’t think of another profession where you get paid to just explore the
world. And almost anything I’m interested in, if I can find a way to tell a story, they’re
like, “OK, go.” I get to learn how it’s like to be transgender or to be a teenager whose
mom is dying. You get to (explore the world) and get paid for it. And, you know, would I
like to write a book? Yeah, I’d love to write a book. But I also love the instant
gratification of I wrote the story today, it appeared in the paper tomorrow, I go to the
grocery store and I see 17 people that have read it and want to talk to me about it. Then
another 700 people email me or Twitter me or whatever. Cool! That’s a lot more instant
gratification than when you put a book out there and you hope someone buys it.

Do you ever worry that this interest will run out (Chris Jones)/ satisfaction and joy
in writing stories and in talking to people.

I hope it doesn’t. There have definitely been times in the last couple of years, when I’ve
been like, “What am I doing?” and my husband was like, “You should go make so much
more money doing…” my friend who is the spokesperson for the hospital, or one of the
reporters who is the spokesperson for the airport. They make three times as much money
as I do. But if I had to get up every morning and be over there, writing press releases for the airport, I’d be so dissatisfied.

So I think if it does come a point in time when I’m either too tired or to burned out by following these stories, I think that would be a time for me to be an editor. Because really, I do like coaching other people. I like working with young reporters; I feel like I can see a story and help it, but I’m not willing to give up my authority to just be out of the office three or four days a week and write at home. I don’t want to sit in meetings, I don’t want to have to be tied down to somebody else’s messed-up story when I can still be doing my own for right now.

**What’s your favorite story that you’ve ever written?**

Two actually, and for very different reasons. I mean, “The Girl in the Window,” that won the Pulitzer Prize, that was probably the best story that I ever happened upon. Forget how I executed it, but just to be given that opportunity and that tip to tell that journey of that girl was amazing. And, of course, the aftermath was life-changing for me in terms of affirmation, and all of a sudden I felt like I wasn’t going to get fired over a …; I flew around the country and talked to different papers and colleges. For all those reasons.

And because “The Girl in the Window” made a really big difference. It had a 33 percent increase in the number of calls to the child abuse hotline. I know at least three kids who got adopted because of that story; and I know that family had a trust fund set up through the website that someone created after seeing my story for donations that are going to help keep that little girl at home and cared for. That’s hugely gratifying. That’s a really tangible difference that that story made that I’m very, very proud of.
But my other favorite story didn’t do anything except for marrying my two favorite jobs, which are being a mom and being a reporter. It was my first first-person story that I’d written. It was called “I brake for Bo-Bo.” You can look it up if you want; it’s not very long, but it was the first time I wrote a first-person story about my little boy. When he was four, he dropped his stuffed elephant out the window, and I come into work the next morning and told all my friends at our Monday morning, like “Oh my God, you can’t believe what my kid did yesterday. And I drove all around looking for this stuffed elephant.” Everybody in the room was like, “Oh, my kid’s teddy bear,” “Oh, when I was…” Everybody had a story about some kind of doll or animal that got lost. So my editor was like, “Lane, go write that story.” And I was like, What story? It never occurred to me that it was a story to write for the newspaper. But other than “The Girl in the Window,” it got more hits and comments than anything I had written.

I never thought of my own life having anything interesting enough; it never seemed like it was important or interesting enough as the people I write about. And that was the first time he gave me permission to kind of say, no this is a universal story that happens to a lot of people. Go write your take on it. I was like, really?

So these stories that have had very different effects on people. One has cause tangible changes, and the other just resonated with people, what do you hope your stories accomplish? Do you hope that they will bring changes to the system, or is it enough when they help people empathize with other people?

I think all of the above. There’s definitely stories that I write that I think, “Oh, this is going to help this person, and maybe it will change something,” or I want to make
policymakers think about something in a different way by having to invade these people’s lives for a little bit, you know? But some stories I just want people to think about themselves a little bit. Or to see the world in a different way. Just talking about it makes a big difference to me, people talking about my story. I did a story a couple of weeks ago about a 99-year-old man who goes to work at a fish factory every day. Nothing happened in that story, though. There was nothing at stake, there was no movement, but everybody was talking about that story. And that was so cool that just this little slice of life made people stop and be grateful for another day, or look at an old person differently, whatever it was in their own lives that they didn’t have it as hard as this guy. I think Mr. Newton helped influence a lot of people, and I hadn’t expected that kind of reaction.

All of the men I’ve interviewed have said they are grateful to their wives for taking care of everything while they were writing that awesome book or story… not a great dad or husband. How do you do this as a woman?

I am so glad you asked me that question. That is such a great question. It is something that my female friends and I talk about here a lot because, if you look around our newsroom, most of the editors and most of the other men at the level of what we’re doing not only are they married, but they have stay-at-home wives, or they have wives that work part-time, or they have wives that work at home. So that they do, they have their backs all the time.

My editor, his wife packs his lunch every day for him. He comes in with these beautiful lunches in a little lavender box. And I’m like what? I maybe have a carrot in my
refrigerator today. My house hardly ever has food in the refrigerator, we eat out, we do carry-out a lot. I am not the cook and Betty Croker mom, wife that I wish I was. That’s definitely something that had to go out the window. I told you I do my housework right before I write my stories, and I think I had to incorporate that somehow or I would have never washed my dishes. Do you know what I mean?

But my husband, he was on the road for two years. He was on the road with his band for the last two years, and I was completely alone. So it wasn’t like I had have pack my back like right now, he’s going to pick up the kids right now. He wasn’t around to do that. Thank goodness my editor was understanding about letting me work at home, and knows that I work late hours because a lot of that schedule is so that I can be there to get the kids after school, or get the kids to baseball practice, or get the kids to play practice or whatever it is that they’re doing. I usually have a chink of my day between 3 and 6 o’clock that I’m not very productive because I’m driving them back and forth trying to take care of their life. Which is why I can’t resent it if I’m working sometimes until 2 in the morning because I just need those four hours to later at night.

I think my boys have grown up knowing a lot more about the way the world works than most kids because they went with me to Miami when I went to stay under the bridge with the sex offenders. They went with me to the Heart Gallery where all the foster kids’ faces were hung. They’ve been exposed to… they met a transgender person that I was writing about. They went to the jail with me when I had to interview a guy. They’ve been to these places and seen these things, and I think they’re more worldly than other kids, I hope. But I also know that I’ve missed my older son’s first date. I got sent on a shooting that I had to go cover in Orlando, and I was supposed to take him on his first date, and the little
girl’s mom took him instead. And he was texting me pictures but I wasn’t there. Do you know what I mean?

So, yeah, it’s a huge balance sheet. It’s pros and cons on both sides for sure. But neither one of them has any interest in being a journalist, by the way.

**Have you felt like you’ve missed out on anything, either in your profession, that you could have done things that you didn’t do because you had a family…**

I think both, of course. Professionally, I would never have signed myself up to go embed with the war, to do foreign correspondent work; I would have never wanted to be gone that long. And then… fellowships or things like that. I would have loved to go be a fellow at Nieman for a year or to apply for a fellowship at Michigan or somewhere. But I didn’t want to uproot them from their school and their friends, and I didn’t want to be gone from them for a year. So I never even tried to pursue any of those sort of upper-echelon awards in the profession, or fellowships or travel. I’ve gotten to take them on some travel stories, which has been cool, the paper paid for us to go to Costa Rica, and they paid for us to go to Outer Banks, North Carolina.

**So you asked the paper to allow you to take the kids with you.**

Well, they paid my ride. Then I paid for the kids’ ride. But I got a week off of work to go report a travel story, and they got to come with me. They had a bonus and perks from that as well. But, yeah, I’ve missed my wedding anniversary, I missed the kid’s first date, I’ve missed birthdays, not the kids’ birthdays, but my husband’s birthday, we had to do it another day because I had to work or something; my own birthday party one year. I got to my own party two hours late because I was writing a story on deadline, and all my friends
were already drunk when I got there. And I got there, and I’m like Hey! You know, you
definitely miss things; you definitely get called to lose some things, and I guess that’s just
part of the price you have to pay. I’ve thought about, oh… it would be so much easier to
own my own time. But that’s not true; because you call on all the people that are working
for you…

Do you feel like you have advantages as a writer and as a journalist from being a
mother?

Oh, yeah. Most definitely. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that sort of my career has just
become from covering news to doing more features and human interest about the time I
had my kids, you know? That transition I don’t think was coincidental. I was fortunate
that I think I was definitely feeling that emotionally I could connect with people more
than I was able to do that as a news reporter. But also kind of seeing the side of life and
what mattered… I didn’t get the satisfaction out of bringing people down as much as I
did before. And I also think it really humanized me in a sense that before that I was a
news reporter, I covered only the beat, and I was Lane the reporter; I wasn’t Lane mom
or Lane, 30-year-old woman. I was a reporter, and I kind of kept that… When I was
pregnant, (fishermen, boat). And I had a belly, and I was throwing up on the water, and
all the fishermen laughing at me, and there was no hiding or pretending that I wasn’t a
pregnant woman. So all of a sudden, we were talking about my baby and my husband and
my life, and I had to connect with them as a person, not just a journalist. And I think that
was a huge turning point for me because people… who wouldn’t be nice to a pregnant
woman, right? Everybody was really nice to me, and it kind of gave me the permission to
go… I don’t have to cut off and the idea of what I think of as a reporter. I can just be me, and it’s OK. And it became a whole lot easier.

**What do you think gives you energy to do both things so well?**

Diet Coke. I drink about 5 to 6 Diet Cokes a day, I swear. I don’t drink coffee, which is unusual for a journalist, you know. I came into the profession after the era of flasks in the door, cigarette smoking in the newsroom, but I have a little refrigerator full of Diet Coke cans.

I don’t know, that’s a good question, too. I laugh because I feel so tired all the time, you know. I never feel like I have enough time to like exercise, or paint or walk the dogs. My life is really my boys and my work. I kind of wonder how that will change. My older son is a junior in high school… I really only have three, two and a half years until they’re gone, and I think about that a lot, like what will I do with that extra half of my life.

**What do you think you’ll do?**

I think if I was going to write a story about me as a third person, I would say that I would do a lot more journalism, but I hope that’s not the case. I think right now I would rather tell myself I’m going to get in shape, I’m going to start riding my bike again, I’m going to read a whole lot more than I ever get to read right now because I want to read not only the stuff I have to read for work, research. I want to travel; I’d like to do a lot more travel stories for the paper. That gets me back to journalism again, you know? (laughs)

Be able to be gone and not feel like I’m leaving the kids alone would be a huge difference. Probably the types of stories that I’d do. I don’t want to do stories about war
(?) right now because I don’t want to be gone that long. But I think I’ll be looking for a bit more national type stories and things like that.
Amy Harmon

It kind of depends. My first narrative story, really, was the story that I did that was part of the project that the Times, a big project called “How Age is Lived in America.” That was in 2000. So for that particular story, the editors had chosen a format. They were interested in the relationships between individuals of different races kind of in everyday life, but in a variety of settings. At the time I was writing about the technology and the Internet. I was doing news and feature stories. I really hadn’t kind of discovered narrative form.

For that one it was a little bit set. I did find my characters. So I mean, I had to find my characters and I needed to make sure I had a good setting, but that one was all of it pre-ordained by the editors.

In general, I guess… the next set of stories that I did that had more narrative was the series called “The DNA Age,” which that was the series that won the Pulitzer. In that, I really drew a little bit from my own experience. I got interested in the subject because of my own experience. I had just had a baby, and I had been offered genetic testing, and I didn’t know what genetic testing was, so I kept that in the back of my mind that when I came back from maternity leave I would look into what other kind of genetic testing was available. So I kind of poked around and realized that it was… I guess, I’m just trying to distill this for you…

I try to do stories that illuminate some intersection of science and society. That’s a subject that I’m very interested in, and that I think is undercovered, and the readers are really interested. That’s kind of the general area. And within that, I try to find trends, like maybe something that’s new that’s affecting people’s lives, and then I try to find a
narrative vehicle through which to tell the bigger story of the conflict that it’s causing in people’s lives, and in society. So all of those things need to kind of be satisfied, I guess.

Like for example the recent story that I did following the development of a genetically-modified orange, which might be the first genetically-modified fruit, mainstream fruit, that Americans will be able to consume or not consume. I was interested in the debate, there’s sort of a big debate going on about GMO, genetically-modified organisms, are they good, are they bad, are they part of an evil attempt by Monsanto to take over the world, or will they help feed the world? It’s a scientific development, the ability to create genetically modified organisms, genetically modified crops, but there’s all this kind of soulful resent about it.

So I wanted to write about that, but I really only wanted to write about it in a narrative form because it’s been written a lot about already in terms of here’s what Monsanto does, here’s what the other side says. So I was thinking the way to shed light on this would be to find the right vehicle to tell it, and then I stumbled upon a mention of the orange, you know, the possibility that orange growers might need to try to develop a genetically modified orange because of a disease that was affecting the orange crop, and I thought, wow, if I can get an orange grower who is trying to do this to talk to me and give me the access that I would need to make a narrative out of this, and follow his journey and the obstacles that he’s facing -- or she -- it turned out to be a he, that would be a contribution to the broader conversation over the social and scientific conflict around it. So I did it. But had I not found that vehicle, I might have just chosen an entirely different subject to write about.
So how important is this social issues in your stories? Why is it important for your stories to cover social issues rather than be simple technology or science stories?

Yes. It is essential. The sort of social conflict is essential. That is what I’m drawn to write about. And I think because it’s life, science is important. It does affect people’s lives, and often I think science especially more so than issues of policy, or politics, or poverty, or war, which are sort of in our faces a little bit more. It’s hard to avoid them. I think science kind of gets generalized, and it’s in the science section, and we read about it and we write about it in terms of this new development, It’s a news story -- this new development happened. We don’t really (prove?) into how it’s affecting our lives. I am interested in kind of the double-edged nature of what a scientific advance is. It can benefit us, and yet it often poses new problems for us, I think.

What are your favorite parts in this whole process?

My favorite part is definitely the reporting. There are parts of the writing that I love, like at the end. The reporting, because I try to do these narrative that are really observed, they’re kind of like fly-on-the-wall. They’re a different kind of narratives, too, I guess we should say. Jacqui… They’re more explanatory narratives. The narratives that I do really tend to be kind of immersion narratives, story narratives, where it’s all show and very little tell. So I like just being an observer in people’s lives, and being able to be, getting them to trust me and having to be writing their stuff that’s kind of intimate and trying to understand how these science issues are playing out in people’s lives, up-close.

It’s basically the openness you get from people and being able to talk to them and be part of their lives.
Yeah, I guess I should say over time. That’s a really crucial element in stories that I do, that they take pace over often over a year, sometimes over two years, or even sometimes I’m reconstructing things that happened 10 years ago, 20 years ago, but often I’m in their lives for at least a year. Of and on, it’s not like the only thing I’m doing, but that aspect of it, the ability to follow them and kind of get to know them (out of) their lives is the kind of input and the kind of trust and intimacy that you can’t really get when you’re doing a one or two-week story just gathering anecdotes for a little more standard feature story.

Is that more rewarding to you than figuring out the science. You write stories that are narrative, but they also have a strong explanatory part, where you break science apart and then explain it.

Well, that’s true. And I love learning about the science, too. It’s a hard question; it would be hard to separate those two things. Yeah, because my stories do bring together these two different elements I try to. It’s the people in whose lives the science is playing out. And I really like getting close to the people and get the whole picture of their lives. But I also spend a lot of time talking to scientists that are not really necessarily involved in the particular story, life story that I’m writing about. Just to make sure that I understand the background. And that’s what I love, too.

The parts that I don’t love, you know, there’s always a pressure, a time pressure, and a feeling like editors are breathing down my neck. “What exactly are you spending all of this time on?” So as long as I can kind of block that out. You know, those elements are really … for me. I mean I also love the reactions. I love when stories get a reaction. I’m sure you’ve talked to other people who do them. They experience something; I’ve talked
to them, too. It’s very gratifying, especially given all the pressure. There is a very painful element, you might ask about that later, so I’ll let you get to that, but after all the pain, you know, like right now, I had … the story I’d been working on for a year, the oranges. IT’s nice to see it makes a difference. It makes people think, they change their minds, or argue…

Do you ever get absorbed by your work to the point where you feel like it’s important in itself, you experience time differently, you’re “in the zone”? Does that ever happen in any part of your work?

Well, yeah. I guess I would say that could happen in two different ways. One is because I’m really part of these other people’s lives for some time. To some extent I’m taken out of my own life. That can be good and bad. It goes with the reporting, and it is in a way enjoyable. It can be disruptive to my own family life because when you’re doing this type of story, you know, things happen on weekends, often families are involved, so you want to be like at a family event, but that means you’re not necessarily at your own family event.

But yes, in that sense I do get hooked up in the reporting… And I get deeply into the science reporting, too. I keep realizing how much more I need to understand. That happened with this genetically modified food story before I didn’t know anything at the beginning, and I didn’t totally understand what genetic engineering was, and then I had to understand genetic engineering in different contexts. I’m looking at genetic engineering in agriculture, but I wanted to make sure I understood it in medicine and so… yeah. I always have 10 more people I really want to call.
So there’s that. That is very pleasurable. Except again, I will say, except for the constant feeling like “uh-oh, this is taking way too long.”

The other type of pleasure… the writing can be a pleasure. The writing, you get to sit down with all of your notes and you try to figure out how to make a story out of them. And then certain parts of writing the story, when the writing is going well… That way you’re talking about that sense of losing sense of time or just, you know, it’s not exactly that I lose sense of time; it’s just that I want to be doing it all the time. I feel like I have something important to say; it’s very hard to figure out how to say it right and how to say it in a way that’s emotionally gripping and that will affect people, but I just want to be doing that all the time. There’s that.

What do you think makes the difference between when that happens during writing and when it doesn’t happen?

I wish I knew. I wish I could always have the first kind.

Like does it happen when the reporting went particularly well? Is there usually a set of conditions that will make writing enjoyable?

Yes. I think the fun writing comes from when you finally reach the point where you feel like you are authoritative. You can answer any question, you’ve done all the research so that you know… So much of this reporting, for me, is distilling huge amounts of information into a theme, into not even like you come with an explanation, but preferably into some dialogue or some theme where it’s communicated through showing not telling. You know, I’ve talked to all these scientists, I’ve witnessed all this stuff going on in my characters’ lives, and then I have to find a way to communicate important
information both about science and about the plot of the story because I want you to keep reading through the story because you want to know what happens at the end. I have to find a way to distill that in a few lines. When I still don’t completely understand every element of either of the science or what’s happening in my characters’ lives, it’s not (dark). And that’s the tradeoff because I want to do more reporting until I really know. Sometimes I work with that, and I feel like I just have to write it because it’s taking too long, and I’m on deadline, and I’m going to be fired if I don’t write the story. And then, you know, when it’s hard I realize like, OK, despite all of these factors, I have to go back and ask more questions.

What are the most difficult parts of the process for you?

I guess the writing. The writing is harsh. I’ve tried different ways, I’ve tried doing outlines, I’ve recently, I’ve adopted new technology -- I started using this program called Scrivener, which was very helpful, actually, although it took a lot of time, but I think it made me more efficient than I used to be when I was using Microsoft Word.

It’s called Scrivener; it was recommended to me by some other narrative-writing people. It’s an outlining program, really. It’s a way to put all your notes into this program and then you can kind of write in chunks, and it puts it together for you. I haven’t even used it (full stability); I just found it much more, kind of, this is a better format to have all my notes together and be able to sort through them easily than having it all in different Microsoft Word files.

But the writing is the most painful part. Just getting the pieces of the story, and the arc of the story, and making sure that the character, the conflict is clear, and my character
changes, and has an evolution, and it all kind of trying to illuminate a bigger theme of, you know, trying to communicate scientific information and illuminate the bigger theme of the conflict in society. These are three levels of the story that I’m trying to write in almost every line of the story: the science, the individual story of my character, and the bigger story of the social conflict. So that’s hard; it takes time. I guess the most difficult thing is this feeling of time passing and not doing my job well enough.

I noticed that you these three levels, and I read again and again the first part of the first story in the cancer series. It had a very interesting structure, where you start micro-narratively, and then you go to science, and then you go to the social aspect, and then you go back. Are there certain things you do in order to keep these three levels, to represent them well?

I don’t know. Honestly I don’t know. I wish I had a better… I mean, I make outlines in which I note each of these levels to myself, and figure out how I want to work with them. But the most important element in the outline is how to successfully tell the story. And then I have thematic points, like a list of thematic points that are mostly points of information, that I try to stick into the outline. Actually Jacqui, I think it’s Jacqui who calls it the spinach. You know, if you want spinach, leave the spinach out… She or Tom French once said that to me, I forget who. But I don’t want to leave it out; I want to put it in… It feels like funny. So, yeah. That’s what I do. But it’s not a very thorough process that I can really recommend.
You can’t recommend to anyone because…

Well, it’s a little half-hazard. So I have these… I always end up. And then I have one that I think is perfect, and then I start writing it and it completely changes, and I sometimes go back to change the outline. So I don’t know whether I’m wasting my time by making the outline and I should stick to writing. I think it really helps actually to work from an outline, even if you have to go back and change it… It’s helpful. And the other thing, I guess I always do is know what the ending is. That’s probably the most important thing to do because I’m writing to an ending. Because the ending is, in most stories, it’s going to be, it’s going to kind of bring everything together and make it worth it for the reader to have read my beginning and the middle. So I want it to be a payoff.

You’ve been doing this for how much time now?

Well, I’ve been a reporter, I started right after I graduated from college in 1990. So that’s like 22 years. But I wasn’t really doing narrative stuff. Is that what you mean?

No, journalism.

Yeah, it’s been a long time.

So is it worth it to spend big chunks of your life doing it?

Yeah. I would say it is. I can’t think of any other job… sometimes I’m a little jealous of my friends who are academics, who like have tenure, so you get to kind of breathe, and I have to worry about deadlines. It’s hard because there’s so much pressure. But I can’t devise a better job than my job because I realize I get to spend months learning about new things that are important to the world and then writing this out into a story that will
hopefully make a difference to the world. Yeah, I love it. I love the work. I do complain about it constantly. I should say that, too. If you asked my husband, I don’t know if he would say that I love it because, you know, he sees the other side. He sees how stressed out I get when I’m feeling like it’s going too slowly or it’s so hard. But also like, I do love it.

**What do you hope to achieve, ideally, through your work?**

I hope to communicate a better understanding of the important science that is affecting our world with stories that are emotionally gripping. I don’t think people pay so much attention to science stories that are just telling it what it is straight. You know, some people do. I think it’s really important for a functioning society that the majority of the citizens, all the citizens to understand, climate change is an example, to understand what scientists are finding out about, you know climate change or genetic diseases, or other things, cancer, things that I’ve written about, why it’s happening the way it is, why it’s unfolding the way it is or why it’s not unfolding the way it is. So I think that people don’t really understand it that well, or often are suspicious of scientists or are not sure what to believe. I think the best way to explain it is through stories that are emotionally gripping because everyone loves the story. They won’t mind that it’s about science if they are drawn into a sympathetic character facing a conflict that has to be resolved. You know, the classic narrative form. And that’s what I’m hoping to do, illuminate these scientific trends through classic narrative form.

I’ve been asking people about how they manage to strike a balance between their work and family lives. And the men I’ve talked to so far, I think all of them told me
that while I was working on that book or that story, my wife could tell you that I was not a very good husband or father because I was so absorbed and dedicating so much time and attention to it that I was not so much involved in the family life. How does that work when you’re a woman?

Yeah, well. Honestly, I’m very lucky that my husband takes up a lot of slack for taking care of, we have one daughter who’s 9. You know, she’s young and needs a lot of care. So you know, when I’m traveling or when I’m writing 24 hours a day, when I’m rolling out of bed and writing, you know, I really depend on him to help. And it’s not easy for him. I’m not as present of a partner, and it definitely has put strain on our relationship, as I say, to be candid, and you know, the only thing that kind of saves it is that it’s going to be over eventually. But of course, with these stories, people always ask, what’s your deadline? There’s no tight… it’s not like a thing with a strict deadline. A lot of it depends on what I get and editing it, and if I can answer all my set of questions, so that’s part of it, too, is that you don’t know when it’s going to be over.

I would say that I like to believe that my daughter sees… and, you know, and there will definitely be times when my daughter will just like clam down the cover of my last article, now that she’s getting to be 8 or 9. It used to be that I would be putting her to bed and I would be writing by the side of her bed, waiting for her to fall asleep, but at least I would be keeping her company… And now she’s more able to tell me to stop working. So, you know, you could say that’s not being a good parent. On the other hand she sees me doing something that I love to do and that I think is important and that gets lot of reactions and hopefully makes a difference in the world, so I like to think that I am
actually being a good parent that I’m modeling that for her. I’m not necessarily there as much, either mentally or physically, as I might otherwise be.…

Anne Hull

Ever since the ‘90s, you’ve been writing stories about race and class and immigrants. What drew you toward that area?

I’ve just always been interested in people at the outer edges of society. The non-majority class. I don’t want to use the word “minority,” but those who are outside the majority and who are sometimes marginalized, who are strivers but who are trying to get closer to that middle. It’s just naturally what I’ve always been interested in. Some journalists write about the powerful; I just tend to write about those without power. It’s partly because it’s the social justice mission, but I just also love hanging out and reporting in those kind of niche worlds. It’s a lot more raw experience trying to figure out how to get ahead. And that’s largely why I do it. It’s most intellectually satisfying, but it’s also most personally satisfying.

You said that reporting is more rewarding in those environments.

It is for me because I like it. If you were to take a congressional reporter, they would probably be bored out of their mind because it’s a different rhythm. In this sort of reporting, you’re really staying with people for a long time. And you’re watching hours and hours of nothing happen. And you just have to be prepared for when that moment happens. And that’s not like traditional reporting. Or, again, you take a more formal, official reporter, who might cover Congress. The off-camera detail, so to speak, how people think and feel and smell and the dialogue, that really has very little place in
traditional reporting. So just as I wouldn’t be crazy about going to Congress and covering something, it’s a different skill set, really.

It’s also how you talk to people. Sometimes there’s more formal, I say formal, I don’t mean it’s better, but you deal in a more official realm don’t know how to speak to people who, you know, are on the street, or in the shelter, or in a bad situation, locked up, whatever. I just have always felt at home in that world.

**When did you discover that you liked these types of stories?**

It’s all I’ve always done. I literally started doing this sort of stuff from the very get-go. I have kind of a different background. I didn’t go to college. I went to college for one year -- I went to Florida State University -- and prior to going off to college, I was hired as a coy (?) kid at The St. Pete Times newsroom, St. Petersburg, Florida. And so I started working in a newsroom when I was 18. Went off to college for a year. I don’t know, for whatever reason I didn’t like it, I was homesick, I missed working in a newsroom, so I really went back to the newsroom and learned everything there.

You know, I went to the weather desk, and then I went to the city desk, really just doing - - they’re not minimum-wage jobs, but around that area. But it was always in a newsroom. And the first piece I ever had to report on, I was some sort of clerical worker and Madonna, it was her first year of stardom, and she came to a concert in Tampa, and our pop critic was sick, so they sent me to cover it. I think that was my first story. And then just slowly from there I kind of worked my way up. Luckily, the St. Pete Times was, and is, a fantastic, not only newspaper but learning environment. You know, David Finkel worked there when I was there, and Tom French. You know, Finkel is probably one of
my two best friends in the world now, and it’s just a tradition that that paper encourages. And had it been today, I’m not sure it would have worked out that way, you know? So I was just allowed to sort of come up in a very unusual way. And I didn’t have to go through the normal channels of college, internships, and then trying to find a first job. I didn’t do any of that stuff. I just stayed at The St. Pete Times.

And then only when I was a reporter after, I don’t know, seven years, I could then go cover cops. And then I was put on the courts beat. So I did things all in reverse. But in terms of just wanting to cover people who are outliers financially or economically or socially, racially, ethnically, that’s just always been something I’ve been interesting in.

My mom was a school teacher, she was a principal rather in so-called inner-city schools. She did the same thing.

What do you hope to accomplish with these stories?

Just in a very basic sense to get readers in touch with how other people live. And I never want to, you know, be scolding to readers or poke a stick in the eye of certain social policy. I really want to just kind of peel the back on a world that they don’t see. And if I can do that, that’s sort of the best I can hope for. You know, these sort of stories often don’t bring results like journalists are trained to bring. The best example of this sort of stuff is Katherine Boo from The Washington Post. You know, for instance she wrote a piece in The New Yorker, her first piece called “The Marriage Cure.” It was during the Bush White House years. Did you read the piece?

Yes, yes.
An easy route would have been to use the whole piece to talk about how bad the Bush policies were. Instead, she did just an incredible portrayal of poverty and how hard it is to get out of it. That’s really, I’m not saying all we can hope for, but that’s a big step, to get people to engage and to think about these issues in a new way.

And that was doing the Walter Reed stuff. And that was just like, there were Senate hearings, and the world was turned upside down, and conditions for soldiers were improved, and I had never experienced something like that. Most reporters never do experience something like that. But for me it was especially new because I’m used to writing about issues people don’t care so much about. But for the soldiers they cared, right? And it was an investigative piece somewhat.

What are your favorite parts of your work?

It depends on the story, but usually it’s reporting. That’s my favorite time. Just because I’m a voyeur, and I love to be in someone else’s world. It’s just the best, you know? You’re living on their time schedule, you’re living where they live, you’re doing what they do, you’re eating what they do, you’re observing what they do. It’s anthropological in a way, but that’s my favorite time.

The most difficult time is the beginning of the writing process, which is extremely hard for me. Take a writer like David Finkel. He is extremely structured. He knows where he is going to start and where he is going to end up in a story, whether it’s a short story or a book. I’m not at all like that. I kind of, you know, the analogy would be say there’s a big forest, and Finkel would take his machete, and he knows where he’s going to get to the
middle. I’m sort of dropped off in the middle, and I start blindly hacking my way out. It’s just a different process.

So for me the beginning stages of writing are the toughest, and the best stage of writing is redrafting. Once I have a draft, that’s really when I get started. OK, now I know what it’s about, and now I can go. So, you know, I would say reporting is the best part of the process, and then redrafting second to that.

**How do you write your first draft? Do you have a structure, or do you write?**

I try to organize my notes very well. I always keep my notes, transcribe right away if it’s possible. If I’m on the road, in a hotel room, you know, that’s what you try to do. You try to do it every day so you don’t get behind. And so it’s fresh.

So I keep that good organization, the file; it’s a huge Word document. And it’s broken up into chronology of reporting and alos, you know, subjects in the reporting, like characters if you will. But I call them subjects. And then you try to do an outline. Some people say, David Marines, for instance, who is my editor, thinks that in a piece of 3,000 words, you can probably get four-five themes across. And you think about themes, as opposed to the exact, you know, what you’re doing in the next step. I sometimes try to think fanatically ( ?), but for me I think what works best is doing an outline and at least forcing myself to have a little bit of a map to start. Otherwise, you’re just kind of lost. For me, doing an outline is like sitting down and doing trigonometry. It’s not fun. Not fun at all, but you have to do it. My mind just doesn’t think linearly, so for someone with my kind of bumble brain, it’s difficult.
During reporting, like some of these places where you report are difficult. In the Walter Reed series, the people were going through all sorts of suffering and problems. How do you deal with situations like that?

You know, the first objective is to get the story. So you’re really thinking about how you can get the story. And with Walter Reed it was more complicated because we didn’t want to get discovered. So we had to do all this reporting without anyone finding out. There’s just a lot of logistics to that. And, of course, you’re seeing some terrible, heartbreaking things. I tend to see a lot of those in a lot of stories I do. This was just a little bit more extreme because you have physically and psychologically injured, demolished people. And it does wear on you, but every reporter has different coping mechanisms. While I’m in the moment, reporting, I don’t want to say it doesn’t bother me, but you’re so focused on getting exactly what you need that the feelings are deferred. And usually once the piece is published, maybe after the second day, that’s when you’re kind of like, “ah, holy cow!” Then you start feeling everything.

When I have one of those big stories in, and it publishes, and there’s no problems with it - - you know that by the second or third day -- then it’s just an utter emotional collapse. You’re just exhausted. And sad often.

Is this how it happens even when you have several weeks to work on a story?

Yeah. Usually. What’s a good example of a daily? OK. I had to go cover Hurricane Katrina. And that was very difficult reporting logistically and also emotionally. But again, I was writing every day -- not every day but very often -- you don’t have time to
really feel, although in Katrina for some reason it kind of got to me, and I had a couple of hard days even getting through my day. It was just really upsetting.

Usually when you do those longer-term things, you’re with somebody so long you stop being surprised. When you see a soldier without legs, missing an arm or a head bastion, it’s terrifying at first, but then it becomes very normal because that’s all you’re doing.

**And you’re thinking about the story and what…**

Well, yeah. You’re thinking, “What do I need?” “What do I need to ask?” And that again, that was an extra layer of complication because we couldn’t get found out. So I’m basically doing all of my reporting in a place that I can’t be seen there. That was very difficult logistically. But think of what you’re trying to get at, is do you ever feel sad, and how do you deal with it? And, yes, of course I do, but I think most reporters would say that you couldn’t function if you just crumbled. You have to get through it. And you’re very focused on getting everything you need. Because your adrenaline is usually getting pretty high, and you’re very focused on getting what you need. The best thing you can do is get what you need.

There was a situation in Katrina where people really needed help, and I was asked to help people get out of New Orleans, and that was really difficult for me. I had just written a story on someone, and she wanted a ride out, and I couldn’t give it to her. But before I said yes, I couldn’t do it, I called my editor. He says, “You know, you’re not a first-aid worker. Your job is to report what’s happening.” And that’s really hard. It’s easy for an editor in Washington to say that, but it’s hard for me to look that person in the eye, who
has just given me three hours, and say, “I’m sorry; I can’t help you.” That’s the hardest part for me.

**How do you relate to people you write about? How do you see your role as it relates to them?**

I’m just a reporter. I’m not a friend. I’m just a reporter, following them everywhere. Sometimes I’m quiet, and other times I ask questions, but it’s just basic reporting. I don’t really relate per se. I’m just with them all the time. It’s more a question of not relating, but when to ask your questions, when to watch and be quiet, and when to ask your questions. But you always want to remind them that you are not a friend, that you are a reporter. People tend to let down their guard after days or weeks go by, so it’s a fine line between always reminding them that you’re on the clock, and this is a job, and you’re working, but you also need them to open up as much as possible. It’s a double-edged sword. But I just always make sure they know I’m a reporter and I’m here to do a story; I’m not here to hang out and drink beer.

**Do you get attached to people you spend more time with?**

Sure. Some more than others. It’s just like normal life. You kind of click with some people better than others. It makes the job a little more difficult when you don’t click with somebody, or when you don’t like somebody, or when you see them doing bad things, so that’s when you just again have to reserve judgment almost like you reserve emotion when you’re upset.
You said your second favorite part is rewriting, redrafting. Why is that more pleasant than the first draft?

Because once you have a first draft, you have something to work with. Think of it an analogy would be sculpture. Is it easier to take a big block of ice and start there, or is it easier to me to take an ice block that’s already been kind of started, and then you can go in and do stuff. It’s just a temperamental preferential thing I like to do. It’s getting that first draft down and telling myself that first draft doesn’t have to be perfect. I’m just trying to get the building blocks down so that I can then really start to work.

Everyone is different. Finkel, he’s mostly a one-draft guy. He writes 85 percent of what’s in the paper. I tend to in my first draft to write 50 or 60 percent, and I often do two or three write-throughs, which I love doing. A lot of reporters think it’s an insult to have to go back and write again, but I’m really, I pray that I’m asked that.

Do you at any point in this process experience… people who have described experiencing flow say they’re completely absorbed by what they’re doing, sometimes lose track of time; they do the thing for itself… Do you ever experience that, and if yes, in what parts of the process?

What do you mean? Like I spend a lot fo time watching subjects work. What do you mean in terms of me feeling that?
Does it ever happen that you get so absorbed by your work that it flows? Do you get into “the zone”? Or is it always completely conscious and rational?

Yes, sometimes time flies. Like two days pass, and you’re not really aware that two days have passed. Other times it’s more tedious. It just depends on the story. I did a story once on a group of Mexican women that come from the central highlands of Mexico and went to North Carolina to work in the crab houses, and that was for The St. Pete Times. And basically I stood on concrete eight or nine hours a day watching them pick crabs, and the time does go slowly then. So I’m absorbed in it at first, but after a few weeks doing that, you have to find ways and little tricks to keep engaged because the minute you kind of go offline, you’re not going to be reporting, so it’s best just to walk away from the situation.

But yes, in some situations reporting is tedious. In others it just flies by.

What is your favorite story that you’ve done so far?

I think the crab-picking story, that was for The St. Petersburg Times, called “Una Vida Mejor.” That has a special place because I love journey stories, and that was ultimately a journey story. A journey across geography, and a journey across race, and a journey across class. And, you know, it was a bus ride. It was just great. It was a road trip in some ways. And I loved being with those women during that experience, watching everything. In total, that has a special place for me.

But I did a story on second-generation immigrants in Atlanta, in the south, and that was awesome at the time, and I did a story on gay teenagers, which was great. So really stories that I can really sink into are the ones that I’m closest to. And I keep in touch with half the people I write about, so I think that’s a sign of a connection that’s formed.
I mean now it’s a little different because you’re always nervous as a reporter to get the facts right, obviously, and to get the themes right, but now there’s this thing where social media and people comment, and readers comment, and it’s really a cruel experience for the subject. I have to balance sort of warning them of what it’s going to be like. Some people say, “Don’t read the comments.” Well, that’s kind of impossible. You’re going to read the comments if you’re written about. It’s just brutal… it’s so mean and ugly, and I almost feel bad for the people I’m going to put through that. That’s the new angst, you know?

If you were to have a few like best-practice pieces of advice for when you’re working on stories like these, what would they be?

First of all, if you can make sure you’re interested in it; that’s kind of the first… Are you curious about it? You have to be curious about it or it’s not going to work. You’re just going to be kind of going through the motion. So you have to have your own curiosity about a topic; that’s first and foremost.

And the other best practices, it’s really, you know, the amount of time you can spend to get to know the individual and to get as close to the truth as possible whatever the truth is. A lot of that investment in time, in reporting is no longer available to journalists. I’ve always told journalists who, you know, want to know how to do it, how to get ahead, it’s like, “You know what? You have to do what you want, but you have to work for a place that’s going to support the kind of writing you do.” If it’s a little, tiny paper in North Dakota that will hire you, you need to go there and to get the experience. So many people want to start out at a big paper, and it’s not going to happen. You have to kind of have the
patience to go through those steps of a career. It’s the only way you learn stuff. The only way you learn journalism is to do it, really; there’s no other way. It’s not like medical school, where you really have to learn something. You don’t have to go to journalism school, I’m sorry to tell you; you need to learn how to be a journalist.

(Romania, business daily, Cristi. And what do you want to do? One-year job at The Oregonian. Jamie Francis. He’s really cute, silver hair.)

**When did you start journalism?**

1985, almost 30 years. Unbelievable.

**Was it worth it?**

Oh, yes. A million times over. I couldn’t do anything else. I can waitress, but there’s nothing else I know how to do. Which I have waitressed. Yeah, it’s a great time to be a journalist. I feel like I lived in a golden age of journalism, whatever that was, and we’re probably entering a new age, and it’s neat to be able to straddle these two worlds. I mean with the Post just being purchased by Jeff Bezos... all sorts of exciting things are going to happen. Absolutely. I’ve lived the best professional life I could ever want, and it’s giving me like a real life, you know? You can’t break the two apart.

**What do you feel that journalism has brought you?**

A sense of -- gosh -- you can do something with your curiosity that’s productive. I’ve always been a curious person, always as a little kid. Like spying, you know, just very, very curious. Question asking to the pint of annoyance; so this is something that you can
kind of do and reveal to others how a certain world works. It just fits naturally with my
personality and what I like to do.

**Does it get better with time?**

It depends. You really have to keep mixing up what you do, or you will feel like it’s deja-
vy, Groundhog Day. You’ve done over and over. So it’s a little harder for writers because
we don’t want to become editors. So we stay writers, but it’s a different sort of adrenaline
feeling when you’re 50 years old than it was at 30, so you just have to keep picking
stories that keep you interested, and keep working for a place that allows you to do that;
that’s the other side of it.

**Mixing it up means…**

Mixing it up could mean doing a piece with another writer, you know, when Diana Priest
and I teamed up on Walter Reed that was mixing it up; I almost never wrote stories with
anyone else. That was brand new. Maybe going back and doing dailies, which I’m not
very good at; that’s one way to mix it up. You could take a break and edit for one year, or
you could change beats. You just always have to be thinking, how am I going to stay
interested? Because if you’re not interested, it really shows in the writing.

**Have you ever thought about doing something else?**

Never. I’ve had periods of extreme struggle, but never like I wanted to do something else.
I was in a big struggle last year, and it had to do with, I don’t know what it had to do
with, to be honest, but I never wanted to quit or do anything else, I just wondered, what’s
happening to me? And it was a really stressful thing; I just couldn’t, I just wasn’t hitting
it. It’s hard to describe. You’re just like hitting the wrong chords, and everything you try doesn’t quite work out, and it’s really depressing. So you have to figure out ways to get through that. And for me it’s other writer friends. You just need your little tribe around you to kind of whine to or express your fears, or you know, all that stuff.

**Was that like a writing block?**

It’s kind of everything. It’s a confusion over what you want to say in a story, a difficulty with the writing; you might pick a subject who’s not easy to write about, and all these things combine to make it a really difficult experience. You know, writing is very tied to confidence, and if you confidence is shaken, it’s more difficult. That’s happened a couple of times. Last year it really happened to me. It’s scary, especially if you’re not used to it, if you’re used to everything kind of working. Not working because it’s just worked out, but maybe because of you and the place you’re in. But I came to a point where I just struggled. No other way to put it. *But I never wanted to quit; I never not wanted to work. I just wanted to beat it.*

**But can you be not confident after you’ve had a successful career, after you’ve won a Pulitzer?**

Oh, yeah, it happened last year. It can happen to any of us any time. So sure. There’s no way to say what brings it on. You just don’t know. But it’s very stressful because you’re used to having things -- nothing’s ever easy, but you’re used to having things work out a little more. But, you know, I lived in Berlin. I’m in Berlin right now on a book leave, but I lived in Berlin right before all these started to happen, and of course I’m wondering, is it because I didn’t live in my own country? Is it because I see things from a more global
experience now instead of a more narrow United States prism? You know, they think they know what poverty is and, you know, as you well know, that’s not really poverty. So it’s almost like your mind takes in so much information you don’t then know what to do with this new information. It’s almost easier the less you know in some ways; you know what I’m saying?

Yeah. I guess it’s what they call a culture shock.

Yeah. It causes so many questions like what is suffering, and what is deprivation? You know, and then I go back to so-called suffering and deprivation in my country, even during the financial crisis, and it’s nothing like other countries, you know? And once you’re sort of, you know, again, I got a lot of experiences in Berlin and hanging out with a lot of foreign correspondents, a lot of war correspondents, who just travel all over. And it just kind of in one way expanded my mind in a little great way, but it made it a little more confusing for me to go back to the States and write about the issues that I do. Does that makes sense?

But do you feel like you have a sort of a responsibility to cover the bigger problems, or a problem that is bigger than another?

No, Simina, because I’m not a foreign correspondent. There are many people who are great at that; I’m not just talking about a war correspondent, but people who are just more globally inclined. I do write for an American newspaper, and that’s where I do my reporting.
When you choose your stories, do you ever wonder, what is a category of people who are having a really bad time now? Should I try to find someone and tell that story, or is it just… How do you choose your stories? Is that even a factor?

Well, like first of all it’s how do you choose your topic, and then how do you choose the subjects is a separate matter. Say it’s immigration. Then your choosing of the subject, of the person, tells the story one way or another. I would never really choose to do a story about immigration, and then have the character or the subject be someone who’s just made it and they’re on top. You want to find those people who are struggling, who are ascending and on the way up. That’s the story of immigration. Everybody writes the story about a successful person. So I spend a lot of time trying to think, OK, what is my responsibility for the news? For instance, when I did that immigration series I had to study the census really hard to see where immigration was happening. And I also then had to drill down further and say, what kinds of jobs are those new immigrants having in the south? So that means I do have to get someone from the service class because that’s where the news is.

So you select based on trends and facts, but then when it comes to a person, it comes down to two things, OK? Will they talk to me? Will they let me get in their life for three weeks, or three months? And then the second criterion for me is can they articulate their thoughts? They don’t have to be Shakespeare, they don’t have to be great in English language, but they have to have that ability to kind of express their thoughts. Honestly.
So now do you have any issues that you really want to cover in the future?

I would love to cover the idea, it’s again, what I just said, the idea of suffering and deprivation in America, what our idea is of going without. It’s very difficult to write about the people at the high end. They’re just private. They don’t want any, the analogy is the gated community. That’s how they live their lives; they don’t want a reporter; they’re private people. Whereas lower income people, people without a big stake in things, they let you come in and write everything. So one reason you see so many stories on people in the lower tiers is because they’re accessible. And it’s very difficult to get people at the higher end to let you do that. I like to think about ways to do that. There are certain writers who have done it successfully, so I see how they have done it and study that way.

Who are some writers that you like?

In this realm or in general? (in this area) There is a guy, forgive me if I’m not, it’s Thomas Frank, I think, from The Wall Street Journal. He wrote a story, it was a collection of reported reportage, but maybe 10, looking at really rich people in America. It was called “Richstan,” and it was about this community of ultra-rich people and how they made it. But each one let the reporter, Frank, Thomas Frank, into his life or her life. And so that’s the kind of stuff I’m really interested. Again, it’s more that anthropological stuff.

But you have to convince people to let you in, and almost every reporter I talk to now, as social media gets bigger, as the web is more present in our lives, it is more and more difficult to get people to let you into their lives. And I’m talking from every strata.
They’ll always say, “What’s in it for me? Why should I?” And often you don’t really have a good answer. So you always have to think about that before you even ask someone: Why should they? Why should they do it? What’s in it for them?

You know, I’ve had the mother of a gay teenager in the Bible Belt in Oklahoma say -- you know, if I was going to write about this kid, Michael; he was 17, 16 at the time, he was just coming out, very Evangelical community -- and the mother said to me, “Will this hurt Michael?” And I couldn’t answer. I said, “I don’t know.” All she had in her mind was Matthew Shepherd, of course. But I can’t say, “No, this won’t hurt Michael. Nothing will happen.” Because you really don’t know, and that’s what’s really hard to look at someone and say, “I don’t know.”

**You’re hoping to write about the richer people at some point in the future?**

Yeah. It’s something I’m thinking about. It’s more difficult to get access to people with money. They don’t want their problems, their intimacies, to be aired publicly.

**Is that important in telling the story of poverty? Is that part of it, or is it just a completely different thing?**

In terms of asking a more wealthy person to let me write about them? Oh, yeah. Really the bar is 20 times higher than people who are wealthy, and it’s almost impossible. You can see this with the crash of Wall Street and with the rich Wall Street guys, you’ve hardly seen any personal profiles on them. Either the ones who were presidents of these roadbridge houses, or even the ones who went to jail or the bankers who’ve been indicted. You don’t see any personal profiles on them, and there’s a reason: they don’t want it.
What would you tell someone who is starting out in journalism? Why is this profession worth it?

It’s nothing you can ever force. I think of medicine sometimes, parents want you to grow up to be a doctor, and you’re smart so you’re like, yeah, sure, I’ll be a doctor. But with journalism it’s not really like that; you have to want to do it, and you’re not going to make a lot of money, and you have to be comfortable with that.

So why should you do it? If you like to do it, it’s the best job in the world. There’s nothing more satisfying than telling someone’s story and illuminating a problem. But it does take a lot of work, and I noticed with a lot of the younger generation, they kind of want to stay at the desk all day and do stuff on the computer, but that’s not really reporting. They have difficulty even talking to people face to face. I get so many people wanting to email me questions. And it’s like, you’re going to have to look me in the eye and do it, because that’s half the battle. There’s something about the younger generation, and correct me if I’m wrong, that just temperamentally it’s more difficult for them to interact with humans. It’s like why people text and that kind of thing. There has to be human contact in reporting. I think.

Maybe there is more interaction via social media than anything else.

Absolutely. But you can see, as a reporter, you can see the limitations in that. It’s great if you want to meet someone in a bar or whatever But in terms of getting information from them for a story, it’s not the best.
Why is it like a gift to be able to tell someone’s story?

I don’t know why it’s a gift. I just consider it a gift because I love doing it.

So it’s like a circle.

I consider it a privilege more than anything to be able to go into someone’s lives, enter their world and hang out and observe them. It would not be possible without then. So when I get to come into that other world, it’s a privilege to spend time reporting on them; that’s how I look at it.

Do you see yourself eve doing anything different?

No, not really. Just writing in some form. Always writing. I enjoy teaching a lot. I taught at Princeton last year, and I really had a good time teaching. It’s so fulfilling. I had a seminar of 16 students, and we spent the entire semester, I crafted a course around covering people who are at the fringes of society. And that was really, really rewarding, and these kids most of them have money, come from a lot of money, so it was an eye-opening experience for them and for me.

Did they get to do work, hands on?

Yeah, I mean they don’t have a journalism school there’ it’s humanity, so it’s not a fun course because it’s a lot of work. But some people are just good writers and want to take it; other people really will go into writing, go into reporting. But for a lot of these kids who come from money and privilege, to go out and cover some of these issues that we were talking about was difficult. They really didn’t even know how to talk to people like that. The cafeteria worker; they didn’t even know what to say. So I learned a lot.
David Finkel

It’s a great question. I don’t know what the answer is. I’ve been doing this a long time, and at the beginning I’d do everything that I was assigned to do. And over time I developed I guess a specialty in narrative reporting and writing. The stories usually came not as assignments, but out of conversations with whoever my editor was. An example was an editor came to me at one point and said she wanted me to think about doing some kind of story or a series of stories about when George Bush was president, his primary foreign doctrine, which was democracy promotion, and she said, just think about how to turn that into a narrative, a storytelling thing. So that became a series of stories I did out of Yemen in 2005 or 2006, which I told the story of a U.S.-funded project to bring democracy to Yemen: here were the intentions, and here’s what happens.

So that’s an example of how, at some point, instead of just getting assignments, this came out of conversations with editors, what would be an interesting thing to pursue? What’s an important theme, and then how do you turn that theme into a story that would engage a reader?

How did The Good Soldiers come about?

That came out of one of these conversations. My editor at the time said, you know, I was still writing at The Post then, now I’m editing. He said: There’s this thing happening with this new attempt in Iraq, why don’t you write a piece about the soldiers heading into it? So that … Fort Riley, Kansas, I went out to do a newspaper story on them, I spent probably a couple of weeks with them as they got ready to leave and go overseas, and at one point, the guy that is leading the group, the battalion commander, said to me…
Kauzlarich?

Kauzlarich, yeah. He said to me, “It’s interesting you’re doing this story, but you oughta come visit us halfway through and see how we’re doing, and maybe at the end even consider writing another piece when we come home because I don’t know how, but this experience is probably going to change us.” And I thought that was fascinating. So instead of doing two more newspaper stories, I published the story in The Post and then I got in touch with Kauzlarich, said I wanted to do a book, he said, “Come along,” so I went.

I went not knowing what would happen to us. You’ve read the book, so you know that it turned into a … story, but this a type of journalism where you don’t know the ending when you go. You only have a question. In this case, the question was what would become of these young men? And then it took me, the journalism I do of just going and staying and staying and staying and watch as the story unfolds until there’s a story to tell.

In this case, the focus was on the soldiers rather than the policy or the surge.

Yes, it was not a policy book; it was the far-end of policy, the effects of policy. This wasn’t a book about strategy, about what was being decided or funded or thought of in Washington, but what happens at the far end. I’ve talked about this before, but this was four or five years into the war, and policy books had been written about the war, and memoirs were coming out, but no one had done a journalistic, observed journalistic look at what’s happening on the ground. So that was the idea -- what’s happening? What will happen for them? We’ll see. So I went.
How was this process for you, being there?

Well, this is a little different. It was the first book I had done. This thing I was describing earlier in Yemen involved being in Yemen for four months, but this was different. I wasn’t prepared for it, and it was hard. It was physically frightening. But at the same time I was guided by the thought that this is a consequential war in my lifetime and for whatever reason, I’ve been given a good seat to observe it and to write about it, to add to the archives of the war. So don’t complain, don’t screw it up. Just go do the work.

When you’re reporting, when you’re out, you usually try to figure out what scenes to pay attention to, what people to talk to. How did the reporting process change when you were there with people dying around you?

Well, I didn’t know in the beginning. I knew that Kauzlarich would be one of the people I would be writing about. Beyond that, I didn’t have any clear characters or clear ideas. And you know from your own work, in reporting, when you’re trying to figure something out, you’re just trying to absorb everything and write it down and pay attention to everything, and it can be a little wearing and frustrating because you don’t know what the story is yet. You’re just kind of going along, trying to feel your way and learn your way until you reach the point of having some confidence that you have a story to tell.

So the people I ended up writing about and the things I ended up describing weren’t evident at first. They were things that unfolded organically as my time there continued. Certain events would happen, and they were worth writing about and exploring. You know, for all the 12 things I did write about there were a thousand things I didn’t write about. That’s the choices a writer makes, right?
How would you describe this professional experience now, of being there and working on this story?

In 30 years of doing this in various forms, I consider this the crucial work of my writing time. It mattered to me more than anything else I had done.

Why?

Well, first of all, the particular kind of journalism I like to do and I respond to isn’t pack journalism, but it’s the work of the journalist who goes to a place that matters and also the place where others aren’t. There are plenty of people coming to war, of course, doing extraordinary work, but no one up to that point had done this kind of reporting where you stay and stay and stay and then write the full story. It wasn’t using these people to write about war. How do I explain it? I wasn’t trying to write a war book. I was using the war to try to write something more intimate about what becomes of someone who’s sent into something of consequence, and what is perceived to be the lost moment. What happens to them. And that was a rare place to be. It was frightening, it never lost its sense of importance to me, it could feel overwhelming at times.

In my mind, what these soldiers were going through mattered, and I got to be there.

That’s a profound thing.

How was this different from when you covered the Kosovo conflicts?

Well, because I tried hard in my coverage of Kosovo, but when I compare the two, Kosovo I felt like I visited. This story I felt like I stayed long enough to inhabit. It’s not to diminish that work or to come across as boastful about his work. I don’t mean it that
way. What am I comparing? I did as well as I could on Kosovo. **But this, it was almost**

**like, this seems silly, but the previous 30 years had led me to this assignment, this**

**place, this moment, this chance to write a big story.**

**Do you think you were aware of that while you were there?**

No, I don’t think so. That would probably be a little… No, I wasn’t. I knew it was a consequential war and as the months went on, I saw what was happening, I knew I had something, a story to tell in my hands, but as I’m sure you know from your own reporting, but when you’re in it you’re just in it. You’re not removing yourself and thinking about whether this is big or small or anything else. You’re just trying to get the thing done. You’re just trying to get through it. You’re trying to, What is the story I’m trying to tell? How do I tell it? Who do I need to talk to?

**Who used to be on your mind while you were working, reporting? Were you thinking about the soldiers or the readers? Who was mainly on your mind?**

All of it, right? I mean of course I was trying to pay attention to what the soldiers were going through. I was trying to make sure that what I would end up writing would have emotion to it, that it wasn’t my naïve emotion I was writing about, but it was a true representation of what the soldiers were feeling. That requires I think, again, **not visiting a story, but being willing to stay there for a long time until you know that you’re not telling your story but you’re telling a true story about them.**
Was there anything else you were doing to make sure the emotion you were conveying was true and was theirs besides spending a lot of time?

Well, spending a lot of time, listening, talking to people, going out, just observing. All the usual stuff we do as journalists. I mean, who knows? I didn’t really know until the book came out and then people responding to it, soldiers of all stripes, that what I hoped for was working out. That I had done something that to them described their own experiences. Again, I’ve mentioned this many times to many folks, but the emails continue to interest me. I’ve gotten so many email from soldiers saying a version of, “I came home, I didn’t want to talk about it, I can’t talk about it, I’ve read your book, now I give your book to people and say, ‘Read this, and you’ll know how it was like and why I can’t talk about it.’” If I had gotten that email once it would be nice, but I’ve gotten a version of that email hundreds and hundreds of times. That helps me think that I did get to their story, I did get to a version of their story, I did get that part right.

This might sound strange, especially considering the subject of your story, but did you get enjoyment at any point working on this? Was it exciting?

No, it wasn’t. No. It changes from day to day. Some days were unbearably sad, some days were infuriating in many different ways. Some days were just nothing at all, they were just days with funny moments. I’m not going to answer that question well, and it’s not because it’s a bad question. It’s just that I don’t have a good answer.

I also wanted to ask you about the tone of the book. It’s like one of the things… The way in which it seamlessly moves from very difficult moments to lighter moments, and it’s funny at some points, you just laugh…
It is funny at times. I mean there were incredibly boring moments over there, there were moments that were as funny as anything I had come across, and then again, there were these moments that were off the chart sad and angry.

**Were you intentional with the tone in which you were writing the story?**

Well, yeah. I mean it’s not just turning on a recorder and then transcribing what’s on the tape and that becomes a book.

I came home with, it was a 15-month deployment, so at the end of it I had basically a 15-month chronology of what had gone on. And that’s when the writing begins. You, first of all, want to tell a true story. But you also want to tell something that reads like a story. And that involves. It can’t be a one-note thing. If this is something as unbearably sad, you can’t continue just to have that one note playing again and again of sadness. That would be unbearable for the reader and also probably pretty boring. There’s pacing, there’s a different tone, there’s otherwise, I mean you want a reader to read it. So, yes. Again, not a good answer.

It’s just, you know, I came home and I had, I spent 9 or 10 months writing the book. Which is to say I had 9 or 10 months to take this lump of chronology and fashion it into a narrative. To turn chronology into something more than chronology, into a story that’s all the arc of storytelling - from the beginning through a journey to an ending.

**What were you hoping the story would do to the people who read it?**

Get their attention, affect them, give them specific people to think about whenever they would go on from the book to read in general ways about that war or Afghanistan or any
war to come. To understand, for instance, if they happened to come across a headline in the paper that says something like, “Three people killed from roadside bomb in Iraq or Afghanistan,” that they would have a fuller, deeper understanding of what that headline actually means. These wars have not been paid attention to by many people, and I had no idea if but if anybody was going to read it, but if they did read it, I wanted them to walk away with a fuller understanding of what was going on. And I don’t mean just in terms of a war, but in terms of the transformation of these young, eager men into the men they became by the time this was over with.

How did you stay strong while reporting this story, and you were working on a follow-up, right, that’s coming out this fall? How did you make sure you wouldn’t get overwhelmed with what was going on?

Well, I mean, the luxury I had over there, unlike the soldiers, was when it got to me, when I could feel myself not being a very good reporter, not listening as closely as I needed to listen, when I felt myself getting a little tired, I could take a break. I could arrange for transportation away from there either into the city of Baghdad, where I could stay for a few days recharging my batteries at The Washington Post bureau, or back to the States to do some reporting here. And that’s a luxury the soldiers didn’t have. I’m quite aware of that. Every 3-4-5-6 weeks I could take a break. They could not. Except for 18 days of home leave, they were in it for the duration.

Did you ever feel like a dad?

A dad? No, I didn’t. It’s complicated enough feeling like a reporter. More I think central to what you might be doing is the corresponding question of how… It was important for
me to maintain some distance. I mean I wasn’t there to be a social worker. I wasn’t there to be a friend. I wasn’t there to be a comrade or a leader. I was there to get as close as I could to what was going on but never forgetting and never letting them forget that my role there was not as friend or personal confidant, but as journalist who was going to possibly take everything they were saying and use some of it or all of it or none of it in a book that was going to be read by all kinds of people who didn’t know them. There was always some signal when I was talking to guys to remind them not only that I wasn’t a soldier but that I was a journalist performing and producing journalism. A recorder would be out or a notebook or just some signal of what the relationship was. I wanted them to be aware of that at all times.

**Were you hoping for higher changes? Were you hoping that officials and people in Washington would act in the future based on the book?**

No, no, nothing like that. I would like them to read the book, but as far as a book like this producing changes, no. Maybe policy books can do this or that, but this wasn’t the type of book that would. The most it could do was remind people, too, whether they’re people in charge of the war, people with no connection to the war, that the war is and all wars are filled with people like the ones they were reading about. That’s the best I can hope for. That they would be able to think specifically about the population inside the war rather than abstractly.

I mean, look, again. I said this to you because I think it’s true: there’s no breaking news in this book. There are no headlines. Everybody knows that war is scary, it’s dangerous. To some people it can feel exhilarating, but it’s a lousy, it’s a horrible fact to be inside a
war. It’s a horrible place. That’s not exclusive to this war or this book. That’s been written about again and again through history. So in this case it was just I’m telling an old story that’s been told before, but I’m telling it I guess in a modern moment: this war, these people. I’m not pretending that our book … it’s not that kind of book. Everybody knows what war is, but maybe this reminded them in a visceral way what they think they already know.

One of the powerful contrasts I found in the book was overlapping what was going on in Washington, the kind of discourse people were having, with what was going on in Iraq.

Right. But this is not to say one was right and one was wrong. It was just to point out that any war is so many wars. And so the little quotes from Bush at the beginning of each chapter. The intention there wasn’t to make fun of Bush. It’s not up to him what’s going on in 2-16 on a particular day. It’s to show, again, one war is 90 wars. Like that day in September when Bush was in Australia saying, “We’re kicking ass.” To him, that’s the truth of his war on that day. And I don’t quarrel with that. That’s what he thought. Now in this unit, it so happens that day was the day that a roadside bomb went off and three guys were killed on the spot, the fourth lost his legs, and the fifth … nearly killed him. Same day, same war, totally different experiences, and to the people involved each is as legitimate as the other.

What are some of the reasons why you do this type of work?

Let’s see. I think it’s because I’ve always like writing. I went to school, and I ended up in journalism school in Florida in the mid to late 1970s, which happened to be a time when
newspapers were on the ascent, and they were fat with profits, and they were fat with people trying to figure out how to do narrative journalism. And so being in Florida, I would read these stories in The St. Pete Times and The Miami Herald and think “I want to do that.” And then it was just a matter of figuring out how to do it. But I’ve always responded to this kind of storytelling when it’s done well. And so I started to set out that’s what I want to do.

What’s attractive or important?

Oh well, I guess I grew up reading a lot, I like hearing stories, being told stories and telling stories. It’s just a different move. Now I’m at The Washington Post, and there are reporters who can’t write terribly well, but they can report in ways I wish I could, and they’re just great, great reporters and investigative reporters, and then there are other people here who like reporting, but they like writing as well. I just sort of fall into the second category. One thing I like to think is that underneath every sentence in that book is not just flimsy writing, but there’s a piece of reporting. Above all, it’s a reporting book and the writing is secondary. I consider the book an act of reporting first and foremost.

But why I like to do it? I don’t know. That’s a great question. I just sort of always wanted to do it, I kind of like doing it. At this point, it’s the only move I have left, right?

What kept you doing it for such a long time?

I can’t imagine… I feel very lucky. I mean I can’t say what my life would have been like if I had done something else. I can’t know that. But I do know that by doing this I’ve traveled to five continents, and I’ve seen people at their very best and their very worst and their very middling trying to figure life out and in almost, not every day, but almost
every day, it’s caused me to lead a life that feels very engaged, not perfunctory, not going through emotions, but it’s led to an interesting life. 😊

**Engaged in what way?**

Thinking. Making sense of things. Not feeling mechanical about what’s happening in a giving day. It’s pretty damn luxurious to be able to live a life that feels full of being able to consider things, think through things, see things, ask questions, see life unfolding, with pretty limitless, go places, go pretty much where I’ve wanted to go and stay as long as I can and figure stories out and then tell stories. I mean that seems like a pretty good deal.

**Maybe this question is stupid, but…**

No, no. My answers are not so hot, but your questions have been great.

**What has kept you from falling into a somewhat monotonous way of seeing journalism? Which sometimes happens. People start writing or seeing stories in frames after a while, they do certain types of stories. What has kept you engaged, like you said?**

Again, a pretty rare luxurious position here where I don’t face the same time constraints and the daily demands that a lot of other reporters have. So I have time on my side. That’s a good thing. I used to love being a daily reporter. But could I be doing daily reporting after 30 years? Probably not. I don’t think so. Darn. I’m not trying to be thoughtless here. It’s what I do. It’s interesting is too weak a word.
I mean if we’re getting to the thing you’re trying to figure out, the thing you asked about initially, and I would like to give you a good answer. But it’s not that I lack introspection, but either I can’t or I’m not comfortable giving you a perfect answer here.

I don’t know. This is, someone once said, and I didn’t quite understand, that a good life is a felt life, but I get it now. I think I’ve been lucky enough to have that.

**Did you think at any point about doing something else?**

Sure. Every day.

**And why didn’t you?**

I don’t know. Lack of imagination maybe.

**Have the types of stories you’re drawn to change with time?**

Yeah. They’ve, I think gotten harder. And this is an interesting point now because I wrote that book, I’ve just finished this next book, which was basically a book about what happened to some of these folks after they got home: grief, mental wounds, and again and again. It’s volume II of a story that’s been told a bunch: people go to war, people come home from war. But I wanted to finish the story, and now I finished it, and this is an interesting period where I have to figure out what to do next. And it’s not that I lack ideas, but every idea I’ve come up with so far seems a little frivolous. Maybe that’s natural. I’ve been embedded in this story every day for more than six years. As much as anything, it’s defined the last six years of my life, and like a lot of reporters I know, I’m fairly obsessive, so I’ve obsessed on this thing, and now I’ve got to decide what’s the next story to do. I just don’t know.
What would the project that you would want to start now look like?

I don’t know. I really, honestly don’t know. I understand the flaws of my works. I can pick any page in that book and pick a sentence at random and wince a bit at the way it was written. Life is a process of constant rewriting, I guess. And so it is with most of the work I’ve done, and most of the work I’ve done, I never want to see it again. I don’t want to.

But this work, despite its flaws, which I can see, unlike the other stuff I’ve done, I’m proud of this. So if I didn’t write another thing, then I think I can be content with that because I’ve written something that matters to me, that I’m proud of. On the other hand, if I didn’t write again, it gets back to your earlier question: what am I going to do? Beats me. So it’s an interesting moment.

To me it’s very obvious why this work is phenomenal, but what makes it special to you?

What makes it special to me? That it was hard and it mattered and I went there and I stayed and I got it and I did it. 😊

How did the writing work? Were you just working on this book when you were writing it?

Yes. Every day. I’m very slow. So I was getting up every day for like I guess 10 months, and writing my way from one sentence to the next to the next until I eventually got to the end.
How many hours did you work a day?

It depends on the day. Some days I would start at six in the morning, and I would still be there at midnight. And I wasn’t a lot of fun according to my family. But I’m probably not that much fun anyway.

How exposed were you to danger when you were there?

A lot.

Because I couldn’t tell in some situations whether the scenes were reconstructed from interviewing or whether you were there.

Some that I wasn’t there for I reconstructed. But I was there for most of it and I mean most of the book is based on observed reporting, not recollections. Not being told what happened, but being present for what happened. It was not the worst place in the world, but it was a bad place. And if you’re on the base itself, a lot of mortars, a lot of rockets, then when you’re out in the convoy, every road had roadside bombs waiting for you.

Did you ever think that you might die?

Yes.

And was it still worth it?

Yeah. But I can say that because I know the ending: I didn’t die. I think of people I know who have died covering wars and was it worth it for them? I have no idea. But I sure wouldn’t have wanted to die.
Again, I’m sorry if I keep repeating the same questions…

Because you’re trying to get an answer.

I’m trying to picture myself in that situation…

Yeah. But you can’t picture yourself in it until you’re in it. If I had known what was going to happen, would I have gone in the first place? I’m not sure, but I didn’t know what was going to happen, and once you’re there, you’re a reporter. And as I said in the book, underneath everything I felt fortunate to be there. If I’m going to be a journalist and I’m going to be a storyteller, well, this is the great story so, you know, shut up and tell it.

That makes perfect sense.

It makes sense when you don’t know what you’re getting into. That old, bad story, what was it, frogs and boiling water or something, they don’t realize what’s going on because they’re in the water and then slowly, incrementally, it’s getting hotter and hotter until at some point they’re no longer a living frog? It’s not like they’re jumping into boiling water; they’re starting up out of a pleasant pool, and then incrementally it keeps changing. It’s a bad analogy.

Is your main duty to tell the story, or to tell the story of those people, to do justice to their lives or experiences, what is it?

For me, the obligation was to tell a true story. It was their story. Not my opinion, not to declare something good or bad, won or lost, to remain as invisible as possible and to watch them. You know, when I’ve given talk about this to people, there’s always a question about why didn’t I write the book first person. I’ve read first-person books that
have blown me away; there’s been great first-person work done. But in this case, this
books, who cares what I want through? The point was to write about what they were
going through, these soldiers, and they were doing their jobs, and I was doing my job. My
job was to write about what they were going through. So of course it had to be a third-
person book. I would like to think that anybody who reads that book would come away
not knowing very much about me. But I thought about it? I mean obviously, like
anybody, I was emotional at times and angry at times. But I don’t think you know very
much about me when you finish that book. You do know something about what it’s like
to be a soldier.

So in this continual process of figuring out life, do you have any conclusions?

I think the conclusions, the best conclusions are what the people who are in it think.
That’s not a deflection (?) It’s true. On the other hand, in this particular battalion there
were 800 soldiers, 800 different opinions. Some people came home thinking it was worth
it, some people came home thinking it was a waste of time. And most of them were in the
great gray middle, where they weren’t thinking in these grand terms, they were more like,
pardon my French here, but what the fuck just happened?

And as I learned in the second book, they’re still thinking about that, and they’ll get to
think about that for a long time. Not whether that was won or lost, but what was that?

So, no. I’ve tried really hard to avoid having opinions in the book, and I should probably
stick to that in this conversation.

It’s a phenomenal, phenomenal book. But you’ve probably heard this from many
people.
When you do a story, you know all the good things and the bad things with the story. And so it is with this book. I know how hard it was, I have a sense of what it did to me personally, at the end of it, though, I guess the satisfaction and the sense of pride is despite the flaws, I got to the thing, I got it.
Chris Jones

How do you choose the stories you end up working on?

It’s a process. We sort of go back and forth with my editor and decide what stories to do. I pitch a lot more stories than we actually do. What I look for in a story… I like stories that have almost stories behind them; they’re not just about something on the surface, but they’re about something larger. I like stories probably because I’m vain and I like to think that I can maybe write a story that matters; I like to pick important subjects generally. That’s not always true, like someone breaking The Price is Right isn’t actually an important story, but I like to do stories about important subjects, emotional subjects often.

What’s an important subject?

That’s a good question because sometimes stories that don’t seem important actually have something touching behind them. And I think The Price is Right story is a good example of that, where it’s really just about a guy who breaks a game show, but it’s about dedication and obsession and being good at something. And those are important. But often I sort of fall back on that idea that if a story isn’t about life and death or fatherhood or, you know, world-changing events, the political moments or things like that. I’m definitely drawn to stories about life and death. You know, once you’ve done stories like that it’s hard to see the same value in a story about something more frivolous. But there are lots of great stories that don’t have a body in them. I don’t want you to think that I’m thinking someone has to die in a story for it to be important. Some stories have a better chance of being stories that count to people, and, I think, if I’m being honest, I’m always trying to find those stories.
For your experience so far, what are readers looking for in your stories? What are you trying to offer them?

It’s hard for me to say what they’re looking for. I know I’m trying to offer them, my hope is always that I’ve given them something to think about. My hope is that they don’t finish one of my stories and then immediately forget about it. And certainly I’ve written my share of totally forgettable stories, but the hope is always that it’s something that sticks with people. I can’t say that when someone’s reading a story, is that something they want? I don’t know. I know when I read a long story I hope that I’m rewarded in some way, that I’m given something that makes me think, “Ah, I’m glad I read that.”

Sometimes that can be just 20 minutes of diversion that isn’t TV. But I like when a story gives me something to really think about, that maybe changes the way I look at something or how I think about my life, or how I think about someone else.

I don’t know if most people go into stories wanting those things, but I like stories where I feel like I got something in exchange for my time. And that’s what I try to get. I don’t want a reader to… I think a good compliment you can give to a writer is that he or she never cheats the reader, that you’ve given them something of value for their time. I guess that’s what I try to do.

What are your favorite parts through this process?

My favorite part is the reporting. By far that’s my favorite part. I love going out on the road and talking to people. I love that moment when you find something interesting or a little nugget, a little detail. I love meeting people; I love traveling. I love that kind of detective work. Sometimes I think about alternate careers I might have done; I think I
would have been a pretty good detective because I like digging. I like that sort of looking in files and trying to crack tough nuts, people who maybe don’t want to be interviewed. And then when you get those moments that you know are going to count in a story. You know, you find those little details or that moment in a story that you know is going to play a big part in your final product. At this point, I kind of know when you get one of those moments. That’s sort of what I love doing. And I love the feeling I have at that time, when you’re sort of going, “Oh, I got one here. I got a really good story.”

Finding ideas is OK. It’s frustrating sometimes. You pitch so many that don’t get taken. Sometimes you go through a slump where you’re trying to find something; you’re trying to convince yourself that something’s a good story. Oh, yeah, I know, I think I can make this a good story. But you have the ones that are going to be great, you kind of know, and your editor kind of knows.

Writing for me is actually pretty hard. I’m not one of those people who just sits down and just flows. I work. Writing for me is work. I don’t dislike it, but I much prefer reporting. My dream job would be to be to be able to report something and just hand it out to somebody else.

Can you give me an example that a moment and several moments that you felt would count for the final stories?

Yeah. It’s different moments for different stories, but it’s funny how they kind of stick with you. Like I can remember really clearly the moments when I got those moments. Do you know what I mean? It’s funny, when I think about stories I often think about the reporting and those very particular moments when I got something. Like I’m thinking,
you know, the soldier story, I can remember very specifically, there’s a scene in that story where Michael, Joey’s brother, tries to put his ring on his finger and the glove kind of, and he’s got this glove that’s stuffed with cotton. I remember very specifically their aunt Vicky telling me that in a Cracker Barrel restaurant over lunch. I just knew that scene was going to be an important scene in the story.

In the Animals, the one about the Zanesville Zoo shooting, I can remember seeing Steve Blake for an interview at the police station, when he told me about this tiger being shot and this puff of fur going off his back, and you could see his spine. And down he goes, he said, and down he goes. I can still hear him saying that, and the way he said it, I can hear it perfectly. And that was one of those moments where I was like… and that’s not the whole story.

In every good story you have those moments. Because unless the story itself has those moments, it’s probably not going to stick. I think a great story has to have those scenes or those moments that really catch in people. And what happens invariably is when you’re reporting those moments they’re catching you. I can remember the moment I got them. It’s often crystal clear. Even the stories that are old, eight years old, I can remember the moments when I found a particular thing that I thought would count.

**What do you do so that you make sure the readers would react to those moments in a similar way in which you reacted when you experienced them?**

You can’t guarantee it. Sometimes you think they’re going to be a big moment, and you screw it up. It’s like lost in translation somehow, you don’t convey it well enough. So your job is to write in a way that gives those moments the importance that they should
have. And that comes down to things like the language you use or where it is in the story, how you build to that moment, is it the start or the beginning of a section. I often put important moments in starts or beginnings of sections. *I like to use section breaks as like beginnings and ends in some ways.*

I’m trying to think of the theory, there’s a word, *Chekhov’s Gun*, is that what it is? It’s where you put like a little hint of something, and you think it doesn’t matter when you first see it, you’re kind of like, that’s a weird detail, but then it really counts later. You set the reader up in some ways. You think it’s just a little note, and then all of a sudden, it means something much bigger later in the story. Teller the Magician story I did, has a bunch of those in it, where you think it’s just some mundane detail, and then at the end it all kind of becomes important.

That’s a story in some ways you have to read twice to pick up on everything because you think it’s just nothing, and then when you get to the end of that story and you think the whole story’s a trick, you kind of go like, “Oh, shit!” There’s moments where it matters more. *I think the biggest thing is structure, it’s like placing those moments in the right spot in your story.* You might not necessarily lead with them, or maybe they’re an ending, or maybe you use them as a section break, or, you know, those are the decisions that you make… In writing a story, you make a thousand of those choices, like where something goes or the words you’re going to use, and you hope you’ll write it in a way that means those moments have as much gravity in the story as they did to you when you first found them.
Is this an intellectual process?

I think it’s both intellectual and feel. I think there’s some writers who really sort of plan, like outline and really plan things out deliberately more intellectually than I do. For me a lot of it comes down to feel, like it’s just sort of… and that’s always a frustrating thing. I always hate it when I talk to people about how they do things, and they talk about feel. It’s a really hard thing to pin down, but it’s true that sometimes you write a scene and it just feels right. It feels like, “Oh, I got that.” I’m trying to think of a good example.

In my Roger Ebert story, where he gets really mad that they’ve taken down the videos of Gene Cisco, there are these videos of Gene Cisco he had put up, and … has taken them off the Internet and Robert gets really mad about it. I have a spot memory of writing that scene in my basement in Montana and knowing it just was right, it just felt good. I was like, OK, I got that. And then you don’t touch it. I don’t have to mess with it. You get those moments when everything kind of falls into place. And I don’t know why they happen. I think some people try to make them happen and do make them happen intellectually. They plan it out: this is how I’m going to write the story, and I do this, and I do this, and I do this, and I do this. I’m less like that and more like I just do my best to make it.

You know, I listen to music that inspires me, and I try to just of let things flow. And hopefully you get one of those moments when everything kind of drops into place.

It’s hard to explain: it’s like, you know how athletes talk about being in the zone, where you’re just keyed in, if you’re a baseball player you can see the pitches really well and you just feel comfortable and you feel like everything’s kind of clicking? In writing you get those moments, too. There’s some nights when writing is a real struggle, and you’re
sort of chugging away at it, you’re not really capturing it properly. You mentioned flow in your original email. Whenever it’s not flowing, when you’re just kind of hammering at it. And then there are other nights when it just kind of comes. And I wish I had a better explanation for why those nights are like that because otherwise I would do whatever I needed to do to guarantee I was going to have one of those nights. But they’re rare. They don’t come very often. For me, anyway?

**Do you think the work is better when it comes easier?**

Oh, yeah. The final product? Almost invariably the stories where the writing you get those moments are better stories. For me. This is for me. Yeah. The stories where it just pours out, those are usually better for me as final products than the stories where I had to really wrestle. It’s hard to be objective about that because I’m not reading my stories the way a reader does. I can see everything that’s missing, I can see all the hard parts, I can see where I struggled, I know the sentences where I feel like I didn’t quite catch them. So I’m not sure there’s the same difference in stories that I can see, but definitely the stories that I like, at least at some point during the process I had that moment where everything kind of came.

**Does this happen when you write or when you report or both?**

Well, I think those stories happen when I’ve done a good job reporting. I think my goal is always to report a story to the point where I can just tell the story, where I know it back to front, do you know what I mean? You don’t really get those flow moments in the reporting; you certainly get those moments when you get a great detail or whatever, when you’re reporting. But for me, those really transcending moments where the writing
just comes, I think almost invariably, I’ve reported a lot, I’ve reported really well. I don’t know why particularly you get those. You’ve probably had them. Where you’ve had those two or three hour little windows where the words are just coming, and you feel like everything’s flowing, and you feel like it’s all sitting right on the page. I think those invariably come from good reporting, but they don’t always.

So you’ve been doing journalism for more than 15 years now?

Too long, dude. Yeah. 15 years.

Why have you kept doing journalism?

I have so many answers to that question. Well, I can’t do anything else, the money is pretty good, the lifestyle is pretty good. What I will say, nothing is ever, you know, we were talking about those nights when it just comes, like I live for those. Maybe if it was always like that, I would be less into it. In a strange way, I think there’s something elusive about those moments or those stories, and it’s like I guess I’m kind of driven to have that feeling again. I know how good it feels. It’s like a drug. For me, those nights are like drugs. And those stories, you know, 15 years, I probably got 6 or 7 or 8 stories that I really, really like. Which isn’t very many; it’s one every two years. But I’m proud of those stories, and the feeling that those stories give you is… I don’t know, it doesn’t feel like work. At its best, this job, you feel like you’re stealing money. I feel like I’m stealing money. Sometimes I feel like I would do it even if I wasn’t getting paid just because I love how it feels. But it’s not always like that. There are times when this job is really frustrating.
What do you think sets apart those 6 or 7 or 8 stories from the other stories you’ve written?

Everything kind of clicked. There are stories where the ideas was good, and the reporting went well, and I had one of those nights writing them, and the editing was good, and it looks good on the page. Like the whole process is good; do you know what I mean? It doesn’t necessarily mean that story was easy, the process was easy, but in the end everything worked. And again, that comes down to that awful feel. Everything just fell into place. Except it doesn’t fall into place because you make it happen. Everything just kind of works, and you know it. There’s a moment when you kind of know. Sometimes I’m sitting there and I’m trying to convince myself that the story is good; oh, it’s pretty good. You start talking yourself into it. The ones that are really good, you don’t have to convince yourself. You’re like, I got that one. But it really is rare; it just doesn’t happen that often where it’s just like everything clicked.

And sometimes it matters, I think, too, the response. I think in some way my opinion of a story is colored by the reception it got. There are a couple of stories of mine that I liked that no one gave a crap about.

**Which ones?**

There’s one I like, it’s called “The End of Mystery,” about … investigators. No one read it, no one talks about it, I still like it. But a lot of the ones I feel particularly good about are the same stories that kind of caught people.

My favorite story I’ve ever done in terms of a story I just love is Teller. I loved working on that story, I really liked the final product. Yeah, that’s probably my favorite one.
It is a magical story.

So we started this conversation talking about important stories. That’s not especially important. That’s a story about a magic trick that someone stole. But again, that story is about passion and dedication and belief, and Teller, I guess I just loved how much he cared about magic. Yeah, I just loved how much he cared. To see someone that passionate and, you know, everything today is cynicism, people shitting on stuff, and he believes so intensely that magic can be this beautiful thing. I loved it. I loved everything about him, and I think that’s part of why I feel that way about the story.

If you asked me what story am I proudest of, I would probably say Joey, the soldier story because I think that was important that we did that, but in terms of a story that I just loved, I loved the Teller story. I hope that doesn’t sound arrogant, talking about stuff I like because there’s a lot of stuff I hate.

I remember when I read the Teller story. It just felt like it was one of the most beautiful stories I’ve read in my life.

Thank you. That’s all Teller there. That was one where I think the idea was cool, magic tricks and Teller was so awesome talking about it, and even some of the supporting characters had really good stuff. Joe Stenmeyer, the magic inventor was really cool. And, you know, you talk about weird stories. That one, I can’t remember if I said this in Romania or not, but I had a totally different ending. A totally, totally different ending where it was fictional. I made up the ending. And then I got high one night, and I was reading the story, and then I finally realized that it was a trick. I had this moment where I was like, “Holy shit, he’s just played a huge trick on me.” The whole ending changed
because I had this moment where I was like, “Oh, my God.” Just this moment of realization which I’m not sure I would have had if I hadn’t smoked a joint.

You talk about flow, that night my brain opened up, and it was like, Oh, crap, but I think it made that story much better.

**To what extent is it caring about the people you write?**

That’s a lot of it. That’s the best advice you can give someone, I think. I will take the reporter with the biggest heart in the room every single time. I think it matters so much. I think you need someone who is curious about the world -- that’s where the ideas come from, right -- someone who is curious about the world, who sees the world differently or has questions about things where people don’t have questions. Reporting. There’s a skill to reporting I think in terms of talking to people and knowing where to go for information, but reporting really comes down to care. It comes down to being willing to put in the time and to be careful with people, to be empathetic, I think that’s how you get good information. And then writing, a lot of it comes down to labor, just being willing to sit down and work and work and work and cross write, in those moments you can be motivated by fear of losing your job, or you can be motivated by money, or you can be motivated by deadlines, but the best stories, you’re motivated because you really want to tell a great story. You care about the people in it.

It matters so much, Simina, that you care. It’s like you can tell in a second when someone didn’t give a shit about the story they were working on. It comes out in so many ways. It comes out in lazy reporting, crappy writing, where someone should have gone back and worked on it more and they didn’t; you can see that from a mile away.
And how do you see the care?

You can see care in just the way when you look at a beautiful piece of furniture or look at a really good movie, you can see that someone took the time. You look at a beautiful Japanese zen garden, you know, they don’t just happen. That happened because someone worked on it and worked on it and worked on it and cared about the little details and polished it until it was perfect. And you can see that in stories. You can see it in how much reporting was done, if you finish a story and you don’t have any questions, it has answered every one of your questions and let you satisfied, and there’s sentences in there where you just close your eyes and you go, “Oh, they nailed that.” I still read stories where I think, “Oh, that is perfect.”

How did this work in The Things That Carried Him?

How did it work in terms of care?

Yeah. Did you feel connected to Joey?

Oh, absolutely. I felt super connected to Joey; I had never met Joey, but I felt super connected to him, cared a great deal about his mom, still care a great deal about his mom. I knew that was an important story from the beginning, but as I worked on it I became more and more invested in it, as I saw people’s reactions to the fact that I was doing a story or to my questions… I had a particular moment, it was quite early, where I went to the port mortuary, where all the bodied go in Delaware, and in the military, they have this tradition of giving coins. Not like quarters or dimes, but they melt their own coins, it’s almost like they’re metals. They’re not metals they’re coins. And the head of the
mortuary was a woman named Karen Jiles, and she gave me this coin that was one side it had a folded flag, you know, with white gloves, and it represented the mortuary.

And she said something, she was like, “When you write this story, I want this sitting beside you when you write this story, and I want you to look at it, and I want you to remember what you saw here and how much people care, what it means to us.” She said something like, “I don’t want you ever to forget what goes on here.” And I’m really glad she did that. I don’t think I would have forgotten, but, you know, when I wrote that story I had that coin sitting on my computer. And I felt in some ways like I was part of the journey of bringing Joey back. I felt like everyone who did that had cared so much and worked so hard, and I felt like if I let them down, I would regret it forever. So I just did my best to write a story that they would be proud of. That they would read and say was right and was true. It was just one of those stories where I felt like I couldn’t cut -- not that I do this anyway -- but I didn’t want to cut any corners. I wanted it to be perfect.

I can’t say that it’s perfect, but I can say that I tried my hardest. I can say without any doubt that I put everything I could into that story.

How does a story like this, where you care a whole lot, which is also very sad, how does it affect you?

It affects me a lot. I think some reporters are better at that than I am. There’s a debate here, I think, about objectivity and maintaining distance, all that kind of stuff that they teach you in journalism school. I don’t maintain any distance; I don’t try to maintain distance; I think that’s a shitty way to treat people. If you’re asking them to open up to you, I don’t see how you return that favor by being a wall. So I feel it, and I feel it during
the reporting; I had lots of moments during that story where I was crying with people. I cried with Aunt Vicky at Cracker Barrel; I cried a lot with Joey’s mom. I pulled over at one point driving back from her house and cried on the side of the highway. There’s a cost to that. It’s hard. I worked on that story for eight months. My wife will probably tell you I wasn’t an awesome husband during that time.

I was pretty consumed by it. And then when I was done, I went into a pretty deep depression after that story. Partly because it was such a sad subject, and partly because I didn’t know what to do next. You know, when you have one of those stories, a lot of a writer’s life is kind of structureless, like you don’t know what you’re doing day to day, you don’t really have any -- I don’t anyway -- have any patterns and routines. When I was working on that story I knew what I was doing. I knew it, and I knew it counted. I knew it was important. So I was motivated every day to find the next piece of the puzzle or to write that paragraph. And when it was over, I was kind of like. What do I do now? What do I do now that’s going to matter as much? And the truth is, I haven’t written a story since that matters as much, and I probably never will. I’ve sort of come to the realization that that was probably the most important story I’ll do.

There’s a definite cost, but at the same time I feel like if you don’t invest yourself that way, if you don’t care, you’re never going to get those stories. You’re sort of making a deal. I’m making a deal where I’m deciding it’s worth this cost for me to do this.
Why do you think you won’t write another story that will be just as important or more important than that?

I just can’t imagine it, I think. And that story is now five years old, and I haven’t come close to it. I can always hope that I’ll find a story that everything happens the way that story happened, but I think I’ve slowly come to the realization that I will probably not. I don’t know; I feel like that story was special. Again it was kind of those ones where everything worked. *Esquire* let me write 17,000 words. I don’t think that’s ever going to happen again. Everyone was so helpful. Everything just kind of fit.

That’s not to say I won’t write stories, you know, Teller came after that… That story will probably be the best I can do.

**To what extent are you pursuing heavy subjects now?**

I still pursue heavy subjects. I haven’t had a great year this year. I haven’t done much this year. I did Hugh Hefner in April. Not many people read that story. It didn’t do very well. I tried on it, I liked doing it. I have a story coming out in the September issue about how they make money, how they physically make the new $100 bill. So it’s not a story about life and death. I think it’s interesting. I’m doing a story now on the JFK; you know, it’s the 50th anniversary of the JFK assassination, so that’s what I’m working on now. That’s my kind of stories, it’s dark.

I’m still drawn to those darker subjects for sure. Even Teller, Teller’s kind of dark. It’s a story about magic, but it’s pretty dark.

**Yeah, but it does have a lot of heart.**
I haven’t done a celebrity cover story in… I guess they don’t give them to me anymore. Sometimes I think I’d like to do one just to take a break from the dark stuff, but who knows, I’d probably do a celebrity cover story that had a body in it by the end.

**You were saying at some point that you were considering doing something else other than writing. Are you still thinking about doing that?**

Yeah. I still think about it a lot. Not because I don’t like writing. It’s a couple of things, I think. I think a lot about -- this probably explains a lot about the stories I do -- but I think a lot about how I’ll look back on life whenever I’m dying. Will I have done everything I wanted to do? I think about that a lot. Will I be happy with my life? And sometimes if in that moment if I’ve only written, if I didn’t do anything else, will I be, “OK, that was good”?

And sometimes I worry… I don’t think I will keep writing if I stopped caring about it. I had a moment -- I actually tweeted about it, I think -- I had a moment a couple of weeks ago where I had a really good writing session, it felt really good, I was grateful for that, I had one of those nights, I was grateful I had one of those nights, but I always have this little fear that’s the last time it will happen. If I stop caring, I think I’d stop doing this. I like to think I would, anyway. I hope I would.

**What do you think might make you stop caring?**

I don’t know. You see it happen. You see where people just get tired or stop investing themselves so much. Sometimes I worry that having kids, as they grow up, maybe it’s right that my priorities change and I want to spend time with them rather than travel and work on stories. Maybe that’s the correct order of things. Maybe places will stop wanting
to have me work for them. A lot of this stuff isn’t in my control. I like to think that I’m grateful when it happens now, and that I’m mindful of the fact that it probably won’t always be like this. Especially writing about sports, Simina, you see all the time that people peak and then they disappear. And that’s how it works, kind of. There are writers who are great in their 70s and 80s, but I don’t want to presume I’m going to be one of those people. If I am and I’m happy, great. I don’t want to talk my way out of it. But I’m aware of the fact that it probably won’t last forever. Then I’ll do something else, and hopefully I’ll find something I’ll care about as much.

**What are some of the things you’re most proud of now (in life)?**

I’m proud of my kids. I try to be a good dad. I’m proud of some of the work I’ve done. I like to think that I’ve worked hard. I like to think that what I do, whether it’s working on my house, you know, if I renovate houses, stuff like that. I was sitting in our bedroom looking at the floor that I refinished. I worked my ass off on this fucking floor. But it’s good. I’m proud of that. This floor had shitty pink carpet on it, and all sorts of paint, and now it’s a beautiful wood floor. I feel good about that. But you know, 50 years from now, somebody’s going to come back and paint it, put shitty pink carpet back on it. So it’s part of the deal.

That’s a sad question… I like having experiences. I think that’s what life is about. I like when I do things that… they’re experiences that I sort of cherish. For me, it’s almost become more about that than concrete accomplishments. Over time, it’s sort of become more about that. Like was today a good day? Did I do something good today? Did I do something useful today? Did I do something that made me or someone else happy today?
As you get older, you sort of… I think I’m having a mid-life crisis, Simina. I think I’m having it right now. You’re trying to make it count. Like you’re trying to make the time count. Man, that’s a hard question. I think I’ve a lot more work to do because I don’t have that long a list of things I’m proud of.

(Doubting yourself) Like I can hope I will, but I don’t know. You see people in this business all the time who were once really good and then aren’t. And it’s like what happened there? What changed? Why aren’t they as good as they used to be? Is it because they physically can’t do it, because reporting does take some stamina, is it that? Did they stop caring as much? Did they get distracted by other things in their lives like their families or a different passion that rose up in them? What happened there? I don’t know. And I think it would be the height of hubris if I just sat here now and say, “You know, when I’m 70 I think I’ll be doing really good work.” I have no idea. I don’t even know if I’m going to be alive. I’m prepared.

Every time I see an athlete who’s great being a dick to somebody, the way I make myself feel better is that I know that in 10 years they’ll be retired and no one will care about them anymore. No one gives a shit that Michael Jordan was Michael Jordan. He has no power now. He thinks he has power, but no one cares. And he was the greatest basketball player ever. Wayne Gretsky, the greatest hockey player ever, now just loafs around golfing. That’s just how life works.

I’m mindful of the fact that one day people will stop giving me work and students like you will stop caring what I think about writing and no one will care. I think that is inevitable, and I think I am prepared for that. It’s a pessimistic way of thinking, I think.
it’s realistic where I think it won’t last forever. I think about that time when it will stop. What will I do then that makes me feel as good as those nights of writing make me feel now?

I don’t take it for granted. I’m aware of how good I have it right now. I was in the Esquire office on Monday, and I was talking to Granger and Peter, my bosses. And I said to them, I was like, “Thanks for the ride. I really appreciate the work, and I appreciate being part of this for like 11 years now.” But Granger could quit tomorrow, and then everything changes. I’m just aware.

**Where do your stories fall in this? Are they immortal?**

I think so, yeah. Some of them disappear the day they came out. They have different lifespans. Some of them will last longer. But I think we’ll still read something like “Frank Sinatra has a cold” or John Sacks, “M.” Certainly when I was younger I had this vanity that people would be reading my stuff years from now. I don’t know now if that’s necessarily the case. I think there’s so much to read and there’s so much information out there. I do my best to write a story that someone will think nicely of and will remember, but I can’t imagine that even 20 years from now people will be talking about my stuff. I don’t know. I think some stories have a better chance of lasting than others. But I don’t think any of them will last forever. Holy crap, that’s depressing. What am I doing?

**If you were to talk to someone who’s just starting out and is thinking of dedicating a few decades to this type of work, what would you tell them? Is it worth it?**

Yeah. As much as I’ve been talking about doubt and fears and terrible things, my working life has been great. I can’t imagine many other things I could have done that
would either give me the life or the pleasure that writing has. For me, it’s the perfect lifestyle. Someone made me work 9 to 5 somewhere, I would have topped myself a long time ago. I couldn’t have done it. The travel has been amazing. I’ve gotten paid to go to meet interesting people and watch amazing things. I’ve had such a good deal. And my work product are these very tangible little stories that hopefully people like. And I do think there is like a minor magic in being able to write something that gets printed on a piece of paper that can ship to California or Romania or Missouri, and then someone just sits there and reads it. And I wrote it here in my house. I still think that’s pretty cool. I can think of a lot worse jobs for sure.

It occasionally has its frustrations and disappointments, but I think that would be true of anything that you care about. I can’t imagine caring about something and being perfect at it all the time. I don’t know anybody that lucky. So this is a pretty good level of luck where I do get to experience that sometimes, and I can stay at home with my kids, and I can go on a plane and see somewhere new and make a good living doing that. I have nothing to complain about. I think that’s probably why I think so much about it ending, because I don’t especially want it to end. If I can give myself credit for something, I’m aware of how good I have it and I’m grateful for it. I know there will come a time in my life when I’ll look back on this and go, “Wow, that was a good run.” I always think, when you look at someone, you know the Olympics, there would be a gymnast who does something insane, I always think about them being 80 watching themselves in TV, and remembering when they could do that with their bodies. You know, when they’re 80 and sitting in a wheelchair and they’re watching themselves doing backflips in the air. Like
what’s that like, to look back and see that moment when you were great? 39… Very mindful of good days and being appreciative of it.

**Do you make any different whether it’s storytelling and not medicine.**

Literally lifesaving? It threw me through a loop because once you see someone’s life come back, holy crap, once you see that happen, you’re like what am I doing? I should be doing this. If I’m capable of doing this, this is what I should be doing. I had a really hard time after that because I was like well, I should do that. I think I’d pretty good at it, and I think I can do it. **Why would I tell stories when I can go out there and I can start people’s hearts back up?** But stories can still change people. You can’t literally bring them back to life, but you can make a difference to someone’s life. You can make someone feel better, you can make someone think about things a little differently, you can make them see things a little differently. You’re not changing a life in the sense that you’re saving or ending it, but you can make small changes. And that’s a lot to ask from a job. That’s a hard standard for success: did I save a life? That’s a high standard for success.

(The Teller story didn’t change anyone’s life. The soldier story brought Joey’s mom comfort.) I think in that moment when I’m starting a story, I’m just hoping it’s a good story. To be honest, I’m not sure I really think that deeply about it. OK, I’m going to do my best to make sure this is a good story. I think it’s the story that matters in some weird way. That sounds pretty awful, I think, when I’m saying, “All that matters is a story.” But I think that’s kind of true. For me in that moment. Maybe afterwards when I look back I’ll feel good about the effect it had on someone or whatever. **But most of the time I’m thinking I just want to make the story as good as I can.**
Why is this important?

Because it’s what I’m doing. If I am spending that time and energy on something, I want it to be good. If I was doing it and it was shitty, I wouldn’t feel good about it, I wouldn’t get satisfaction from it. It’s important to me, if I’m going to do something, it’s important that I do it as well as I can. It’s just how I am. My wife and I always talk about this because I refuse to do things I’m not good at. Like I don’t cook because I’m bad at it and I don’t see any point in doing it. Whereas she likes to do many different things. (She’s just learning, and that’s part of the process. Whereas me, I’ll just do two things with my life because those are the things I’m good at.) I’m nuts. Why waste time on something you suck at? Why don’t just go to the restaurant?

(Finkel… it was important to him that he was in the middle of a great story and he was grateful for that)

Sometimes, like Finkel, at the detriment of your own safety. I can honestly say, when I have one of those stories, I’m consumed by it. It’s all I think about.

Again, my wife will start talking about those times when I’m here but I’m not here. I’m present but I’m not mentally present because I got one of those stories going on, and it’s just… I know what Finkel’s talking about. You’re so excited to have one of these things, you’re just doing everything you can to make sure you don’t blow it. Because that’s the worst feeling, when you know you got one. When you know you got the material and you fuck it up.
How do you maintain that over the years? Is it natural?

That’s the question. I don’t know. Right now, it’s almost natural. It’s just how I am, it’s just how I’m built, so when I’m in that moment, I’m excited and happy. But that’s my question, is always will it last? Maybe it will. Maybe I’m totally wrong, and when I’m 80 I will still get as jacked up about a story as I do now. But I don’t know. I see it so many times when people don’t maintain… Maintain is the right word. Like to maintain that standard is hard. To be consistently decent is hard. Right now it is natural that I feel that way; I keep expecting that at some point I won’t feel that way. When someone will call me with an assignment and I won’t want to go. And I think that moment, it’s got to happen… I don’t think you can make yourself care. I think you do and you don’t. Today I woke up still caring, tomorrow I hope I’ll wake up still caring. The day I don’t want to go and I don’t care, then that’s the day I’ll probably do something else.

Reinforcements…

No. Check, people saying nice things. That’s a little bit of fuel. But ultimately I think it comes down to you… If you’re going into a story and you don’t care about it, I think you’re cheating the reader. I think there’s a writer out there who would care about it, who would do a good job, and you shouldn’t fuck it up.

I think you have a responsibility. I mean, if I’m asking someone, “Can I tell your story?” and deep down I don’t give a shit, that’s a pretty lousy way to treat somebody. To ask them to give you something when you don’t really care. That’s a pretty dirty thing to do to somebody. And I can tell people, I can look them straight in the eye and tell them I care about getting the story right, doing a good job, being careful. I would hate to say
those things and not meaning. I think that’s a moral responsibility you have as a reporter: if you’re going to ask somebody to tell their story, you’d better care about what you’re hearing.
Paige Williams

1. How do you choose the stories you write about?

Years of talking about narrative and thinking about narrative have been both blessing and curse. The blessing is that it’s my job to think about the ingredients of masterful storytelling, and to gather other people’s ideas about storytelling and share them with an audience, whether narrative writing students or readers of Nieman Storyboard. The curse is that personally, as a writer, the awareness can sometimes feel like a weight; storytelling starts to feel over-thought and coerced. But to answer the question, the ideal story, for me, involves an interesting and knowable (in as much as we can know anyone) character caught in an unusual situation. The non-negotiable required ingredient, though, is tension, conflict. Opposing forces must be at work: a guy v. a government; an asylum seeker v. homeland estrangement and potential death; a lottery winner v. his own inner demons; an emerald miner v. a town’s ridicule; high schoolers v. extraordinary expectations; an artist v. institutional bias and racial history, etc. If you’ve got tension/conflict you’ve got potential for arc. You’ve got a situation worth exploring. I also choose stories based on the probability of a 360-degree reporting experience: human sources + opportunity for scene + documentation (public and private records, etc.) that can provide the kind of details that make a story worth hearing.

2. What do you hope to accomplish through your stories? In an ideal world, what would they offer readers?

A good time.

A translation of human nature.
A window onto a complicated or mysterious process.

A closed gap in the historical record.

A feeling.

A memory.

A nudge.

3. What are your favorite parts of the process and why?

The reporting, for sure. The detective work. The digging. It’s great fun, to me, to unravel the root system of an organism, whether a person or a situation or an institutional structure. The love for this part of the process probably grew out of more than a decade of working in a newsroom. Daily newspaper reporting can bridge the knowledge between understanding a small part of the world and how it all fits together, or how it’s supposed to fit together. Nowhere but at a newspaper (or a newspaper-like structure with actual journalists in charge) do you get a 3D education in the essentials: how to talk to people; how to cultivate sources; how to understand systems (courts, schools, legislative government); how to work on deadline; how to plumb public record; how to develop a sense of professional ideals (ethics, accuracy, creativity, productivity); how to detect bullshit; how to go deeper; how to switch tactics; how to succeed gracefully and fail even more gracefully and get up the next morning and try again. My two other favorite parts of the process are fact checking and editing. I know! Some people hate it! Well, I love it. Good fact checking is an art, and I love seeing it in action. Same with editing. I always look forward to both. An editor who knows how to talk story (the developmental
conversations are as important, if not more so, than the mid-edit conversations), and who pays attention to detail down to the comma, will have my loyalty every time. The best editors are deep readers. They read beyond the news of the day or the week. They read beyond the news, period. They read literature, poetry. They have interests outside the business. Their connection to the world at large gives them a stronger sense of what stories mean, and what stories can do. They recognize structural influences. They celebrate nuance. They make the writer feel seen, and heard. They consider what the writer is trying to achieve, and they help them get there. Find an editor like that and you’ll not only be happy for life, you’ll do your best work.

4. Writers and creative people, in general, sometimes describe experiencing "flow" when they work: they are completely absorbed by their work, they lose track of time, their work becomes a purpose in itself. Do you ever experience something like that? If yes, how does it feel, in what part of the process does it appear, and what do you think contributes to it?

I feel like that’s what we all hope for, right? The ideal is a sort of fugue state that deflects the distractions and petty engagements that can derail your day and undermine the work. For me, the zone comes when the reporting is engrossing (especially the reading portion: a report, a court transcript, a study, a diary), but also when I’m trying to figure out how to say what I really want to say. What leads to the productive fugue? For me it’s silence and solitude. By solitude I mean a period of time untethered to the voices, images, sounds and other urgencies that come at us all day as Input. Unplugging from all the juiced-up devices in our lives sounds like an oversimplified way to achieve positive headspace, but it’s the only way, for me, to settle down and stop twitching. Not long ago, a developing
story took me to a remote area of Maine. I stayed in an inn without wireless. At first it freaked me out. I needed to text, tweet, Instagram, post to Facebook. My friends *really needed to be able to see* a filtered photo of that fly swatter hanging on the wall. I needed to be able to call 911. I don’t even think they *had* 911 where I was, and I’m glad I didn’t have to find out. I had no choice but to turn off my phone. I opened a window onto a garden and a patch of woods. I could hear crickets, and free-range chickens. The sun set in quiet dignity. I took a walk, to a salt marsh. I went to the dining room and had dinner alone beneath an old beamed ceiling, as a traveler might have taken dinner in a roadside inn hundreds of years ago. Then I went back to my room and read. I found that I could breathe there, and without all the stimulation that’s become an acceptable part of the human experience, I could think. The memory is a strong one, and worth channeling at a time when every action, every thought, feels multitasked.

5. What is your favorite story you’ve written and why?

None of them. I don’t read them once they’re in print, and I don’t dwell on them once they’re gone. That’s a form of denial or perfectionism, probably, but there it is. My writing life has been weirdly episodic and uneven. I’ve written about things I wish I’d never written about, and I’ve accepted some regrettable assignments to pay the rent. Like a lot of writers, probably, I wince at some of what’s out there, on the record, knowing that there are stories that could’ve been done so much better if only I’d framed the story differently, or had more time, or had *less* time. I’m not so great at the gig economy. It makes me feel anxious and unsettled. My favorite stories to report, though: I can answer that. My favorite stories to report are the ones that let me reveal or explain something to readers, and that put me out in the field, experiencing someone else’s world and learning
something new. (I’m a generalist by choice.) Finding truly original characters or a little-known slice of a subculture is an important part of what keeps me doing this work; sometimes, when you live in a certain regional or institutional bubble, it’s easy to forget that the world is full of vibrant, brilliantly authentic people just doing their own thing. A strong sense of place is also important to me. You can’t always have it, but you hope for it, and when you find it you remember it, and the residue of the experience informs your work even if you can’t use the material. A couple of summers ago, I spent some time in remote South Dakota and Wyoming, watching paleontologists and commercial fossil hunters dig out a couple of T. rexes. The setting was almost magically dramatic: the neon meadows of wildflowers, the hilarious weather. In a matter of minutes, a single wispy white cloud could slip across and sky and stop directly overhead, mushroom into purple fists, and shoot lightning and painful rain. So that, or an office? An office, or standing at the rim of the breathtaking Badlands National Park, watching a storm come in? An office, or watching students butcher a bison with hand-hewed obsidian? An office, or hearing a bird you’ve never encountered in your life sing from yellow-tipped prairie grass? An office, or happening upon stories like this one: A middle-aged South Dakota woman named Karen married a ranch hand named Fred and moved in with him. They lived way down a rutted dirt road, past a stand of buttes. Karen came from town, town being a place of fewer than a hundred people, about ten miles down the highway, and now she lived out in the middle of gumbo lilies and sage. The only problem she could see with her new arrangement was the probability of snakes. A nest of them lived and bred in a den either next to the house or beneath it. It wasn’t unusual to find a snake coiled beneath the kitchen table. It wasn’t unusual to be sitting on the toilet and see a pile of laundry move.
One night as Karen and Fred were watching television, a snake slithered out of the bookshelves. Karen at that point turned to Fred and volunteered he do something about all the snakes in the house. He said he would, and in the meantime she wore boots. So yeah. I mean I do love a box of dusty old documents, but give me a rental car and an unknown road and the serendipitous encountering of real people’s stories, and I’m good.

6. Why is journalism worth dedicating big chunks of your life to? What has it brought to your life?

1) Because it keeps the campfire alive.

2) A seat at the campfire. Human contact, for better or worse. An awareness of the world at large and our place in it, and responsibility to it — an awareness of the infinitesimal smallness and foreverness of a single person.

7. Have you ever thought about quitting and doing something else? If yes, what made you keep at it?

Oh hell yes. I thought about it ten minutes ago. I think about it all the time. It can be grinding, frustrating, sickening, poverty-making, lonely, relationship-ruining work. But so what? It’s not supposed to be easy. I like that it’s hard. I like that it requires something of the soul. I’m programmed, at this point — I’m in it. Even if I did give it up, I’d still be in it at some level: thinking about journalism, writing about journalism, exploring it in other mediums. Journalism is like a masterful tattoo: painful, pretty, symbolic of something that matters, and superfreakinghard to get rid of.

8. Do you think that, by doing journalism, you're missing out on anything?

Yes. Unbridled creativity. And the satisfaction and release of making something from
nothing — of creating a piece of work that did not exist before it was born in your personal head and heart. Also, money.

9. Who do you think were the main people impacted by "You Have Thousands of Angels Around You," and in what ways?

Good question. If you find out, let me know.
Tom Hallman

Are you taping it now? (Yes.) I would say I got into those general areas on the edges of the story. I never set out to be the social issues reporter, or the race reporter, or the trauma reporter. I got into those areas because of my curiosity about the way people live or deal with tragedies or deal with race. So it came from the story first, and those issues were secondary, which I think is very different from someone who says, “Well, I want to cover social services.” They approach it with a different take on what they need to cover. Usually way too much policy, reports, officials. If you come to it through the story, through the people, you have the ability to reach readers. So that’s how I discovered that. I would say it grew out of covering the police beat because that’s where all these things collide. You have race, poverty, all of it collides there.

So you were a police reporter at The Oregonian.

Yeah. I had done some other stuff at different places, but I was a police reporter here for like 10 years.

Like Max’s job?

Different. Back then, I worked in a press room at the old police station, and I could wander around and stop and talk to detectives, see reports. It dramatically changes It started when I was an intern here one summer, then I came to the police beat -- that was my job, day cops -- and they had some people fill in who really messed it up. Because I had open access to everything. I would come up to the front desk, and they would just buzz me out back, and I would wander from robbery to vice to homicide, and then make a loop. Well, some of the people who weren’t all that qualified to cover police started
taking stuff right out of reports and putting it in the paper, or didn’t understand, so they really did clam down on us. I had a press room at the police station, and I spent more time there than I did in the newsroom. I would work from 7:30 to 2 o’clock down at the police station, and then come up from like 2:30 to 4 in the newsroom. So my world was really on the street with the detectives, with the street cops.

When was this?

1980 to 1991 or something like that. And I love it because you got to cover the reality of these issues you’re talking about, not from the spokesman or the professor. You want to talk about race things? Well, then go out to a crummy area of town and see what it’s like, see what the frustrations are, and the tensions between the cops. You want to see what trauma is like? Go to a car accident and watch people. So I grew up that kind of way, much different than coming from the top down.

So when did you start writing long-form stories about these issues?

I was part of a golden age of journalism. When I got into business, we actually used manual typewriters and glued the paper together and used pencils to edit. When I came to The Oregonian, nobody really talked about writing. It was all about reporting. And pretty much breaking news and covering beats. And so there were these big gaps that nobody cared about. And the police beat was one of them. The police beat was a place for alcoholic reporters, screwups and young people. And my competition was an alcoholic from an afternoon paper, who never left the press room. He sat and read a book, and all he would cover is the news of the day. I was 26 years old, something like that, so I had no competition, and I would get out and talk to these cops, see these wonderful stories, and
since the paper didn’t really care about productivity in a sense, like “What do you got for today? What do you got for today?” I could do my little news things, and then have the freedom to do these other stories.

So I learned on the job about writing: the murder victim, the rape victim, the drug dealers. I remember going for a ride-along with the vice squad; we picked up hookers. And I was in cars with the hookers, and the dialogue… Because this kind of writing was so different, nobody now really what to do with it, and so they gave you the space. They just let you do it. I learned from doing it… It was more like free form, learning that way. And that meant some of the stories were way too long, they meandered, great openings, terrible endings, all that stuff. But whatever interested me I would go for, and they always said yes, so I learned from doing that.

In the early years, there were no other writers doing the things I was doing. They had feature writers, but it was more feature, like, people hey, they jumped out of their skins, you know, cliché-written stories. There were other people at other papers doing it, but we really didn’t know about each other because there was no Internet. You knew when award season came around.

I can’t remember what was the era this started, but there because a movement with this kind of stuff. And some of the names were big names: Ken Fuson, Tom French, Jacqui, all these people. I remember first hearing about Jacqui when I had won some kind of low-level national award, and they had talked about hiring her here to be an editor, and she didn’t do it, but I was aware of who she was. And then these conferences started. People would go to these conferences, and they would talk about writing.
The Nieman Conferences?

Before that even. But I remember at one, you have to think of the heavyweights that were at this thing: Richard Ben Kramer, all these names that are now authors, they’ve done books, but at the time they grew out of newspapers. During that era, the best writing really was in newspapers, the narrative writing. Before all that came to be, I was kind of dabbling in it and learning my way, and then I grew as the movement grew.

How did you start writing narratively? Did you feel a need to include…

The police beat had such a drama, such characters, such a lingo that the way we were writing it was sterile. It was the kind of thing you would go out and you would do something, and you would come back and you would tell people -- not people in the newsroom, but friends -- “Oh, I went on this undercover drug buy, and here’s what happened.” But the stories that ran in the paper were stripped of any of that stuff. So it was a really natural built-in story. So it grew out of that way, more the excitement of what I was seeing than thinking, “Oh, here’s a good scene.” The beat I had shaped how I wrote.

Why did you keep doing it?

It was a challenge, I loved the learning, you would look around the newsroom and see people, I’m 58 now, I was ancient. Looking back, how old are you? 25. I look like an old man to you. The same way when I came to the paper, I’d look at guys y age and think, who are they? And a lot of these older reporters were burned out because they had done the same story. I liked the how do you do them. It was always interesting. I would never
have the perfect story, so it was exciting to learn how to do it. And there was a power to it; you would get the reader response.

Letters and phone calls. I still have some of them. People loved the stories. They loved the worlds I took people to.

And then I started to think, here’s a real story, how to tell it like a narrative. And I kind of fumbled my way into that.

**How do you choose the stories you want to pursue in depth?**

I have to have access, there has to be enough meaning, and power in the character or the world, and I have to be intrigued enough that there’s something there. I don’t care about, like this plane crash in San Francisco, I could care less about covering something like that. Everybody will cover that.

**What do you mean by meaning through the character?**

What can these readers learn about life through this character’s life, or how they lived their life; what can you learn? So there’s got to be depth to the story.

**Doesn’t everyone has story with depth?**

Everybody in the business?

Everybody in the world. **How do you select among the stories out there?**

For the newspaper, if it’s not somewhat close to the news or some universal event, yeah I can go do a story about the security guard in the front lobby, but I would have to make it so people found something there. You’re right; everybody has a story.
(How has selection evolved over time?)
The whole era of the police stuff, which would be undercover drug guys, prostitutes, murderers, stories that had a built-in structure. Then there was a whole era of stories about places. Places or events or people in institutions, like I followed a woman getting out of prison; what was it like. And then I started to drift into places where there was no story, but something would intrigue me, and I would hang around long enough and go, Oh, my God, there’s a story, or there’s the person with the story.

What sorts of places? What drew you to them?

I would say a lot of the police beat stories were about places: the world of the detective, the world of the undercover guys. There was a fascinating world because it had its own rules and lingo, and I liked getting into that world and writing about it. I also liked the medical world. Then I did stuff, not as much, a little bit with attorneys. But I really liked the medical stuff a lot.

Why?

Life and death. It’s amazing to sit with a surgeon who became a friend of mine, sitting here like you and me, and an hour later she goes and operates on a baby’s brain. And I watch her. She’s no different than me physically, but something in her can do that. And it was incredible to watch a human operate another human. Drama, what was at stake.
What is your role as a reporter?

To figure out the story, to convince them to let me into their world, not get tired and bored with me, and put up with questions that don’t seem to make sense, but they’ll go, “I’ll talk to this guy.” Because most people don’t know their story.

I would never do a profile on a doctor. I would do a story on a doctor in the world doing something that would reveal something. And I started out intrigued by something or somebody, and follow that curiosity to figure out what the story is. Then kind of work backwards in a way. Most stories aren’t clear-cut, like beginning, middle and an end. They’re kind of all over the place, and you search for the story.

When you say story, do you mean the narrative or the meaning?

Both. I’ll give you an example. Somebody called me about a story; it was about a school issue, which I could care less about. But while we’re talking, the guy tells me he’s going to Arizona for the winter. I start talking to him, I say, “What do you do with your home?” He says, “We clean it out and lock it up for four months. And we have an African American woman cleaning our home. Hmm… Interesting, kind of, right?” My mind works like this: I grew up in Portland; I remember as a kid seeing those black women standing by the bus stop down in the mall. As a little boy. Cleaning ladies. I thought, “That’s an interesting story. Would you mind if I talk to, could you give me her number?” He sets it up; I call this lady. She doesn’t know why I’m calling. I just said, “I heard about this; can I come meet you?” She’s like, “Sure.” She has no idea what I’m there for; I don’t even know what I’m there for. And while we’re talking, I notice this big Bible on the side of the table, and I ask her, “So tell me about the Bible.” And all of a
sudden I start to realize the story. She grew up in a shared-cropping farm in the South like a lot of kids, very poor. She left home, this guy came to town, married her, took her out here to Portland. Her father gave her this family Bible; that’s all they have had. She taught herself to read with this Bible, and every day she would slip through the Bible and what the message would be for the next day. Her husband, they have like five kids, he’s an alcoholic, he abandons her here. And she has a choice: she can go back to the share-cropping farm with the kids and live there, but the kids have no future. Or she can stay in Portland, where they have a future, but she has no skills. She flips through the book and lands at the Book of Joe, which she says means patience. So she cleans homes for 55 years. Toilets. Walks to Lake Oswego. Raises five kids.

Now this was an interesting interview to deal with because the kids… I had to get these kids to talk to me about their mother. I told this one girl, who I could tell didn’t dislike me, but was very weary of me. I said, “Look, I’m a white guy. I can’t dance.” And that broke the ice, and she told me an incredibly powerful story that I got because of that. Because she listened. She trusted me. The girl was in her high school class one day, and heard her rich, white classmates talking about the cleaning lady. And she realized they were talking about her mother. Like the reaction you had right there. She wore raggedy clothes, and she was ashamed of her mother. And she came home and told her mother, “I’m ashamed.” Her mother said, “This is who I am.”

So this story has some very powerful moments. When you think about the honesty of saying that. The story ends with these kids coming over for dinner. Now they’re grown. Here’s the end of story: In walks an attorney, a school teacher, a businessman and a nurse. All from cleaning homes.
When the story ran, the Portland Trail Blazers honored her at Center Chord. The story won a national writing award. The woman called me afterward and said, “I never thought my life had meaning until I saw your story.” And I told her, “The life had meaning. The story gave it structure.”

That’s how narrative comes to be. Not sitting around saying I’m going to write about race and what race means. I’m going to tell a story about one woman that moves a city.

That story can be told in a thousand different ways. How do you make that decision?

It’s like music. It just sounds right; it feels right. Now Jacqui would tell that story maybe just like I did, maybe completely different, her story could be better, mine could be better, you might have one. It doesn’t matter which way we tell it, but it’s got to be told like a story. You can tell that story through the eyes of the daughter. You got to pick something. That worked for me.

What do you mean tell it like a story?

You wouldn’t put a nutgraf in there, “A Northeast Portland woman, who turned 75 last week…” You don’t know until the very end what happened. She cleaned homes.

What are you trying to accomplish with these stories?

Make people feel something. Love, anger, sadness, happiness, any kind of emotion. How often when you pick up the paper do you feel anything? When you read a story, you can feel something. You could cry. I can cry over my own stories, the good ones, not the bad ones.
I feel like crying when I read your stories. But it’s not sadness.

It makes you feel something. Yeah. I can read stories that I’ve written, I know how it’s going to end, I know where the moment is, and I can get teary eyes reading it. Even though I’m the guy who did it.

So how do you do that?

You just do it. You follow your heart. (boyfriend questions: did you intellectually think, oh, I like him, or did you feel something?) That’s what a story is. You want the reader to feel first. You don’t want the reader to go, “Oh, I am reading a story about a woman who cleaned homes, she’s a black woman, that’s great how things have changed.” You want to be in the middle of it, going, “Oh my God, her kids are ashamed of her. Oh my God, I feel for her.” Once you get them to feel something then you can give them the information. But you got to feel something. That’s why writing is an emotional process, not an intellectual.

So are you basically saying that you are trying to include moments in the story that people can relate to?

Yeah.

How do you give value to a moment like that, in writing? How do you give it life?

Through the details. Let me give you an example. I did a story about a guy who was mentally retarded. In the story, he had a crush on this girl. The girl’s parents were driving him. He’s 25. And I have a scene, which I’ve reconstructed, where he reaches over and holds her hand in the car, and he’s really nervous. Have you ever been like that? OK, you
get that. It has nothing to do with whether you’re mental… And he squeezes her hand.

My next sentence was: And she squeezes back. It tells you everything. That moment when she squeezes back makes your heart, “Oh,” makes me feel good, makes me like the girl, makes me like the guy, makes me feel good. And when you’re done with the story, you hope they’ll have a bunch of those moments where they cry or they feel something.

**So basically recognize these moments and then make sure you…**

We all recognize them. (As people, not necessarily as journalists.) Yeah, that’s the problem. The journalism gets in the way of it. That’s why some of the greatest writers in history were not journalism students.

In my career, I worked in a car wash, a grocery store, a Greyhound race track, volunteered at the Veterans Hospital, bartender. To me that’s better than saying I went to Harvard, I had internships at The Washington Post, my SATs are perfect. Because that very background makes me see those moments. I’ve … in cars when I was 15 with the homeless guys, bums. Or I pushed guys around the VA in their wheelchairs, I listened to them tell stories.

**How did you realize this was what you wanted to stick through, emotion through writing?**

Because I can’t live any other way.

Emotion is just who I am.
When you’re making the readers feel emotion, do you hope anything else will happen beyond that? Why are you trying to do that?

Because it reminds them that they’re alive. Most of us are very isolated. A story has the power to make somebody stop for a while, and think, and feel. Why does a guy paint? I mean Bruce Springsteen is worth billions. He doesn’t have to write another song ever. Why? Or why does somebody have to do anything? I think it’s because it becomes part of who you are. That’s a difficult thing to understand at your age. I think if somebody gets older, they realize what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are. They learn who they are.

I think it’d be very difficult…You can have somebody who’s young, who’s a great writer, fantastic at putting the sentences together. But they’ve got to go live life to be a storyteller. That’s why you get me somebody who has lived a lot of life, you can teach him how to put a story down, but a lot of people don’t recognize a story. And the way you recognize a story is you get out there and you live life.

So readers stop and they feel something, and they feel alive. Is that it?

Is that it? What else can it be? That is good, because in that moment I take this stranger and this stranger, and I’m in the middle, and I bring them together. And that’s the goal, to make them connect and feel something, or read something and be changed, even if it’s for a minute. Some stories can change you for a long, long time. Decades.

Sometimes better, more thoughtful. Think of someone who might be a borderline racist but doesn’t think they are. Have never really met a black person. The only black people they know are from TV shows. And they read that story about the cleaning lady. When
they start they think, “Oh, I don’t want to read another story about an African American. I’ll bet they’ll be complaining about something.” And by the time they get to the end of the story they’re weeping. And they have been in the presence of grace, and courage, and wisdom. And it changes their life.

Or take someone who grew up in the city, and thinks people in the rural areas are hay seeds. If you write a story about somebody out there on the land, and it makes them stop and think, wow, I’m not that much different. Or someone who’s terrified to come to a city and wants to live out in the middle of some isolated place, is afraid of the bad guys coming to rob her home, and you write a profile about a cab driver, and in that they see themselves, and go, “Wow, that’s not as different as I thought.” That’s how a story can help, too.

**What would you want written on your grave?**

He was a good man, and a great father, and a wonderful husband.

**Where does storytelling fall?**

What’s the biggest story you can ever write? Your kids. I’ve been here 34 years next year. I’ve won all these awards; you walk down that hallway, there’s all these awards. The day I retire and I come back two years later, I’ll be an old man walking through the newsroom. Nobody will care. But the love you put in with your family is what matters. Those are the best stories I will have ever written – my daughters.

And the stories, I will live on not in the newsroom, but in the readers. Who 200 years from now, no matter how you read it, if you pick up that story about Sam Lightner, I’ll be
dead, everybody involved in that story will be dead. But they will pick it up and they will cry, and they will go, “Oh my God, I can’t believe it.” Nobody will pick up the story about the city council or the budget or the crime two years from now.

Go to the Pulitzer books, go to the Pulitzer feature writing, investigative, breaking news. You’ll read some of the investigative and breaking news stories, and go who cares? Every one of the Pulitzer for feature writing will move you. You can read Jacqui’s story 20-30 years from now, and it will still have the truth in there and the power of it.

**Empathy – Uncle’s Tom Cabin, I was in Romania and I could feel something for this old man from another world. To what extent do you see your stories like that, timeless?**

Not all of them because even a great narrative might not have that kind of power, but I bet you there are 20 to 30 that do have that timelessness and the lessons. And none of them are really related to the news. None of them were considered sexy stories when I started them. All of them probably were within 15 miles of the newsroom. They were just there.

**How do you see yourself in relation to your readers?**

A teacher and a partner, at times a guide, at times walking alongside them and not that much different from them.

**Do you consider yourself happy?**

Yes.
What contributes to that?

That I have a very rich life outside of the newsroom. I play guitar, I ride the motorcycle, I go on my big motorcycle ride Thursday, I do ballroom dance, I do martial arts, I have a whole wide range of people that I know that have nothing to do with journalism. In the same way cops should not be hanging out with cops and doctors should not just be hanging out with doctors. Journalists tend to be a very isolated group.

I also think most of my career, I did not hang out in the newsroom. I came in to write. If you look around the newsroom, most people come in, they pick up the phone, they get their stuff on the phone, they write their story, and we’re in a bubble. So for me to get out and walk downtown, I would go out and talk to the cab driver, I would be part of the world. And when you’re part of the world, it makes you think, and it makes you happy.

Do the stories make you happy?

Yes. In two ways. One, it’s wonderful to take moments and scenes and you structure them in a way that you know this is powerful. And I know when somebody reads it, they’re going to cry or laugh or whatever. So there’s that power. There’s also the power of the mystery of the story. Even as much as you know how to do the scene, how to control it, there’s still something else that’s in you that you really don’t get, but the story brings out in you. So I like that.

You’re basically saying that you discover something in yourself?

Yes. And then the third part is when it’s written, you send it out into the world and you see what happens. Which is pretty cool.
How does the selection process work for you?

Finding the story? What intrigues me. What interests me. You know, I’m 58, I’m kind of like a boy inside. I’m 17. I’m very curious about stuff. How does something work? How do you that? How do you put that together? What’s it like to do something? I don’t ask a question just to make conversation; I really am interested. And so the more questions I ask, all of a sudden I think, that’s kind of cool. That’s a good story.

When you’re writing the story and you’re choosing those moments, the magical moments… If I were a creature inside your brain, what would I experience?

You would feel how my emotions would go up, and then I would feel something.

As you realize that oh, that emotional moment fits here?

Both. As I’m watching it, knowing this is an incredible moment and I’m witnessing something as a human, and at the same time going, “That’s an incredible moment for the story.” Then to actually write it and struggle with the writing; how do I make you, who weren’t there, feel what I felt through words? That dance is good. That’s challenging and fun, too. My emotions would go up and down. I would feel them and then try to manipulate the reader to feel the same way.

Is it difficult when you’re trying to write emotion into those moments?

No. Because I feel them.

But you said it was challenging. And pleasurable.
You watch a surgeon talking to me, and 15 minutes later go into a room to pick up a baby and put the baby into her arms, and say goodbye to the parents, and walk back and start operating. I felt something when she took that baby. The challenge is how do I get the reader to get what that means? Is it the way she does this on the child’s hair? Is it the fact that she always wears pearls so that when the kids wake up they see the pearls? What is it?

And so part of it is asking questions, part of it is being observant, and part of it is structuring it in a way to build to those moments.

**How do you decide what details to pick?**

How I feel.

**So you’re basically your own test reader?**

Yeah.

**Do you ever doubt your choices?**

Early on in the process when you’re writing you struggle with it because you’re not sure if it’s right, or you can’t get your hands around it, and as the process goes on, I’m more and more confident. So when I turn a story in, I’m a very easy person to edit. Because I’ve done it, I can’t make it any better. Which makes the editor’s job fun and challenging, because if they’re going to edit, they can’t just copy edit, they have to story edit, which is, you know, fun for an editor… I don’t fight over words at all. I can tell you why I had that sentence there. If you want to get rid of it, explain to me why it will make it better. And if you can, then hey, I’m all for that. Some people fight over a single word. I don’t.
Where does the pleasure come from?

The act of creating. I like the journey and the struggle and the fun and the learning in the doing of the story.

Have you had periods of time when you were disappointed with journalism?

Yeah. When you realize because of space limitations or time you only get to capture a bit. Or you get the opportunity to tell a story, and because you can’t devote the time to build a relationship with the person, you have to let it go because they’re not operating on your timetable. And I think that’s changed, too, over the last 10 years. There’s not as much space. A long story now can be 45 inches. I wrote a 6,000-word story about a guy working at a coffee shop. That would never happen now.

They read them different online. Online, I have a 6,000-word story about a guy working in a coffee shop, and right above it is a story about a car accident. And they’re both given the same prominence. Maybe down the road people will read things differently…

Has there ever been something more serious than being disappointed in the changes the media is going through?

I look out in the landscape, and there are some really good young narrative writers out there. There’s a guy at The Washington Post that’s great. I think he’ll win a Pulitzer this year. What’s happening is the next generation is taking over. And they’re better at their age than my generation was at their age. There’s some great storytelling out there. It’s going to take the commitment of the publications to say it’s valuable, readers want it, and then create a platform for that.
What has kept you doing this for 30 years?

Mortgage. I don’t know what else I’d do. It fits me.

You obviously put in a lot of emotion to offer that much emotion. Has it ever felt draining or too much?

It can be draining, but not in the classical way. We fool ourselves if we think we’re the one in the story. We’re watching it. It can be draining when you watch something, but no. I still like it.

I know a lot of people my age who are reconsidering a future career in journalism.

It is different. Because the role of the reporter is much more directed by the institution than it used to be. I came in when there was a city editor, two assistants, and then all the reporters. So you could come up with an idea, and the editor would almost lose track of what you were doing. While now you got an editor on a team; it’s much more controlled. And I think it’s harder for a younger person to develop their passion or their interest when you don’t have the freedom to go explore.

(Is there more?) I like to tell stories. I like people. I like getting into these different worlds. I feel like I’m going to school every day. I’m not bored. At 58 there’s a lot of guys bored with what they’re doing. I’m not bored. So that’s why I like it.

(Satisfied?) Yes. Because I was able to do it on my own terms. Twice I was offered a job at The New York Times. The first time, my wife was pregnant, and I turned them down. I came back, I was still the police reporter here, no big deal, working Sunday through
Thursday. I’ve written two books, Pulitzer, finalist twice, I won all those awards. But I’ve been a great father. I didn’t have to lose my life for the awards.

And the bottom line is the Pulitzer is just a piece of paper hanging on the wall. So I was able to do it on my… I didn’t expect it. I didn’t think, oh my God, my goal at 25 is I’m going to win an award. I was just like, I like to cover the cops; it’s kind of cool how they are. I am happy with what I accomplished. But I never hung an award on the wall ever until my wife for Christmas like three years ago had the Pulitzer framed. But they were in boxes, in the closet; I never had any of them hung up.

So how do you think you were able to do that, to be accomplished both in your career and in your family?

In my life, I always put the job in perspective. When I was covering the cops, I would work 7:30 to 4, and at 4 o’clock I would get up and leave. I went home, I played with my kids in the park, a game of bass, I was there for dinner, which kept me balanced, living the life.

At the paper I would say I had a crummy beat, the police beat, which allowed me to grow and learn at my own pace, and I was lucky enough to learn from the first group of editors, who were more interesting in reporting than writing, and then work with Jacqui for a while, Jack Hart, these really good story editors. I got lucky that way.

How old were you when you got married?

I was almost 24. I just celebrated my 34th wedding anniversary Sunday.

Congratulations!
Thank you.

**So how important do you think this balance was for your work?**

Critical. If you don’t have the balance, you start to become jaded with the world, and you can’t see stories in the world if you look at it as jaded, and the more you’re out in the world, you get story ideas, you hear things, you have to have the excitement about being in the world. If you’re sitting in the newsroom 12 hours a day, you have nothing left to give the world. You go home and watch TV.

So you got to get out. You got to dance or play music, ride bikes, do whatever it is to renew your spirit.

**How do you do that on a long term? How do you make sure you stay on track?**

You find what moves you. Do you listen to music? I listen to music all the time. I can feel myself fill up listening to music. And I can feel myself feel melancholic listening to music, which I like, too. I like hearing the sad songs. Or whatever. You find ways to renew your spirit that have nothing to do with going and drinking or whatever, but what makes you you. Whatever that is, you figure that out.

**Are stories renewing your spirit, or are they the thing in which your energy goes?**

Both. Because when you get to go do a story about somebody, the black cleaning lady, it renews my spirit to be with her, it renews my spirit to write about her, and then to get the response; in three different kind of ways. One is human to human, the other is writer to story, and the other is journalist to reader.
In those moments that you said are the ones that reveal emotion and make the story powerful, what else do you pay attention to, except for the details you select?

For a while there, many of my stories, especially the stories that were, a lot of the award winners, I would start a story not sure where it was going; I would be there while it unfolded. So I was able to pick the moments, and go, this is going to be a big moment, or this is a moment, or I’d better be there for that moment. Not necessarily knowing why, but feeling. In addition to feeling something, being able to have the access to be there when it happened was a big deal. There’s not as many opportunities to do that now because those stories take so much time.

And then when you write it, how do you make sure you don’t screw it up?

You probably screw it up anyway.

Less is more, number one – and I’ve violated these rules. Don’t try to overwrite it. If it’s a beautiful, simplistic moment, trust that the moment is powerful enough for the reader to get. You don’t have to be overwriting it. And let your heart be the guide, and if you’re, “Oh, my gosh, I really feel something about it…” and figure, well, the reader will feel that, too.

If you were to point out three major happy moments in your life, what would they be?

Birth of my kids. I wouldn’t say getting married because you’re not aware of what it is, but I would say the story of a marriage, sharing good times and bad times. And I would say winning the Pulitzer, not necessarily for me, but for what it meant to my parents and
my kids and the people who had been there on the journey. That was a cool moment. The publisher. There’s a picture. I had been a finalist twice before, and there’s a picture in New York that they took at the moment they called my name. And you can see my father, he has tears in his eyes, and I’m walking around, I put my arms around the publisher’s shoulders, who was the kind of guy you really didn’t do that with. But it was a very powerful moment, and I realized that was cool for them. They were both alive to see it, that my parents was there, my kids for there.

Is this a job worth offering half of your life to?

Yeah. Because you’re going to offer it to something. Because at the end of this journey, do I want to look at a file drawer full of cases I’ve prosecuted? No. The doctor thing is pretty cool, but only if I can be like a brain surgeon. I wouldn’t want to be a dermatologist. I was drawn to the drama of it. That’s pretty cool: heart surgeon, brain surgeon, yeah. Because you change lives. But these stories, you bet. It’s great. I can pick up stories I wrote 30 years ago and go, I love this. Yes. No, it is worth.

Because they have changed lives?

Because they will live on past me. (And have the same impact on people) Maybe in 20,000 years it will change, but in 300 years, you’re still going to cry over the same things you cry about now. And when you read a story of mine, or any of the other Pulitzer stories, too, that’s power. That’s life. And when you read them, to think that in 100 years any one of those Pulitzer winners will be dead, but yet Jacqui’s story will speak to somebody, even though she is long gone.
Oct. 22, 2013

To whom it may concern:

It was my pleasure to serve as Simina Mistreanu’s supervising editor during her reporting internship with the Breaking News Team at The Oregonian in the summer of 2013.

In evaluating Simina, the most important thing I can tell you is that no one wanted her to leave at the end of her internship.

Simina proved an excellent reporter. Almost from her first day with our team, she showed herself to be eager, thorough and versatile. She could report and write like someone with many more years of experience.

Simina would take on any story happily, whether a brief about a car wreck, a news feature about water safety in our rivers or complicated enterprise pieces about changes in the GED system or how the state was changing guidelines governing the release of certain prisoners.

She was also a terrific teammate in that she was always quick to raise her hand to help out other reporters, to do the mundane as well as the exciting, and to work varied shifts when other reporters took days off.

In sum, I would say that Simina had a great summer and that we hope she will someday come back to the Breaking News Team.

Please contact me directly if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

John Killen
Breaking News Team leader
The Oregonian
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Nov. 8, 2013

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• 10-year-old injured in Mount Hood fall is doing 'phenomenal,' dad says - July 31, 2013

• Second Oregon wildland firefighter dies in line of duty - Aug. 6, 2013
• Teenage firefighter died on the third day of his first firefighting season - Aug. 7, 2013

• Polish climber who died summiting Mount Hood wanted to plant flag, authorities say - Aug. 13, 2013

• Romanian princess, Oregon husband arrested in bust of suspected two-state cockfighting ring - Aug. 15, 2013

• Romanian princess charged in alleged Oregon cockfighting ring known for childhood love of animals - Aug. 16, 2013

• Romanian princess, Oregon husband to be freed while facing cockfighting charges - Aug. 16, 2013

• Life after prison for Oregon killer Kenneth Janowski: 'I don't want to forget what I did' - Sept. 21, 2013

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Susan Gage
Director of Local Content