

Yankee Quill speech October 2007, Boston

I am honored and humbled to receive this award.

I want to congratulate Jim, Eileen, Michael and Larry who are also receiving the Yankee Quill Award tonight.

I thought writing this speech would be difficult but it turned out trying to figure out what to wear was even tougher. My six-year-old daughter Nora informed me with every outfit I tried on, “That looks super weird Mommy.”

So, standing before you looking ‘super weird’, I’ll tell you that I was quite surprised when I learned that I had been chosen for the Yankee Quill Award. I always feel like there is someone else out there who deserves this award just as much, if not more than I do.

But I know for certain that I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for the editors and mentors who taught me how to tell stories that matter and make a difference.

I had a lot to learn when I first began working as a journalist at the Lawrence Eagle-Tribune in North Andover, Mass. It was my first job at a big paper and I was terrified.

One of my initial lessons was meeting a deadline. I never was good at that. I always wanted my stories to be perfectly reported, perfectly written.

Not long after I began working at the Eagle-Tribune, the paper’s top editor Dan Warner tried to cure my habit of pushing deadline. Warner looked like a miniature Lou Grant and he could yell just as loud.

One morning, the police scanner broadcasted: Shots fired in downtown Lawrence. A couple of reporters ran out the door and were told to phone in the details to me. The morning deadline was an hour away.

Thirty minutes later, the reporters called. I held a phone to each ear, typed their notes and hung up. Then I attempted to create a poetic lead: The day dawned with striking beauty as shots rang out... While I struggled to write beautiful prose, Dan Warner barreled out of his office. He headed towards my desk. “Walsh,” he bellowed. I knew I was in trouble.

The red light hanging from the newsroom ceiling flickered on – meaning the presses were rolling. Warner wasn’t enthused about my perfectly crafted lead.

“What the hell are you doing?” he screamed.

“Writing my lead,” I whispered.

He then began dictating (in a very loud voice) what I should write: “There was a shootout on the streets of Lawrence this morning. Period. Police say two men were involved.

Period. One was shot. Period. Police are investigating the shootings. Period. There is no more information at this time. Period. Now send the damn story!”

I learned many lessons from Warner and my first city editor Al White. They were like superheroes to me. They possessed a magical power that allowed them to know what stories we needed to tell and why we needed to tell them.

One of their beliefs was that we should interview family of people who died suddenly in car crashes or other accidents. One fall morning, I received a call just after 7 a.m. from Al White. Three teenagers had been killed in a car crash on their way to school. White told me to go talk with two of the families whose daughters had just died.

I shook as I knocked on the door of the first family. Inside, a woman screamed. A man answered the door and, he too, was crying. I explained to this father why I was there and told him I wanted to get some information about his daughter. Amazingly, he sat down with me and talked about her. As he spoke, he cried and I cried, too. In the nearby room, his wife continued to sob.

The parents of the other teenager who died did not want to speak with me. I was glad; I am not sure I could have done another interview that morning. I drove back to the newsroom and typed up my notes. When deadline was over – and miraculously I did make deadline on that story – I knocked on Warner’s office door. “Why do we do this?” I asked.

Warner explained that we wrote about these kids and people who died suddenly because we wanted our readers to know that they mattered, that they had dreams, goals and talent, that they weren’t just a statistic – that the community lost someone important that day.

Knocking on the doors of families who lost a son or daughter was never easy, but at least I knew why I was there. I understood the importance of the story. Warner’s words and explanation carried me a long way. I always had to know why the story was important, why I was telling it.

I was 27 when Warner and White assigned me to the Willie Horton story. At the time, I had no idea of how powerful newspapers could be. But this story would teach me that passion and persistence could change lives, laws, and even affect a presidential election.

I spent a year searching reporting on why rapists and killers like Willie Horton were released from prison on the weekend to go to McDonald’s, to the mall and to do basically whatever they wanted to do – unsupervised.

I also spent a lot of time in prison talking to killers who said Willie Horton was giving them a bad name. And I learned that you save your tough questions for last or you end up with someone like Willie Horton screaming and threatening to leave an interview that took months to arrange.

I also learned a lot about politics that year and how a story can serve many purposes. I will never forget sitting in my North Andover living room watching the 1988 presidential debate and listening to George Bush Sr. talk about Willie Horton and how Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis was soft on crime.

Much later in my career, I learned that sometimes the story you choose not to tell is as important as the stories you do tell. A 16-year-old girl who tried to kill herself taught me there is more to journalism than going after a great story.

A day after her boyfriend shot himself, this high school girl also tried to kill herself. Two weeks later when she learned I was writing a series on teen suicide, she told me she wanted to talk to me. I was concerned about how fragile and vulnerable she was. But her parents and her therapist were thrilled that she was speaking to me – because she wasn't talking to anyone else.

I spent time with this teenager at her home; the two of us sat alone in her bedroom. She cried with me and told me things she'd never told anyone else. In theory, this was going to be a powerful story about one girl's suicide attempt and the struggles she faced to overcome depression.

But I was worried. What if she tried to kill herself after my story appeared? Even if I wasn't to blame, I knew that wouldn't matter.

Finally I asked her, "Do you understand what you're doing?" I explained that even though everyone in her small town knew that she had taken tried to kill herself, once her story was in the paper, it would live on forever. It would circulate endlessly on the Internet. "Do you really want that?" I asked her. She shook her head no.

During my years as a journalist, I also learned that sometimes newspapers and journalists do not do the right thing. Sometimes, we are driven by deadline and the desire to beat the competition. One of ugliest assignments I ever received was to interview the family of a girl who had just killed herself in South Florida. In her suicide note, the girl had written that the local sheriff, her step-father, had molested her. She chose to kill herself, she said, because she couldn't live with the shame anymore.

My editor told me to go interview her parents to see if there was any truth to the story. These same parents had hung up repeatedly on other reporters, telling them they didn't want to talk. It was my job to go to their home. Unfortunately, it was the day before their daughter's funeral. I arrived at their doorstep, trembling and feeling ill. A woman answered the door.

When I explained why I was there, she fell silent and stared at me like I was the most evil person she had ever encountered. "We're about to wake our daughter," she told me. "What do you want?"

"Nothing, I said quietly. "Nothing."

I had no answers for this mother. No fancy talk about how the community needed to know right then, right at that moment about whether her daughter had been molested by the sheriff.

I wish I could somehow have explained to that mother why I was there. But I didn't know myself. Sometimes I think the news business could use more compassion, more patience, and more common sense.

No one remembers the stories we don't get. People remember the stories we do tell and how we tell them. They will remember the details we use in our stories and how we get them.

Thankfully, I've had the good fortune to work for editors and publishers who believe in telling stories with honor and integrity.

Several of those people are here tonight. I've had the privilege to work with some of the best editors and publishers in the business. People like Portland Press Herald's Publisher Chuck Cochrane, who has always given reporters the resources and support to do their jobs. I had the good luck to work for John Christie, my news editor at the Florida Sun-Sentinel; he taught me how to write stories that are balanced and fair. Press Herald city editor Eric Blom, who is also here this evening, worked with me on a series about how Maine's mentally ill children could not get help. Eric has a lot of patience and I nearly drove him insane on that series.

Several of my family members are also here tonight. I'd like to thank my parents, who have always believed in me – even when I didn't believe in myself; my five sisters, who have always cheered me on; my husband Eric Conrad, one of the best journalists and editors in the country, who has always supported and encouraged me.

And I'd like to thank my daughter Emma for her patience. She sat quietly by my side for hours as I talked on the phone with mothers who couldn't get medical care for their mentally ill children. While I worked, Emma sat at her own desk with her plastic PlaySkool phone, notebook, and pen, later telling me: "I'm interviewing mental health people too, Mommy."

My daughter Nora has also begrudgingly put up with Mommy's stories which have taken far too much time away from her and Mommy playing Barbies.

So, I could go on for another hour or so, but I know there is some important baseball game being played tonight.

Thank you again for this honor.

**The Yankee Quill Award is a regional American journalism award that recognizes a lifetime contribution toward excellence in journalism in New England. The award is bestowed annually by the Academy of New England Journalists, and administered by the New England Society of Newspaper Editors. It is considered the highest individual honor awarded by fellow journalists in the region.*