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Journalism Driven By Passion

'... we're totally comfortable with the view that New Orleans should survive. As a newspaper, we're clear on that position.'

By James O'Byrne, Mark Schleifstein & Susan Feeney

In the spring, the Nieman Fellows were visited by three journalists — a reporter and editor with The Times-Picayune in New Orleans and a senior editor with National Public Radio — each of whom has been involved with the long-term coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, an epic storm that devastated the city of New Orleans and many other areas along the Gulf Coast. They spoke of great personal loss and of professional obligations and about the passion they feel for a story without an ending that they know must continue to be told. What appears below is an edited version of the discussion that took place during their morning visit with the fellows.

James O'Byrne, Features Editor, The Times-Picayune: The experts on trauma will tell you that the human mind has a great deal of resilience in dealing with trauma, because once you're removed from the traumatic event, your ability to heal yourself is actually quite profound, and it's a very limited number of people who have difficulty long term. The problem with Katrina is that the trauma is around us every day. The part you visit is doing great but not the part you live in. The neighborhood that I drive my kids through to school every day is still ruined. It's still empty houses — it looks like a neutron bomb hit it. So if you are a citizen of New Orleans, you're exposed to the trauma on a daily basis.

If you're a journalist in New Orleans, it's hard to have to tell people's stories. We spend all day long listening to people's stories, and it's important that we listen to them and that we continue to tell them for our readers. But that takes a toll on top of just living in the city.

Mark Schleifstein, Environmental Reporter at The Times-Picayune: [In a series of stories he co-reported in 2002, Schleifstein revealed that the risk to New Orleans from hurricanes was increasing because the protective wetlands were disappearing and the levees were sinking. Even a Category Two storm, his series concluded, would put water into the city.] I dealt with the trauma around us by working and then overworking and overworking and overworking until I ended up in the hospital. I ended up with a back injury and had surgery and then the day after I'm out of the hospital, I'm still working at home.

O'Byrne: For others, there are drugs or alcohol. There are all kinds of ways to deal with it.

Schleifstein: The second I was out of the hospital I stopped taking any medication, because I didn't want to get hooked on anything. But I was lucky, because my wife was sane and dealt with everything and was able to deal with the rest of my life. So I had that ability of doing that and not having to deal with knowing that we are now in the ninth place that we have lived in the last six months, and she's going to go find a house for us to live in. My kids were not living with us because they're grown, so I don't have that to worry about. We had enough money to survive, as opposed to what a lot of other people at the newspaper were dealing with. Even so, there were many stresses going on from Day One, and it could be overwhelming if you allowed them to be.

Susan Feeney, Senior Editor for Planning at NPR's "All Things Considered": There are a lot of people on the staff who are really struggling, and the city has a profound lack of mental health services. It took a while but the Dart Center folks who deal with trauma in journalism came to speak to people at the newspaper. They came in right after Katrina hit and then some months later, and I think it was needed. I think you would admit that there are still people at the paper having a hard time holding it together.

O'Byrne: I think the problem with journalists in particular is that we think we're so resilient that we don't need any help, so we resist it as much as we can. What Dart did was provide a scientific underpinning for the struggles that some people were having and, therefore, made it a little easier for them by giving them this medical information about why they might be depressed or might be dealing with the effects of trauma or stress. Once they understood the medical underpinnings of it, they felt a little more comfortable getting help.

I manage 31 employees post-Katrina, and at the very least we had each other, and all of us work in a place where we understand

there is a context for anything that happens. For example, it's not a particularly noteworthy thing in my department for an employee to cry over something seemingly small that just happens every day. As a manager, it's incumbent on me, in a way that probably would have been inappropriate before the storm, to know how my people are doing in their personal lives. I don't ask incredibly probing questions, but I will ask people how they are doing. And they know I don't mean "How are you doing on your story?" but I mean how are you doing getting by day to day. And they will tell you how they're doing, and it's important for them to be able to talk to you and talk about that.

One of my editors has been trying to get her house back together for 21 months. You can build a new house from the ground up in 21 months, but not in New Orleans you can't. You can't even get your damn house renovated in 21 months. She was so long without running water in her kitchen that one day she just lost it. She said to have to cook every damn meal in the FEMA trailer parked out in front of her house for a year and a half, you just get to the point where you can't deal with it anymore. So that's just in microcosm what people deal with, and you just have to give them the room to have bad days.

Question: Susan, you spoke earlier about how NPR has tried to stay with the story but that when you report on Katrina's aftermath listeners tell you they don't want to hear about it anymore. Perhaps you could talk a bit about these two parts of your life — one in which you are very involved with what's happening in New Orleans and you understand so well the personal dimensions of this story and the other when you are hearing from people from some other place who are saying, "We're tired of this story."

Feeney: Let me make that clear, there's no disagreement at NPR, all the way up to the president, that we will continue to cover this story. It is enormously expensive to do so, and we don't care; we will keep doing it. It's easy to cover a tragedy when something happens. When Katrina hit, we knew how to dive in. We know how to do big stories. But to continue to cover very, very slow-moving tragedies, it's really hard, because when we do a story now and you hear it and it's a lovely story you have this vague sense that you've heard this story before. We had one the other day about this community in New Orleans East that picked itself up — the Vietnamese community — and someone said, "Wasn't that a great story?" I said, "Absolutely, and I'll give you the date that we just did that story. We did the same damn story, and I'm glad that we did it again, but we have not found a way to continue to tell the story in a compelling enough way."

When I personally see a poll that tells me people aren't caring, I think that's a personal failure of mine that I haven't found a way to make people understand how enormous this problem continues to be. OK. And a couple of weeks ago, because we're retooling "All Things Considered" a little bit, we did focus groups in Boston with those we consider to be hard-core listeners. We thought they might complain a little bit, because we're having that sort of problem with our Iraq coverage in telling that story. Sometimes people complain we do too much Middle East or too much Somalia or something, so we're used to that. But we didn't expect that the story that these listeners were most sick of was Katrina, and we were so sad about that. If you're a commercial network, you're probably not doing it anymore. But we can still do it; to me it's an invitation to find interesting ways and that we are really trying to rethink how we tell the story.

For the moment, this involves some bigger profiles of people and families, and we're going to try to do a little less of the incremental. While I think the money stories out of Congress are important and that the bureaucratic battles are incredibly important, we're going to try to do more personal, more big picture stories, and see if that's an interesting way to sustain it.

O'Byrne: I think Katrina has revealed two shortcomings of our craft. One is what Susan speaks of that we can write the story about one person's tragic heartbreak, but when 100,000 people have tragic heartbreak and that heartbreak extends over 21 months, we just don't have the capacity to cover that. The other thing that I think that has sort of been our enemy on the national stage is that as journalists we think we know what disaster looks like. We know what floods look like, what wind damage looks like, and what storm damage looks like. We know what tornadoes look like. So there is clearly this thing where editors who make decisions about coverage think they know what New Orleans looks like, and they don't. They don't have a clue, and all you have to do is get one or five of them or however many you can get to come here and drive around the city for five or six hours and never see a habitable house and, by the end of that, they say, "I had no idea."

Feeney: Most reporters talk about that even when they've come down here to do stories, they have the hardest time convincing their editors that this is a story, let alone that it should go on Page One.

O'Byrne: The people who were in New Orleans in the first weeks after the storm, whether they're TV people or print people, they are forever haunted by this story because they know how big it is.

Feeney: John Burnett at NPR is a great example. He's been back many times.

O'Byrne: Anderson Cooper at CNN won't let it go; he was there in the first couple of weeks after the storm, and he cannot get this story out of his head. We talked to a print reporter at the Los Angeles Times who said the same thing. He wants to come back and

write stories, but he can't get his editors to let him. What we need is for the editors to come, and if the editors come and they see it and go back and decide not to write about it, that's just the breaks of the game, that's the way it works. But what's hard is for people to make decisions thinking they know what happened in New Orleans, when the only way you can know what happened in New Orleans is to go to New Orleans.

Feeney: This is a hard story to do — doing a story that's basically saying nothing's changed. Nothing-has-changed story is a really hard story. There's not good TV footage that looks any different than when things hadn't changed before. It's the nothing-has-changed story that is just mind-boggling.

O'Byrne: We talk about the Katrina channel being this continuous channel in which you never see the same house twice, but it's just driving up and down streets. But that's the reality.

Schleifstein: From the public's standpoint, I think the biggest problem is that they still look at this disaster as a TV screen and this little picture of a house or a guy being interviewed in front of a house or looking down a street, but just that little street. They don't recognize that today you can drive 90 miles from New Orleans to Venice along the river, and on both sides of the street for that 90 miles every single house is destroyed. Brian Williams is trying to do this on TV, but there's just no way of explaining that. Indeed as James said, "Who is going to watch a TV show like that? Oh, here's House No. 257. Here's House No. 1,242."

O'Byrne: House No. 97,324.

Schleifstein: They all look alike. "Oh, my God, look there's some more children's toys that are out in the middle of the street."

Question: I'm struck by the notion that this is, of course, what foreign correspondents have been dealing with for a long time.

Feeney: Darfur is a great example.

Question: How much can you write about the tsunami since it happened? Some people find it interesting because of the personal dimensions that are being discussed in new ways.

Feeney: I think that's right. We've done quite a bit of speaking at journalism schools and to media groups and so these people are interested enough to listen and to talk about it.

O'Byrne: A great thing about being a journalist in New Orleans right now is passion drives our journalism in a way that it never has before. Far from feeling defensive about it, I'm unapologetic about it. I think the newspaper has been an extraordinary leader in trying to define the agenda and trying to raise the issues that are important to the future of the city. In the absence of civic leadership, I think the newspaper has done a great job identifying the issues and calling on people who aren't doing their jobs and exposing fraud where we see it and holding the city's officials and the state and federal officials accountable where we can.

We have no compunctions about it — we're totally comfortable with the view that New Orleans should survive. As a newspaper, we're clear on that position. The conversation about whether or not we should have a place to live, whether or not our city should survive — just imagine having that conversation in your hometown. Your hometown is hit by a disaster and the nation wants to talk about, "Well, should we really have a town there after all?" I mean it's an extraordinary conversation to have, but as a newspaper in New Orleans, which was a city before the United States was a country, it's strange to have a conversation about whether or not you're going to have a city at the mouth of your major river. You are, OK? Let's dispense with that at the outset. We take the position that it's okay to have that position and that the flip side position — "We'll just let those people rot, essentially, let that city rot. Sorry we didn't build a strong enough flood protection system but life's tough. Move on." — is not an acceptable position to have.

So emanating from that is really passionate journalism about what's happening in the city. I'm the features guy, so I sort of have a somewhat arm's length view of what goes on in the news pages, but I think they've done everything that great journalism should do to hold people to account — "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" — that's what we should be doing, and that's what we are doing in the city.

Schleifstein: We've also been successful even in our hires in getting some really good young people. One of whom is a local kid whose family was flooded out, and he is reporting on the state's Road Home program [set up to help those affected by Katrina get back into housing], and he's there all day and night and just killing them on a daily basis. I'm sitting right next to him, and he's like yelling at them, "Well, you have to tell me this. What do you mean you can't tell me?" We're all like that, and it's this aggression and ownership of the story. It's our story. It's our lives, and we're going to do something about it.

Feeney: There really has been extraordinary leadership at the paper. Editors are very close to their staffs and connected to them

and pay attention to them and take care of them. I'm going to say one really nice thing about the Newhouse family that owns the paper, and everyone there has said this, "Thank heavens The Times-Picayune is not a publicly traded newspaper." Would you want to be part of the Tribune Company and have your paper making zero money? Have it lose money for months and months and months? And they kept everybody on staff who could make it back by a certain date when basically half the city was gone, half your circulation was gone. It's a pretty extraordinary thing, really.

O'Byrne: Yes, it is. I think the date people had to be back at their jobs was October the 13th, six weeks after the storm. Regardless of whether you were in St. Louis for six weeks or you were in New Orleans working for six weeks, you were getting paid.

Feeney: And receiving a clothing allowance and health insurance no matter where you were.

O'Byrne: Today we have a much smaller staff, but it's a staff now that more closely reflects our circulation, anyway. Our staff shrunk with our circulation; it was 265 before the storm and right now we are around 200, which isn't bad. Our strategy to focus a lot of our efforts over the last 20 years in the suburbs paid off in big ways. No one was fired.

Feeney: No one was fired. That's a pretty big issue when every other newspaper in America is laying people off.

