**Behind the Prose Transcript**

Episode 31: Jessica Contrera

Air Date: 1/11/2015

Hosts:

Keysha Whitaker [KW]

Guests:

Jessica Contrera [JC]

So I'm just going to read what's at the top of this article that is posted on Indiana University Student Work Gallery, just so people can become familiar again with this particular story: "Senior Jessica Contrera's story "The End of the Waffle House" about the last days of the 46-year-old restaurant placed third in the Hearst Journalism Feature Writing Competition. The story also gained popularity on a national scale, appearing in Reader's Digest and being cited by Poynter.org and other media outlets. The story was first published in the Indiana Daily Student. The story won a first place award for feature writing from The Society of Professional Journalists Region Five Contest and second place from Indiana SPJ. It was also a finalist in the national SPJ Mark of Excellence Awards Contest. That award included honors for Contrera as well as designer and photographer.

So let's give her a round of applause for that.

[KW] Let's start with the story. Where did you get the inspiration to bring this story to life, about the closing of The Waffle House?

[JC] I was in a journalism class; I was a journalism major at IU and my senior year, I was in a class with two girls - we were in this class together where we were - there was a class of writers, photographers, and multimedia people, and they put us into groups of three. Those girls and I had worked together before; we were all really close. So I was lucky they let me work with them. Kind of as a team building exercise, your professor said you have to go out tomorrow, it was like the first day of class, and from like 12 noon on Friday and 12 noon Saturday - --- We had 24 hours to do it.

I had seen a couple days before that this restaurant had a "We're about to close sign." I actually had never been there before but I was always kind of intrigued by it because it was - I'm sure you could tell if you got to see the pictures - it was really pretty rundown and I'd heard the food wasn't very good, but there was always cars and people in the parking lot. So I'd always go by and be like that place must have something going for it. So I was curious. And it was a 24 hour restaurant. So when we had the 24 hour assignment, it sort of lent itself to that.

So we decided that we would go there and do our 24 hour project there and we would write about why people go there and that kind of stuff. So I did that project and turned it in. I was lucky because I was just sort of ready to let it go and move on to the next thing, but my professor said I really think you have something here and I think you should keep working on it.

So that's how it happened?

[KW] So did you have a word count when you started out with this?

[JC] I think that the story - the first draft that I turned in was much shorter. Basically, the story that it came out to be - there was basically three days that I went there. So the day it closed, a week before it closed which is that middle scene with Dr. Lila and Rose and Bud, and then the day that it was torn down. So the first draft that I turned in was just that section with Dr. Leyda and sandwiches and that kind of stuff. So it was much shorter. And at that point, I didn't know a lot of the stuff I love in the story, like getting to know those characters' backgrounds because you realize it's a special place to them and that what I think makes it feel special to me.

So a lot of the background we talked about briefly, but I didn't know a lot of those details until afterwards, until my professor made me keep going back and going back and asking questions like "Tell me about your wife's Alzheimer's" and then he would say things like, "oh, I go and see her at the retirement home." If I hadn't known - and it's still a thing I'm learning to do - sometimes you would just write that down and let it be, but that doesn't really connect with anyone. It doesn't really paint a picture in your mind of someone sitting in a retirement home. So it was a lot of going back and saying, "What do you guys do when you are there?" And he'd say, "I sing her songs." Well what kind of songs? Things like that. You're constantly asking stuff until you get details that people can connect with in the story.

[KW] In the article on Poynter, I read that you did 15 drafts, and when we talked about it in class, everyone kinda said, Oh my goodness.

[Laughter]

What separates your drafts? How do you mark a first draft, a second draft, in terms of revision?

[JC] In this case, I had to turn it into my professor, so every time I would turn one in, I would mark it as a new. So this is like one of those weird situations - like now, no one would ever let me do 15 drafts. You know what I mean? But this was a special situation because I was in a class and I had the time and I really just wanted to make it good, and I kept mentioning my professor wouldn't take no for an answer. I'd turn in a draft and he'd circle it and say, "Find out more about this" and it transformed a lot. So I really, probably by the second or third draft, I decided to really focus on those three people. By the sixth or seventh draft, I realized I would need to hammer down on the backstory of their lives.

I originally - the first drafts had more information about this neighborhood, like how the neighborhood had changed and getting into the idea of urban planning, there was so much change going on in this area. I had to make a choice: am I going to talk about buildings or about people? And obviously it's a lot more powerful to talk about people. So it was just making some of those choices. Again, it's not something that I get to do now, but

7:19 And again, it's not something I normally get to do now, but having that experience really helps me now.

[KW] You interviewed many more people than you included in the narrative? How did you choose?

7:47 [JC] There were always cars in the parking lot. I talked to a police officer who would go in there everyday. When Emma who was doing a video interview, someone broke down in tears to her. What helped me make the decision was, well I knew it was going to be Bud because it was his place, but I realized from the way people answered 'why do you like coming here?' And they would say, 'Oh it's never changed,' **so I think somewhere along the way I realized the people who had the most at stake were the people who needed something in their life that wasn't going to change.** There were people who already everything else in their life had just changed so much. Rose, her husband had died, and Dr. Leyda was watching his wife just disappear before his eyes and so they were both people that they went there everyday. It's one of those things that you wonder if that's the case, and you ask them do you think you go there because there are so many things in your life changing, and they're like yeah, you're right.

I could write that these people had crazy things happen and they like having the same tuna salad sandwich but instead I decided to dig down and find out what those stories were and just try and share them in a way that wasn't fancy, but like someone was telling you themselves. They were the people I chose because they had the most at stake with the place closing.

[KW] 10:05 You say, you don't try to write fancy, but you use several elements of word play like alliteration and bringing forth elements of fiction in character description. Does that come naturally or do you concentrate on that during the draft process.

[JC] If that comes naturally to anyone, they are very lucky. I think that's all practice. When I say write fancy, I just mean using big words or trying to make these grand connections. I think it's like when you read a fiction book - my favorite is Harry Potter - but you just read it and it's simple and you know what's going on but there are tons of literary techniques. Like in the Waffle House when you find out Rose talks to this picture and you get back to it later. So those are techniques used in books, and that's something that you only really learn by reading more of other's peoples work. That's where you learn. You just start to imitate other people and hopefully your own voice comes through on that.

[KW] Did you find out she talks to her husband's picture because you saw or it is that what she told you?

[JC] I went to her house - I met her twice - and then I went to her house to learn more about her life because she couldn't talk on the phone so I went over to her house. She had this picture, and I saw her do it. She'd say, "Oh, isn't that right Stan?" And I asked, Do you talk to him a lot? And she said, I talk to him everyday. That's one of those moments that is so sweet and I try to remember that if its affects me that it will affect other people.

13:25 As a features writer and you get a detail like that, is there a litmus test that you use to decide which details to include that might offend the subject?

[JC] I think I try and make pretty clear to people. I always have my notebook out and I think people understand everything is fair game. If there's anything that I would be worried about - especially in a story like this where you have the time - I think there's a lot of merit in running it by people. You can't have someone read your story before it comes out, because that's considered unethical, but I think there's merit in like 'Okay, I want to walk through my story and tell you what's in it.' One, because I think people will appreciate it. Two because sometimes you just get things wrong but you wouldn't otherwise know. But most of the time, they usually will confirm it or tell you something else that would add to it. In that situation, I think I told her before hand that it was going to be here and she just laughed or something. She was really sweet.

[KW] You have lots of details in the story like the smell of the frying sausage, the aluminum cane, the cracks in the ceiling. Do you set aside a time to just record details?

[JC] That's really hard. I still struggle with that. This story I had a lots of time to add in more details. I'm sure I don't do it as well when I'm going more quickly, but one thing I do try and do is whenever - wherever I am - I will take video or photos of the room and that saves me time because I don't have to write the couch is grey. I always explain to people what I'm doing. That frees up time to write down smells or times. Sometimes it's just a matter of reminding yourself to do it.

[KW] We'll open up to questions on The Waffle House.

[Student] My name is Miguel. I'm a Professional Writing Major. My question is, who or what inspired you to get into journalism?

[JC] Probably books, reading. I used to think when I first started I didn't want to be a journalist because it's not about making stuff up. But then I discovered there's this whole world of journalism that is about telling stories. So reading a lot. I had an aunt in journalism for a time. I watched a lot of Gilmore Girls. In high school, I joined the high school newspaper and wrote some really terrible articles but had a lot of fun. It's such a cool job. You basically get paid to go on field trips. You get to be so curious. It's a lot of hard work but really fun.

[Student #2] My name is Kim. I'm actually an organizational leadership major, so I'm not in journalism at all. But I do have a question for you. You had spoke about Rose, specifically where you had said about her talking to her dead husband. Towards the end of the story where she was coming back from the church, and she spoke from the picture at the time, was that something that you knew or was that something that you inferred from prior knowledge of her talking.

[JC] So the ideal thing would be for me to be with her int hat moment and then I would really know, but I wasn't. So what I do, is I am always very clear, I think I want to write about that moment when you went home. I can't remember if she - I think she said that to me at that time, and then because that's such a detail that I love, then that's when I decided to place that earlier in the story because that detail sticks out more.

I had one other question. As far as Bud is concerned, did he intend for the place to be what it was and what point did it become sort of different?

22:18 [JC] He was the hardest one to crack. It was very difficult for him to talk about what it meant to him. He was an old school guy. The one thing I did do because I was having so much trouble with him, I interviewed his wife and son.

23:09 [Student #3] Hello. I'm Avery. I'm a Professional Writing Major, hopefully to do what you're doing now. One of the questions I want to ask you, in your article, you made The Waffle House feel like an actual character in your story. I love how writers can do that - make an inanimate object come to life. I want to know if you came up with that on your own, if not, what gave you that idea?

[JC] I don't know that anyone has ever put it to me like that before. I do think that there's a lot of value - if it's going to be a story about a place - really it's a story about people, but the whole frame of it is within this place. Maybe that was the hardest for me - was figuring out why people go there - getting people to figure out what it's like to sit inside there. It's not like I was writing about a place that people couldn't imagine in their mines. I think at least some Americans have been to some version of a crappy diner. At least growing up in the midwest [I have] so I think the more details you put in a story, just like when you're reading a book - the more details that make you feel like you're there, the more likely you are to keep reading.

25:30 This one is kind of like a silly question: In your article, you said 16,776 mornings. Did Bud actually count the mornings?

[JC] I'm glad you said this. At one point, that sentence wasn't in the story because we had cut it. I used some computer calculator or something. I found out the exact day that it opened and closed. I had spent so long - I'm not that good of a math person which is very typical of journalism **- but I had spent so much time, but my professor had cut it, and I was like no, I'm putting that back in there.**

[KW] Okay so you graduated from Indiana University. Tell us how you got to be a staff reporter at The Washington Post.

27:09 [JC] It actually had a lot to do with this story. So the story came out and I was really lucky that it had been posted online, so more people probably saw it than would see a regular student article. So anyone that tweeted it out that worked at a newspaper I wanted to work for, I reached out and said I was about to apply to the internship program and asked do you have advice for me.  I did that a lot of places. Some never called me back. One guy at the Post was really generous with his time and helped me look over my clips. I think that's one reason why I got the internship at the Post because I had some connections in the building. I wouldn't have had them if I hadn't been an annoying, nagging person. But I always tell people, everyone started at the bottom. most people are a lot more willing to help you out if they can tell if you're a hard worker.

I did do that, and then I got the summer internship. I'd already done a lot a before. Internships are really important in journalism. It's a really hard thing to learn in the classroom alone. I worked really hard and tried to be the person who went above and beyond. Some interns in my class acted like they were great when they got the internship, but I think it's important for me to remember - especially because I'm so young - is that you're on the bottom o fate totem pole and that's okay.

So I was very lucky and they offered me a job. I will say - as they were hiring a lot of people - Jeff Bezos the owner of Amazon bought the paper - so I was lucky to intern at a time when they were hiring a lot of people.

30:20 [KW] How long was your internship?

[JC] Three months. So I started in the fall. So I'm 30:32

It has nothing to do with fashion, it's a lifestyle and does arts and culture and feature stories that are off the news.

[KW] Can you explain how a staff reporter position work at a daily paper?

[JC] It's a little bit different for everyone. There are staff writers who write two stories a year because they're on an investigation team and there are staff writers who write mainly for their content - is mainly online - and they write three stories a day. For me, my schedule is Sunday through Thursdays and on Sundays, I help out with whatever needs done. Sometimes I'm there in case anything happens. That could be one story, sometimes it's three. Those are when I'm doing sort of more stories, just reading what happened over the weekend and trying to maybe call one or two people for quick stories.

The rest of the week, I work on these general assignment stories. I always have probably five or six going at one time. Some of them I'll work on for six months. Some for a day. I pitch a lot of my own stories, especially since I'm on a general assignment team. I sort of know the areas I'm interested in writing about and I'm always reading and looking for the next thing I can work on. During the week, I probably have between one and three stories that go in a paper.

32:59 [KW] Most students I find, find it hard to get motivated about something that they don't care about. That's what you're faced with as a general reporter. Do you have advice for that type of mindset?

[JC] So I think there's value in having something you're really interested in. If you're really interested in crime stuff, you might be set for a police beat. What I like about general assignment is the whole idea of telling stories. When I look at stories, there are characters, beginning and end. Even in that sort of situation for me, I still like to find the people whose lives interact with that concept and I'm explaining it through their own personal stories. For me, lack of having a beat, is still within my wheelhouse because I like to tell stories.

34:39 Do they expect you to produce a certain number of stories a month?

[JC] That's a hard balance to find.  I've never been given a quota, but I'm always checking in, like 'Do you need more stuff this week?' 'I know I need to take some time on this story, is now a good time for me to do it? Because that's the way the world of the newspaper works. If they told everyone write six stories every two weeks, it wouldn't work. With the internet, there is not stopping how much you do, but we do have a print product. So I don't have a quota but I think it's a really important part of my job is keeping in touch with my editors and saying what do you need this week.

[KW] Do you have a certain number of hours to be in the office?

[JC] Well, it's general business hours. Journalism business hours are a little later. I would say most people are there from 10 -6. But it really depends because I might not go in at all because I have an interview in Maryland that takes all day. My hours, I get in between 9 and 9:30 and leave around 6 or 7.

[Student 4]:  Hi. I'm Gina. I'm a writing major. I'm not actually sure what I'm going to do with it yet, so I have a couple of questions for you. When you started out as an intern, what were your emotions, were you nervous or scared or doubtful of your own skills?

37:17 [JC] Yeah, all of those things, I would say I'm still all of those things many times. I'm really lucky to work in a place where people are so talented. I think there's always a little bit of self doubt. In a way, I hope I still have it when I'm fifty because I think it makes you better. It makes you want to keep working hard. I think as an intern, people are pretty understanding and know you're not going to know everything. I think it was matter of getting up the courage to ask, how do I do this? Or how does this thing work? I can't get this story to send to my editor. I think being a good intern is asking a lot of question and not pretending you know what you don't know but also having the confidence that they picked me for a reason and I got to do my work and whatever else it is they think I can do.

[Student 4] Now that you're a reporter, is it everything you have imagined? Are there thing that you wish you knew then that would have helped you now?

[JC] That's a really good question. It is more - It's awesome. I will say that. I knew that I was going to be learning a lot of things, but I probably didn't expect all of the things that I would get to learn. Every time you get a new story, it's like you're taking a mini class. You try to learn as much as you can really fast, and you talk to the people who are experts and you become a little bit of one, a novice on these particular issues. Is there something I didn't expect?

I guess I didn't expect that there would be times when I would have to give myself creativity. I would say journalism - you're never really going to get bored - but it is really easy to fall into a complaceny. If you don't have to write a long story, you can fall back on things that you like doing - writing a lead a certain way, structuring your story a certain way, so I think it's easy to get complacent because what's the point of that because you're not going to get better.  For me, it's about how often I need to push myself to keep getting better and better.

[Student 4] Do you travel often?

[JC] Not as often as I would like?

[Laughter]

I have traveled for stories a couple times which is cool. Basically, how that works is that I find a story that is worth traveling for, then I ask if it's okay to do. As far as other travel, I'm going to New Mexico next week for the first time. We're going to the International Hot Air Balloon Festival.

42:08 [Student 5] Michael Sartini. Pleasure to meet you. How did you go out securing your internships?

[JC] Applying to a lot of them. I would say that is the trick. They get a million applications across their desk. You can't just write a cover letter and call it a day. I worked really hard on those. It's a matter of what clips you have. Trying to do a good job of packaging those things, now it's all online, but when your resume comes across, I made an online portfolio. Those things are not fun. I interned in Pittsburgh the summer before my senior year. I think working really hard when you are there, those people will recommend you to the next person and stuff.

Oh and anyone wants to apply to The Post internship, and I think the deadline is in October. They take all different kinds of people. They have people who have graduate degrees and have been working in another field. I have no pull.

[Student 6] Hi. It's Avery again. Have you ever did an article that you really didn't like the type of thing the person was saying, but you had to be totally unbiased.

[JC] I don't think there's anyway to be totally unbiased. We all come from a certain background and have had certain experiences in our lives. So I think part of it is knowing your own biases. I guess the best thing - this week, the pope was in DC. So I got to help out with some of that coverage. So Wednesday night there were people waiting to see him. Obviously when he's in town you're going to talk to people about a wide range of political issues.

There was a guy that I interviewed that was like, the pope is the antichrist. People who don't believe in gay marriage and do believe. People who are pro-life and not. The key for me is distancing myself - like my own whatever - just from my job. There's me as a person. And me as a reporter. My job is not to judge people. There is a quote from someone - "A writer's job isn't to judge it's to understand." I think that's really important. So I think you interview the person who is telling you all about their views on immigration, the same way you interview the person who's telling you all about the views on Obama being the devil. When you go to write it, it's a challenge because you have to introduce multiple sides. You have to introduce skepticism. Especially as a features writer because your stories have to have a voice to them but I think there's a way to do that and also still respect people.

SO when I wrote about the guy who had the sign that the pope is the antichrist and Obama is the devil or vice versa, I can't remember which, he was dead serious. I included the things he said to other people and I also included the things that would indicate the full range - he had this camera hooked to his sign. He said I do YouTube and Google, but I don't do Facebook because it's evil, so it's putting that in there to show who he is.

48:59 It's also this guy who stood on the bench and turn on Taylor Swift to drown out the guy with the antichrist sign. You don't write, a crazy man - you let people make their own decisions.

[Student 6] What did you learn from your internship and what skills did you have going into it?

49:28 [JC] I would say, in journalism, like they're all one. You're always trying to get better. Listening and learning when to shut up is really important. People, who especially when you talk to them about really emotional things, will give you a generic answer first, but then you just look at them and stay quiet. Then they say something that is meaningful. Also to listen when people give you an answer so you're not just reading off a set of question.

I think for me a skill I'm always working on is sort of organization of you know - my living room [laughter] - and writing. Organization for me is really important as a features writer. Another thing that's really important for me is reading and some of my professors, when I was assigned a story that I really like. I almost reverse outlined it and figure out how they decided to put certain things where. I think that's like the biggest piece to success, I think when it comes to writing a long story.

These are awesome questions.

[KW] Thank you for joining us. My final question for you is - I usually ask my guests what their writing super power is - but for your -I'm going to ask you what is your reporting superpower?

52:14 [JC] That's really hard. One thing I really get excited about that I'm able to do, is finding a person or people who represent an issue or something going on in the news. You can't ever find someone who is exactly representative of what's going on. When we read about something like immigration or foodstamps or Planned Parenthood. I'm not personally affected. I'm not going to feel affected unless I read a story about the person - a mom whose foodstamp schedule changed and she had three days where she couldn't feed her kids (I'm using other people's story examples). These are types of stories where you take this issue, and then through reaching out to advocacy organization or looking on Facebook, you find a way to cycle down and find someone who is really affected by it and you tell the story of that person's life and what they're going through and you connect it back to these issues and you say this is a real thing. This is how it's affecting this one person and probably lots of other people.

Those are my favorite types of stories.

54:26 [KW] Thank you for joining, and as Avery said, we wish you 16,776 mornings at The Washington Post.

End of Recording