

Title: 2024-03-15 Covering Justice

Description: Devlin Barrett, Pierre Thomas, Anthony Coley discuss Cover the Justice Department.

Created on: 2024-03-18 15:54:24 PM

Transcript:

48 min read (9433 Words)

Kevin Johnson - 0:00:00

We are really fortunate to have two folks who know so much about the department join us today under under difficult circumstances. It's been a hell of a Newsday already. As most of you know there was a ruling out of Georgia that that threw some ointment into into things this morning. There are continuing churning of of filings in New York in the Manhattan DA's case up there involving Trump. But it is, it is kind of what we wanted to talk about today in terms of the Justice Department especially with this panel and Pierre Thomas will join us in a in a little bit. As I said he's coming in from Miami where there was a hearing down there yesterday and and how the department for as big as it is and for as long as it's been around and and for people who've covered it have covered various facets of of this department from the civil rights division, the FBI, the ATF.

Kevin Johnson - 0:00:49

Any one of those agencies can keep you busy for your entire, for the entire life that you spend on the beat. But in the past, well since 2017, the beat has changed markedly and even before that. And so it raises the question how you cover a beat that is so now singularly focused. I mean, I shouldn't say singularly because you have 4 prosecutions going on, not all Justice Department prosecutions, but four prosecutions that touch on aspects of of the job that you would be doing at the Justice Department. So really fortunate to have both Devlin and and Anthony here today to talk about one, how this development, how this change has changed the job of reporting on the department and how you're able to to deal with that. Now, Devlin's interesting example of this.

Kevin Johnson - 0:02:12

If you read the Post today, you saw his byline on a front page story talking about what had happened in New York. And then inside he's sharing a byline on what had happened in the hearing in Florida.

Anthony Coley - 0:02:30

Were you in both plates?

Devlin Barrett - 0:02:32

I was. I wasn't neither.

Kevin Johnson - 0:02:34

How do you juggle them, Anthony? I think would be great to talk about from the perspective that we kind of touched on in the morning and that is.

Devlin Barrett - 0:02:43

Sorry, sorry.

Kevin Johnson - 0:02:49

An appropriate theme and that we touched on in the morning in that how is the how is the department managing this attention to the Trump administration against and reconciling it against the agenda that they want to pursue the priorities that an attorney general and an administration wants to pursue on criminal justice, criminal justice reform, Prison Reform, civil rights. And so there is there is a tension there that Sochi I think discussed a little bit today, but I thought these two could talk about it in a little bit more detail. So I'm going to turn it over to Devlin. Maybe you can start by talking about how in the world you're managing a job now that's that stretches you from New York to to Florida.

Devlin Barrett - 0:03:46

Well I think judging by how late I was I think the answer is clearly I'm I'm handling it very badly. So I'll just save. I'll just do a little very hopefully short spiel. Thank you for having me. I used to be one of you guys of many years ago sadly now but it really I found it incredibly helpful when I first came to Washington and I hope and certainly believe it is for you guys too. Although I won't be one of the helpful people. I am not anyone to learn very much from.

Devlin Barrett - 0:04:11

So how do you handle it? I one of the I have been covering Main Justice since 2008. Before that, I covered federal courts in New York for about 7 years and NYPD for a few years. And so I basically only know how to do one thing really. And one of the really odd parts about DOJ right now and federal law enforcement right now is it's never had as many reporters on it in in my time. It's never had this many reporters on it.

Devlin Barrett - 0:04:42

And paradoxically, the the place has never been less covered than it is right now because everyone is covering 3 things. Two of them are named Trump, one of them is named Biden. And we're all like pack hunting in that space. It's a very important story. I'm not saying like this is a terrible thing and, you know, woe unto democracy, but it does. I think I I think it is.

Devlin Barrett - 0:05:07

It worries me because to me it feels dangerously structurally imbalanced as a way to operate over the long run. To Kevin's point, I feel like this imbalance basically started in 2016, primarily the Clinton e-mail investigation, which I could bore you to death about. You can look it up, it's on Wikipedia. But it is a genuinely, I think, difficult time in the sense of there's a lot of things the Justice Department does that are very important. Obviously, I believe, because I've been covering this stuff for a long time. But most of them aren't getting much out external scrutiny the way they normally would in in every other time I've done this because everyone's trying to figure out like what's going to happen to Trump what's going to happen to both the Bidens and that's not good.

Devlin Barrett - 0:05:44

It's understandable. I don't think there's a there's an easy solution for it right this moment but it's it's not a it's not a great dynamic so it's very busy. I think I can give a different type of answer if you want to talk more about the meat and potatoes of how you do it, because there are some, I think, some worthwhile points about the meat and potatoes. But like the bottom line is very busy, very important, but also very one-dimensional, and that's a change.

Anthony Coley - 0:06:32

Hi, everybody. I think it's the coolest beat in town, hands down. And this is somebody who I spent almost twice as much time at the Treasury Department during the Obama administration. I spent a lot of time. I'm not sure if there are any Hill reporters, Capitol Hill be reporters here. I worked for three different

senators, but I love this beat. I love this building so much because it is you can make whatever you want to make out of it, like whatever your interest in it, it it it comes through and it touches the Justice Department.

Anthony Coley - 0:06:54

Devlin did a story about a year or so ago, maybe 15 months, right around Christmas of 2023, about fentanyl. God.

Devlin Barrett - 0:07:16

Bless you for remembering that.

Anthony Coley - 0:07:17

Remember this?

Devlin Barrett - 0:07:18

God bless you.

Anthony Coley - 0:07:19

And so his broader point is right, is that there are, you know, 80 percent, 70% of what most of the DOJB reporters are in the categories that he mentioned. But occasionally, and this is the point that I'm trying to wait, he I'm not sure how this story came about, but I suspect it came about because it's something that you wanted to report out as opposed to as opposed to it being like a top down type of assignment editor piece.

Anthony Coley - 0:07:30

And this is the point that I'm trying to make. There are so many things that DOJ touches that you can carve out your own niche. And this story if you if you want to cry. This was one of the best stories I've read of of Devlin's, and I started reading it when I was at the department and I stopped reading it after like the first two or three minutes because you know how you like, you feel yourself. Like, actually I I cannot cry right now, right? But it was really a truly touching story.

Anthony Coley - 0:08:23

And I noticed on an Associated Press person here the AP has done incredible reporting about the Bureau of Prisons. Incredible reporting. I mean the FBI just, we don't use the term raided. It was a court authorized search. This is this is a hill I will die on. I will hear him by.

Devlin Barrett - 0:08:47

You will die there. You will.

Anthony Coley - 0:08:50

Court authorized search. But a court authorized search at one of the prisons in Northern California and Mike Balsamo, who is now an editor, and I forget the other person's name.

Devlin Barrett - 0:09:04

Maybe Mike Sisak?

4 - 0:09:05

Yeah.

Pierre Thomas - 0:09:05

Mike Sisak.

Anthony Coley - 0:09:06

Yes, like that. I mean they have owned this beat. And so, I mean, even though you all aren't assigned to

Speak

the Justice Department, there are still things, if you care about it, There are, there is a lot that you can do and cover topics that you can cover that are under covered right now that are so important to the public. Like it's just there because nobody has the time and the resources. And I mean, the Washington Post has three beat reporters, right?

4 - 0:09:39

At.

Anthony Coley - 0:09:39

The post right now alone and they're still not covering everything that that should be covered. And it's not just the post, it's it's nobody is doing it. So the other thing I will say I think another real opportunity for our folks here and I understand you all talked to Wen and Dean and others earlier today. So much happens out in the in the country with various US attorney offices. Those are if there are issues that there are areas of the country where you really want to know what's happening outside of DC, you should talk to Win and get connected with some of the US attorneys because right, you want to talk about crime, for instance, right. Like, yes, you could do this from ADC angle here. You could go deep here, particularly because DCI think right now is an outlier in terms of violent crime in the country.

Anthony Coley - 0:10:32

But there is so much happening out in the States that you really can and I think should reach out to some of these US attorneys because they can give you a different perspective based on what they're seeing on the ground and some of the cases they're bringing, OK.

4 - 0:10:54

Good.

Kevin Johnson - 0:10:55

Good place to start. Questions because we really want to make this a conversation and wait until I get to you with a microphone so we can get it recorded. There you go.

Aneri Pattani - 0:11:07

Hi, my name is Aneri, I write for KFF Health News. My question may be more targeted towards Devlin. But just you both touched on like there's so much that happens at DOJ outside of this few stories that are sort of sucking up all the oxygen. How do you, how did you pitch stories to your editors that are not those, you know, main ones that they want you on all the time? And what advice do you have in trying to pitch kind of all this other stuff that doesn't get covered when you know a lot of the focus is going to be on those big stories?

Devlin Barrett - 0:11:39

So it's different for me now than when I was younger. Now I'm an old, cranky person and my bosses are a little afraid of me. And now I can often just present a finished product to my boss. And if I I have enough confidence that I know how to execute a story where like, so the fentanyl story, that was something that I cared a lot about. I felt like we weren't doing justice to what this issue looks like in the world, and I put feelers out and I finally got the thing I wanted from those feelers, maybe a full year after I first started asking around.

Anthony Coley - 0:12:18

Really, it took a year to do that it.

Devlin Barrett - 0:12:20

It well, it didn't. It's not like it took a year to do the reporting. It took a year to have someone call me back and say you know I think I have the kind of thing you are asking about and I think these parents are actually like want to talk to you about it. Like you needed you needed two things. You needed a set of facts that were that were important and and were representative and you needed buy in from people

Speak

who are in a tremendous amount of pain. And so because I've done crime most of my life, like I think I spent a lot of time thinking about victims And so I was I was really that time I was really looking for just the right victims. That sounds crass.

Devlin Barrett - 0:12:54

That's not, it sounds crasser than I mean it, but but it's really important if you want to tell the story well, Like if the family is just, you know, broken and can't even engage with you, it's harder to tell. It's much harder to tell their story.

Anthony Coley - 0:13:12

The other thing I'm going to jump in here as the esteem Pierre Thomas comes in.

Devlin Barrett - 0:13:18

Fresh from Florida, ladies and gentlemen.

Anthony Coley - 0:13:21

Good to see you, Sir. What he referenced but didn't explicitly say was the strength of his relationships. And both of these gentlemen have strong relationships that they've developed over years that allow them to tell those type of stories.

Devlin Barrett - 0:13:42

And and the other part I would just say, because again, it's different for me now as an old cranky reporter than it was as a young reporter. As a young reporter. What I did, I I I remember very this was in my mind like a key part of how I started. I was covering the NYPDI was the night NYPD cops reporter. And in that job you're really just a grunt. You're just doing like 2 hour bytes of reporting. That's all you get.

Devlin Barrett - 0:14:01

And what I did on the side is I looked around at the other reporters who covered crime and at that paper there were a lot of them. So there wasn't. There wasn't like it's not like no one was asking talking to the FBI. It's not like no one was talking to the NYPD. Those bases were covered. But what I realized pretty quick was that no one was talking to the ATF on a regular basis.

Devlin Barrett - 0:14:17

So it was like a 22 year old. I just was like, I'm going to be the ATF guy and some a lot of those stories aren't that interesting. You're not necessarily getting on a front page or the top of the home page for anything. But two things happened. One, I got a decent relationship. I just had some decent relationships with some number of people.

Devlin Barrett - 0:14:36

So I got a bunch of decent, let's call them small stories. But also when there was a big story, you know, if a if a crime in particular is big enough, the ATF will be involved and the ATF will know things and you can call the ATF. And even if it's a Bureau case, like someone at the ATF can tell you actually the gun was sold in Vermont two days ago, and that's important and that's valuable. And no one else is doing that. So my only suggestion would be when you're starting out, especially look around The Newsroom and you can tell what's not really being, who's not being talked to. And they touch a lot of things.

Devlin Barrett - 0:15:14

They probably touch a lot of things, especially in government. God, they probably touch a lot of things that you, your newsroom cares about. They just don't know how to get to that person, to that story.

Pierre Thomas - 0:15:26

I mean, and I'm obviously coming in late to the conversation again, pleasure to be with you. Fortunately one of our top bosses came into town and I just called into a meeting. So.

Devlin Barrett - 0:15:37

We're we're all late.

4 - 0:15:38

Yeah, like.

Devlin Barrett - 0:15:39

Anthony's the only one who showed up on time in order.

Pierre Thomas - 0:15:41

To maintain gainful employment this was something that had to be attended. But I I would just say at base it's all about interpersonal relationships. You have to think of your job as about interpersonal relationships and and and the one thing that's consistent just listening to Devlin here is you know when you're doing your basic beat reporting if you're starting out on a beat you know, always realize that no person that you're talking to is unimportant.

Pierre Thomas - 0:15:53

And and I find the main thing is consistency of talking to the person or the people on a regular basis where they almost feel guilty about not you know, getting back to you because you're showing that you're committed to the work and you know maybe it's just my upbringing. I've just found that the way you treat people over time really does matter. And and that can be the key. And you being the first phone call to the public affairs specialist makes you know or giving you a heads up to something's coming and trust that simple word of trust. I mean you know when I talk to people you know in your experience level, you know, one of the things, you know, I try to emphasize these sort of basic tenets of trust and how you're communicating with people. And one of the things that I would encourage you to do is wash out of your system that people have to tell you anything.

Pierre Thomas - 0:17:07

They don't. They really don't have to tell you anything. And the key is whether you can convince them that you're doing the job the right way, professionally and thoughtfully. And that will be one of the greatest things that you can do in in terms of standing out in your profession. You know, why do they want to talk to you first? Why should they want to talk to you first?

Pierre Thomas - 0:17:37

And you want it to be because they think you're smart, thoughtful, you want to get it right and that you're committed to doing the job the best way every single day. And hopefully that compliments what he hasn't been saying.

Anthony Coley - 0:17:52

So that's how Pierre got the attorney, The first TV interview we did with the attorney general, right? We wanted.

Devlin Barrett - 0:17:59

To thanks for mentioning that Anthony.

Anthony Coley - 0:18:01

I said TV interview these day. The print people always you know.

Devlin Barrett - 0:18:05

Bitter we're bitter, petty little.

Pierre Thomas - 0:18:06

People bitter.

Anthony Coley - 0:18:08

Right. But you know, we were looking for this is in April of 2021, right. And we knew it was a time where we wanted to reintroduce the country to the Attorney General. And remember, I was talking about relationships. The attorney general knew Pierre. And when you have somebody who respects the role of the Free Press, but you know, he's only done, we're in year three now. He's done literally three TV interviews, right?

Anthony Coley - 0:18:40

So he is not someone who's going to spend a lot of time doing, sitting down with with reporters, doing TV interviews. And so the very first one, we wanted it to be with someone whom he respected, who we knew he would ask tough questions but do so in a way that also gave him a sense of comfort. And so we talked, Pierre into flying to Oklahoma City, Right. And folks got to know, I, I don't think any of you are old enough to remember the Oklahoma City bombing. No. Y'all are not, right.

Anthony Coley - 0:19:21

No. OK, Well it's one of the things you may have read about.

Pierre Thomas - 0:19:25

It was the biggest terrorist event in the history.

4 - 0:19:27

Of right.

Devlin Barrett - 0:19:28

Yeah, and just one thing. Very important point. None of none of you tell me how old you were on 9/11. No one wants to hear that crap. Don't tell me no one wants to hear that crap.

Anthony Coley - 0:19:37

You know one or two of them may not have been born.

Devlin Barrett - 0:19:39

What did I just?

Pierre Thomas - 0:19:40

Say to you not born I was three. No, we're we're in the stage. We don't want to hear.

Anthony Coley - 0:19:46

So to wrap up the story, we wanted to go with someone that right there that the attorney general respected and trusted and we knew we would get tough questions but fair questions. And so that's why the first interview we did was with Pierre and with ABC News and we actually had it wasn't just about the Oklahoma City bombing. That's how people. That's how he people were reintroduced to Merrick Garland. He was on the top DOJ official at the time, the Paydac, who was sent to Oklahoma City.

Pierre Thomas - 0:20:20

And he was.

Anthony Coley - 0:20:21

Overseeing that case, but this was also at a time when there was a lot of racial tension in the air and we tacked on to that trip, a stop by Tulsa. This was right around the 100th anniversary of the the what was the the massacre?

Devlin Barrett - 0:20:40

Wasn't.

4 - 0:20:41

It black Wall Street.

Anthony Coley - 0:20:43

Black Wall Street. And so in this interview, it was really sacred space. The Attorney general talked about the same type of hatred that destroyed Black Wall Street 100 years ago. There were elements of that that we also saw on January 6th. So, like, he made it relevant to the moment.

Pierre Thomas - 0:21:02

But and his family, he mentioned, you know, his family coming right in the Holocaust in terms of, you know, how that affected him and why civil rights was such an important part. And and interestingly, that came in a time when in our industry, particularly television, you know, I would remember explaining to to Anthony that we were morphing into multiple ways we would get that interview out. So we did a portion of it on a Sunday and some of that ran on Good Morning America's Sunday Morning on on she's been on the show this week. And but we were able to get versions of the The Interview on Good Morning America, World News Tonight with David Muir and some of our other platforms. And, you know, not to brag, but those happen to be the most watched morning show, the most watched, you know, show on all the television. Which is sort of remarkable that the Evening News most weeks with David Muir is the most watched thing. Of all the things you can watch on TV every single day.

Pierre Thomas - 0:22:02

That show is the most watched thing. And the fact that Merrick was reintroduced on a variety of conversations. And one of the things I told Anthony and hopefully felt that way before the interview was that I like for the principals to speak in complete sentences so the public can hear how they think. These are consequential people making very important decisions. And I think it's important for the the public to hear how do they process information, what how do they think about the things that they're making decisions on. And and we were able to do that And you know and and also version of the interview ran on this week.

Pierre Thomas - 0:22:38

So it was like 5 different places running over a period of days where the AG was introduced reintroduced to millions and millions of people. And so I say that to say this, when you hear an agency or if you're covering a campaign and they have a point of view about what they're trying to accomplish, you know, it's OK to listen because your goals are not usually mutually exclusive, you know, in terms of what they're trying to accomplish and what you're trying to accomplish.

Pierre Thomas - 0:22:54

And and what I mean by that is what I'm trying to convey is information that people at home can latch on to understand and make decisions about in terms of their view of the world or their view of a candidate or their view of policy. And and sometimes you end up having to to negotiate. What's the first best way to get that done? Hence going to Oklahoma City. You know when Anthony mention that, oh, you know, it's much cheaper to just wait till it gets back. Then we can go on.

Anthony Coley - 0:23:49

Pennsylvania in the country.

4 - 0:23:50

Baby.

Anthony Coley - 0:23:50

Real people.

Pierre Thomas - 0:23:51

And like you work in companies that have budgets. But I was able to convince my boss, I said, look, I think you know Black Wall St. Tulsa, OK City is the right place, venue to have the conversation. And if that makes him more willing to, you know, be fulsome in his comments, then I was willing to do it. Hi, my name is Michael Sully from the AP. My question for you is talking about you mentioned victims earlier and how do you go about that? I work in, in video.

Pierre Thomas - 0:24:28

So Pierre, for you 2, how do you go about covering a story that's related to the department but, you know, crime, injustice in speaking, trying to get victims to talk to you about these things that you're covering and especially on camera, which can be an added layer of anxiety for someone who's been wronged.

Pierre Thomas - 0:24:29

That's a great question. And I'll start if it's OK. Look, it's interesting. My job as Chief Justice correspondent is obviously I cover the building, right? And FBI and DHS and all those different things. And so when there's a announcement to this special counsel investigating former President Trump or President Biden, that's a dominant big story.

Pierre Thomas - 0:25:07

That's going to lead the Evening News, is going to lead the morning shows. It's going to be a lot of streaming services as well. But I also be part of the job is to look for stories that illustrate some of the issues that we're covering on a day-to-day basis. So one of the things that I've made in my career, a personal professional job or goal, is to cover gun violence. So I've done half an hour's Nightline specials on gun violence, which means getting out into the community, riding with the police, talking to community leaders, talking to victims. And, you know, part of it is use the base of knowledge that you have as a way to get deeper into the story.

Pierre Thomas - 0:25:54

A story that I did this past year that ran in early November is one I'm particularly proud of. It's called One Girl, One Bullet. And basically having done so many stories about mass shootings and whatever, I wanted to do, a story about what does it mean to be shot and survived. Because if you think about the coverage, both in the print press and television or streaming, it's like there's a mass shooting. We go, we descend on it. And there's a couple stories about, you know, the people who died, typically and what wonderful people they were.

Pierre Thomas - 0:26:35

And you might get an interview with someone who was shot, but usually they're kind of recovering and the families are very protective of them. And I said, you know, I want people to understand that being shot is not like in the movies that, you know, people see someone get shot on the screen and then next thing you know, they're up and out of the hospital in two days. And what we took weeks to find a person who would be willing to let us kind of chronicle her recovery time. And it turns out it was a 12 year old girl who was in her bedroom sleeping and heard gunfire outside. And all of a sudden, 36 it was, dozens of bullets came raining through her apartment and hit her in the abdomen, minding our own business. And so we chronicled the story of the moment she got shot.

Pierre Thomas - 0:27:30

And we we were able to find, for example, that the Police Department had body camera footage. They were the first to arrive at the scene. It was in North Carolina, which what we like because it wasn't some major big city, it was kind of a suburban area. And we were able to get the body camera footage of them arriving at the scene and finding her on the floor in the corner to the ER doctors who operated on her, on her. It turned out she died three or four times on the operating table. She had like 20 surgeries in the span of like several weeks and it was months and months of recovery and and multiple surgeries.

Pierre Thomas - 0:28:04

And that was a story of getting born out of the data I've been able to accumulate over the years in terms of understanding what the gun violence truly is, being a chronic. I call it the chronic epidemic. And and also I was hell bent on pushing past the notion that it's just people in urban places shooting each other. And that one of the reason I was convinced that the the country hasn't done much on gun violence is the notion that there's this perception it's just poor black and brown people shooting each other. When when you really look at the data, the just as many people in in what I call domestic violence scenarios of all races and socio economic types like the businessman who comes home and kills his whole family, it happens way more often than you realize. So that's part of the job is trying to peel back the layers of urban myth and get to reality.

Pierre Thomas - 0:29:02

And you're right, those stories where you find the people. But it took us weeks of talking. But part of it, they understood that we knew what we were talking about. We had to convince the family that we would treat the story sensitively, like literally, a young lady was in her underwear when she was shot. So I made the points that we're going to digitize the lower extremities of her body. You know, we're going to make sure that we do everything to be respectful of the fact that this young lady nearly died and somehow survived the story.

Pierre Thomas - 0:29:29

So.

Devlin Barrett - 0:29:40

So talking to victims, I do it a fair bit now. I used to do it a great deal when I was younger. I have a lot of strong, cranky old man. Get off my lawn opinions about some of the ways that younger reporters do it and some of the way that younger reporters think about it, which I don't agree with. I think reporters often worry too much about the feelings of the people they're talking to. And I don't mean that as like you should care about these people as humans. Like when you talk to someone, your face should convey how incredibly sorry you are that this happened to them.

Devlin Barrett - 0:30:10

And I think there's the fundamental challenge of talking to victims is to do it well. I think you need to slow down. But that's not what your business is. Your business is to get like 30 seconds of like the weepiest person on earth, you know, screaming Billy, Billy, Billy. And then like, you got your clip, you're done. You're gone.

Devlin Barrett - 0:30:35

Like it. It's harder for TV. Like it's harder for TV to do good victim work than print because you know, you got the machinery. God, when I started, you know, I would go to crime scenes and like, each station had not just a guy with a giant camera but like a boom guy. And then there's the reporter. And it's like you put ten of those people in some poor person's apartment and like you look like a lunatic.

Devlin Barrett - 0:30:53

You, you come across to human beings as in some ways the worst part of the entire process. I will say in my experience, and again, I do less of this now than I used to. In my experience, it is much easier to talk to victims families who are poor than victims, families who are middle class or wealthy. In my experience, victims, families who are middle class or wealthy are are really often, much more often offended and insulted by your presence because they don't need you. They don't need your questions to tell them how significance this loss is. And I have.

Devlin Barrett - 0:31:33

In my experience, I find that poor people are often much more appreciative of the idea that you believe their loss is meaningful and you give their loss meaning. I once covered this will always be burned in my head. I once covered 12 year old girl walking home in Queens listening to headphones. Semi truck takes a turn. She doesn't hear it. He doesn't see her.

Devlin Barrett - 0:31:57

She's just she's dead in a in a second. I I don't even it's not even that great a story. But I went out there and that family let a dozen very loud, aggressive, boisterous reporters into their apartment and talked to them for hours. And at the end of it, I worked at a tabloid. We had a big tabloid headline that said, you know, she never heard death coming. It was not a gentle headline.

Devlin Barrett - 0:32:21

And that mom wrote me a letter. And I remember getting that letter that day and being like, oh God, this is it. This is the You're the Worst Person on Earth letter. And that letter praised me effusively for being the only one who cared. And I to this day, I cannot tell you why she thought that. I don't think it's true.

Devlin Barrett - 0:32:45

And this is the other thing, the fentanyl story you talked about. I bawled like a baby through every single interview I did in that story. There were interviews I did where I would finish and like, I remember going into another room and just crying for a solid hour. I think as I'm older if this stuff affects me more, but I also think it's easier to be affected. Like I could cry in front of you right now and honestly, don't really care. It doesn't.

Devlin Barrett - 0:33:17

It doesn't say anything about me, but I think when you're talking to victims, the most useful thing you can do is convey that you care. And most of that is with your face. Like, there's no magic words. There's no like, oh, if we sit you in this chair, you know, you'll be comfortable. Like none of that. I don't.

Devlin Barrett - 0:33:33

I personally, and this I'm not being fair to the TV, but I personally don't think any of that stuff matters. But I think when you look at someone, you have to convey that you actually care and you have to be willing to slow down and you have to, even if slowing down means you don't get the thing that your boss sent you there to get. I have had, I remember Tabloid's a different world, but I remember talking to 1 victim's parent and she was sad. I was sad we were talking back and forth, but she wouldn't really talk to me. And it was a very competitive story. And then and you know, it was going to be on the national news and my editor at the time was good guy, but he was old school and very hardcore.

Devlin Barrett - 0:34:09

And he said go back and tell her you'll be fired if she doesn't talk to you. And I was like, sure. And I'm like I went to get a cup of coffee like I don't, I don't need. And I was, I was 22. Like, you know, sometimes I think you guys are all like have real jobs. I was, I was like a copy boy being sent out to fires in Harlem like I was, I think.

Devlin Barrett - 0:34:32

But even at that level, you have to have some notion in your head of I know what the right thing to do is. I I have some guess as to how to do it. And if I fail, fine. Like, failure is not the worst outcome here. Being a jerk is the worst outcome. You.

Pierre Thomas - 0:34:53

Know, I don't know that I totally agree in terms of whether poor people or wealthy, you know, are more inviting. But what what I will piggyback on and totally endorse is when you're doing interviews, whatever happens, do not lose your humanity. If you do that and react to people based on what you're seeing in the moment and be respectful, it generally will work out for.

Anthony Coley - 0:35:24

You all right, Pierre. So a follow up. I'm going to do the reported thing. Why don't you think own race? Why do you?

Devlin Barrett - 0:35:31

Have. I didn't say that.

Anthony Coley - 0:35:32

Why do you? Why?

Devlin Barrett - 0:35:33

Do you? Have you said poor? I said poor, poor.

Pierre Thomas - 0:35:36

Why don't I think you know it it's just, it's just going to, it's it's going to it turns on the circumstance and the people. Like there's some people that as far as the media who are rich, poor or whatever, they're just suspicious of the media, right. And then you're going to see some rich people who are not suspicious and then you're going to see some poor people who are. And it just it depends on the situation. So I don't presume that that that's the one thing I the one thing I can tell you. I try to presume nothing when I walk into a situation.

Devlin Barrett - 0:36:07

That's that's a really good point. Can I just, like, add one thing to that? Because one of the things that always stands out to me, when I was a young reporter in Brooklyn, I was covering a serial rape case and they caught the guy. It was one of the first DNA cases Brooklyn had ever did. And one of the moms, one of the women was a mom who spoke at his sentencing. And afterward she came up to me and she's like, can I talk to you for a minute? And I was like, sure.

Devlin Barrett - 0:36:33

And and then she pulled me aside and she's like, I want you to, I want you to come talk to me about this case. And I was like, OK, you know, we probably aren't going to write a ton about this. Like, you know, there's no celebrities, there's no whatever. And she's like, I know, but I it would, it would help me out if you could come talk to me about this case. And I was. I didn't really understand what was happening to them.

Devlin Barrett - 0:36:51

Sure. And she takes me to a side room and her 12 year old daughter is there and she starts talking about her rape. And I realized pretty quickly that this person had raped her in front of her daughter in a in a project elevator. And he his whole approach was he held a knife to the daughter and said do what I want or I will stab your daughter. And so the daughter was trapped in the elevator watching this happen and she brought her daughter with her to the sentencing and she had a whole very clear notion in her mind that my daughter was there for the thing. My daughter has to see the entire process because my daughter is not going to get better necessarily, but her best chance of getting better is if she sees how the whole thing plays out.

Devlin Barrett - 0:37:33

Don't, don't hide, don't shirk, don't pull back from it. And I'm like a 23 year old white guy who's had a pretty comfortable life talking to a poor black woman in the projects who was raped in front of her daughter. And the daughter is there for the whole thing. And it was probably the worst interview I've done in my life because everything I'm asking, I'm just thinking like the daughter's hearing this, the daughter's hearing this. And at one point she stopped and she's like, you got to just ask like we can't. It's not going to work if you don't ask the question.

Devlin Barrett - 0:38:10

She's supposed to hear the questions.

Pierre Thomas - 0:38:14

And and so and what I'm saying is, in in every situation, you're looking for consistency, right, of your

reporting techniques, right? Not losing your humanity, humanity and using everything at your disposal in every situation is what works. You know when you walk into a situation, you immediately are looking at the people, you're looking at the circumstance and you're you. You want to react to them based on the circumstance with the goal of accomplishing the mission, which is to get the most interesting, compelling story. And and I'll give you an example, one of the first stories I did that kind of got me on the map at the Washington Post, I was this young cub reporter at the Washington Post. I started when I was 24 years old. And I developed this knack of like getting stories under the front page.

Pierre Thomas - 0:39:03

And they were like, how's this young kid? He's, you know, from, you know, rural Virginia. His parents don't come from any kind of money. He's not from, you know, anything to speak of. How's this kid suddenly showing up in the Washington Post to get the stories on the first page? And and part of it was always looking at whatever circumstance and seeing the potential for stories and looking at people as the gift of the story, if if that makes any sense.

Pierre Thomas - 0:39:22

So one of the first stories that they were like, shocked, This is what makes you laugh. I wrote a story onto the front page about what life was like for commuters in Virginia, and it turns out it was a fascinating story about Prince William County, which is this county just South of Fairfax. And it was a story about this couple who had children who got up every morning at 5:00 AM, prepared their kids breakfast, lunch and dinner, and then embarked upon getting in their vehicles and taking commuting into Washington. And their whole life was built around the fact that they had this community. And so convincing these people to let me be in their house at 4:30 in the morning and watch them come into their kitchen and, you know, stumbling around, you know, pulling out the cereal, you know, But it made the story right. And and so again, just thinking the story story through, thinking about the people.

Pierre Thomas - 0:40:26

And you reminded me of the story I did about women who have been raped. I was looking, crunching through data, crime data, and I saw that the Washington area had a massive increase in rape year over year statistics and it was part of a three or four year trend. And I was like, how am I going to make this story not just a number story? And I sat down and I came with a plan. I said, you know what, I'm going to reach out to rape support organizations. I'm going to tell them what story I'm doing, but I that I need victims.

Pierre Thomas - 0:41:05

But I want to do it in a way where they will fully tell their stories and what it was, what what what it meant to them. And it turned out after talking to these support groups that I would do the interviews by phone, not in person. They all you know, and it worked out beautiful. I got all these great interviews. The women were very forthcoming about the trauma of it and making clear that this was not sex of any sort, this was violence, pure violence, and how they were trying to sort of piece their lives together. But that was getting born out of the notion of how do I make this comfortable for the people that I wanted to interview.

Anthony Coley - 0:41:55

So I have a question for both of you all and you and I talked about this when I was leaving Devlin. There is a sense because there's there's so much death, there's so much violence at the Justice Department and you all are reporting on it a lot. Like how do you protect yourself and your mental health, right? And I'll as you guys think.

Devlin Barrett - 0:42:19

About that. This is the thing where I'm going to have a very inappropriate answer. I think it is fine and good to feel pain and sympathy for people who are in pain. I worry that we are telling young reporters too often that you are experiencing trauma because you are talking to someone else about their trauma. I personally, I I have covered a lot of stuff over the years, not as much as Pierre, but like, I think

we've both been to more than one awful rodeo. And I will tell you, I don't love the idea of of telling people you're being traumatized by talking to people who have endured real awful hardship.

Anthony Coley - 0:42:58

I get that, but I'm going to push back on it a little bit. Please do. When I was at the Justice Department, I think about myself and like the first real mass shooting we had when the attorney general was there was the Atlanta spa shootings where I'm not sure if you all remember that well, but that was, that was maybe April of 2021, give or take, maybe three or four weeks after Merrick was sworn in.

Anthony Coley - 0:43:01

And I remember that shooting. Eight people died. And I remember feeling that shooting in a way that after the last I stayed at DOJ for two years after I can't remember what mass shooting it was. You know, I I I mean, I feel bad even saying that, right? Because there's so many mass shootings. But towards the end of my tenure, there was a mass shooting and maybe four people, five people died.

Kevin Johnson - 0:43:56

Probably in Maine.

Anthony Coley - 0:43:58

Maybe it was Maine. I I didn't feel that shooting the same way that I felt the one early in the attorney general's. And I I asked myself like, what's wrong with me? Like like have I am I am I like numb to like death and violence. And you know, you all have a job. We we all had a job to do, right. I mean we have to get out of message.

Anthony Coley - 0:44:22

We have to communicate what the FBI, what the ATF, what the attorney general is doing. And you can't be subsumed with emotions. You have a job to do. But I didn't feel that, and that bothered me. I'm.

Pierre Thomas - 0:44:38

Going to give them the true experience that I've shared a couple times in similar settings. Like it's not the story. I enjoyed telling the story, but it's a true story. And before I say that, one of the reasons why I had such respect for Anthony in the job is that not only was he what I thought, you know, very professional and thoughtful, but he's a real person and you can see him thinking through the job he was trying to do. And I have great respect and admiration. Thank you. I can say that publicly.

Pierre Thomas - 0:45:12

I've told you that.

4 - 0:45:14

Privately, thank you.

Pierre Thomas - 0:45:17

To to answer his question, it's it's a ongoing process of processing dealing with the things that you cover the most pronounced I for me and and and the reason I tell the story because you'll, I think you'll get it. So I was a young reporter just to come to ABC News, and I've been at ABC News about nine months and have not gone to New York to meet all the brass, the vice presidents of ABC News and the various components. I've done that. I just gotten ABC News started working, doing what I needed to do, and someone said, yeah, you need to go to New York and meet some of the people who make decisions about your career down the road. So I happened to be in New York on September 10th of 2001, and there was a thunderstorm series of thunderstorms coming through the New York area and we were supposed to come back on September 10th. And the Bureau chief, her name is Robin Sprawl, said, well, up here we can go to LaGuardia and sit there and only to be told that our flight is canceled and we can just go ahead and have my staff book us a nice hotel sometime. We're in midtown, let's have a nice dinner and we'll leave sometime in the morning.

Pierre Thomas - 0:46:34

So I'm sleeping. I get up around 8:30, I've showered and all of a sudden my phone rings and it's my wife. And she says, quote, did you see that plane hit the World Trade Center? I said, what are you talking about? And immediately, immediately I thought it was a prop plane. Small prop plane somehow lost its way and hit.

Pierre Thomas - 0:46:57

And then she said no. A commercial airliner turned on the television and see video of the plane crash again. So the next thing you know, I'm racing to get from the hotel to ABC News headquarters. Again, I'm based in Washington, just happened to be in New York when 9/11 is going down. So next thing I'm on the set with Peter Jennings. How many of you know Peter Jennings?

Pierre Thomas - 0:47:23

He's one of the legendary.

Anthony Coley - 0:47:27

I'm glad to see people raise their hands. That made me feel as old.

Pierre Thomas - 0:47:32

Great. Now confidence in you going because he he, he really was one of the best television journalist journalist. All time. And so suddenly we're in the midst of covering this humongous, horrible story. And there's one point. We're on the set and the first Trade Center comes tumbling down. And Peter, I'll never forget, just had the instinct, experience, or whatever raised his hand to signal to everybody on the set to shut up.

Pierre Thomas - 0:47:58

Not to say a word as the thing was fall into the ground. And if you, if you recall this huge chasm and clouds of smoke started flowing through the city of New York like something out of biblical times. It was incredible to watch. And you know and he let that just play out where we were silent for about two or three minutes. Wow. And and then to round up the story, because I never run in.

Kevin Johnson - 0:48:38

No go. No, go ahead. I want you to finish.

Pierre Thomas - 0:48:41

So we were in wall to wall coverage. There were no commercials on commercial television. The main networks for about, you know, four or five days. So all you were seeing was continuous coverage. And I was a person who was a part of the coverage hour after hour after hour, I think over four days. I got 8 hours sleep. OK At one point I called Ted Koppel, Peter Jennings and those were two of the biggest anchors in television.

Pierre Thomas - 0:49:01

Next time and I kept saying Peter, 'cause I was just saying his name over and over again. And finally, Ted said on air. All night, Pierre, I'm Ted. Thankfully the viewers gave me a certain amount of grace... But the long and short of it, there was this moment when people first started showing up with pictures of their loved ones who they would never see again. And I was sitting on camera and they said Peter is coming to you in 30 seconds.

Pierre Thomas - 0:49:40

So we have AIP. That's how I'm communicating with the code controller and that's how they tell me he's about to ask me a question. I'm about to start crying my eyes out because I'm seeing these people showing up. Have you seen my daughter? Have you seen my son? And I'm about to just cry.

Pierre Thomas - 0:50:00

And I literally just said sucked it all in because I said I am not the story. The story is happening in the city that I'm covering. It's about these people. It's not about me. I'm not going to cry on the air. I'm not going to do it.

Pierre Thomas - 0:50:18

And I was able to vacuum, clean every bit of emotion I had in the moment and just do the story. Fast forward three months later. It's Christmas, Christmas Eve, and I'm sitting in the kitchen and my wife had made pancakes and we were, you know, and suddenly ESPN did one of those year in retrospective, the year in pictures, the year in video. And so I got to see the Sundays after 9/11 that I never got to see. People in the stands saluting as fighter jets went by, people crying in the stand, and all of a sudden I just started weeping. I didn't even notice it at first.

Pierre Thomas - 0:51:04

Tears were just flowing down my face. I was crying.

Anthony Coley - 0:51:09

You had bottled it all up for so long, I.

Pierre Thomas - 0:51:12

Had followed it all up and then it just came rushing out right.

Devlin Barrett - 0:51:16

Don't do that and.

Pierre Thomas - 0:51:17

My wife walked into the room and again, this was just a private moment, she said. What's wrong with Something wrong with pancakes and I?

Devlin Barrett - 0:51:26

Said we need to talk about the pancakes, I said.

Pierre Thomas - 0:51:28

Honey, I I didn't give myself room to grieve. And so that's the.

Kevin Johnson - 0:51:37

Well, what I love about this conversation is that the former president's name has not come up once in about 45 minutes. And this is what the Justice Department has been focused on. This is what these guys have been focused on, and Anthony's life as well, and now in his new life. But what I think is really instructive about what we just heard is that you bring all of that experience, knowledge of the way you treat people in interviews to the justice beat or whatever beat that you cover. And and you use that to your advantage in the best way that you can. But again, I think this is the second time that we've heard this, and maybe it was from the White House folks that we had in here. Don't leave your humanity at the door.

Kevin Johnson - 0:52:31

And I think that's the advice we're continuing to hear and it's something in my own career was was a huge piece of advice that I always tried to follow and all of these guys are great examples of that. So thank you very very.

Anthony Coley - 0:52:49

Much as is Kevin.

Devlin Barrett - 0:52:50

As is Kevin as.

Pierre Thomas - 0:52:53

To say about Kevin, you know we had many encounters where we were walking into the room covering the same story and didn't often get a chance to discuss the stories of recovering. But just seeing him, knowing the grace and the expertise that he brought to every story, which is something I counted on and he's one of the reasons why I was. I've been willing to stay in the justice kind of beat even though I have forays into many other things. It's it's always kind of home and it's because of someone like him. And you're very lucky to have someone who's, you know able to give you some thoughts and instruction. And I will say this about covering Trump.

Kevin Johnson - 0:53:41

You can stop right there. I'm good with. No, no, I'm kidding. Go go.

Pierre Thomas - 0:53:47

Is is that you just have to cover him fairly. I mean as one who goes in the Evening News or GMA and have Trump supporters just furious, I think for having the audacity to to cover January 6th and say, you know that actually happened, that video's real, you know that that happened. And then also to get similar theory when I'm doing a story about Hunter Biden, like how dare you, there's a false equivalency. Why are you even covering that story? And my only retort is I'm going to apply the same set of principles every single time, every, every single story. You know, like finally, Well, this case, I'm not covering that case today, but that in part is a story about choices. What's the story about choices now doesn't impact the evidence necessarily, but the choices.

Pierre Thomas - 0:54:35

You can't look at that story without covering that story. You know fairly and and and you have to examine the choices that the prosecutor made and her staff made or something.

Kevin Johnson - 0:54:57

Again, thank you guys so much. I know that we've probably overstayed our welcome with you, but but thanks for for all of your knowledge and and and explaining it to us in a in a wonderfully grish this way.

Pierre Thomas - 0:55:09

Thanks again. I apologize for being late, but you guys were high priority for me. I made sure I got from the fight that got me home at 11:00 last night.

Devlin Barrett - 0:55:18

I also want to apologize for Pierre being late. Good to see you, man. How are you?