

**Texas After Violence Project**

**Interview with Emilie Eaton**

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JANE FIELD: All right, so it is November 30th, 2018 and I'm here with Emily Eaton at the San Antonio Express News Offices. My name is Jane Field, the voice behind the camera. And also in the room is aems emswiler, running the video equipment.

EMILY EATON: Hi.

FIELD: So just to start, I wondered if you could tell me a little bit about who you are, and so if you want to talk a little bit about where you're from, I don't know if you are from Texas, or where you grew up but tell me who you are, where you come from and how you ended up here.

EATON: So my name's Emily Eaton, and I grew up in Northern California in a small town called Rio Vista, and I lived there for all of my childhood with my mom and my dad. I'm an only child, unfortunately, but very early on my parents instilled in me the importance of community service and of empathy and of writing. I mean, those are a lot of different things, but those are things that have been constants in my life for a long time. Early on I wanted to be an author and eventually I decided that wasn't for me and it evolved into an interest in journalism and an interest in social justice and human rights. So, in high school I began working for our yearbook and our newspaper and after high school I majored in journalism at Arizona State University and very early on I recognized that I wanted to do in-depth reporting and investigative reporting because I felt like that was a really important facet and very essential part of our democracy.

And also, just on a human level, I like hearing people's stories and I like being able to tell them, I think everyone just has these incredible stories that really, you know, show who they are and that's how we all relate, I mean, you can write a story about someone or you can write a story about a policy and its sort of cut and dry and its sort of like, Okay well that's important but who does it impact? And it impacts people, and so when you actually get their stories you understand, Okay this has really world consequences and real people that it's affecting. So early on, I took an interest in writing about those type of things, I wrote about the influx of children who are immigrating to the United States from Central America, and I wrote about gun rights and gun control and that led me to my first job in Ohio, I worked there for 2 years covering child poverty and social issues, along with breaking news and then I moved here to Texas, and I've been here in Texas for 2 years.

FIELD: Welcome.

EATON: Thank you.

FIELD: Were there any stories that you covered early in your career that were particularly impactful?

EATON: Yeah, the one that jumps out was when I covered the influx of children who were traveling here from Central America. So for that project, I took a class and it was an in-depth immigration class essentially. It focused on writing and reporting and for the project, we first wrote an essay—it was like a 10-page project about talking to academics and talking to people about the policy and about what was going on and if there was any precedent for what it was like, if there was anything like that in the past. And so I wrote a 10-page story about the influx of children traveling to the United States, and then after that we actually travelled to Chiapas, Mexico [00:04:12], which is on the southern border, right next to Guatemala, and while we were there my friend and I, or my reporting partner and I, travelled to a shelter where migrants stopped on their way, so usually it was their first stop after they had gotten over the Guatemalan border—Guatemalan and Mexican border—then they travelled for about 2 or 3 hours and then ended up in this shelter. And it was a great stopping point for them because they could jump onto La Bestia, the train, that takes them up to Northern America. So

we were there overnight and I was just—it was a really incredible experience and it was really humbling what people were willing to go through in order to get to the United States.

So there was a young boy who we met there, his name was Samuel, he was 17, and we basically asked him, Why are you willing to do this? The La Bestia and all of the issues along the border, I mean, you're risking your life to essentially go to the United States, and we said, Why? and he said, Well, if I, at least if I try, then I have a chance of helping myself and helping my family, if I don't, I'm just going to live in poverty in Guatemala. Or something to that affect. And it was really humbling, I mean it was really sad seeing a 17 year old being willing to die for his family and a lot of other people too, I mean, a lot of other people who are making the risk. So that was really impactful. And we also met a mother there who was bringing along her 4-year-old daughter, I believe, and you know it was just, it sort of amazing and sad at the same time seeing this 4-year-old make this incredible journey, and that she was just so full of life and so, like you know she could be my niece, or she could be, someone's, one of my friends little sister or something, you know, she just, she had no idea exactly what she was getting into. My friend and I, my reporting partner and I, we talked about it and we just, you know, we still think about her and we still think about Samuel, and we're like, Did they make it? Are they alive? And we don't know, because we could never find them afterwards. So, yeah, that made a huge impact, very early on in my journalism career.

FIELD: Do you find when you're reporting a story like that, I mean clearly these people that you met had a deep impact on you but do you often find you have a deep connection with the people that you are talking to and engaging with as you do your reporting? [00:07:02]

EATON: Yeah, yeah, I would say so. Its a different type of understanding and connection because I myself have not been through something like that but it is a sense of empathy and understanding, just knowing that many of the people were the same age as me or maybe a few years younger than me and they were going through this. I think maybe I was probably 21 when this was happening, and Samuel was 17. So, I very much connected to him being a young person myself, and caring for my family myself. and seeing that he was willing to do all of this for his family was very impactful and I did feel sort of connected to him. Whenever anyone shares a very intimate part of their life, I think you can feel a connection to them, so I very much felt that way with him and with others.

FIELD: It sounds like, reporting for you is just by nature much more intimate than it is for, like as you mention just cut-and-dry policy reporting since you're doing the in-depth investigative reporting, that strikes me. So eventually you made it here, to San Antonio, what was your first day at San Antonio Express News like?

EATON: That's a good question. I don't remember exactly. There was definitely some logistical stuff we had to take care of [laughter]. Where I had to get my badge and turn in my paper work. I remember in the first couple of days, there was some news about the mayor, she was setting up a police-community relations meeting, or, committee. Where civilians and police officers and police union members could all get together and talk about police community relations. And I was thrown on to that assignment with very little knowledge of San Antonio and very little knowledge of how things worked, I mean it was the first time that I had covered criminal justice. Before I had been covering breaking news, and social issues, child poverty. And, so, I was sort of just thrown into the middle of it, which is often what happens in journalism. And another reporter sort of took me under her wing, and together we reported on this, I went to the meeting, it wasn't open to the public but afterwards we had a press conference, so I attended that, so I remember frantically trying to meet all of these people and call all of these people and sort of do what we're talking about, we're talking to real people about, what this committee means to them and what they're hoping will come out of it.

FIELD: What were your first thoughts as you—how did you feel, as you were making that shift to covering criminal justice? [laughter] How did you feel about making that transition? Was it one that you wanted, did you want to jump into that type of reporting? Had you sought it out or were you just kind of thrust into it?

EATON: Sort of thrust into it [laughter] [00:10:54]

FIELD: That's what it sounded like. [laughter]

EATON: I didn't know what I was getting myself into but I wasn't sure if that's what I wanted. So, I had been in Cincinnati for about 2 years covering those various topics and in the midst of it the San Antonio Express news had reached out to me and asked me if I was interested in a job. And, I believe they did that two times and both times I said, No I'm really happy where I am and I'm not ready to move yet. And eventually, it got to a point where I was getting ready to move, I just didn't feel like I was growing as much as I could. So yeah, I reached out to them and I said, I am interested now if you guys have any openings. And they said they had a couple of openings but what they were most interested in filling was the criminal justice role, and at first I was like, I never really saw myself covering criminal justice. But I did see a lot of parallels between that and child poverty and social issues and specifically on reporting on disenfranchised groups and sort of groups that don't, can't necessarily always speak up for themselves, or don't have the opportunity to. Yeah. So I said, Okay, I'll give it a shot. Might as well. And I really enjoy it, like two years later I don't want to do anything else, at least now. [laughter] I think eventually I'll get tired of it, or eventually I'll want to do something else but for the time being, I'm really happy and the beat presents itself with a lot of opportunities and a lot of important stories.

FIELD: So, that was two years ago, so the end of 2016 about?

EATON: Mhmm.

FIELD: [00:12:55]: I know that one of the first capital punishment cases you covered was Rolando Ruiz and he was executed in March of 2017 so it sounds like that was very soon after you started covering criminal justice. Are you comfortable moving into discussing that?

EATON: Yeah, yeah.

FIELD: Okay, I would just like to hear what it was like for you and the experience. I don't have any direct questions [laughter], I'll certainly jump in.

EATON: [00:13:36] I'm trying to remember actually how I found out about it and I can't remember of the top of my head, but I do recall that since I got to San Antonio, I had an interest in the death penalty and an interest in capital punishment. And I had begun researching and looking at the people here from San Antonio who were on death row for various reasons. And I remember Rolando Ruiz's name coming up and doing a little research about his case, and I can't remember exactly how I came to really focus on it and the month before he was set to be executed, but it might have just been that I saw that his execution was coming and I realized, Okay well this would be a really good time to dig into his case and meet the family of his victim and possibly meet his family and go from there. [00:14:38] So, I reached out to the family of his victim, her name was Theresa Rodriguez, she had been killed by Rolando because her husband wanted her life insurance money.

So her husband, I forgot his first name, had basically hired Rolando Ruiz to commit the murder and he had approached them as they were coming home from the movies and had shot her in her driveway. And they tried to make it look like a burglary gone wrong or some type of theft, but there were obvious clues to the investigators that that wasn't the case. So I reached out to her family, she had several siblings and of course her parents. I believe I talked to one of her siblings first and they said they didn't want to talk but that their parents probably would. So I actually went to their parents' home, we talked on the phone at first, and then they said that I could come over. So I went over to their house and I just asked some questions about who she was and what she liked to do and what that marriage was like and whether there were any indications that her husband was violent or didn't want to be in a relationship with her anymore, and what it was like for them to find out the news that she was dead, and that she had been killed by her husband—well she had been killed by someone else but it was hired by the husband—and of course that put a huge rift in the family, you know they loved him and had welcomed him into their family and then to find out that he was responsible for asking someone to murder her was really devastating. So, I talked to them and I wrote a story about it and I believe I reached out to Rolando as well and I think he declined to talk to me for the story, which I don't blame him. Yeah, I certainly wouldn't talk about my upcoming death if I was in his shoes. So, I put in a request for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to witness his execution because I felt like that was important. We often try to do that. And I was the obvious choice for the execution, or to attend the execution because I had been covering the case and I had met her family and he was from San Antonio. So, I got on the list and I began traveling down to Huntsville where they do the executions. It was a four-hour drive, so there was a lot of time to think on the way. [00:17:40]

FIELD: What was it like on those drives?

EATON: So, I was really nervous. I had never witnessed an execution before and while I had witnessed some violence through my reporting, I had never seen something like that. So I really wasn't sure how I was going to react to it. And I had told my mom beforehand that I was going to witness the execution and about maybe an hour before I got there, so I was still on the highway, she called me and she said, I just don't think you should do this, I think that you're too kind and too sensitive and this is going to, for lack of better words, mess you up and you're going to be really traumatized by this and I just don't want that for you. And, it really freaked me out, because I was already really nervous and then to have my mom who I'm really really close to and who I love and appreciate tell me that she didn't think I could handle it. She didn't, of course, say it in those words, but that's what it felt like to me. It was really difficult and I remember actually starting to have sort of an anxiety attack in the car, where I was like, Maybe I can't do this, what should I do, I can't back out now my work is expecting me to write this story. I calmed myself down and I went to a Starbucks and I pre-wrote some of the story because it was going to happen late at night, and then I went to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, the Huntsville Unit and again as I was walking in, I was like, Oh my god what am I doing, I can't do this. I remember breathing really fast and not being able to stop. [00:19:40]

FIELD: Had you been to the- you hadn't been to the Huntsville unit before?

EATON: Hadn't been to Huntsville at all. Yeah, it was very daunting. So, they led me inside and as is typical with death penalty cases there were a lot of last minute appeals and they had something awaiting the Supreme Court and we weren't sure if the Supreme Court was going to rule on it or not and we actually ended up waiting. And "we" is a group of reporters and then some of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice officials so there were maybe about eight or ten of us total, waiting around to see if the execution was going to happen or not [00:20:24]

FIELD: Where were you waiting?

EATON: We were waiting in a building, like an administrative building right across the street from where the units are where the execution takes place and where the inmates are housed. And the inmates, the death row inmates actually are not housed there, they're housed about maybe thirty minutes or a hour away and they get transferred there, I believe, the day of or the night before. So they're there but the rest of the death row is not there. So we were in an administrative building across the street where the public affairs or the PIO was located, the Public Information Officer. It was a really bizarre experience, there was several of us, I think three of us that had never witnessed an execution before. So we were all sort of nervous, and we were talking about what to expect and some of the veteran reporters were telling us what to expect. One thing that they told us, which I'm really glad that they did, is that after they administer the drugs, they work really quickly and the person probably dies within a minute or two, maybe like five minutes at most. But they actually don't check them for their pulse for another thirty, forty-five minutes. So, they said, they warned us, they said, You're going to stand there for about 30 minutes just looking at a dead guy. I think they don't check because they just want to make sure that he actually is dead, or she is actually dead and so they wait to make sure that the drugs have been fully administered. But, yeah, that was very, very nerve-wracking and I'm really glad that they warned us ahead of time. [00:22:15]

So, we were sitting there waiting and we're all sort of joking and laughing and talking about what a weird experience it was and I remember thinking to myself how awful it felt, that we were sitting here sort of laughing and joking about this upcoming execution and there was a guy literally hundreds of feet away across the street who was facing death and didn't know if he was going to make it or not. [00:22:52] And, but I think it was- I don't think it was necessarily us being insensitive, especially on my part, I wasn't trying to be insensitive to him or what his family were going through. But it was a way to cope, it was sort of that like nervous laughter where you're like, this is how I know how to handle it. So we actually waited for about 3 or 4 hours, I think it was around 10 or so, 9 or 10, when we finally got notice that the Supreme Court was not going to rule in his favor and that the execution was going to go on as planned, and we were all on edge by that point because the Texas Department of Criminal Justice can't execute someone within a certain timeframe of midnight, so if it gets too close to midnight they actually delay the execution, and at that point we were like, they may completely delay it because we're getting too close, but they decided to go through with it.

So they led us over to the unit and, so you walk across the street—it's like 2 brick buildings and this courtyard in between that typically people can go to and from, but they cordoned it off during executions because there's a lot of protestors that are typically there, so they walk us across and you can see to your right as you're walking across the courtyard, you could see all of the protestors, cheer—or not cheering, but chanting and basically saying, Shame on Texas for doing something like this. We walked across and went up the steps into this building, and they took our identification, and closed one gate, opened another. We went in, at one point we stood around in a room, sort of like an administrative room where some of his family was, and actually I don't think it was his family, I think it was his really close friend and a lawyer, I can't remember exactly, but I remember his family wasn't there but someone who was close to him was there [00:25:13] and they were waiting in the same room as we were, and I remember just sort of standing there and not knowing what to say and not knowing what to do, we all like, maybe there were fifteen of us just standing there saying nothing.

And then they led us into the—further into the complex and you went outside a little bit through some gates until they lead you to where the execution actually takes place, and they split the reporters up between the offender's side and the victim's side, and the victim was the person—the family that was killed, and her family did not attend. Maybe her siblings did, but her parents weren't there, the people that I had met were not there. So

I was on his side, on Rolando Ruiz's side, and I walked in and I sort of pictured it like the movies. I figured like that we'd be sitting in seats and that we would see through the glass and it wasn't quite like that. You could see through the glass but there was an extra layer of barbed wire or of some type of fencing. There was no place to sit, you just stood there and looked through the glass, and he was already set up on the table, where he was wearing all white, I believe, and they had a towel half way over him. They already had the needle injected in his vein, it wasn't—of course nothing was going through it yet. He was just laying there strapped down.

So I sort of stood behind the family, of course letting them take—they took precedence. And I stood behind them, and there were some technical things that the department of corrections, or the Department of Criminal Justice, took care of where they asked if he had any final words, I believe he said that he was at peace, and I think he said something to the effect of Jesus Christ being his lord and savior, I believe he also apologized to the family and then the Warden said that they could administer the drugs, and they began pumping the drugs into his veins and he, I think he took a breath and then basically fell asleep. And, I know this sounds really bad to say, but in some ways it was a little anti-climactic, because I had spent so much time waiting in that room and talking to my mom and worrying about this, and then he essentially fell asleep. And I remember just standing there and it was very awkward and it was very weird standing there waiting for them to pronounce him dead when he was obviously already dead, like you could tell at first that he was still breathing, you could see his chest moving up and down but then it stopped and we stood there for maybe 30 minutes before they checked his pulse and checked his vitals.

So a doctor comes in and checks his eyes and checks his heartbeat and pronounces him dead at such-and-such a time. [00:28:40] And then we were led away and lead back to the administrative building and we began writing our stories, I frantically wrote, because we were on deadline. I actually think we weren't able to get the first version into our story—or into our newspaper because it was so late at night that we couldn't keep the updated—we couldn't update it fast enough but then the second version of the paper got the updated version with his quote and with what had happened and when he had been pronounced dead. And then that night after I finished the story I went to the hotel that the newsroom had paid for me to stay at—thank goodness, because otherwise it would have been a 4 hour drive home at like 11pm. And I called my boyfriend at the time, and talked to him about it and went to bed. So, yeah. [00:29:38]

FIELD: What was going through your mind when you were- in the time between getting to the room where you were all witnesses in that, I guess, how long were you in there for entirely for when you got there and when they pronounced him dead? [00:29:58]

EATON: My guess would be about 45 minutes, or an hour. I can't remember honestly. I remember feeling somewhat, I hate to use the word relieved because that seems so insensitive, but feeling somewhat relieved that it wasn't dramatic in any way and that there wasn't—didn't appear to be any pain in any way. I do remember looking at the family. I think that's probably the thing that sits out the most is just watching the family and watching them have to watch this body for 30 minutes. Like they didn't, you know, they didn't turn away, they didn't leave, they couldn't leave, they just stood there and silently sobbed. And I remember thinking about what was going through their heads, and I wonder how they felt and if this was going to be traumatic for them and I remember thinking about Rolando Ruiz as well and thinking, you know, what does he feel, what is he thinking. Is it comforting knowing his friends are here? You know, I remember thinking what happens? You know, the ultimate question of what happens after we die. So yeah it was really varied, I think it mainly focused on them and me thinking about what they were going through. [00:31:37]

FIELD: So, the next day when you drove back and you had that four hour drive, what was that like? [00:31:47]

EATON: That's when it really hit me. I think I went into reporter mode when I was at the execution and I was witnessing it. I think my instinct sort of took over both as like a human so that I could survive it as a human, but also as a reporter so that I could do my job properly and so, while I do remember thinking about what his family and what he was going through, I think most of it was just instinctual, it's just okay just write. Write what he's saying, write what's happening, write what you observe. And the same thing with writing the actual story, it's just like okay, well, just—just do it. I imagine sort of that adrenaline kept me through the evening and it wasn't until the next morning when I left that I remember really having a difficult time. I can't remember, I wanna say that I did cry on the way home. I can't say with certainty, I do remember feeling really, really torn and wondering what—how do I say this, just wondering about society's role in the death penalty, and that's in no way saying anything about my personal beliefs, because I really do try to keep my personal life separate from my professional life and it's my job not to take a stance on anything like the death penalty, it's my job to tell both sides of the story.

But I do remember thinking, Okay, this is what we as a society do, am I okay with that. You know at the end of the day it's not completely up to me but I did sort of feel like I am part of this society that allows this to happen. And for better or worse I mean maybe it's a good thing, maybe it's not, who knows. But I remember sort of feeling somewhat complicit in it all, and just realizing that a man had died and that his family missed him and that it was probably very traumatic for his family. And, of course, her family as well, I'm sure it brought up a whole bunch of feelings for her family, it had been 25 years since she died and you know, I imagine it brings it all back. So yeah it was a really emotional drive home, it was a long drive home. But my bosses were very understanding and they let me take the rest of the day off, actually I didn't even ask, they just said, Okay you're good for the day [laughter]. I think it was on a Thursday, I may not have gone into work that Friday, I can't remember.

And as time went on, it continued to sort of weigh on me, where I thought about it a lot and I thought about him a lot, and I wondered about the death penalty and whether or not it's the right thing or not and I don't think I've come up with a conclusion there, but it at least made me think about it. And actually afterwards, it was so difficult that I promised myself that I wasn't going to witness another execution. Or maybe promise isn't the best word, but I was like, I really don't want to do this again unless I absolutely have to. I did avoid it for some time. There were a couple of executions from San Antonio in the time between witnessing Rolando Ruiz execution and then later witnessing Christopher Young's execution. And one of the executions my colleague covered and I believe for the other one, maybe it was two, we used the Associated Press story from the person who's always in the room. But there's also a part of me that felt like I needed to be there and that I wanted to be there to tell that story.

I mean I think it's really important for journalists to be in the room because they're the only one's allowed except for the families, and they get to tell the story of how it actually goes on. There have been cases where executions have been botched and of course it's really important that that story gets out to the public, so they can decide whether or not that's humane, and what we should do to make sure that the executions go on as planned. So, yeah, there was like a part of me that was like, I'm never going to do this again and then there's a part of me that said, maybe, you know I'm still sort of morbidly curious, so yeah. [00:37:02]

FIELD: How did you feel about- and did you talk with your mom after it had taken place, about how—whether you felt like she had been right or what was the aftermath of that conversation? [00:37:20]



EATON: So, I actually have been seeing a therapist on and off for several years, long before this happened. And I did talk to her about it, and I talked to her about the affect that my mom's words had on me and we had decided that it probably would be a good idea for me to confront my mom and say, Look that was really difficult and it really upset me that you said that and it had a big impact on me, and I understand that you were doing it out of the goodness of your heart and because you cared about me but in some ways it sort of did more harm than good and I can't remember why, I think something else happened around that time and I just never got a chance to say anything to her, nor did I really want to have that conversation. So I never did talk about it, in fact I pretty much acted like it was all completely okay, because I didn't want her to worry. It was at first, it was okay, but as time went I remember it affected me a lot more and I never told her because I just didn't want her to worry. [00:38:41]

FIELD: How, as time went on, how did it impact you and when did it start really sinking in, in the next few weeks and months? [00:38:53]

EATON: I don't completely remember, I think in some ways it was somewhat traumatic and so I think I sort of, didn't completely—I may have sort of blocked some of those memories from my head, I just remember feeling really complicit, like I said before, like I took a role in the whole thing. And just worrying about it and about his family and about her family and I can't remember exactly how it manifested itself, but I do remember that it weighed on me, at least that I would think about it a lot. [00:39:38]

FIELD: Before this experience, had you thought much about the death penalty, I know they have the death penalty in Ohio, but you weren't covering it, or was it just something that happened that didn't really cross your mind? [00:39:56]

EATON: Yeah, I think it did. Cause I always have been very socially, and politically active, not necessarily in expressing my own beliefs but just in understanding the issues and I do vaguely recall my parents talking about the death penalty and talking about what would happen if it was me and what they would want done if I was murdered and there was someone else responsible and if they could bring them to death, would they. And I remember my dad being very much like, Yes- or he wouldn't say yes but, you know, my mom would sort of argue against the death penalty and my dad was like, Well what if it was Emilie? And so, you could sort of tell where he stood on the matter. So, I do remember thinking about it before and I do remember when I got here to Texas having an interest in it, because it is so prevalent in Texas, because it happens so often.

And I really was interested in it from the offender side of things, that of course does not negate what the victims are going through and the victims' families are going through, but I just remember thinking, you know, a mother whose son is going to be executed, for the most part she has no responsibility, I mean she isn't the one who did it, some people might blame her, but for the most part, you know, it's her son that's dying, or someone's brother, or someone's sister or whatever the case is. And I always was interested in that point of view, to see how a family comes to terms with the fact that someone likely did something very, very bad, and perhaps they have made up for and perhaps they have apologized for their sins, so to say, but how do you come to terms with the fact that someone you love has done something so horrendous and what is it like for you if that person has to be executed, and what is that impact on that family? [00:42:19]

FIELD: So after thinking that you weren't going to cover executions anymore, how, what changed your mind? How did you become interested in covering Christopher Young's story and talking about that.

EATON: It sort of fell in my lap. So, I don't remember exactly why but a filmmaker had been working with Christopher Young for a period of time to work on telling his story and to also work on telling some of his art, because Christopher Young was an artist. And he reached out to me, they were doing this documentary and they reached out to me and said—asked if I would be willing to or interested in interviewing Christopher for the documentary—that our roles would be completely separate, because the documentary definitely had a certain focus to it and was going to be used in part in his clemency campaign, so I couldn't be associated with that. But basically what we worked out is that we could both go into the, it's not Hunstville, what's the other?

FIELD: Polunsky?

EATON: Yes, into the Polunsky unit, and that he could interview my questions for his documentary and I could use my questions for my own reporting and that we would be completely separate of each other and that he would have no say in what I wrote or what I asked.

FIELD: Was that so he could get press permission?

EATON: Yes, yeah, he couldn't get in. He'd gotten in a couple of times before under different credentials but he wasn't able to get in again. So, we agreed to that, we felt like that was fair that we could be independent of his focus, and he could be independent of our focus and I put in a request with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and they approved. Mr. Young said yes and they approved the request. And so I went in there with their crew and at first when I went in there my intent was just basically to tell his story and to learn a little bit more about the crimes that he committed because he didn't deny, he did deny some of them but he didn't deny all of them, particularly the murder. So my intent was basically just to go in there and meet him and tell his story, I was interested in what it was like to interview a death row inmate, and to go into the Polunsky Unit. But I had no intention of actually covering the execution, I sort of figured someone else would do that or we would take the Associated Press story, and we also talked about having a reporter from Houston Chronicle, which is our sister paper, covering the execution, which is a lot more convenient cause she's only maybe an hour away. So I went in and I interviewed him. [00:45:39]

FIELD: Can you slow down a bit and describe, because you had talked about going to the Walls for the execution but this was your first time visiting Death row, so can you talk a little bit about just what it was like to go in?

EATON: Yeah, so, we were warned ahead of time that you couldn't bring certain things into the building, you couldn't bring a cellphone. I couldn't bring a purse, I think the only thing that I was allowed to bring was a recorder, they were allowed to bring their video equipment and I think I brought- I didn't bring a recorder, I just brought my notebook I think. And my camera, 'cause I took a picture of him. And you go into the main building and they go through all of your stuff just sort of like an airport check and you went through the metal detectors, then they patted you down. And then we waited for several minutes before things were set up, and, again, you went through- you went into one room, this was in an administrative security building so you would go into one room and the metal gate would close behind you, then the other one would open up—it would beep, and then it would open up. Then we walked across the courtyard and they lead me into the building, the Polunsky Unit.

And we weren't actually on Death Row, we were in the visitation area where the inmates typically meet with their families through the glass, and so they lead me through the building, and there were some more security checks, and then eventually lead me to the visitation room, and there were 2 offenders that were there. One was being interviewed by a separate TV Crew and then there was Mr. Young. And so I sat across from him and sort

of waved, and the Public Information Officer told me not to say anything to him because as soon as I started talking to him, then our interview officially started and that marked the hour that we had, because we couldn't go over one hour. So it was a little weird at first, you know, we were just sort of sitting there, just like, Hi. And that's it, you know, we couldn't say anything to each other. Some of the camera crew could talk to him about setting up the mic, and setting everything else up, but that was it. [00:48:01]

FIELD: How did it work logistically getting him mic'd behind the glass?

EATON: So, what they did is, so the camera crew gave them- gave him a mic, sort of like the one that I'm wearing today, and they gave it to a security guard and that person went into the back and handed it to him. And so, the way the visiting room is set up, if I remember correctly, is there's several little booths, just like you see on TV, with glass windows and the phones. And then there's a strip behind that, the inside of the booth is locked from the outside so that the offender is in there and he can't get out. I believe he's not handcuffed but I could be wrong on that. And then there's sort of like a walkway behind the booths where the guards can walk back and forth and see who's visiting who, and because today was just the media visits there were only two people there, but there was a guard back there and they handed him the mic through a little cubby hole and he put it on. He had done this before, he had been interviewed by the documentarian, by the documentary crew before. So he knew what to do, he just put it in, and they actually also handed him an ear piece because they knew that the telephones didn't work very well, it was really hard to hear people through the telephones, so they gave him an earpiece and they gave me an earpiece and we could talk to each other through the ear piece, and it was pretty crystal clear. So yeah, that's how they set it all up. [00:49:52]

FIELD: What was, again not to be using the same questions but, what was going through your mind when you were sitting there and, you know, not yet speaking with him, but getting ready to. What were you feeling? [00:50:03]

EATON: I remember thinking about my questions, thinking about what I wanted to ask him, and thinking about just the logistics of it all, I mean it was all happening so quickly that I was trying to make sure that the crew had everything they needed to set everything up, that where I was sitting was not in their shot because they didn't want to get my head in the middle of it. And looking at my questions, setting everything up, getting the earpiece in, so for a lot of it I wasn't really thinking anything. I did remember thinking, Wow this is really weird that I can't even acknowledge him, and that I'm going to ask him all of these really personal questions in less than 10 minutes and I'm just sitting here sort of staring at him. And I did ask the Public Information Officer if I could take a picture as they were getting ready, and so I did do that. As they were doing everything, I stepped to the side and I started taking pictures. The public information officer picked up the phone and told Chris that I was going to take pictures, so he posed, but again it was really weird because I was like sitting there taking pictures, and you know I'd give him a thumbs up or whatever, but that was it, like I couldn't say thank you or anything along those lines, or he knew I was acknowledging him but I couldn't actually say anything. And so that was really weird. Yeah, and then they said that we were ready that the one hour was going to start, and so I sat down and I started asking my- I, you know, could hear him through the earpiece, and I started asking my questions. [00:51:48]

FIELD: Did you, were you able to say anything before just launching into the questions, or was it, because the sense of urgency because of the time limit, did you just launch into the questions? [00:51:59]

EATON: I did set up, I did talk to him a little bit beforehand, just because I wanted to make sure he was comfortable, and I wanted to make sure that he knew what my intentions were. I mean, I always feel like I'm

asking a lot of people to open up personal parts of their lives. And so, I always want to offer a little bit of myself and offer just a little bit of, some type of communication instead of just directly just like drilling people or interrogating people. So, I do remember saying that, I had talked to the film crew and I knew a little bit of his story, I had read some of—he wrote some pieces, some personal essays, so I had read some of that and I had seen some of the footage that the film crew had filmed before I had gone there. So I had knew a lot about his story and I told him that some of my questions might be really specific because I was just trying to complete the timeline, that I wasn't really, you know, some things I knew and I just sort of wanted to piece it all together.

So I started by asking him questions about his time on death row, and about his art and his children, and how he has a relationship with his daughters from prison [00:53:21] and what it's like raising kids from prison. So, I tried to ask some really, I wouldn't say easy questions, but some warm-up questions, where we could get to know each other and he could start to feel comfortable. And then I asked him if we could go back and start talking about the actual crimes, and I had read a lot of that through court records so again, I just asked him some very specific questions about what happened, what he remembered, what was going through his head. I remember asking him, so what he was accused of doing is he was accused of following a young woman to her apartment complex after she had left briefly to go pick up some cigarettes, I believe, at the store down the road. And she was heading back to her home where her children were, and he was accused of following her back, he was sitting in the parking lot and followed her to her apartment and pointed a gun at her and forced her into the apartment, and authorities said that he raped her in front of her children, who were all very young, I believe they were like 2, 4 and 6.

And at one point had fired a shot into the floor to show her that he was serious and that he could hurt her and he denied all of that, he said that he never raped her, but he did admit that—he did admit that they had a brief interaction where he asked her for money and then he left. And at that point he went to a minimart that he was actually a frequent customer at, and he knew the store owner and he went in and authorities said he asked for money, he denied that he asked for money, he said that he was going in there to confront the storeowner about something that he had said to Chris' girlfriend at the time. But the surveillance footage which I've seen showed that he did ask for money. Then he shot the store worker, the owner, and fled and authorities found him a short time later at a women's house. So I remember asking him when we got back to the crime and what had happened, I remembered asking him what happened, what was going through his head in those moments where he had just shot the store owner, his name was Hash Patel, Hash was his nickname, I can't say his real name but I remember saying, What was going through your head as you shot Mr. Patel? He said, That I needed to get the f out of there. He was very candid and very honest, I felt. Where is that sound coming from? Is that disrupting the audio at all? [00:56:32]

FIELD: I don't think so.

EATON: So, I remember asking him about that. And he was very honest throughout our conversation. There was times where he said things that sort of surprised me, and then there were other times where he said things that were very expected. It was an interesting conversation because he was so candid about some things. I mean like, I remember being sort of taken aback when I said, well what was going through your head when you shot him because I was thinking he might say something like, Oh my gosh, what have I done, or how this is so awful, or you know I'm going to be in big trouble, but instead he said, you know, I have to get the f out of here. And I remember thinking, that's sort of insensitive, you know, but I did feel like he was being honest with me. That he was, you know, he was a nineteen-year-old kid that really did feel that way and really did do that and it wasn't until later that he began to feel remorse and understanding for what he had done.

So then throughout the interview I asked him about how he came to terms with the crime and how he felt about it now, and he felt deep remorse and he wanted to meet the son of the victim, his name was Mitesh. Mitesh is in his 30's now, I believe, and so Chris wanted to talk to him and apologize to him personally. Chris also talked a lot about his own personal life and his history with his family and how his father was murdered when he was seven or eight years old and how his close family member was raped when he was a kid and that how it sort of sent him into a free fall and made him join a gang and that things just sort of went out of control until that shooting and how death row essentially saved his life and that he felt going to death row helped him get on the straight and narrow, he felt like if he had stayed out on the streets or if he had only gotten a short prison time and then was released, he probably would've stayed part of the gang, probably would've stayed part of the gang in jail, or in prison, and then would've gone back out on the streets and committed more crimes, or been killed himself. So he really did feel like death row helped him sort of save his life, for lack of better word. And he didn't want to die, he felt like he showed remorse and that he wanted to be there for his children but yeah. Sorry I jumped around a lot there. [laughter] [00:59:13]

FIELD: No it's okay. I'm so interested in the thinking of death row as saving his life and how did, what was that like to hear and what was it like for him as he was talking about it, if you remember? [00:59:34]

EATON: I had read an essay that he wrote prior where he had said, Death row saved my life. So I was sort of expecting that, but I do remember the first time I read that essay, feeling like that was a very impactful thing to say, and very—he showed a deep understanding for his life and his choices and what could have happened if he hadn't ended up on death row, and I just- I remember thinking it was really profound and he talked about it again during our interview and when he talked about it, he was actually pretty neutral throughout, he didn't breakdown or cry or show any real feelings of sadness, he was pretty chipper for the most part, and he'd joke a lot and he would smile a lot, this really big smile. But you know I think—I think in some ways he was very used to talking to the media because he had done these sessions with the documentary crew so he had told his story again and again, and I think in some ways he was very rehearsed, but there was also other times where he was very nonchalant about certain things that I remember thinking, Oh this guy's telling me the truth because if he, you know, saying something like, I gotta get the f out of here, I think a lot of people will not take sympathy on someone like that, and he surely knew that and yet he still told me that and I think it's because it's the truth, I think he was telling me the truth. I think that that was who he was and then with time he grew up and he began to understand the consequences of his actions and he talked about that as well during our conversation. [01:01:38]

FIELD: Had his execution date been set at that point?

EATON: Yes. It was set for, I want to say like two or three, maybe four weeks at most. So and it had just been set recently, maybe in the last month. So, he was trying to come to terms with the looming execution date and what it meant or his children, I think more than anything he was worried about his children. He has three daughters, two of them he has a relationship with. And he was really worried—they're both young, they're both, I believe, seventeen and sixteen. And he was worried how they were going to handle it. They—one of them, NaQuita, had just started a relationship with her dad, so for a long period of time he didn't know she existed. He had been dating this girl before he went to prison, and they had a falling out and she got pregnant but didn't tell him, and then she had heard that he went to prison and that he had been sentenced to death and she assumed that that sentence was immediate and that he had already been sentenced to death so she never contacted him or contacted his family about the pregnancy and she told her daughter NaQuita that her father was, I think, was out of the picture, or something like that, and planned on telling her one day when she was mature enough that in fact her dad had been executed. And then one she ran into Chris' brother around town somewhere and they were

talking and she realized that Chris was still alive, and so she told Chris' brother, Hey, he has a daughter. And at that point she was maybe fifteen or sixteen and they started a relationship. He began writing with her, at first he wasn't—I don't think he really necessarily denied that he had a daughter, but he wasn't completely convinced. And then he saw a picture of her and he was like, Oh my gosh she looks just like mom. And he realized that in fact she was his daughter. So they had just started a relationship, she was maybe 16, 15 or 16, when they started. And he would send her book and encourage her to read the books and tell him what she was thinking and what she was going through. He knew that he wasn't a standard dad, that, you know, he was in a very unique position. But he still wanted to offer some guidance or whatever he could, and to show his kids that a life of violence or gang life is not the right life, because look where it gets you. So, yeah, he talked a lot about his daughters and how difficult it was going to be to leave them behind, especially the one that—where I mean both of them obviously, but especially because one of them had just gotten the chance to meet her dad and now he was going to die. And I know that was difficult for her, too, she was like, You know I finally got some answers, and then this happened. So yeah he talked a lot about that. [01:04:56]

FIELD: What was the connection between the two of you, like as you were talking?

EATON: Um—it was good. I mean, in some ways it was sort of hard to build a relationship in one hour, and especially when there's film crew behind you and glass in between you. And you're taking through an earpiece, it wasn't very—it didn't necessarily start a close bond. But I felt like we got along well and we—he answered all of my questions, and he thanked me for taking interest in his story and I told him that I would, that he could write to me if he thought of anything else. Or that I could send him a copy of the story once it was published, so I tried forming a relationship with him, but it was hard, it was only an hour, so I'm really not sure, I don't know what his impression of me was.

FIELD: Is that the only time you met with him?

EATON: Mm-hmm.

FIELD: It sounds kind of like you talked to his family too though?

EATON: Yes. Yeah, so for the next several weeks I ended up meeting with his two daughters, or I didn't meet with both of them, but I talked to both of his daughters. I talked to his ex-girlfriend, his mom, his grandma who raised him, his brother, and then the victim's son and then victim's daughter. And I believe- I don't think I talked to the victim's wife. I think I just sort of—I asked about how she was doing but I didn't actually talk to her personally. Yeah, so that was tough, because I mean again, it goes back to what I was saying before, here are these family members who didn't do anything wrong, or at least in terms of this crime, they weren't responsible for pulling the trigger, and yet their lives were going to be dramatically impacted as a result of the execution. And you know I especially felt for his two daughters, who—they're so young, to be 15 or 16 and have your dad pass in an unnatural way, whether justified or not, has to be really difficult. My dad actually passed when I was 21, he died from cancer, so it was obviously a lot different circumstances, but I know how difficult it is to lose a parent, and a dad and so I really did feel for them, especially cause it was such an unnatural, like so few people could ever relate to what they're going through. I mean I can relate to people who've lost their dads to cancer, or lost their dads in general but I mean, these girls are one in a few. There's a very small group of people whose dads have been executed.

So, I really did feel for them, and I felt for his mom, and his grandmother as well, his grandmother was the one who pretty much raised him, and you could tell that she was trying to be strong, but that it was

difficult. [01:08:40] She had lost her son, his father who was murdered when he was 8, so she had talked about how difficult that was, and his brother had told me that Chris was pretty much a spitting image of his dad, and was around the same age as his dad when his dad got murdered so it was particularly hard for his grandmother, because she saw her son die, and then she was waiting for her second son, or her grandson, to be executed. And there was like maybe five years apart I think her son, Chuck, was maybe like 30 when he died, and Chris was 35, but still you could tell that it was having an impact on her, that to have two people who she helped to raise, die in her lifetime. And he had a very strange relationship with his mother growing up for various reasons but you could tell, they had finally sort of formed some type of relationship and started to forgive each other for both of the mistakes they had made when she was a young adult and when he was a kid, and they had begun to talk and see each other more often and—while, you know, they weren't always close, I could tell it was really difficult for her too, I mean, who wants to ever lose a son, let alone lose a son in this way. So, in some ways they were very strong, you know, they didn't break down and cry, they didn't get really, really, upset, but you could tell that they were impacted, especially his daughters. His daughters, NaQuita did cry a little bit when I spoke to her, and she—she left briefly, we were at a Starbucks, and she left briefly to go collect herself. And you could tell his other daughter, I talked to her over the phone, that she was having a rough time. [01:10:42]

FIELD: What was it like for you, I mean I know you were covering other stories at the time but it sounds like you were going in so deep with this story and talking to so many people, and it sounds like it was a pretty short period of time, just a few weeks out from his execution date, so what was it like for you to sort of embed yourself in this story? [01:11:09]

EATON: It was stressful, trying to make sure I got everything and making sure that I told his story correctly, and it was of course stressful talking to individuals who were going to be so impacted. And it was a little nerve-racking too, cause at that point we didn't know whether or not his execution was going to be stayed or not. He had filed a clemency petition as well as several last minute appeals with the Texas Supreme Court and the Court of Appeals to stay his execution for various reasons, and that's how the victim's son got involved in the case because he learned through the filmmakers that Chris Young was really sympathetic for what he had done and that he wanted to personally apologize to Mitesh Patel and his family, so that's how they got involved. So it was very stressful trying to talk to all of the key players and form this story in a short period of time, while also not trying to be too sympathetic to one side, because you know, in this story, everyone was sort of on Chris' side, no one wanted him executed. Mitesh didn't want him executed, his mom didn't, his sister, his daughters, of course, his family. And so I wanted to make sure that the story wasn't just about their side, you know there are people out there who do feel like this man should be executed, and that that's fair judgement, and perhaps that is. And I just wanted to make sure that that was reflected in the story too, that it wasn't just, let's save Chris. That, of course, was the main aspect of it but I wanted to portray both sides of the story. So it was stressful trying to bring that all together. [01:13:08]

FIELD: It's kind of complicated because you say the words both sides but do you think that gives adequate nuance?

EATON: No [laughter], no I don't think you could ever bring enough nuance to this.

FIELD: Yeah. [laughter]

EATON: [01:13:37] Yeah, I mean, often the saying in journalism is that you have to have both sides of the story but often it's not two sides, there's a lot more to it and there's a lot more perspectives. So, that is very true and I guess that would be a better way to phrase it, that I wanted to make sure that the story was nuanced, not

necessarily two-sided, because that doesn't properly reflect how complicated his story and the story of executions are.

FIELD: Yeah. When you spoke to Mitesh, did you get to know him much? [01:14:24]

EATON: A little bit, he was a little on guard because he had a lot of media contacting him—one second. But I did form a little bit of a relationship with him, I still have his number in my phone. So he had just, he talked a little bit about his family, and growing up, and growing up without a father. I believe he was, maybe nineteen or twenty, when his father was killed, so we talked a little bit about that and we talked about what his dad was like, and some of their favorite memories, and that definitely brought us together, and formed a relationship. He talked about his life now, about his wife and about how his wife could never meet his dad, and how that upset him. And he talked about having his sons, and his sons were never able to meet their grandfather. The grandfather did meet one of his grandkids, but that was through his sister, so none of his kids had ever met their grandpa. So, he talked a little bit about, you know, his son, and he had just—his wife was pregnant, in the middle of all of this.

He was actually petitioning for this guy's life in the middle of his wife giving labor. Which was amazing, I mean it was really incredible to see how selfless this man was, and how dedicated to the cause he was, despite everything that was going on in his life, he has two sons, his wife was pregnant, she gave labor to a third, and the next day he was at a news conference about this. He still had the medical bracelet on, he showed me at one point and he was like, I still have this on. And so it was really inspiring to see how involved he was, he wasn't—it was so obviously a passion of him and he so obviously believed what Chris had to say, that he was a changed man and that they should spare his life as a result, so yeah I would say we did form a relationship and especially as I began to write the story and I kept in contact with him and asked him questions, or he would keep me in touch. He really wanted to meet Chris, before Chris was executed, and that was one aspect of Chris' clemency campaign where he said that he wanted a stay in his execution so that he could meet Chris Young and that they had the chance to talk. And unfortunately that part didn't work, but they were able to meet briefly, so Chris [Mitesh?] told me about that. He was bound by confidentiality, you're not allowed to talk about those kind of things so he couldn't tell me too much, but he did sort of generally talk about what it was like for him and then I would check in about his kid and how his kid was doing, and when the story published I sent it to him. I think I wrote a series of maybe 3 or 4 stories. He sent me a statement the night of the actual execution. So we stayed in contact, and I would say that we, you know, built a pretty good relationship. [01:17:49]

FIELD: I think the thing that, one thing that strikes me is how much grief runs through all of these stories, and Mitesh's grief and then the sort of anticipatory grief out of Chris Young's family, and you mentioned you have a personal experience with grief too. Did that—and you don't have to answer this if you're not comfortable, but—how, or did—I'm sure it did—how did it impact the way you reported the story, to have your own grief that you live with, and again you don't have to answer that if you don't feel comfortable. [01:19:01]

EATON: No, it's okay. You know, I don't think the grief was very instrumental in my writing, but it's very instrumental in my reporting, because typically when I'm writing, I'm writing the story as it is and of course you can emphasize certain points and negate certain points, but for the most part I just try to tell it as it is, and especially with this story because it is so nuanced and my editor and I talked about how to portray certain things, like the alleged rape, because he denied it, but I talked to the victim, and she very clearly remembers it and remembers him. So, you know, we decided in the end, and this should be always be the decision for the journalist, to tell it how it is. So, we mentioned it and we mentioned that he denied it, but we also mentioned



what she said and it's up to the reader to decide if they believe him or they believe her, or maybe they believe a combination of the two.

So, when it comes to writing I just tried to write it as it is, but when it comes to reporting, I think my own personal experiences do play a role, in how I ask questions, and how I interact with people, because they do understand how complicated grief is, and how difficult it is to lose someone that you love. So, I, you know I, I tried to keep that in mind as I asked questions, I don't typically bring it up, sometimes I do, because I think sometimes, so often I'm asking people to share such intimate parts of their life, and such difficult parts of their life, that I think its only fair that I offer a little of myself too, or to let them know that I understand at least in part what they're going through. I can't remember if I brought it up in this case or not, I very rarely do bring it up, because I don't want it to seem like a badge of honor, you know, I don't want to be like, Oh well, my dad died too. But it does always sort of guide my reporting and I try to be empathetic and understanding to what a person is going through. And, yeah, try to understand them and understand what they're going through, keep an open mind. [01:21:41]

FIELD: Yeah. It sounds like, with Mitesh, because you shared that experience, losing your fathers at a similar age.

EATON: Mhmm, I did share it with him, I forgot. Yeah, yeah I did share it with Mitesh.

FIELD: [01:22:05] May I ask more about that or no? I don't have to.

EATON: No, go ahead.

FIELD: I just, I'm thinking about the similarities between Mitesh and you, but also thinking about Chris' daughters who are also sort of young adults, did it, did it weigh on you at all, in that sense? [01:22:37]

EATON: Yes, especially with Mitesh, because we were around the same age. I was, it was five days before my 21st birthday when my dad passed, and I believe Mitesh was 21, or around there. And so I definitely saw the similarities, I mean it was obviously- the death itself was much different. My dad died somewhat peacefully from cancer, and his dad was murdered with a gun. And Mitesh had actually seen the surveillance footage of his dad dying. So, in some ways it's apples and oranges, but in other ways I could understand the grief and the— how difficult it is to come to terms with the passing of someone that you love. I, too, understand how difficult it is not to have your dad there for certain aspects of your life that are really key, like my dad never saw me graduate from college and he didn't see me get my first job, or get my first award, or move to Texas. And he won't be there for my wedding if I ever get married or if I ever have children he won't be there for that. [01:24:02] So I understood what Mitesh was going through in that sense, but in other ways it seemed wrong to compare the two, because, well, as awful as it was for me, it wasn't nearly as traumatic. My family and I found out about two-and-a-half months before my dad passed, so we had two-and-a-half months to get things in order and to tell him how much we loved him, and to be there for him, I took time off school so that I could be there, and Mitesh didn't get that, you know, he has to replay that last conversation in his head. So in some ways, I feel for him having experienced grief as well, but in some ways I know that my grief doesn't begin to compare to his.

FIELD: Thank you for letting me ask those questions, I'm sorry if it was too much. [01:25:10]

EATON: No, no it's okay.

FIELD: So after, how many weeks were you reporting this story, would you say?

EATON: Ummm, good question,

FIELD: It doesn't have to be exact [laughter]

EATON: I believe it was about 3 or 4 weeks. So I believe I met with him in June, in late June, maybe around the 20th. And we published a story in mid July, around the 14th, I believe he was executed maybe around the 18th or so, so it was a matter of weeks, it was pretty quick.

FIELD: [01:25:52] So, how did you, I mean as you mentioned a little a bit ago, you didn't—even when you went to interview him at Polunsky, you didn't anticipate that you would be attending the execution and so, what changed over the course of those three weeks about your thinking?

EATON: I felt an obligation to be there, I felt like I had done, I had met so many people, and had taken such an interest in his case and in his story that I needed to be there, whether I liked it or not. And another part of me, as much as I hate to say this, felt this type of morbid curiosity about going again, I wanted to see what it was like and if it would be different a second time. And then, three-fold, I wanted to be there in case anything went wrong, as I was talking about before, I think it's really important for journalists to be at executions to make sure things go as planned. So, I felt this sort of, obligation, and this need to be there, whether I wanted to or not. And, I debated it a lot, like I was saying before, there was a Houston chronicle reporter who was willing and wanted to go, she covers executions quiet frequently and covers the prisons a little more in depth than I do, so she was a natural fit, and in fact I asked the Department of Criminal Justice folks if she could take my place, and they said no, because the spots for the witnesses are given to local media outlets, and so it would have been me or another reporter from the area.

So, when I realized that we really wouldn't have anyone there besides me, or besides the Associated Press reporter, I felt even more of an obligation to go. So, I said yes, and I was torn about it, just given my previous experience I wasn't sure how I would handle it, and especially because I had met his, pretty much his whole family, and I had met Mitesh and talked to Mitesh's sister and knew that they were not on board, and they really didn't want this to happen, it was even more complicated. You know, I think, the first execution in some ways, while not easy, it was a little bit easier because you knew that his, that her family wanted this to happen. But with Mitesh and his family taking an active stance that they didn't want him executed, it really, made you wonder, what's the point. Sure, you know, the State of Texas has a stake in this, and the Bexar County District Attorney has a stake in this but really, its Mitesh who is impacted at the end of the day, and Mitesh's mother and Mitesh's sister. And so, it really made you question why the state was doing this if he didn't want it to happen. So, yeah. [01:29:17]

FIELD: So, I'm curious if your mom had any thoughts about you going to see the second execution?

EATON: I didn't tell her. [laughter]

FIELD: You didn't? [laughter]

EATON: Actually, she still doesn't know, I guess I'll have to tell her before this publishes [laughter]. Well no, I mean it's not funny, I was going to say funny, she read my stories before and so I wondered whether or not she

might stumble upon the stories after the execution, she never did. And I was planning on telling her at one point, and then just never got around to it, so yeah, she still doesn't know, I was afraid of her reaction and I didn't want to worry her, I think more than anything, I knew how much it had worried her before and I didn't want to do that to her again.

FIELD: [01:30:15] You said you were, you were nervous about attending, especially given your experience at the first, what was so what was the drive, the long drive to the Walls unit like the second time, knowing what you were going to. And what was going through your head, and what were you feeling?

EATON: If I remember correctly, it was raining cats and dogs, and it was very, sort of traumatic driving there, because literally it was cats and dogs and we were driving, or I was driving five miles per hour on Interstate 10 on my way to get there, and I had a lot of the same thoughts about how I was going to react. And, I thought a lot about his daughters and a lot about Mitesh. In fact, I actually believe I texted with Mitesh the day off and told him that I was thinking of him and his family and he said the same for me and told me to stay strong, which was very nice and, 'cause I had shared with him how difficult it was for me to cover an execution before, so it was very nice that he was thinking of me, in a time that was very difficult for him and his family. And I believe I also talked a little bit with the filmmaker and told him to pass along my regards to Chris' ex-girlfriend and his daughter. So, for the most part I was thinking about them, and thinking about how they were going to handle it and what it was going to be like for them in the days and weeks ahead. And I also thought about whether, you know, I would be able to handle it, and—yeah. I mean I don't remember exactly what I was thinking about, I remember trying to get there in time. Yeah.

FIELD: [01:32:27] And when you got here- got there, what was the process again? I mean, you described it the first time but I imagine every time is different based on what's happening with the courts.

EATON: Mm-hmm. So, the clemency board had already denied his clemency petition, so we knew at that point that was not a viable option. The only thing that could happen at that point was the courts could interject and give a stay of execution. Or the governor could grant clemency. And it did not appear that any of those things were going to happen. The governor, governor Abbott, actually had granted clemency to another death row inmate, maybe a month or so before, so there was some questions of whether he would do it again, but I think we were all pretty sure that that was a one-time thing, and it was a completely different case. So, after I arrived at the unit, I walked into the administrative building and they lead me up the stairs and I met two of the same reporters that were at the first execution, one from the Associated Press and one from the Huntsville Times. And so, we talked for a little bit, and then two other reporters from local stations were there, and I introduced myself to them and we talked. And there were some questions as to whether or not it would go on as scheduled but it actually went—it did go on. I think this execution was scheduled for 6, I want to say at like 5:45 or 5:50, we got the go ahead to go over.

I remember it sort of being, sort of routine in some ways, not routine in that, routine for me, but it was like I knew the steps to go through, and some of the new reporters had never experienced in execution, so now I was one of the seasoned reporters, by no means do I have nearly the experience of the Associated Press and the Huntsville unit reporters because they have both witnessed over 100 executions, but I did, you know, when we were being lead into the building, I did warn a reporter from I believe it was KSAT or local ABC affiliate that there would be that time that you would have to wait after the drugs had been injected and before the doctor ruled if Chris was dead or not. And he thanked me, he did not know that, so he thanked me. I do remember thinking, again, like how weird it was to be meeting other reporters and talking and going amongst ourselves. The reporters from the Huntsville time and the Associated Press are very used to what they do and it shows in

the way they talk about executions, they're very nonchalant about it, which is completely fine, you know, everyone handles things in different ways. But there was a reporter from, I believe it was Telemundo or [01:36:04] Noticias who asked, you know, what is it, she asked the Associated Press reporter, What is it like covering these over and over again?

And the Associated Press reporter was a little nonchalant about it and was just like, Well, it's not, you know, basically they're going to sleep, it's not nearly as bad as what their victims went through, you know being gunned down in the middle of a convenience store. And, like I get what he's saying, but I remember thinking to myself, that's a little nonchalant about witnessing a hundred executions, probably actually upwards of 300 executions. Whether you feel it's justified or not, I do feel like there should be some understanding there of the fact that a life is being taken away. [01:36:56] So I do remember, you know, thinking about that, thinking about how weird it was to talk among ourselves while someone that I know was right across the way, and while his family who was in Huntsville but was not at the execution were waiting to see if it was going to go through. So we, got lead across the courtyard and into the other building and we handed them our ID's and they lead us into a series of rooms and I don't think we waited very long at all. No one from his family was there, he didn't want anyone from his family there. Originally, he had told me that he didn't but then he had also indicated to his mom and his grandmother that he might allow them to be there, he has to sign off on any of his family or friends being allowed into the witness room. But no one was there, not even his lawyer, and no one was there from Mitesh's family. He too had indicated that he might go.

FIELD: [01:38:06] Had any of the other reporters interviewed him?

EATON: Yes. The KSAT- I think two of other reporters had interviewed him, the Associated Press reporter and the KSAT reporter.

FIELD: So, there were people that he knew there but not his family, not his loved ones.

EATON: Yeah, exactly. And he had told me that he didn't want, he didn't see the point of having people there and he didn't want his family there. And I told him that I understood what he was saying, that I wouldn't want to put my family through that either, but that I did see the point in having a journalist there so that they can make sure things go as planned and that they can properly document what happened. So yeah, there was no one there, it was just prison officials and us. So, they lead us through the courtyard and we made it outside of the two rooms that are adjoining that look at the- where the execution is happening, and that's when I told the KSAT reporter like, Hey, FYI, has anyone told you that they're not going to check him for several minutes. And he said, No, thank you for telling me. And then we got lead into separate rooms. I believe I was paired with the Huntsville reporter and the Associated Press reporter and then the other reporters were on the so-called victims' side, even though there wasn't anyone there. And we were mixed with a series of activists, or not activists but victims' advocates, and prison officials and things like that.

So, we walked into the room and Chris was already on the gurney, just like Rolando was, and he looked over and he saw me. And I was, oh I must have been mistaken because the KSAT reporter was on my side 'cause I remember we were both on the same side and I remember the guy—Chris looked over at both of us, he had interviewed with both of us, and I remember thinking to myself, What the heck do I do? Do I smile? Do I wave? Do I say hello? Do I do nothing? I remember, just feeling sort of helpless, I didn't want to indicated that I felt one way or another but I mean I had met this guy before and I believe as a reporter and as a human that I should treat people with respect regardless of what they have done. I try to treat everyone the same, so I try to treat everyone with respect, I try to ask everyone the hard questions. And I just remember feeling very thrown off

about like, well what do I do. Because I'm surrounded by all of these people, do I say hello, is that weird? Is that weird for him? And so, I sort of just like very barely just sort of smiled and sort of acknowledged him and he turned away and just looked at the ceiling. I feel like he acknowledged me as well, I mean it was very, it was practically not noticeable but I feel like we did sort of—like sort of acknowledged each other. He knew who I was, he knew who Deven Clarke, from KSAT, was.

And the prison staff, or the warden, asked if he had any final words and he said his final words. And then they began to inject the drug, and he said something to the effect of, This shit burns. And he said it again, that it burned. And that was really startling because the first time I had not seen that, and I had read other execution stories and known that this is like the second or third time that inmates or death row prisoners have been—have said that the drug burns when it's not supposed to burn. So that was a little nerve-wracking. [01:42:35] So he said—he said his final words and he said something about the drugs a couple of different times and then he started murmuring something under his breath and I couldn't understand what it was, it didn't seem audible, it didn't seem like English, it sort of seemed maybe like it was a prayer or song. And he took his final breathes and that was that. And it was different this time because I was in the front row and I could actually see everything, whereas with Rolando Ruiz, I was behind his friends and I believe his lawyer, and so I remember with him I was like, on my tippy toes looking over then once it was done and it was obvious that nothing more was going to happen I just sat there and I just saw the back of their heads, or I'd look at the floor, whereas I was in the front row at Chris' execution and I could see him, right there, and there was nowhere else really to look.

So, I remember, looking down and saying a prayer for Chris and for Chris' family and, which is sort of odd for me, I'm not a prayer person, but I felt it was appropriate, especially for his family. More than anything, you know, I understood what his family was going through and what Mitesh was going through and that it was going to be difficult for them, and I wanted to send positive vibes into the universe. So, I said a prayer, and then we stood there for maybe twenty or thirty minutes, and the doctor came out and checked his pulse and checked his eyes and pronounced him dead, and they covered him with a sheet, a white sheet, and we were all slowly lead out of the room. And it was very odd, I think that's how I would describe both experiences, because it's not something that most people get to experience in their lifetime and it's just a really strange thing to watch someone leave this world. Especially watch them leave this world not on their own terms. I mean I would say that both Chris and Rolando, you know, had come to peace with the fact that this was happening but it certainly wasn't their choice, and so it was a very weird experience.

And so they let us out of the building, I wrote my story in the administrative building and then I went over to a Starbucks and finished writing and I called, I believe Mitesh's family had already released a statement that I had, and I called the victim of the sexual assaults and she was very upset that he didn't acknowledge her and that in his dying words, in his last moments, he didn't acknowledge what had happened to her. So, she was very angry, her mom was very angry, her children were very angry. So, I talked to her about what she was feeling and what she was going through [01:46:20] and she was very happy that he got put to death. And so, I finished up my story, I included her perspective, and sent it in. And I had avoided the whole time in planning to go to the execution, I had avoided getting a hotel 'cause I had a feeling I did not want to stay in Huntsville. There was nothing wrong with it the first time, but just knowing the impact that it had on me, I sort of felt like I wanted to go home, so I started driving around 9:30 or 10 and drove home and got home around 1:30 I think, it was another long drive. It was nice to be able to go home to my boyfriend, and my bed, and my cat, you know, just somewhere that felt safe, and yeah, so I drove home, I don't remember exactly everything I thought about. In some ways it wasn't as hard cause I knew what to expect, and I didn't- I don't think I did break down like I did the time before. I still had those questions in my head, and I still was thinking about his family but in some

ways it was a little bit easier because I had experienced it before. Uhm, yeah, so then I went home and went to bed. [01:48:01]

FIELD: I'd like to—I'm curious about the victim of the sexual assault. Reading your coverage of it I was curious, too, because in articles before the execution I read a quote saying, from her, saying she didn't really believe in capital punishment because of religious reasons but she didn't really care, like she wasn't going to advocate for clemency, and she didn't forgive him, she was in this sort of neutral space and I thought it was, in the quote, after his execution, you know, you mentioned that she was very, very angry and so was her whole family and that came through in the quote and I just wondered if you could speak about that, you may not know about that, but since you did talk to her before and then again after, what changed? And was it just his—the fact that he didn't acknowledge what he had done, and what about that acknowledgment was so important for her? [01:49:23]

EATON: You know, I can't say with certainty, but I really do think his denial really hurt her, that she had gone her whole life and this, so something like 14 years, and this crime, this rape, had hung over her head that whole time, and it had hung over her children's head 'cause they witnessed it. The little ones didn't really remember it but the older one did. And it was something that had such a meaningful impact, awful impact on her life. You know, she at one point, I believe was checked into a mental health clinic and had problems with drinking and lived with her mom for a period of time and was scared to answer the door, wouldn't go grocery shopping, and her mom attested to a lot of this. And she finally had gotten to a place in the last couple of years where she really felt somewhat more at peace with what had happened, or maybe not peace is the right word, but she had gotten back on her feet, and she, you know, had her life back and felt like things were in control and that she wasn't as affected by it, and then all of these memories came back with the campaign to save Chris' life and the nearing execution, and I think it was really difficult for her to see Mitesh and his family advocate for Chris just given, you know, I think she sort of felt like her story was being forgotten.

You know so much of it was about Chris and Mitesh because they were—they wanted their stories to be intertwined, they wanted to meet each other, they felt some similarities in that both of their fathers had been murdered. And that they both wanted to stop the cycle of violence and they both care for the children of the world, like NaQuita and her sister. In the meantime, there was this woman who, not a lot of people found, I was lucky in that I found her. It's difficult to track down sexual assault victims because their names can be redacted from police reports, but her name had been mentioned in court records, and I was able to track her down that way, but a lot of other people didn't take the time or know how to find her and in fact she actually told me she wasn't going to speak to me at first. She saw my message and she deleted it and then later, as she watched all of this unfold, she realized like she wanted a say too. Like I was saying before, she just felt like she wasn't part of the conversation, and that people were forgetting something really awful that Chris had done. And so that's when we spoke and at that time, she did express some reservations and that she said she was a Christian and that she didn't support the death penalty, but that she couldn't say that she could advocate for Chris' life either.

And as time went on and the execution happened, you know, I think yet again, Chris failed to acknowledge her, failed to apologize to her so for fourteen years she never got an apology or even an acknowledgment of what had happened and I think that was really difficult and I think she really wanted an apology. You know, Mitesh got one, Mitesh got to meet Chris face-to-face and he got an apology and he—Chris went to his death denying that this had ever happened. So, I think that was really, really difficult for her and it brought about really complex feelings where she felt like as a Christian she shouldn't support the death penalty but this was personal to her and this was her rapist and had ruined her life and her children's life, or, she felt like it had ruined her life and her children's life. So, it very much was difficult to reconcile those two. [01:54:03]

FIELD: [01:54:10] Yeah. So, it's been a few months since then, how have you carried it with you over the past few months, how has it impacted you, how have you thought about it?

EATON: It's crazy to think it has been a few months 'cause it feels like it was a long time ago, but in the immediate aftermath, I actually felt okay for the most part, whereas with Rolando, I was very upset for the weeks afterwards. In this case, I wasn't really necessarily upset, I was just more worried about his family, and worried about what they were going through. Especially his daughters. There was one point where maybe a week after, it might have been less than a week, and I can't remember exactly what happened but I—my boyfriend and I had gotten in an argument and I think I was being a little irrational, I cannot remember for the life of me what we were arguing about but I think I remember thinking the next day in hindsight like, Why did I care about this [laughter]. And, at one point I just became so emotional, and I just like, started crying and sort of, I wouldn't say necessarily lashing out but just being like, You just don't understand.

And in hindsight I very much feel like it was because of this, that I had sorted of bottled up all of these emotions and I, it was all sort of like coming to fruition, you know, like with this anger and being upset about something completely unrelated, but that with that sort of came these other emotions and that they all came to the surface at the same time and I remember, like going to the bed, it was very late at night, and going to bed and huffing, like just crying myself to sleep and my boyfriend just being like, What the heck is going on? [laughter] Like whatever we were arguing about was not that big of a deal and he was just so baffled as to like what the heck is—why is she crying about this? You know, and I know that made me even more upset, that like part of me was thinking about the fact that these two girls didn't have a father anymore, at least a father that was present in their life. And these family members were missing someone who was so important to them, and that Mitesh had to, you know, deal with Chris dying when he didn't want him to die, sort of a re-victimization of sorts.

And I remember just being so upset that my boyfriend didn't understand the severity of what had happened and how many people were being impacted. And that he didn't understand where my anger and where my mixed feelings were coming from and I think I eventually did explain it to him, that it was like a lot more than a simple argument about something very petty, that I really was sort of just reacting to everything that had happened that week. But besides that I mean, in some ways life went back to normal and that's what's so weird about this job and these stories is that, the end of the day, my life does go back to normal, and a lot of peoples' don't. So I think I always come back to it and I always, you know whenever I think about it for a long period of time like I am now I think I do get—feel a little affected by it. But, you know, for the most part life goes on, for better or worse. So, yeah.

FIELD: [01:58:41] Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about or address?

EATON: Hmm. Let me look at this, let's see if there's anything important that I—that I missed.

FIELD: What is that photo—the photo of?

EATON: [01:59:02] It's a photo of NaQuita flipping through letters that she had received from her father when he was on death row. So, here I can show you. So, one of our photographers took that picture. I wasn't there for that, but I remember looking at that picture and being, I mean it's so beautifully illustrated what their relationship was like. You know, that she had saved all of these letters from him and she still, I believe, she still saves them all. She has a box for, you know, where she can go back and look at them. You know, I guess the

last thing that I would say, I think this case and this story resonated with a lot of people, I heard from a lot of people afterwards and I think that's because it conveys the complexity and the nuance of death penalty stories. This is not a cut and dry story, it's not a black and white story, and it rarely is, and it really was illustrated through this story. Here you have a young man who admitted that he did something awful, that he took another man from this earth, from his family and possibly committed a rape, as well, a very violent rape. And from that, you know, he had supposedly grown into a different person who really wanted to help others and help raise his children in any way he could.

And you had the victims son and his family advocating for him but then you also had a rape victim who said, No way, this isn't fair to me and this guy should rot in hell, I think were her words. So that's what I was trying to convey in my writing and I think that's what sticks with me, is so often these issues get broken up into something that's black and white and, you know, either your pro-death-penalty or anti-death-penalty and it's so more complex than that, I mean, you have to think about his daughters who now, it's been five months without their father and they are going to be spending the first Thanksgiving without, I mean he's never has been at the table but the first time without him being in this world, or this earthly world and, the same thing for his mother and his siblings and his grandmother, that they're going to be impacted at Christmas, and Thanksgiving and every holiday after this. As will the rape victim, that she will never—you know her life is never going to be normal and so I think the reason that the story resonated so much, and the reason that people were interested in this story is because it is so complex and it really shows the wide range of emotions that we as humans go through and it makes us think about policies, think about the death penalty and whether or not, it's a good fit, and perhaps it is, perhaps it isn't. But that's sort of my job is to explore those stories, and this story definitely showed that.

FIELD: [02:02:56] I thought of another question [laughter].

EATON: I do that all the time [laughter].

FIELD: So you said, you know, that you get to go back to your life, and you haven't, you know, had to think about it in your day to day life. Do you think it will have an impact, or, has it had an impact on your reporting, even just the broader criminal justice—reporting about the criminal justice system more broadly, and what has that impact been if it has?

EATON: [02:03:31] Just going, I hate to sound like a broken record, but going back to what I said before, I think it was a reminder of the complexity of these types of stories. And so yes, I will—I think I will always come back to this in that it's a reminder of how I need to do my job, and how I want to do my job. I am very proud of these stories, because they did take a lot of work, and they took a lot of empathy. And I feel like they adequately described everything that happened and so it will be a reminder for me moving forward to always pursue stories with that in mind, to always think about the complex nature of the death penalty and of death in general. Cause often criminal justice reporting does include a lot of death. So I think that will be- that will stay with me moving forward.

FIELD: [02:04:49] Do you think you'll attend more executions in your reporting or are you back to going to try to avoid it?

EATON: That's a really good question. I hadn't really thought about it, until earlier this interview I was like, I bet you she's going to ask me if I'll ever attend another execution. [laughter] [02:05:12] I wouldn't be opposed to it in certain circumstances. I feel like it was—I'm glad I attended because I feel like I saw this story to the end,



and I told the story in its entirety. If I got the chance to do that again, if I was invested in the story of a person and of their family and of the victims, I think I would be willing to do that again. But it's not something that I'm going to be actively seeking out. I guess only time will tell. I haven't really been faced with that question because there is no one from Bexar County who is going to be executed any time soon, or who is scheduled to be executed. So I sort of been able to avoid that, whereas after Rolando's there was already a line-up of people from Bexar County that were going to be executed, right now, it does not seem imminent, so I guess only time will tell.

FIELD: [02:06:19] aems, do you have any questions?

AEMS EMSWILER: I have one question, I was thinking about, you talk a lot about your sense of moral obligation and duty as a journalist, and how sometimes that takes precedence over your initial impulses for what you need to do for yourself, so I was wondering how you navigate that and how do you take care of yourself, especially considering this does impact people, especially people who are empathetic and impacts our relationships, and comes out in times we don't expect it, so I was wondering how you process that if you feel comfortable talking about it.

EATON: Yeah, that's a great question. I'm assuming I should answer to her so that [laughter]—I know the drill. Yeah, that's a great question. Going into this execution, I knew how it could impact me, at least in part so afterwards I made sure to talk to a lot of different people, so on that drive home I talked to my best friend who lives in New York and I believe I talked to one other person. I did call my boyfriend briefly but we didn't talk about it until later. So I knew that I needed to have that support system near me, I had warned my best friend ahead of time that I was doing this and that I wasn't telling my mom and that to be sort of on standby if I needed to talk. And it turns out that I was okay, at least that evening and I didn't, you know, it was nice to talk to her and have someone checking in on me, but I didn't necessarily feel like I had to. But I think, I also recognized the importance both times of taking a break from it all and from getting away from all the craziness of the story, so that I could process it.

So the next morning I did have an interview set up at like 10 in the morning, but that afternoon I took the whole afternoon off, and yeah, I mean I think it's just important to center yourself afterwards and find things that bring you joy and relaxation, and sometimes those things that bring you joy you feel guilty for because, I remember after this, and after Rolando Ruiz, like feeling like, Oh here I am, I get to go spend time and go out and eat and go hang out with my friends, and a guy is dead, and his family is planning a funeral. That was one thing that really impacted me about this case, because I knew Christopher's family so well they shared with me the details of his funeral, or his memorial service. And they- they didn't want anyone there, which I completely understood or any press there. But I remember thinking like, How do you set up a memorial service for someone who has been executed and what is that like and what is his family going through. You know, they were actually planning the funeral before he was dead which was really weird.

They were—when I met his mom at a Starbucks, I had asked her about the funeral arrangements and they were already talking to a funeral home. And setting a date, if it were to go through. They were hoping against hope that it wouldn't happen and that it would all be for naught but they also knew they had to be prepared. So going back sort of to what I was saying before, it was difficult at times as I was having fun or living my life, to think, Wow, right now there's a funeral going on or, you know, I wonder what NaQuita is feeling, or Chrishelle is feeling. And I guess that's what makes me a good reporter, I don't want to like toot my own horn in the middle of all of this, but I think understanding the long lasting affects that this has on families is important and the

long-lasting affect that it's going to have on me is important. So yeah that was a very longwinded answer [laughter]

FIELD: [02:11:08] That's great thank you.

EATON: You're welcome.

FIELD: So, just one more opportunity, if there's anything else that you want to say. I mean it doesn't have to be about these cases but if there's anything else at all.

EATON: No, I just I'm glad that I had this opportunity to share these stories, because I think they're really meaningful stories and again, I don't want to sound like a broken record, but I think stories are what bring us together, and that's why I'm telling my story, is because, although I don't think it's particularly that interesting compared to some of these other stories, but I do think it's important that we all share our human experiences and what we've been through and that's what make these stories so great, and that's what makes the project that you're doing so great. So, I'm thankful for the opportunity. [02:12:12]

FIELD: Well, thank you. [inaudible] Thank you.

EATON: Yeah. Awesome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]