NIEMAN STORYBOARD

Annotation Tuesday! Kathy Sawyer and the execution of the "Death Row Granny"

More than 30 years ago, a journalism grad student clipped the Washington Post story as a great example of how to transform a deadline story with narrative details. He still has it, and it's still a great example.

ARTICLE BY
BOY KIDDERMAN
@BoyKiddermanJg

Tweet
Share
Email
Print
Comments
Like
Print
Hide all annotations

TAGGED WITH
Annotation Tuesday! (AKA AT)
Kathy Sawyer | Washington Post

Boy Kiddermann with her clipping from the 1989 WSJ. Pic Pending

Condensed title: Kathy Sawyer's story. Expand/Hide

The clipping is yellowed, a mile from 33 years ago when I was a journalism grad student and so wowed by a story that I cut it out of the newspaper for inspiration.

The article chronicled the last moments of the pajama-clad killer known as "Death Row Granny," who in 1989 became the first woman executed in the United States in more than two decades.

Reporters the world over covered the event in Raleigh, N.C. But Washington Post writer Kathy Sawyer – a former's daughter with no formal journalism training – penned what I remember the most compelling account of the episode, transforming a deadline news story with vivid narrative details.

And she did it without even witnessing the actual execution.

I've kept the clip for more than three decades, and used it in journalism seminars and classes as a case study on how future-setting techniques can elevate hard news stories.

The method certainly elevated the writing of Sawyer, a tenacious Pulitzer nominee who went on to cover space science for the Post, covering the Challenger disaster and other "The Rock from Mars." which drops down into the headline-grabbing saga of a mysterious green meteorite.

Sawyer crafted her approach to journalism on the fly. Hired by the Nashville Tennessean despite having no news clips – just a couple of college essays on French literature – she initially wrote TV and film reviews. Eventually, she delved into weightier topics for the paper's Sunday magazine before landing at the Washington Post while "Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford were hanging out in the newsroom making 'All the President's Men.'"

After a stint on the metro desk, she moved to national issues, including murderess Margie Velma Barfield's controversial death by lethal injection, a topic that still resonates today. Sawyer actually crashed our two stories on the 2 a.m. execution – one a quick turnaround for the Post's late edition, the other (which I saw and thought for the next morning's paper).

A few weeks ago, she reached deep into her memory banks to answer my questions about how it all came together.

> An editor once told me to conceive of these sort of stories as if they were "letters to your mother." That sometimes helps me decide quickly what's important.

How did you end up with this assignment, and did you go into it knowing it would be a featurized approach?

I was at that time a general assignment reporter on the Post National Desk, and kept a lot of my stuff in the direction of this. This one was a natural, involving a gothic story of murder in the Southern Appalachians, focusing on all sides, a historic milestone and contentious social, cultural and legal concerns. My options aplenty.

As you wrote the story, it was (and is) unusually to report a story as if I were doing a feature – i.e. gather as much telling detail as possible – even though sometimes there might be time or space only for a shorter news story. Sometimes I would have to stitch together type details into a hard news story. In this case, I did both – a couple of advance news stories on the execution as well as the piece you're referencing.

One of the most impressive things about the vivid detail in this story that you didn't even witness the execution, but rather relied on descriptions from post reporters. Did you work with them in advance about what sorts of information you were looking for, or did you just get lucky with their observations?

Thank you! To the best of my recollection, I spoke with prison officials and possibly some of the scheduled witnesses. I know that I tried to speak with as many of those involved on all sides as were available and find out as much about the process as possible.

In many cases, narrative journalists have the luxury of time to report deeply and carefully craft their prose. This was a deadline news story, yet it feels like a lovely labour. How do you go about creating a narrative sensibility when the turnaround time is relatively limited?

The ride is "show, don't tell," right? So the accumulation of concrete detail is vital. The more dramatic and newsworthy a story is, I've found, the more it is to write. I've always tried to step back and see the overall arc and meaning of the story (the timely word these days, I guess, is "narrative") and decide where to heart lay. Then I would try to accumulate as many meaningful details as possible that would allow the readers to feel almost as if they were actually there along with me.

As for the pure mechanics, to write a lengthier feature in a short amount of time (and keeping in mind this was decades ago when the tools of the trade were mainly pens, paper notebooks and sometimes a tape recorder), I would have transcribed the pages of my notebook, then created on the back page a sort of running index of categories, such as "Barfield quotes," "victims," "prison operations," "demonstrators," etc., with page numbers so I could locate them quickly when writing the story. Sometimes I would actually make the pages copy of my notebook, tear them into strips and pile them into different categories. Organizing material is a bit easier with today's devices.

Looking back 30 years later, is there anything you'd do differently with this piece?

Of course! My notes are always full of "golden" but unused factoids and quotes – unused because of a lack of space, irrelevance or some other factor. And I can always see phrases I could have written better, or angles I should have covered. But it's a done deal, right, so I believe dwelling on such stuff will surely lead to madness!

> I've always tried to step back and see the overall arc and meaning of the story (the timely word these days, I guess, is "narrative") and decide where it heart lay. Then I would try to accumulate as many meaningful details as possible that would allow the readers to feel almost as if they were actually there along with me.

Candlelight Vigil Marks N.C. Woman's Execution

By Kathy Sawyer

Published in the Washington Post on Nov. 3, 1989

With a prayer on her lips, born-again killer Margie Velma Barfield died peacefully at just past 2 a.m. today as a prison minister and nine women posted a state-of-the-art $50 injection despoiler but failed. (1) This is a book full of details and cute little jabs at the prison system. Fast-paced stuff. Note the contrast also this, what and when, how did you decide which elements to use? (I particularly like the experiment needle-poking a vein and the "not quite" phrase.) Thanks! Funny thing is I didn't know about that! I try to prepare as much concrete detail as possible, acting as if advance the story, here, we're dealing with the mechanics of the state killing process. Prison officials were cooperative, with conflicts starting around the end. (It's crucial to include the various citizens of what's being done in their name. Also, reasons (though I don't remember specifically) that I went through several drafts of the sentence, revealing it before I settled on this version. One caveat about the entire "Innovation Tuesday" presentation: I'm trying hard to remember events from three decades ago.

"It's not fair for you to leave me here with all this misery when you're going to all that glory," her attorney had told her a few hours earlier.

In a candlelight vigil suffused with the old-time religion of her Bible-belt heritage, Barfield's stolen relatives and other mourners smiled through tears and prayed for her.

In counterpoint, a chorus of the victims' families and pro-death penalty demonstrators cheered for Old Testament justice. (2) Throughout the article, you weave in a number of religious terms – the prison signs, the prayers, the crowd which seems to feel that God was given the story and will use our for such ungodly ends. Was this a conscious choice? I know going in that there were religious overtones to this story, but I remember also being struck as I drove around there overwhelmed by the number of churches, religious billboards, bumper stickers and other visible signals of the importance of Christian belief and practice in this region. I'm not sure I could say how it colored the Bible Belt, but this was a striking display nonetheless.

At the end, the news crews broadcast the world as "Death Row Granny" told the warders once again that she was "sorry for all the hurt that I have caused" and thanked those who had stood by her.

As she lay in her pink pajamas in the stark, white death chamber under a blue-grey sheet, the former nurse-housekeeper kept her head turned away from the sit-official witnesses on the other side of the glass viewing panel. (3) Were you in the room with the witnesses? Or did you watch from the other side of the glass? Either way, I'm guessing you had a sense of the prison's operating principles, and a couple of other stories I remember about Barfield (she's well, I know, the Constitution and the courts have prohibited "cruel and unusual punishment," but as we have seen recently in some botched executions, the state sometimes fails in the legal).

"I was struck by how peaceful it was," said witness Tom Fulcher, a reporter for WNCN-TV here.

The details of Barfield's death were revealed to reporters by Pulliner and three other witnesses, who gathered in a separate room at the prison for an announcement of lights, cameras and satellite dishes that had grown up outside Central Prison. (4) Very cool that two of the witnesses were women! I thought it was relevant, and cute, given that women were represented on the witness side of the glass as the executioners of women.

Barfield was the first woman executed in the United States since 1962 and the first white woman executed in the state. She was the sixth person in the country to die by injection and the second in North Carolina.

In wrangling over approval of death by injection here, one legislative critic charged that the method "augmentes" capital punishment. But supporters hailed the method as humane, allowing the condemned "a peaceful death." They noted that while the traditional cyanide execution in the gas chamber costs $1004.04 per killing, injection costs the state only $50.04. (5) Is it fair to the state expense aspect of having witnesses to death row. Right. This is just a little more detail.

As the hour of execution passed, inmates inside the prison held lighted matches to their sealed windows. (6) Another cool detail. Were you outside the prison during all of this? Were you also at the prison? I didn't remember the exact timing of my arrival. (When I do remember it that as I peered at the prison, I was in such a hurry I forgot to put on my overcoat and ran toward the bus stop. Instead, I ended up shivering in the gale all the way home. Yeah, "gale" was apparently that stone-cold day. Anyway, I'm not sure I could have gotten much more detail in seconds to break in and retrieve my keys.) My memory is that I was outside the prison, mingling with the demonstrators, part of the crowd.

The eerie sound of rolled pills and hoots of triumph rose from the few dozen pro-death penalty demonstrators gathered outside the prison. They carried signs saying, "The law is the law," and "God bless the victims."

Construction worker Douglas Furmage had said earlier, "We just hope the state of North Carolina gives her their best shot, if you know what I mean. She killed people and it's wrong."

On a grassy slope near the prison, the sharp points of lighted candles held by some pro-"anti-death" protesters looked like a massive, false firmament that echoed the real one above. (7) Wonderful description. Its unintentional first echoing of your never-this-country-again-since-1962 line. (I'd cut that if it keeps bad tension in spare, and seriously, and no doubt these impulses aren't a big. I'd guess that's one of the great things about journalism: even if you don't it right, you can follow your instincts and get paid for doing things you enjoy. Shhhh ... Don't tell the bosses.)

Along with their candles stuck in soft drink cans, the protesters carried signs bearing scripture quotations. "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind," said one. Another showed a picture of a man with the words, "Injun compassion."

Not midnight, Barfield's sister and two brothers appeared suddenly among the demonstrators, attracting a burst of bright television lights. As they spoke in turn, thanking and blessing the protesters for their support, voices in the crowd responded, "Amen," and "That's right," to the rhythm of a revival meeting.

"It hurts, 'cause I'm gonna miss her," said Faye Pearl, Barfield's sister, tears streaming down her face. "We hadn't planned to come over here, but we wanted all of you to know that we love you."

"We love you, we're with you," muted voices answered.

"We're victims, too," said her brother John, "beside victims because it was our mother who killed and Velma's our sister. It was hard ... but we understand, we forgive." (8) Did you leave out the explanation behind her siblings' forgiveness because it had (presumably) been covered previously? I'm guessing there's more about that from an earlier story. It is important that Barfield's condemnation had her father had rejected her and generally abused her when she was a child, and her sister's confirmation of their brutal treatment. Barfield's siblings also presented moral descriptions of what Barfield was like in a personal sense (big-giving, kind, with pink constellation freckles in the face on her cushion).

Describing his visit with Barfield earlier that day, her brother James said, "I told her I'd love you later ... with the Lord." To Alfred, he said, "She's not afraid. We went in to lift her up and ... instead she lifted us up."

Barfield's attorney, James D. Little, a state lawyer who has worked on her behalf for her, witnessed her execution. Earlier that evening, as he bid her goodbye, he said, his eyes filling, "I told Velma ... if I didn't believe and know that when she was executed, she would be joining the Lord, I couldn't witness the execution."

Relatives of Dorre of Barfield's four victims gathered at a Howard Johnson's motel about two miles south of here, near her hometown, and in the small community where the murders occurred. (9) How was this gathering in relation to the prison execution? Were you also present for this? No, no reflection is that I was around the same time, and that I did meet with them.

"It's a comfort, It's a relief," said Allen T. Blevins, daughter of Hazel Tyler, the tobacco farmer Barfield was convicted of poisoning with much killer just before she was to marry him. "I'll be able now to go and visit my dad's grave, not feeling like there's unfinished business."

She described Barfield as a "sadist who enjoyed ... watching people die over and over again, watching them twist in agony and pain." (10) I'm wondering if other victim relatives quotes were edited out for space or if there is a deliberate decision to limit their voices and emphasize Barfield's family perspectives because it's unexpected that her siblings would support their over-murderer's sister? There certainly was no deliberate decision to limit voices. As you know, there is a constant process of small decisions as to what must be included as essential to the story, and then what the priorities are given the time and space for optional material – all with the goal of preserving as much of a passage of reading as possible. I had the benefit of extended, uninterrupted time, not only working with my editors I had with the story for space, I almost always "write long"; I tend certain aspects had been included in earlier stories about the case. Of course, journalism is imperfect by its very nature.

The fourth victim Barfield confessed to poisoning was her mother.

Barfield's family, including a son and daughter who appeared on talk shows on her behalf, and other supporters had fought a battle for public opinion, arguing that she was in a drug-induced fog when she committed her crimes but had recovered, experienced a religious rebirth in prison and deserved to live.

The families of her victims insisted that she used religious zeal and outward goodness as a mask to hide her evil nature.

One of Barfield's final acts was to donate her organs to the transplant list. Officials reported that only the skin, bone and cornea were saved for the living. (11) It looks like there was more to the story. Was it a choice for the saved? Could I ask whether this was the intended ending or whether we topped it off, but isn't there always more to the story?

MOST POPULAR ARTICLES FROM NIEMAN STORYBOARD
"Telling true stories is it worth it?" by Tom Junod
Interview with Ed Kashi: Taking it beyond the media
Why is Reuters so boring?
SHOW + COMMENTS / LEAVE A COMMENT