

McGill

Symposium for Journalistic Courage



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Grady College of Journalism
and Mass Communication
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Welcome



McGill Program Director Diane Murray

On behalf of my colleagues in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, welcome to the McGill Symposium.

The McGill symposium, now in its fifteenth year, is an outgrowth of the McGill lecture.

For more than 40 years, the McGill lecture has brought significant figures in journalism to the University of Georgia to help us honor Ralph McGill's courage as an editor.

Today 12 McGill Fellows – undergraduate and graduate students selected by a faculty committee for their strengths in academic achievement, practical experience and leadership – join five McGill visiting journalists for a discussion.

Topics will include:

- Seeing Inside Issues in Photojournalism
- When a Reporter Becomes Part of the Story
- Witnessing History First Hand
- When Journalism Helps Bring Justice

Carolyn Crist, a McGill Fellow alumna, joins us today to record the day's sessions for a symposium report that will be available later this year.

Today will be a success if the journalists, faculty and students engage each other rigorously to try to answer the question "What does courage look like in journalism?"

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Seeing Inside Issues in Photojournalism

Visiting Journalists: Andrea Bruce, documentary photographer; Kristen Chick, freelance journalist

Moderated by Mark Johnson,
senior photojournalism lecturer

In light of the #MeToo movement, freelance journalist Kristen Chick began to shift her reporting on political and social issues to focus on narratives that included gender inequity and sexual harassment. In 2018, Vox published a story that revealed Patrick Witty left National Geographic, where he was deputy director of photography, after an investigation for sexual harassment. The *Columbia Journalism Review* asked Chick to write a broader view of what was happening in photojournalism, and as she wrote in her article for the outlet: “An issue that’s long been discussed in private was catapulted into the open: Photojournalism has a sexual harassment problem.”

Chick recognized the industry had a pervasive issue as she interviewed several photographers, though many people didn’t want to speak on the record due to the potential risks. After she published the initial story, however, more reporters reached out to share their experiences.

“It became apparent that people were done being silent about it,” she told the McGill Fellows. “Then it snowballed.”



While reporting on David Furst, an international photo editor at The New York Times who quietly left the publication in early 2021, Chick spoke with colleagues and freelance journalists who had complained about his treatment. She found that Furst was known to undermine coworkers and abuse his position of power over freelancers. Several sources didn’t want to give their names, particularly if it could hurt their standing as a freelancer, but then Chick met Andrea Bruce, a documentary photographer who decided to share her story publicly.

“I don’t want the younger generation of women to go through the same thing,” Bruce said. “It’s so frustrating to experience that in a war zone or wherever you are — to work so hard to get where you’re going — and then to have it ripped away and made about your sex.”

McGill Fellow Kathryn Skeeane thanked Bruce for speaking up and creating a path for photojournalism students. She asked how Bruce was able to handle the situation in the moment. When in a war zone, Bruce said, photojournalists and reporters often depend on each other, which can make the situation particularly tough to navigate. Although it may seem easier to brush off a comment or be a “fly on the wall” as a photographer, Bruce recommended that people speak up and call out the harassment.

“These days, the younger generation in the industry is strong and loud. Ask your friends to call it out, industry-wide,” she said. “After awhile, you’ve had enough, and you have to speak up for yourself and know you’re right.”

At the same time, there can be a chilling effect. When Bruce spoke on the record for Chick’s article, she received massive support and public congratulations — but then she didn’t receive an assignment from some news outlets for nearly a year. The work eventually returned, and she had support from National Geographic and other projects in the interim, but it took time for organizations to shift leadership and make internal changes.

Fellow Sydney Fordice asked Bruce how she was able to separate the harassment from her work and whether the situation affected her ability to complete assignments.

At the time, Bruce said, she had to “deal with it” but surrounded herself with close friends and other women who reported alongside her.

“It was a culture that was accepted,” she added. “Sometimes it made me quieter or smaller, and I wonder what would have happened if I didn’t have to deal with that.”

Fellow Brianna Smith asked if Bruce was aware of the industry-wide problem when she entered photojournalism. Bruce said people didn’t talk about it then, and she was primarily focused on the photographers she admired and who she wanted to emulate. Although some workshops made her feel “overly watched or handled,” Bruce said, she focused on working hard, producing good stories and building relationships with the people she covered.

Chick noted that her reporting focused on incidents from the past decade and that harassment was somewhat more normalized before then. During the reporting process, she found that women didn’t think there was a space to speak out before the #MeToo movement, and they believed they had to “get through it.” In addition, several factors exacerbated the power dynamics and opened up more opportunities for abuse, such as newsrooms decreasing staff roles and bringing on more freelancers.

“The precariousness of freelancing contributes to making people vulnerable,” Chick said. “During my reporting, I didn’t get the impression that it’s gotten worse but that more women were ready to speak up about it.”

Fellow Delaney Tarr noted that journalists act as a watchdog for other fields but that it must be different for reporters to cover their own profession. She asked what challenges Chick faced in looking inward rather than looking outward at other industries.

Chick said it was uncomfortable to shift the focus closer to home, especially as a freelancer herself. Some publications have declined to work with her.

“It’s not always fun, but it’s important,” she said. “I’m motivated by the injustice of it and the hypocrisy of us claiming to reveal abuse while perpetuating it among our own ranks.”

Bruce added that some people in the media industry won’t talk to her anymore, which has been hurtful. At the same time, she has received support. Some editors appear to be more open-minded and willing to listen and take a complaint seriously today. Several male colleagues and freelancers have also spoken up and supported women, she said, which has been an important way to show across-the-board solidarity among reporters.

Fellow Matthew Brown asked how men can become better allies and advocates for change. Bruce encouraged people to call out inappropriate conversations in closed circles and stand behind those who speak up.

Chick noted that almost all of her sources were women, and although she spoke with several men about Furst, none were willing to go on the record. “The other aspect is institutional change,” Chick said. “Individuals cause harm, but when an institution allows it, harassment causes a much broader effect than one person.”



Fellow Janelle Ward asked about ways to change institutional structures to stem abuses of power and hold managers accountable. Chick said the first step is for organizations and managers to care. Based on her reporting, people knew about the abuse but didn’t take it seriously or act on the information. Codes of conduct need to be enforced, she noted, and management should discuss it regularly.

“You have to mean it to take the right steps and address the issues,” she said. “It requires actual resolve.”

Fellow Sydney Fordice asked how young journalists should balance opportunities with standing up for themselves. In situations of harassment, Bruce said, reporters should reach out to their editors and colleagues in the field. The nonprofit group Women Photograph, for instance, has developed a close community of freelance photographers who depend on each other. Chick also encouraged journalists to find “safe places of support,” noting that “you don’t have to do it alone.”

“So many of the women who have been sources didn’t tell anyone because they were afraid or ashamed,” she said. “As soon as they told people, they discovered the power and support in others.”

When a Reporter Becomes Part of the Story

Visiting Journalist: Omar Jimenez, CNN

Moderator: Dodie Cantrell-Bickley, senior lecturer in journalism

As a national correspondent for CNN, Omar Jimenez is no stranger to breaking news or protest coverage. Even while doing live, on-the-ground reporting during the summer 2020 protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, he felt calm, prepared and focused. As had happened for two days, state patrol officers moved around camera crews while clearing protestors. On the third day, however, after securing a nearby intersection, an officer put his hand on Jimenez's arm while he was live on air and muttered three gut-wrenching words: "You're under arrest."

While still on the air, Jimenez showed his press credential, asked officers why he was being arrested and explained that the CNN crew hadn't been asked to move to the side or leave the area. The three other reporters on his team continued to roll the footage as Jimenez was led away in handcuffs. Then the team's producer was arrested and led away, and the live shot continued — with the camera laying sideways on the ground — as the rest were handcuffed. CNN studio anchors spoke tentatively about the scene as the police carried the live camera away.

During the two-hour time they were detained, the reality of the situation set in: Jimenez, a Black man, was arrested on live air while covering a protest for the death of a Black man at the hands of police. Jimenez still wore his smart watch, which continuously buzzed on his handcuffed wrist. People were concerned.

After the fact, the Minnesota State Patrol posted on Twitter that they had "inadvertently" arrested several members of the media. However, Jimenez knew that they showed their press credentials live on air and again before being transported away from the scene. He later found out that a colleague — a white reporter standing on the other side of the block — showed his press credentials and was allowed to stay.

"The image of the arrest was shocking, even more so with the narrative of what the police put out there," he told the McGill Fellows. "If we didn't have the video, theirs would have been the narrative that stood the test of time."



“Jimenez saw his story as a microcosm of what his team was covering with the Floyd protests. Initially, the police said Floyd had a medical incident, and there was no mention of police restraint. The juxtaposition of the two incidents still sticks with Jimenez today.

When those in power have the opportunity to make themselves look good, they will take it,” he said. “As a journalist, you are there to tell the people and show the people what the story really is.”

The CNN arrest has opened up conversations about law enforcement and the media in Minnesota. Gov. Tim Walz, who aided in the release of the CNN crew, apologized during a press conference and later apologized to Jimenez personally. Jimenez declined to pursue a lawsuit, but a class action lawsuit was filed to prevent police from arresting journalists in the field under any circumstances. Jimenez has been part of ongoing national discussions, as well as calls between local police and media members to find a solution. A universal credential could help police to identify press members, for instance, or an informed officer in the field could vouch for journalists who report on the scene, particularly at protests.

“I thought that was progress,” Jimenez said. “Though what will happen next time? At least for now, I feel better than I did the day after or week after.”

Professor Dodie Cantrell-Bickley applauded his courage to remain calm in the moment. Jimenez said the reaction was “born out of habit” from his breaking new roles in Baltimore, Chicago and other major national and international cities.

When reporting in tense situations that can change at any moment, he said, journalists must have confidence in focusing on what they can control.

“In that moment, I can’t control the police deciding to grab me,” he said. “What I can control is my reaction to it. If I had reacted in any resistant way, it would have given them liberty to take it further.”

Fellow Brianna Smith noted that even when people of color, especially Black men, follow instructions when encountering authorities, the situation could still end poorly. She asked whether reporters of color should follow different rules than other journalists when in the field. Jimenez said that reporters should be “realistic” about the environments they’re entering and avoid risky situations when possible. When looking for sources in some predominant white neighborhoods around Chicago, for instance, he found that people were more likely to refuse interviews when he knocked on the door. He suggested that his white producer initiate the interaction, and sources immediately began to agree to talk.



“This is why we have to have diversity in newsrooms,” he said. “This pretend world where your race doesn’t matter or people won’t see your color isn’t a real one. Do yourself a service by acknowledging that.”

At the same time, he noted, that shouldn’t stop reporters from doing their jobs. Journalists should mitigate what they can, think ahead and plan for safety. After he was arrested in Minneapolis, for example, he immediately returned to the scene to report again. As protests intensified and the police response grew, however, Jimenez said that officers weren’t discriminating between the press and the protestors on the scene anymore, so he and his crew often moved out of the way for safety.

“A story is not worth my life or physical health,” he said. “I will get the story — whether it’s at a protest, wildfire or COVID ward — but I speak with my crew to figure out what we can control and how we can play in that space.”

Depending on the newsroom, preparation often includes speaking with producers and editors about the next course of action, he said. At CNN, Jimenez trusts that when he says a situation is unsafe, his supervisors will listen.



That type of discussion can be tougher in small markets, he noted, but added that no story is worth a journalist’s life.

As a local reporter in Baltimore, he sometimes had to make difficult judgement calls when reporting on crime. In a particular instance, he was on the scene of a triple homicide where the suspect hadn’t yet been caught, and the police were preparing to leave just minutes before he went live at 11 p.m. Jimenez and his crew decided to film early and leave as soon as the police did rather than wait.

“You’re going to feel pressure when starting out, but in the long run, there will be opportunities and chances to get that story,” he said. “Come back in your off time or in the morning and leave a card at someone’s doormat. There are ways to get around going into a dangerous situation, especially late at night.”

Fellow Kathryn Skeeane asked how reporters can avoid the polarization around the press and rebuild trust in the media locally. Jimenez said journalists must realize that their job is bigger than the moment and lean into the job that they’re doing in the field with integrity. As he says, a reporter’s job is 10% presentation, 30% storytelling and 60% intelligence through habits and preparation.

“This idea of ‘keeping your cool’ is going to get you far. How you get there is prepare, prepare, prepare for what you can control,” he said. “Hitting the game-winning free throw doesn’t seem as big of a deal when you’ve done 1,000 free throws.”

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Witnessing History Firsthand

Visiting Professional: Sarah Wire, Los Angeles Times

Moderator: Charles Davis, dean, Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication

The Congressional tradition of holding a joint session to certify the electoral votes for a presidential election is typically a formality with little fanfare. Every four years, the event sets the stage for a peaceful transition of power to take place about two weeks later on Inauguration Day. On Jan. 6, 2021, however, the scene was anything but peaceful as more than 2,000 protestors arrived at the Capitol Complex to support former President Donald Trump and prevent the count that would designate President Joe Biden as the next leader of the United States.

For weeks after the 2020 election, Trump and his supporters posted online about the “Save America” rally that would call for former Vice President Mike Pence and Congress to reject Biden’s win. Sarah Wire, then a Congressional reporter for the Los Angeles Times, knew that some type of protest would happen, but she felt confident that the Capitol building would be the safest location. If anything, she felt more worried about the reporters in the crowd. That would soon change.

As Congress began the vote count that afternoon, Trump ended his rally speech, calling on his supporters to “walk down to the Capitol.”

As Congress began the vote count that afternoon, Trump ended his rally speech, calling on his supporters to “walk down to the Capitol.” Hundreds of people breached the police barricades as Americans across the country watched the scene unfold on live broadcast. The crowds vandalized and looted the building, assaulted Capitol Police officers and attempted to find lawmakers to harm them and steal the certification box.

In the House chamber, some people were evacuated, but in the upper gallery, Wire sat with dozens of fellow reporters and Congressional members. The doors, which locked from the outside, thudded closed as Capitol Police tried to guard them. On the House floor, people scrambled to shove a bookcase in front of the door, trying to negotiate with the rioters as sticks and flagpoles poked through the glass. In the upper gallery, one of the Congressional members yelled down to an officer, “What about us?”

“You could see the look in his eyes,” Wire told the McGill Fellows. “His job is to protect Congress as a body, and his focus was on getting the majority of people out of the room. A couple of officers were up in the gallery with us, and the color drained from their faces.”



At that point, Wire took cover and crawled toward a Congressional member she knew. Wire was aware that the representative was from the district where the 2015 San Bernardino shooting happened and had experience with watching a disaster unfold. As the frenzy reached a fevered pitch around them, a bang rang out over the chamber, and the room went quiet.

“As a cops and courts reporter, I knew it was a gunshot,” Wire said. “There was banging on the door near us, and Congressional members screamed about whether to open the door. When it opened, at least a dozen protestors were on the ground with their hands behind their heads and police officers standing over them as we scurried away to safety.”

During the commotion, one of the Congressional aides safely slipped away with the certification box. Later that evening, after the Capitol was clear of rioters, the electoral vote count resumed through the early morning. Biden was declared president.

The emotions and experiences from Jan. 6 still linger on Capitol Hill, Wire said, even into 2022. The ongoing conversation about what happened and what should happen next prompted her to change her beat to focus on national security, white supremacy and domestic extremism.

“If this wasn’t a step too far, what is?” she said. “Watching this last year and thinking about my two kids at home, I’ve wondered what America is being left for my children. I decided the best way to know is to write about it.”

McGill Fellow Palmer Thombs asked when white supremacy became a beat focus for reporters. Wire said this is the first time her newsroom will cover it as a beat, with an emphasis on covering extremism fairly and accurately without giving air to it. In recent decades, she said, conversations about “terrorism” have centered on foreign influences, and often, people of color. Domestic terrorism, on the other hand, has become a growing concern since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995.

“The issue was always here, and it’s gotten bigger and bigger,” she said. “Now we’re specifically naming it and writing about it.”

Fellow Delaney Tarr asked how the experience was different reporting from inside the incident, rather than outside it. Wire has covered shootings before, both in person and from afar, but she noted that those previous events were easier to compartmentalize because she wasn’t in danger. At first, she resisted the idea of writing a first-person article about Jan. 6 because she didn’t want to be part of the story, but she realized she had a perspective that no one else did on that day.



When Wire and the others in the upper House gallery were ushered to a safe room, she remained with Congressional members, so she continued to conduct interviews and record audio. Other reporters in the room stopped, but Wire kept pushing forward. She collected as many interviews on her phone as possible, gathering the varied details. People had different perspectives and remembered different details. One person said they had a panic attack, and another said they had plotted how to take out as many rioters as possible. While reviewing the audio later, Wire heard herself ask how Congressional members were doing, with her voice often shaking. She offered a hug to one representative, and another lawmaker put a hand on her shoulder in comfort.

“I was watching it from outside of my own body,” she said. “When I heard the gunshot and it hit me that I could die, I knew I would go out swinging. People would know that I did my job until the end.”

Fellow Julia Walkup asked how the event has affected Wire’s reporting and the way she approaches safety. Wire said she has scrubbed her personal information from the internet and has emphasized safety protocols as part of her life and work on Capitol Hill. Her family installed a home security system, and the police in her town know her. She doesn’t discuss her family on social media.

“My experience is a sliver of what my colleagues of color experience,” she said. “I received my first death threat when I was 19, but it’s nothing compared to what they have experienced.”

Fellow Matthew Brown asked Wire and Dean Charles Davis what they believe should change to reduce hatred against press members. Davis said he hoped for reestablished independence and a more deeply resourced, feistier press that calls out mistreatment in the name of “fake news.” In addition to rebutting politicians who label journalists as the “enemy of the people,” Wire said she’d like more responsibility and transparency among government offices with public records.



“It’s insanely difficult to get FOIA requests. They should be handing them to me,” she said. “I have an outstanding request from 2007. The only way to get the records is to take the government to court, and the government shouldn’t be spending taxpayer money denying the people their information.”

When Journalism Helps Bring Justice

Visiting journalist: Larry Hobbs, The Brunswick News

Moderator: Kyser Lough, lecturer in photojournalism

Reporters can have a tremendous impact at the local level, especially as the only journalist in the room. Larry Hobbs, a reporter at The Brunswick News, was the journalist in his small town who questioned the information provided about the death of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man who was killed while jogging in his community in February 2020.

Hobbs realized that the details didn't feel quite right in the initial police reports he received, so he kept asking questions. Eventually, his reporting elevated the issue to the national level, and he's followed the story ever since — all the way to the hate crimes trial that convicted Gregory McMichael, Travis McMichael and William "Roddie" Bryan in February 2022.

"The impact I feel on the community I serve and live in has never been so resonant as it is right now in this job," he told the McGill Fellows. "Here, I know people and run into people. I'm part of this community, and I'm invested in it."

During the afternoon of Feb. 23, 2020, Hobbs was enjoying his Sunday off from work when he saw social media commentary from people following the police scanner in Brunswick.

He noted a post about someone being shot and killed in the Satilla Shores neighborhood, which he found unusual, so he called the police department to ask about the details.

When he didn't receive a response, he reached out to the county coroner, who shared that a man was found dead in the street. Hobbs questioned why a young man was shot in the middle of the street in a working-class neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon. It rang alarm bells in his mind, so he sat down to write what he knew so far and posted the story online.

The next day, little additional information was available. The police log showed that officers arrived on the scene and found a young man who had bled out and died. Hobbs requested the full police report, and while he was waiting for a response, saw a nugget of information — the case was being investigated by the Brunswick District Attorney's Office.

Hobbs continued to prod and found that Jackie Johnson, the DA, recused herself from the case since Greg McMichael previously worked for her as an investigator, so the case moved to the Waycross DA. More alarm bells.



“They usually make public pronouncements about this,” Hobbs said. “I called the Brunswick DA, and she didn’t answer, and when I called the Waycross DA, he didn’t answer. I said we wanted answers.”

Hobbs reached an assistant DA, who said that three people, including McMichael, were armed on the scene. They were there when police arrived, standing over Arbery’s body, but that was all. Hobbs filed a formal public records request for the police report. On April 1, they finally released it.

“It was late in the day, and the main thing was to get the story,” he said. “I should have done more, but I only had time to get the story. It was damning and scathing, so I printed the facts.”

The narrative of the police report said that Greg McMichael was working in his yard when he saw a Black man running on the street, but the report didn’t give a reason to suspect Arbery of a crime. McMichael ran inside his house and yelled to his son Travis to get his gun, and their neighbor Roddie joined them. They pursued Arbery for several minutes, using their trucks to block his path. A struggle ensued, and Arbery was shot three times in the street. It was April, yet the men hadn’t been arrested.

Hobbs filed a public records request for the 911 tapes, which later came out at the end of April.

In the interim, he continued to make calls to George Barnhill, the Waycross district attorney, who later recused himself after it was revealed that his son worked in Johnson’s office alongside Greg McMichael. The case was sent to Tom Durden at the Atlantic Judicial Circuit District, a small district located north of Brunswick. Around this time, The New York Times began reporting on the story, followed by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the news outlets in Savannah, Georgia, and Jacksonville, Florida.

On May 5, a video of the shooting was uploaded by WGIG, the local radio station. Although the video was removed quickly for being too graphic, it had already gone viral. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation stepped in and found that Alan David Tucker, a local criminal defense attorney, had sent the video to the station, and it had been recorded by Bryan. Within hours of the video becoming public, Durden said he was ready to take the case to the grand jury in Brunswick. Days later, the McMichaels were arrested, followed by Bryan. The case was transferred to the Cobb County District Attorney’s Office. Hobbs continued to follow the story.

“There are a lot of things that I could have done better, but the main thing is that I didn’t let go of the story,” Hobbs said. “I kept calling and finding answers, little bits of information.”

McGill Fellow Reeves Jackson asked how to push for information from law enforcement and other government agencies, especially in small towns where information may not be disclosed. Hobbs suggested following paper trails, such as police reports, and accounts that government officials must keep as part of their duties. If the information isn't immediately available, he said, file a public records request and continue to follow up.

"For me, there's no special magic," Hobbs said. "The main thing is persistence and patience and not letting go. Do good due diligence."

Hobbs continually published throughout court process, culminating in the hate crimes trial in early 2022. He was there alongside journalists from The Associated Press, The New York Times, and even reporters from England, as they wrote during their lunch breaks and after court recessed for the day. A sense of mission drove him to keep going on the emotional and draining days.

"This story has been going on way too long in the South, not that other parts of the nation are immune to this," Hobbs said. "We're talking about racism here and violence as a result, and in times of reckoning, it has come up wanting."

Although Hobbs has faced anger from some community members, he's also received gratitude from across the country.

When he wrote a one-year anniversary story, Hobbs spoke with Wanda Cooper Jones, Arbery's mother, who thanked him for the articles. She was told by police that her son was killed inside a house while trying to burglarize it. She didn't know until the newspaper published the story that her son was shot dead in the middle of the street.

Professor Kyser Lough asked what Hobbs would offer as advice. Hobbs noted that reporters make a difference, whether they work for large, national media companies or local community news outlets.

"You're there when a company wants to build a sewer plant nearby and you show up at the city commission meeting. You're there to find out what's going on in the government, no matter where you go," he said. "Journalism is the first rough draft of history, and you can make a difference wherever you end up."

