Name: _____

Going in Cold: Mark the Text

Learning Targets:

- I can find a potential story in an unfamiliar location.
- I can establish a rapport with a potential subject and have him/her open up and share his/her story with me.

Instructions:

Read and mark the text from as many of these articles as possible in the time given.

- Underline how the reporter found his/her stories.
- Highlight or circle methods the reporter used to get people to open up and/or to report the story.

We will discuss the readings as a class, please participate by offering your observations when we are on a piece you read.

Brady Dennis on “After the sky fell”

Andrea Pitzer @andreapitzer

This week’s “Why’s this so good?” post looked at Brady Dennis’ 296-word story about a toll booth operator’s love for the wife he lost to cancer. The piece ran in 2005 as part of the St. Petersburg Times’ occasional series “300 words.” Dennis has since moved on to The Washington Post, where he is an national economics reporter (and was a Pulitzer finalist in 2009), but in a note written earlier this month, he reminisced about how the series — and the toll booth operator’s story — came about.

At the time, Chris Zuppa and I already had published about 10 pieces in the “300 Words” series. A few had turned out half decent, but almost all of them had been the product of happenstance. We’d started with a story about the security guard in our own office building, of all places. From there, we often just roamed the streets, looking for other overlooked scenes that might make for a nice picture and an interesting tale. We attended the lonely burial of an indigent man in a potter’s field. We found a pair of teenagers waiting in the Greyhound station, experiencing the wonders of first love and the open road. We found a young man on a tractor in Pahokee, cultivating the sugar fields but longing for city life.

Each story was fun and fascinating in its own way. But something felt lacking to me. Nothing wrong with spontaneity, but I felt like we were relying a bit too much on serendipity and needed a better game plan.

Chris and I spent spent an hour one day writing down situations we wanted to witness or types of people we wanted to encounter. Then we set out to make that

happen in a way that still left plenty of room for serendipity.

We wanted to know what it was like for a comedian to bomb, so we hung out at a comedy club until one did, and then followed him to the parking lot. We wanted to document a birth, and although it took months to find a couple and a hospital willing to trust us, it became one of my prouder moments to write about something so common and yet so intimate. We wanted to see a prison visit, and after convincing the Hillsborough County jail to let us in, we bounced from room to room until we saw a little girl. We wanted to explore a prom night, so I trolled the parking lot of Lakewood High School until I bumped into Josh King.

On that pad with the other ideas, I had scribbled down “toll booth operator.” That also took more work than I’d anticipated, because it turns out that the authorities frown on reporters parking their cars on the shoulder and dashing across three lanes of traffic to talk to toll collectors. During my time covering Pasco County, I had gotten to know Joanne Hurley, a spokeswoman for the Suncoast Parkway. I’m not sure she ever grasped why Chris and I wanted to come hang out with toll collectors, but eventually she agreed to meet us at a toll plaza just north of the county line for a couple hours one evening.

I remember that two toll collectors were on duty that night. I talked to the woman first, and she seemed bored and tired with the job. That weariness and the prospect of a long night ahead in her tiny booth could have made for a decent story, I thought.

Then I met Lloyd, who by comparison seemed both upbeat and serene. It struck me how he maintained such an outlook in a job that seemed pretty tedious and more than a little isolating, given the endless, brief encounters with drivers who see your toll booth as just another obstacle between them

and home.

I introduced myself to Lloyd and asked him the first questions that came to mind: How did you wind up here? What did you do before this? What about before that? Soon enough, he was talking about Millie, his wife who had died of cancer. I’m sure I asked some other questions, but mostly I just listened. The story of their life together came pouring out of him – the way they met at a party in queens, their life on Staten Island and their years commuting into Manhattan, their dream of a Florida retirement, his slow realization that she would not live to share it with him. He paused only to make change for a handful of drivers passing through. At some point I asked him what Millie looked like. That’s when he whipped out her picture from his shirt pocket and said he always carried it with him. We probably talked for half an hour, 45 minutes at most. I wished him well and left him there with Chris in his solitary booth.

Because “300 Words” was sort of a side project, I didn’t go back to my notes for a week or so. One afternoon, I was supposed to speak to a small class of journalism students at USF-St. Pete about writing with brevity. I thought it would be cool if I took a rough, unpublished story to read as a way of talking through the reporting and writing process and letting them critique it and offer suggestions. I only had about an hour, so I grabbed my notes from the evening with Lloyd and started typing. I went back to my original question to him, figuring it would be the first thing anyone might wonder about a toll collector: Why are you here? And then I just tried to answer it: “Well, here’s why…” I tried to let the story unfold on paper the way it had poured out of Lloyd. It took all of 15 minutes to write (unlike my usual process of agonizing and rewriting half a dozen times). It ran in the paper virtually unchanged. And, of course, Chris took a very moving photo that said everything in a single frame.

That’s basically it. The story certainly struck a chord. To this day, I’m not quite sure why, except perhaps that all of us have been touched by love and loss, or at least can imagine ourselves in Lloyd’s shoes. The evening with Lloyd, as with almost every time we set out to do a piece for that series, underscored for me that unexpected tales come from the most unlikely (and sometimes most obvious) places, that as Don Murray said (and Tom French has reminded me), “we swim in an ocean of stories.” Sometimes it’s worthwhile to just toss the net into the water and see what rises to the surface.

It’s embarrassing that my explanation for a story has run much longer than the story itself, so I’ll shut up now. Just a brief postscript: A few years back, I was down in Florida visiting friends and drove up the Suncoast Parkway to visit a former editor in Pasco. I stopped at the toll booth, grabbed a dollar from my wallet and went to pay. There was Lloyd, smiling. “Have a great day!” he said. He didn’t recognize me in the slightest. “You too, Lloyd,” I said, and kept on driving.

Thanks to Ben Montgomery for asking Dennis to comment on the background for this story. For more on “After the sky fell.” read Montgomery’s take on how and why the story works.

Most popular articles from Nieman Storyboard

"Why's this so good?" No. 18: Brady Dennis goes short

Ben Montgomery @gangrey

A few years ago, a bunch of us were sitting around the front porch of this crumpled old resort in the Catskills, knocking back drinks and talking shop. I can't remember how it began, but when the sun went down we developed a game: Tell a story in a minute.

It started off cool enough, and some of the kids were spinning fine ones, and quick. But pretty soon we were shouting at each other – "Shorter!" – and we were going shorter, and shorter, and shorter, until the rule had become: Tell a story in a couple of sentences.

Hemingway's baby-shoes short.

I'm not sure I've been part of a better couple of hours of riffing. Being concise made us rethink how to tell a story, from entry point to structure to complication to end. There's some truth to what good writers have always said: Being succinct is harder than going long.

That's the first reason I like Brady Dennis' story, "After the sky fell," part of a series with photojournalist Chris Zuppa here at the St. Petersburg Times that earned Brady an Ernie Pyle Award.

It's 296 words in 13 sentences, and it touches me every time I read it. While a lot of folks are cheering for long-form journalism (1. a worthy celebration a

long time coming, and 2. have you seen how many people follow @longreads and @longformorg on Twitter?!), it’s a reminder that the value of a narrative isn’t related to inch count. Every writer wants to take his clothes off and dance naked in the Fields of the Lord, but sometimes a direct skip from A to B is best. Y’all remember Breslin? Jimmy Cannon? Pete Hamill?

There’s nothing showy or complicated in Brady’s language. There are no words with four syllables or more. Just 10 words have three, which means 97 percent of the words have two or fewer syllables. The story is tight as a fist. You can read it in 45 seconds.

And the structure is so simple. Both the set-up and the question that drives the story are right there in the cinematic sentences of the first paragraph:

> ***The few drivers on this dark, lonely stretch of the Suncoast Parkway in Pasco County pull up to the toll booth, hand their dollars to Lloyd Blair and then speed away. None of them knows why the old man sits here, night after night, working the graveyard shift.***

Lloyd Blair is alone in a tollbooth? Why? Brady does not dawdle. “Well, here’s why:” he writes – and we’re transported back in time.

What follows are nine sentences, each starting with “Because,” each building off the last to shape a story of love and loss years in the making, with reported details that take your breath and make you root for Lloyd Blair. The rhythm that structure creates – and the implied passage of time between each sentence – makes it almost like watching the scenes on a slide projector.

Here’s the party in Queens where they met.

Chuh-click-click.

Here's them at work in Manhattan.

Chuh-click-click.

Here's her growing ill.

Chuh-click-click.

And in the end – the last slide – we have our answer and the climax to this short story. We see him greeting drivers on a dark and lonely stretch of highway and we feel the strange contradiction between the pain he has lived, the predicament he's in, and the cheerful greeting he gives strangers, especially when it's cast against the only other quote in the story.

The last line is a surprising punch. Not sentimental. Not maudlin. No tears race down his cheeks, thank heavens.

Which leads me to another reason I like this simple tale. There's a Hebrew phrase, *Tikkun olam*, which means "repairing the world." One of my mentors used to say that's what good journalism does.

It reminds us that our problems might not be as bad as the other guy's. It reminds us to have the guts to empathize. It reminds us to go on living.

This story, in 296 words, helps repair the world.

Ben Montgomery (@gangrey) is an enterprise reporter for the St. Petersburg Times and the co-founder of Gangrey.com. He was also a Pulitzer finalist in 2010 for the project "For Their Own Good," which detailed a century of abuse at the Florida School for Boys.

To read more about "After the sky fell," check out Brady Dennis' account of

how he got the story.

For more from this collaboration with Longreads and Alexis Madrigal, see the previous posts in the series. And stay tuned for a new shot of inspiration and insight every week.

Most popular articles from Nieman Storyboard

Short and Sweet: Storytelling in 300 Words

Michael Weinstein

[EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an edited version of an article that ran in The Write Stuff*, the monthly newsletter of* The Charlotte Observer*'s writing group.* Observer *features editor Michael Weinstein, along with assistant metro editor Michael Gordon, is co-editor of the newsletter.]*

Brady Dennis was a night cops reporter in the Tampa bureau of Poynter's *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times* when he started writing "300 Words," a series of short stories about ordinary people, in 2004. This year, he won the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing for his series. The "300 Words" stories have been running, alongside pictures by *Times* photographer Chris Zuppa, on the front page of the paper's local-news section, about once a month. To find their stories, Zuppa and Dennis think of a moment they want to capture, then find the subject who best defines that moment. Dennis is now a general-assignment reporter in the *Times*' Tampa bureau. I interviewed him, via e-mail, to find out what he's learned about storytelling in small doses.

MICHAEL WEINSTEIN: How did you come up with the idea of writing 300-word stories?

BRADY DENNIS: I first dreamed up "300 Words" while working as a night cops reporter in Tampa. For starters, I wanted a project that offered a break from the usual murder and mayhem that I typically covered (and enjoyed covering). But more importantly, I wanted to take a chance and offer something in the metro section that readers weren't used to seeing,

something different that would make them slow down and take a breath and view the people they passed each day a little differently. I knew I wanted the pieces to be short — they never jump from 1B — and to highlight people that otherwise never would make the newspaper. Luckily, I [worked with] a photographer who shared this vision and a brave editor willing to try new approaches and fend off the skeptics.

A big inspiration for the series, by the way, were the "People" columns that Charles Kuralt had written for the *Charlotte News* back in the early 1950s [see www.charleskuraltspeople.com].

What was the easiest thing about doing them?

The easiest thing was my complete confidence in the people we would find. I believe that each person not only has a story to tell, but that each person has a story that matters. I've always felt humbled in the presence of everyday, "ordinary" people who are willing to share their lives with us. Give me them any day over politicians and celebrities.

What was hardest?

The hardest thing, I suppose, was finding a theme in each piece that was universal — love, loss, death, change, new beginnings. Something everyone could relate to on a human level. I didn't think it was enough to say, "Look, here's an interesting person." I wanted to capture that person in a moment when readers could say, "I understand. I've been there."

What did you learn about writing short stories with a beginning, middle and end?

I learned it doesn't take 3,000 words to put together a beginning, middle and end. A good story is a good story, no matter the length. And sometimes

the shorter ones turn out [to be] more powerful than the windy ones.

That said, there's a risk of sounding like I'm advocating super-short stories with no traditional nut graph. Not so. I believe no matter how long or short the story, people should know why it is important and worth their time. It's not enough just to paint a pretty picture. We must strive to tell them something about the world that matters, to be journalists and not simply storytellers. Hopefully, in a non-traditional way, "300 Words" does that.

Has it made you a better reporter? Better writer?

Absolutely. "300 Words" made me a better reporter by forcing me to rely almost primarily on observation. Notice that most pieces contain almost no quotes. I didn't interview people as much as I simply shut my mouth and watched and listened. We don't do that enough.

It also made me a more economical writer. With only 300 words to spare, each one had to matter. I've tried to apply that rule to the other stories I do, even the long ones. The idea is to cut away the fat and leave only the muscle. As my editor, Neville Green, repeated again and again: "Less is more." It's true for most stories we write.

How did your editor help you?

Neville Green helped in so many ways. He wrote most of the headlines. He helped me trim many unnecessary sentences, greatly improving the stories with each change. And sometimes, he simply put that universal theme I was searching for in perspective. "Isn't this story about…" he would start, and he'd always be dead-on.

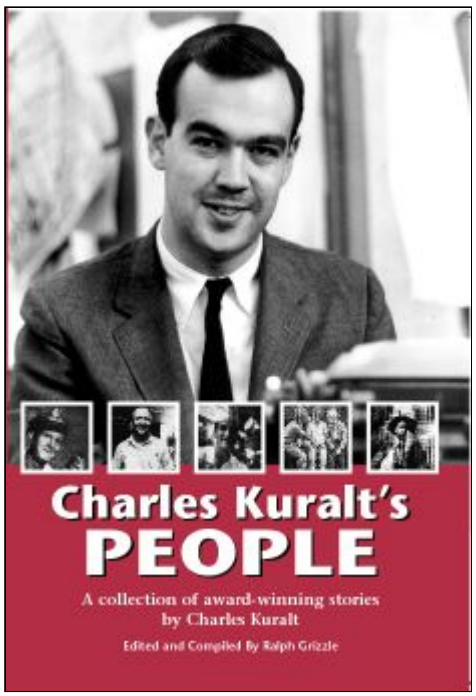
Anything else I should ask?

One thing I would offer is my opinion that, now, more than ever, we should be willing to take risks and make reading the paper an unpredictable and interesting exercise. “300 Words” was an effort at that. But there are a million other possibilities, and journalists are pretty bright folks. All it takes is the willingness to risk something new.

Charles Kuralt's PEOPLE

A Collection Of Award Winning Stories By Charles Kuralt

Charles Kuralt's People



Timeless, insightful and entertaining, Charles Kuralt's award-winning "People" columns lived but for one brief year - 1956. Kuralt went to CBS; "People" went to reside only on microfilm. Until now.

Written while Kuralt was a reporter for the Charlotte News, "People" appears collectively in print for the first time ever. The 169 columns, written when Kuralt was only 22, represent some of the bard's best work and mark the beginning of a dialog that the journalist continued with Americans for more than four decades.

Resonating with themes of hope and goodness, "People" still appears as fresh and relevant today as in 1956, a testament to the extraordinary talent of a reporter who found stories where no one else thought to look.

"Each day I would seek out some cop or kid or cab driver," Kuralt wrote of his experience at the Charlotte News, "and tell his story in a few hundred words . . . I used to walk bravely up to panhandlers and crapshooters - the sort of people others avoided - and strike up conversation."

Those conversations will ring familiar to those who watched Kuralt's Emmy-winning television shows "On the Road" and "Sunday Morning." Kuralt's style and substance were essentially unchanged over the years - from his days as a rookie reporter to his final years as a veteran journalist.

"Kuralt's writing is sensitive, warm with affection for obscure people, and with excellent touches of humor where that is needed," commented a panel of judges who awarded young Kuralt the prestigious Ernie Pyle Award for his columns.
Now, nearly five decades later, Charles Kuralt's sensitivity, warmth and humor continue to echo in these profiles of ordinary - and often unnoticed - people.

"People" will strike a chord with those who remember - and perhaps long for -a time when life was simpler - and with those who did not get enough of the comforting voice and practical wisdom of the CBS newsman who died July 4, 1997.

"He had the ability to see small things and make them large." - Emery Wister, Charlotte News co-worker

Charles Kuralt's People (Kenilworth Media, copyright 2002)
ISBN 0-9679096-1-9 | Hard cover | 384 pages with photos | $25.95

Everybody Has A Story, CBS News correspondent Steve Hartman hosted from 1998 to 2004, Random name picked from local phone book, Dart thrown at map

3 Mar 2018admin

Everybody Has A Story, CBS News correspondent Steve Hartman hosted from 1998 to 2004, Random name picked from local phone book, Dart thrown at map

From CBS News.

“Every two weeks someone threw a dart at a map of America. CBS News

correspondent Steve Hartman then went wherever it stuck, flipped through the local phone book, and picked a name at random. He then did a story on someone at that house (assuming they were willing, of course)."

"The project started in 1998 and ran through 2004 when Steve reluctantly gave up the project to serve as a commentator on 60 Minutes II. When all was said and done, Steve had profiled nearly 100 people from Maine to Miami — from the Oregon coast to the Arizona desert. His youngest subject was a 5-year-old boy from Tennessee who liked to float balloons to his grandmain heaven. His oldest was an 87-year-old woman from Louisiana who still does her son's laundry.

The idea for "Everybody Has a Story" came from a newspaper reporter named David Johnson. Johnson works for the Lewiston, Idaho Morning Tribune. For more than 2 decades he has been picking people out of his local phone book and putting their stories on the front page. After interviewing David in '94, Hartman tried the idea himself. "I was doing it more or less as a joke," Hartman said years later. "I never dreamed you could actually find good stories like that. Turns out I couldn't have been more wrong. Like David, I now believe the white pages are chock full of amazing, untold stories.""

Read more:

https://www.cbsnews.com/news/everybody-has-a-story-flashbacks/

'Everyone Has a Story,' As One Reporter Proves

By Tina Kelley March 29, 1998

David Johnson is not a man of original ideas. If he were, he says, he would be a novelist, not a newspaper reporter living on a remote ranch. But his one inspiration has caught on in this slightly obscure corner of the world.

Every week for the past 14 years, Mr. Johnson, 50, has written a front page column for The Lewiston (Idaho) Morning Tribune featuring a person chosen at random from telephone books in the newspaper's circulation area, in central Idaho and eastern Washington.

Called ''Everyone Has a Story,'' the columns prove how all types of people can blossom under the blessing of focused attention: a 6-year-old boy anticipating Christmas; one of the last full-blooded members of Nez Perce tribe; a fellow who traps muskrats in sewage lagoons, or the high school sophomore here who wants to become a rodeo queen.

Mr. Johnson has written of an elderly couple whose aches and pains made them too tired to spit, let alone want to live; a woman whose husband ran a

hose from the exhaust pipe of his pickup truck into the cab and died to the sound of country music three weeks earlier; a newborn baby who made the column after screaming in the background of Mr. Johnson's phone call, and a couple whose daughter-in-law drowned their granddaughter, thinking the baby was possessed by demons. The child is buried in their backyard.

''This is their one shot,'' Mr. Johnson said of his subjects. ''They might be in the paper for an obit, but this is a big deal. I've seen a man go out and get a new cowboy hat just for it.''

Mr. Johnson, who carries three pens in his shirt pocket, got his idea when he began reporting in Idaho, driving 30,000 miles a year between what he calls ''the little hintertowns.'' He figured everyone there had a story. He raised the phone book idea at The Daily Idahonian, but his editor did not take him up on it.

Then in 1984, while working for The Tribune, he met Charles Kuralt, the CBS News reporter famous for his ''On the Road'' dispatches, at a local journalism symposium.

''He started talking about how he got into doing stories about people who make big balls of string,'' Mr. Johnson said. ''He'd be flying across the U.S. for a news event, and he'd look at the lights below and say, 'You know, we're flying over the best stories.' I told him about the phone book idea, and he said, 'That's one of the best ideas I ever heard.' One of my editors overheard that, and three weeks later I was doing the column.''

Mr. Johnson now does a few columns ahead if he goes on vacation. ''My biggest fear was somebody was going to take it over and do a better job,'' he said.

The Palouse, the region of Idaho and Washington that Mr. Johnson covers

for the newspaper, is not an area where a journalist can work from press releases. The steep, undulating hills continue for 30 to 60 miles from here, waiting for ''million-dollar rains,'' as they are known around here, which can push wheat production up to 150 bushels an acres. Homes, towns and major breaking news stories are all far apart.

Mr. Johnson said he saw the column as a human geography project. He remembers spreading out several years' worth of columns when compiling a book of them. ''I thought, geez, this is pretty much what people were like in The Lewiston Tribune area in the late 1980's.''

His selection process is not entirely random. Subjects have to live in a home with a phone and they have to be willing to talk. Often, Mr. Johnson does get turned down.

''I always felt someday I'll call an ax murderer, and it'll be the greatest story I'll never get,'' Mr. Johnson said. But he does not hanker much for the big story that would get him to a city or a larger paper. At 50, he lives with his wife, two daughters, three horses and six dogs on 117 acres near Princeton. His paper has a circulation of 30,000, in an area where about 150,000 people live.

''It's a noisy newspaper,'' he said, and he likes it that way.

Recently he drove out past where North Palouse Road turns to gravel near Colfax, to meet Chiquita, a white Andalusian horse who might be Sarah McKnight's ticket to becoming Rodeo Queen of the Palouse Empire Fair in September.

''Ah, that's the hook on the story,'' he said when Sarah, 16, mentioned her goal. It takes her seven hours to wash and groom the $1,500 horse, which she bought with her wages from Taco Time. Her boyfriend, whom she said

is ''cowboy kind of quiet,'' answered the phone at Sarah's house when Mr. Johnson called, but she immediately took over.

Before leaving the corral, she introduced Jim Hayes, the 84-year-old widower who owns the land where Chiquita boards. The rancher explained that Sarah is too easy on the horse, adding: ''Horses are kind of like women. They're all nice and some are nicer.'' He hugged the girl, who calls him Grandpa.

''I'll tell you what, Mr. Johnson,'' Mr. Hayes called after the reporter, who was heading back to town. ''Why don't we see about a subscription to The Lewiston Tribune for a while?''

A version of this article appears in print on **March 29, 1998**, Section 1, Page 16 of the National edition with the headline: 'Everyone Has a Story,' As One Reporter Proves. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe

Last chapter of Everyone Has a Story

David Johnson retires after 30 years of finding the extraordinary in the lives of ordinary people

Tribune/Barry Kough

Joel Mills/Lewiston Tribune

When newspaper reporter David Johnson walked into the Cavendish Store 36 years ago, he was just looking for a good story.

But the enterprising excursion into what Johnson fondly calls "the hinterlands" yielded the key to an idea that had been germinating in his curious mind for some time.

"I met Leo Koch, the owner," Johnson said of the day he got the spark that would eventually become Everyone Has a Story, the Lewiston Tribune column that ends its 30-year run today. "During our conversation, he said something like, 'Cavendish used to have a lot more oomph, a lot more people around. Now we're hardly listed in the phone book.' "

Johnson, who possesses a deep empathy for people and their everyday triumphs and struggles, wanted to get more average Joe-type stories in the pages of the Daily Idahonian, his employer at the time. But Koch's offhand comment gave him the notion of going to the phone book to randomly pick his potential subjects.

"It just started percolating in my mind," he said.

An editor was receptive, but wasn't willing to devote the necessary resources to the project. Johnson became the Tribune's roving reporter later that year and frequently wrote stories about average people. But his idea for "phone-book journalism" sat dormant until an opportune meeting with a famous television reporter six years later.

Known for his "On the Road" chronicles of everyday American life, Charles Kuralt was at Washington State University for the annual Edward R. Murrow symposium. The managing

editor at the Moscow-Pullman Daily News (formerly the Idahonian) was also present at what Johnson called a "cocktail hour."

"I got introduced to Charles Kuralt by Jay Shelledy as the Charles Kuralt of the Tribune," he said. "Then he introduced Charles Kuralt as the Dave Johnson of CBS News. Everybody yukked it up, and based on that, Kuralt started talking to me."

During their conversation, Johnson pitched his phone book idea.

"He just sort of halted, looked at me and said 'That's one of the best ideas I've heard.' I think that endorsement convinced the Tribune, because we were doing it about four weeks later."

Over the intervening decades, Johnson has crisscrossed the newspaper's vast circulation area, forming a random web of nearly 1,500 stories. He calls it a mini human geography project that offers a true glimpse of who Tribune readers really are.

Jonnson holds that all-important word, "readers," close to his heart. While newspapers always focus on so-called "newsworthy" people and events, he is proud that the Tribune gave him the space to spotlight the news readers, rather than the newsmakers.

"If I'm honest, parts of all these people become parts of me, vicariously," he said. "I've gone into suicide, cancer, all the dark corners that people have shared that I haven't had to deal with directly. We always do the stories about the airplanes that crash. Well, these are stories about the airplanes that constantly land."

Johnson turned 66 on Christmas Day, and has plenty to keep him busy during retirement. He's working on a new book about life with his adult stepson, David, who has autism. There's motorcycle riding to do and karate to practice. And the canoe he bought to take him back to his Minnesota roots isn't going to paddle itself.

But Johnson doesn't think he will go through withdrawal over the end of Everyone Has a Story.

"It's been pretty satisfying," he said. "As much as I'd like to say I'm an old, ink-stained wretch, I don't have ink in my veins. I think I can walk away from it. We'll see though."

In the foreword to a 1994 collection of Everyone Has a Story columns, Kuralt recalled thinking that if Johnson could actually pull off his big idea, he would be "a helluva reporter.

"That is exactly what David Johnson turned out to be," Kuralt wrote. "The proof is on the pages that follow, full of interest and variety, joy and sadness, and the highs and lows of human life. How thick is that phone book? Dave Johnson has a lot of work ahead of him."

And now, that work is done.

Everyone's story turned into his story, too

Tribune reporter finds himself dragged into the pages of his own book

Heather Frye Jul 5, 2002

Roundabout Wednesday of every week David Johnson rolls into the Lewiston Morning Tribune's Moscow office and grabs a Styrofoam cup of black coffee.

The second thing he does, even after 20 years, is still his favorite thing in the world.

In the reporters' cubbyhole, lit murkily by two narrow, floor-to-ceiling windows, he pulls down a dog-eared phone book, picks a town and has an office mate make a blind stab for a phone number.

Thumbnail jammed to that number, Johnson squints at the book through half-moon reading glasses and makes the call.

In the time it takes to utter his well-practiced spiel, Johnson has another subject for Everyone Has a Story, his regular Friday Tribune column.

Now and then he is turned down, but rarely.

"You never know who is going to answer when you call. There is still an adrenaline rush in that."

But four years ago, when it came time to tell some of his own story for his new memoir, "No Ordinary Lives," which hits bookstores Tuesday, Johnson

demurred.

The reporter who sketched in newsprint the lives of more than 800 people in the Tribune's readership area suddenly found out what it was like to be on the other end of the receiver.

Used to a quiet life at his family's log cabin overlooking Moscow Mountain and the rolling hills just outside Princeton, Johnson says he prefers hiding behind a byline.

"I don't even like having my picture in the paper every week."

The book, as Johnson pictured it in 1998 when a literary agent called after an article about Johnson appeared in the Sunday New York Times, would be a revamp of the stories he had told in his 20 years of doing the column.

But two Warner Books editors, he says, "did lunch over my book, and they decided when I am talking about myself is when it worked ... They said, 'This is fine and dandy, but ...,' and the 'but' came from writing about myself."

Nevertheless, Johnson says he did not go softly.

"For them (the editors) I think it was a little bit like pulling my teeth," Johnson affably recalls of his four-year debate with Warner Books.

"It wasn't so much hard to write about my personal life. The problem is I have to wonder, who gives a damn about my story?"

He admits his argument echoes the one he commonly hears when he calls a stranger for his column.

So after a time, Johnson conceded he owed a little of himself to the people

who gave so much of themselves so willingly.

"All of these hundreds of people have been willing to share their story with me. Now I have to share mine."

So he began to meld his own experiences with those of the people he met in the course of doing the column.

Interwoven with the moments of his life are those of the people whose stories mirrored his own and sometimes provided him a new perspective.

"The spine of the book now is my story. The supporting muscles are the people from the column."

"No Ordinary Lives" opens when Johnson landed in Moscow to earn a journalism degree to go with his bachelor's degree in wildlife management from the University of Minnesota.

"Believe it or not back then my career fantasy was to count and manage ducks -- and then write about counting and managing ducks."

But journalism found him, and following a bitter divorce and a short stint as a mountain man, he became a reporter for the Daily Idahonian, now the Moscow-Pullman Daily News. A few years later he was made roving reporter for the Lewiston Tribune.

While working for the Idahonian, Johnson wrote an obituary that touched him. It was for a young man killed in a horse-riding accident.

Coincidentally, Johnson says, he ran into that man's young widow, Diane Voss, and her daughter, Heidi, while researching an article on midwifery. She became the love of his life.

"I proposed in the spring of 1978 and promised to always keep "Daddy Stan" alive in his daughter's heart. Diane and Heidi accepted."

At the Tribune, he came up with the idea for Everyone Has a Story early on. But the column was not accepted until Johnson's editor overheard CBS "Sunday Morning" journalist Charles Kuralt at a reception at the Washington State University School of Communications say the idea was one of the best he had ever heard.

Still, only tentative approval was given. Trepidation, Johnson writes, was the best of his feelings when in December 1983 he sneaked off to a quiet conference room and made a call.

"...I snatched up a phone book and took pains to make sure no witnesses could see or hear what I was about to do."

"I got lucky," Johnson recalls. The first phone call landed an interview and a meal with Marciano Prado, a Mexican immigrant living in Kamiah and ready to talk.

"The column has always just been a celebration of life and this book is just an extension of that concept," Johnson says.

Despite what the front page news is, "I find that most people's lives revolve around the same things, the basic routines of daily life and not around the headlines."

"No Ordinary Lives," is divided into chapters focusing on those things Johnson has always probed for his interviews for Everyone -- work, love, family, religion, death, home and the frailty of life.

"It is not just a puff-piece column all of the time; it is not just softball journalism. I get angry when people say it is. I have written columns that

deal with death, disease, drug addiction -- those are hard things."

Through the years, Johnson has kept up with some of the people he's interviewed, followed their lives and those of their children, including the first man he interviewed.

"Buried at the bottom of the obituary page were the words: 'Kamiah resident Marciano M. Prado, 51, was struck early Saturday morning in an accident with a passing motorist. Prado, who was walking in the west lane of traffic before being hit, was killed instantly.' I called Bertha (Prado's wife) and we cried on the phone together."

"I feel flattered," Johnson says when asked about the attention he has gotten from the New York Times and from CBS, which copied his idea for television, which was in turn parodied by Comedy Central's "The Daily Show."

Johnson now is working on another Everyone-style book, this one with interviews from New Yorkers before and after Sept. 11.

But Johnson has no plans to retire from writing Everyone.

"No, no, I can't see myself not doing it. There are just too many stories out there to tell."

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Road Trip Journalism

Michael Hernandez February 3, 2014

By Dave Davis

So...this is the challenge...

Organize your high school broadcast staff for a ten-day bus trip from southwest Missouri to the beautiful Rocky Mountains of Colorado. The mission: Shoot and edit stories, photos, short clips, creative segments, all sorts of content for the web. Upload as you go, filing at least three news/feature packages each day.

Broadcast journalists work in the field during this multi-day trip. Photo: Dave Davis.

This is just what we did last summer. We left from our school's parking lot on Monday, July 22 and returned on Wednesday evening, July 31.

Why take on this huge challenge? We have done it three times in the last five years, and I can honestly say it is the most educational and enjoyable

experience I have provided my broadcast students in the 25 years I have been teaching this class.

If you are interested in trying this, the first hurdle with your administrators will be the JUSTIFICATION. The “why-should-we-support-you” part. Try this…

The staff travels by bus from town to town. Photo: Dave Davis.

Tell them this kind of experience encompasses every skill your kids will need for the coming school year in your class, but it will also further prepare them for college, and for a number of future careers. You will be teaching kids to think fast, and critically, while gathering stories in the field. They will be forced to create all sorts of media content for the web–photos, videos,

print copy, you name it. Parents and others back home will be in on the process. They can watch the results each day as all that content goes online. That element makes it even more "real" for the kids on the bus. There are also numerous non-tangible benefits, like the team-building and bonding that takes place. The staff will be a family by the time they return home.

There will be a need for laptop COMPUTERS for editing. You might consult your regional computer representative. Your students might even have enough personal computers to make it happen if they are willing to share. As a rule, you should have a laptop for every three kids on the trip. So 20 kids, maybe 6 or 7 computers. That would work.

Choose your trip ROUTE wisely. Go to places where there will be stories. Think visually, but also consider student safety. Along those lines, you can make parents and admins a lot more comfortable by taking along three or four college-age FIELD PRODUCERS who stay with kids during their story shoots, and provide support as they run into any production problems. Former students from your program would probably love to help. We have four for each trip, and they travel free, but pay for their food, and anything extra along the way. Note: You don't have to do ten days. You might try five or six days, which would keep your costs down. Make sure your field producers have laptops. A lot of the late-night uploading is done by them.

As for the COST of our "Rocky Mountain Road Trip" (it's cool to name or brand your big adventure), our kids paid $760 to cover their lodging and travel for ten days. Food and attractions were not included. That $760 included a little extra to cover the field producers. Bus travel is cheaper than flying, and it is so nice to ask the driver to pull over here, or drop us off there. You also have more room to get comfortable. Kids, chaperones and field producers can have two seats to themselves if your group is not too large. Motor coaches have 56 seats, so if you take 28 or less, you have lots of space. There is also a ton of room under the bus for storage of luggage AND all the gear you don't need on the bus while you ride down the highway. We even took tents to pitch in Estes Park, and the kids saved a lot of money by camping out for two nights. (That helped us keep it at $760)

Our PRODUCTION SCHEDULE is pretty ambitious on our bus tours. Each day we have three different teams of two assigned to find and shoot a package of maybe 75 – 90 seconds. The challenge is to simply "get off the bus and find a story." They learn to approach strangers, to do interviews fast, to make sure they have b-roll, all the things we expect back home, but with the added pressure that they have to find a story NOW. We do NOT plan stories ahead. Their edited deadline is always the next night, so it's shoot today, have it ready to upload tomorrow night.

In addition to the three regular stories, we assign three "Quick Clips," which are things kids get footage of along the way that don't merit a full story, but we want to share online. This can be a site, a street performer, a unique place to eat, whatever. Just more content to upload to remember the trip by. We also assign a team of two our "From the Bus" segment, which is usually shot on or near the bus each day. It's usually something humorous and fun. In addition to all that video, we shoot photos and upload to our home page Instagram feed, and post galleries to our HTV Facebook page. We use our @htvbuzz Twitter account to promote whatever we're doing as well. So we are really uploading all sorts of content all the time, and learning to use social media properly. That's another goal for the trip.

THE SCHEDULE

Usually we travel from about 7:30 or 8 a.m. until 1 or 2 p.m. It depends how far the next city or stop is. For Colorado, we had a long day from Springfield to Dodge City, and we had to stop there for the night. Charter bus drivers

can not drive more than ten hours in a day by law, so you have to figure that in. But I try to stay away from many long days anyway. We usually get to the next town in five or six hours, sometimes a lot less, depending on the geography. For example, in 2009, we had some short routes like from NYC to Washington D.C.

I have been waiting for another school to try this. I hope you can make it happen. Let me know if you need more info. You can contact me: davishtv@gmail.com.

You can see everything we uploaded, the good, the bad and the ugly, from our 2013 trip.

Dave Davis is the adviser of HTV Magazine at Hillcrest High School in Springfield, MO, winner of multiple national awards including 12 NSPA Broadcast Pacemakers.