

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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My job has given me an incredibly joyful and meaningful life. I get paid to ask questions for a living. How much fun is that? It's always interesting. You get access to all sorts of worlds. And I've also learned, because of some of the work we've done, that on a very good day, you can also do incredible positive change. And so, I hope tonight, part of what we can do is celebrate journalism. Because as all of you know, if you've paid attention to the news, it's a very perilous time for the journalism world. You know, the newspaper industry has had financially catastrophic sort of turn of events in recent years, essentially a collapsed business model that it's still trying to figure out how to replace. And at the same time, we have a political climate now in which the press is sort of portrayed as the enemy.

Sasha Pfeiffer was one of five journalists on The Boston Globe's elite investigative team called Spotlight. That's also the title of the Academy Award-winning film about the reporters' shocking findings with a transformational outcome. The Spotlight team never could have predicted that they would expose an almost unimaginable conspiracy that reached far beyond Boston's Roman Catholic Diocese. Their pursuit of clergy sex abuse was controversial. But the newspaper built its case on the weight of evidence. The power of truth telling in our conversation with Sacha Pfeiffer, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawai'i's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. For this edition of Long Story Short, we'll take you to a special event in Honolulu organized by the Hawai'i Leadership Forum before an audience. Our guest is Pulitzer Prize-winning Boston Globe journalist, Sacha Pfeiffer, who was played in the Oscar-winning movie Spotlight by actress Rachel McAdams. As part of an investigative team, Pfeiffer interviewed men in Boston who told of being sexually abused as children, sometimes for years, by Roman Catholic priests. What emerged was a pervasive Church culture that tolerated, and even protected child molesters. And not only in Boston. Sacha Pfeiffer joined us for a conversation about truth telling, and truth to power journalism.

How's the cake?

It's pretty good. You saving yours?

Nah. I can never eat those things. They kind of oppress me.

I know. From Washington?

Yeah.

Very interesting.

I'm not asking you to. All I'm asking is, who's behind it. M-hm. Okay; I get it. You don't want to talk. No, Dad, I'm not mad, I'm hungry. I've been talking here so long, I didn't eat lunch. So, I'm gonna go get something to eat, and that'll give you an hour to decide whether you want to be on the right side of this, or read about it like everybody else. Bye, Dad.

You think Cahill has something?

Maybe. I just don't think the story is for us.

Ben likes it.

Yeah, it's not bad. It's just not Spotlight.

What's just not Spotlight?

The PD numbers.

The numbers.

Oh. You got Cahill to talk?

No, but I will.

Good.

You did your investigative reporting on the Spotlight team on clergy sex abuse in the most Catholic city in the country, by percentage.

M-hm.

And I think most all of the reporters involved were lapsed Catholics.

M-hm.

You were also a Protestant, and I think you lapsed there too. And much was made in the Spotlight movie about the outsider coming in, the Jewish guy running the paper and saying, You guys need to explore that.

Yeah.

Could you talk a little bit about that?

Yeah; this is in reference to Marty Baron, who was the editor of The Globe when I was there, and who is now the executive editor of The Washington Post, a paper that's doing some of the most dynamic work in the country right now. And, yeah. And Marty is a tremendous, tremendous leader. He's an exceptional leader, he's a very gift editor. He has this incredibly pure moral compass, which I really love about Marty. The movie makes a lot of Marty having been Jewish. I think they took a little fictional license there. I mean, I think, yes, they wanted to portray sort of the outsider. But I think what Marty showed is that sometimes when you bring a set of fresh eyes to something, it makes an enormous difference. I mean, we began our project because there had been a priest named John Geoghan who had a long history of abusing kids, and there were many lawsuits filed against him. All those cases had been sealed in the court. The Church asked the court to seal the cases, the court did. Marty came to town from the Miami Herald, and he said, Why are these cases sealed? And there was this uncomfortable silence in this news meeting, because all of us were so used to just accepting that those files are sealed, we can't access them, that we hadn't questioned it. So, Marty told the Spotlight team, Go find out what you can. And at the same time, he asked The Globe's lawyers to try to unseal those files, which they successfully did after several months. So, I think again, fresh eyes can make a difference in coming to a place that's been used to the same thing for a long time.

I'm sure you knew when you started poking around, and you started going to press, that you would become targets. Who are these people? What's the vendetta about?

Because Boson is so Catholic, we were worried that we might be picketed, or there would be protests. We got none of that. And I think that part of why that didn't happen is that, you know, we were able to get into the Arch Diocese of Boston's file cabinets. We were able to access all of their clergy personnel records. So, these weren't stories based on anonymous sources; these were record by the Church itself. And I think that when a project is that bulletproof, it makes it hard to blame the messenger.

I guess it was Mr. Baron who had the idea of, Don't go after individual priests because we've heard of individual priests for so long; go after how the Church institution treated

the priests. And you showed evidence of passing priests. They call it passing the trash, or mobile molesters, from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Yeah. I mean, this was Marty's mantra. Is that, you know, for years, The Globe and other publications had written stories about priests that abused children. We were looking not simply at that, but about Church officials who cover up for priests who abused children, who systematically would get reports, and then shift priests to other places. And in the pre-internet era, if you sent someone thirty miles north of Boston, the people who lived thirty miles south of Boston would lose that person. You wouldn't know where they went. So, that was our goal the whole time, is to focus on the system.

I know what you must be thinking. Like, why would I ever do that to some creepy guy who's thirty years older than me? But what we have to understand is that this is the first time in my life that someone told me that it was okay to be gay.

Mm.

And it was a priest. I'm sorry; I knew I was gonna do this. Oh, I'm sorry.

Don't be sorry. It's okay. Joe, it's okay.

Of course, there is a church right there, and a playground.

Joe, did you ever try and tell anyone?

Like who; a priest?

You know, often reporters are doing stories as a team, they get really excited about nailing an interview, or catching someone in a lie, and you see high-fives. But this is not the kind of series that would produce that kind of rejoicing.

No. I mean, it was pretty sombering. And, you know, we had some very dad, intense conversations with adult men who, when they were adolescents or children, had been abused by priest. And again, very intense, very emotional. But, you know, you also become angry, because you realize someone has been damaged at a formative time in their life, and it's hard to recover from that. And I think anger is a motivational tool, and that's what it was for us.

The most haunting moment in the film to me—and when you get a chance to ask questions, please mention yours if it's appropriate—I think it was Father Paquin. And I think you knocked on his door, and he told you, I was just fooling around.

Hi, there. I'm looking for Ronald Paquin.

Yes?

You're Father Paquin?

Yes, that's right.

I'm Sacha Pfeiffer from The Boston Globe.

Okay.

Could I ask you a few questions?

Go ahead; yes.

We spoke to several men who knew you when they were boys at St. John the Baptist in Haverhill. They told us you molested them. Is that true?

Sure; I fooled around. But I never felt gratified, myself.

Right. But you admit to molesting boys at St. John the Baptist?

Yes, yes. But as I said, I never got any pleasure from it. That's important to understand.

Right.

Yeah. You know, a lot of people have asked whether I thought that priest had dementia. And I don't think so. I think you really just saw this twisted rationalization for why they did what they did. I think for me, the biggest unanswered question is the why. I mean, there are many theories about why it happened, but that's a really hard one to answer.

And you devoted some of your coverage to why.

Oh, we did. I mean, we ended up writing for about a year and a half about this issue. And we didn't just write about priests who abused children; we basically followed the story as it tentacled. So, we looked at why did this happen, was it because the lady wasn't very involved, was it because women couldn't be priests, if women had been more involved would this not have happened. As the Arch Diocese of Boston began settling a lot of cases, it hurt the Church financially. So, we wrote about the Church being on the brink of bankruptcy, the Cardinal resigned eventually. So, it became a daily beat, essentially. You know, when I joined the Spotlight team, Spotlight had been

known for basically doing a story or two a year, maybe. They came in at nine, and they left at five, which is very rare in the newspaper world. And someone had said to me, Enjoy your early retirement. Which I thought was funny. But my experience with Spotlight was nothing like retirement, because basically, once that story broke, it became a daily beat, a competitive beat, where national newspapers were following it. So, it was very intense.

This event is called The Transformative Power of Truth Telling. What kinds of results did you see from this one and a half or two-year investigation?

You know, I think this will sound so basic. But in way, the gigantic lesson of this project was the importance of questioning authority. Part of why this happened is that the Catholic Church in Boston had so much deference that people looked the other way; they stopped asking questions. My grandmother, who's depicted in the movie, was so devout.

Sacha, can I have a drink of water?

Yeah; sure, Nana. Yeah.

And I remember that when the story came out, she said to me, I can't believe this happened, because we all thought the priests were little gods. And I remember thinking, And that's why it happened. Because when you think someone is a god, you're not going to ask tough questions, and even if you suspect that something's not right you might look the other way. So, I think it's an important reminder to all of us for why we need to ask very difficult questions of people in high places.

And I'm sure some journalists in here remember there were calls in Hawaii to newsrooms, where it would be somebody who didn't identify himself, he seemed very much in pain, maybe stuttered, and he would say, I was abused by a priest. He would say the priest's name, but he didn't want to say the timeframe, and he said there were no witnesses, and he didn't tell anyone at the time, and no, he didn't talk to the police, he didn't speak to a lawyer. And he didn't want his name used. So, what are you gonna do with that? So, it really required a different approach. And of course, later, as these boys grew up, they did seek out lawyers; some of them.

Yeah. You know, the movie makes clear that probably The Globe could have done these stories earlier than it did. But I think in a way, it ended up beneficial that we waited 'til we did. Because first of all, it was the very beginning of the internet era, so our stories went online, and instead of being read only by people who got The Globe delivered to their doorstep, they were read by people all over the country. So, our phones began ringing off the hook with people from Washington State, Texas, Maine,

Florida, saying you know, I was also abused by Father Paquin, I was also abused by Father Birmingham. So, confirmation came from around the country. And I think that Boston was more ready to accept a story like this. I'm not sure if we had written these stories in the 60s, or 70s, or even 80s, when the deference was still so high, that they could have accepted it, and maybe The Globe would have been picketed and protested. But I think the city was ready.

Was there corporate pressure? Okay, enough of the series, enough about the Catholic Church?

No, you know, there was one editor who, after we had been writing for a few months, felt like, Is this enough? But he basically was overruled, and several months after that, Cardinal Law resigned. Which I think showed you that we were right to keep up with it. But no, other than that, I would say no pressure. I think that we recognized the story had to be done.

What's up?

Another time, Jim. There are cover-up stories on seventy priests. But the boss isn't gonna run it unless I get confirmation from your side.

Are you out of your mind?

Come on. This is our town, Jimmy. Everybody knew something was going on, and no one did a thing. We've got to put an end to it.

Don't tell me what I gotta do. Yeah, I helped defend these scumbags, but that's my job, Robby. I was doing my job.

Yeah. You and everyone else.

I think we were all conscious that this was gonna take a toll of sorts on our family members, potentially. But it didn't make us feel that we couldn't do it. My mom, who's also very Catholic—I think I told you this earlier. She wanted to be a nun, but at the time, convents were cloistered, so once you went in, you could only come out about three times or so. And her mother begged her not to do it, not to become a nun. And so, I remember that my mom, I didn't hear from her for a while after our stories began to be published. And I think that my mom had to make peace with the fact that her daughter had played a role in something that was damaging to this institution she loved, even though I think she recognized that that story had to be told.

When reporters start on a story like this, they have a pretty good idea of at least how it's gonna start. Did it take you to places you didn't expect?

Oh, yeah. I mean, I don't think any of us ever imagined it could possibly be at this scale. I mean, early on, we realized there may be as many as seven priests, and that seemed shocking to us. And then, in a few weeks, we realized the number was probably twenty. And then, by the time we published, we knew it was seventy. And then, we quickly learned that actually, it was hundreds. So, I think we went into this having absolutely no idea what we would find.

What did you find when you asked the question, Why? Why so much molestation?

Well, I mean, I think that there are so many theories for that. But I think that what I believe played a role is that, at least back in the 50s, and 60s, and 70s, boys who were gonna become priests actually went to pre-seminary. So, sometimes, you went to priest school, essentially, as early as age twelve. And I think that you're at this formative stage in your adolescence in terms of your sexuality, and I think everything became sort of stunted in a way. There was a psychotherapist who was depicted in the movie who talked about ... that it was sort of a version of arrested development. And I think you end up having these very immature priests who weren't sure how to have relationships, and I think it expressed itself in an incredibly tragic way.

What did you see of the victims? I mean, after they were grown up, and they'd been in adult life for some time, what were they like?

You know, I think all of us know that sexual abuse is one of the most terrible things that can happen to someone, and if it's also by a leader person and authority like a priest, it's even more damaging. And so, I think that it's hard to ever recover from that. And we saw that.

And these boys were pretty sure that other people knew that they were being taken to a rector's office or a church office. It was a pattern, but nobody spoke up for them.

Yeah. Or sometimes, people did speak up, and they weren't believed. Their parents may not believe them. And that, I think, compounded the tragedy. So, it was a culture of secrecy.

Hi.

Hi.

I'm Sacha Pfeiffer from The Boston Globe.

Yeah; what do you want?

I'd like to speak with Thomas Kennedy.

He doesn't live here anymore.

Do you know where he lives? Sir, I'd just like to ask a few—

Sacha Pfeiffer, Boston Globe.

Oh, yeah. Hi.

Hi. Thank you. Anything else you can recall?

No.

No. But I got a cousin in Quincy; she saw him on the street a few years later.

The bishop came over the house. He said nothing like this had ever happened before, and he asked us not press charges.

And what did your mother do?

My mother? She put out fricking cookies.

Here, we saw a couple of priests who were named in lawsuits and in accusations. And one molested someone for quite some time, and then mentioned him to someone else, and that person picked it up. It was really hard to hear about.

Yeah. After our stories began to run, I got a few calls from people who would say things to the effect of, What was in the water in Boston, why did your priests have these issues? But they were missing the point, which is that in almost every city in which this has been looked into, it happened. And it was just a systematic problem, and if you had the ability to get into the files, you would often find out it happened in every city where there was a major Catholic presence.

What is an investigative journalist? Because other reporters who are assigned to other areas of coverage, they do stories. What's the difference?

Yeah. I mean, many people believe, and I think I agree with this, that there really shouldn't be a distinction between a reporter and an investigative reporter. There are some people whose fulltime job is just to do long-term investigative stories. But really, any beat you have in addition to the daily news and the feature stories you're looking

for, ideally the beat reporter would be looking for investigative stories to do as well. So, there's no argument that there's no distinction.

You work for a commercial newspaper, and we have nonprofit news folks here. Any thoughts on what business model is best to get journalism that truly matters?

No. I mean, I think that is the question that everyone is trying to figure out right now. What is the new business model? I mean, it used to be that if you were a department store and you wanted to advertise, if you wanted to place a classified ad, you went to your newspaper. That all changed with things like Craigslist; right? So, no one quite has figured out how to replace that business model, but that's the key, I think, to making the industry survive.

One of our attendees has a question, which follows right along. What would you like to see happen to the news, going forward? What would you like to see it evolve into?

That's such a big, broad question. I mean, I just hope the news survives. I hope that people realize that it's worth paying for. And for those of you who are digital subscribers or print subscribers to a newspaper, thank you. If you're not, I feel like every time I have a captive audience, I can't help but give that sales pitch. You know, when you buy a newspaper or you make a contribution to an organized nonprofit like Civil Beat, that's what pays for the reporters to do what they do. So, I hope that you realize that there's a direct connection between keeping the news alive and being a subscriber or a donor.

Another question from the audience. After your courageous investigation, what have you learned about people? Are we basically good, and if so, what do we make of the evil that people are capable of committing?

That's another one hard to answer. I guess I'd just go back to what I said earlier, which is, we have to always be willing to ask very tough questions of powerful people and powerful institution, and nonprofits, and businesses. You know, tonight, we're talking about truth telling. And that's really what I think journalism is. So, we just have to be always willing to question authority and ask tough questions.

What are some of the areas that most need sunshine or transparency in truth telling?

Government, always. Because I think, unfortunately, what often motivates people to go into government and politics is not a sense of public service, but power and access. So, I think that that makes it very important for us to keep tabs on that. I definitely believe the nonprofit sector is one, because too often, it does get a pass. And obviously businesses. I mean, I think everything.

Do journalists take oaths of ethics, like lawyers or doctors, the Hippocratic oath?

We don't officially, but it's a job that involves an enormous amount of judgment and ethics all the time. What we cover, how we cover it, when we stop covering it. You know, you have people tell you very sensitive information, and we interview children. I mean, there's an enormous amount of judgment, and that's why you need to make sure you have reporters with high ethics, and editors with high ethics.

The New York Times is using headlines that say, Trump Lies. That's a policy now. What do you think about that? You know, it's not your policy, it's the paper, but what about—

I think it has to be case-by-case. But I think sometimes, we have to call things for what they are. And you know, Marty Baron, again, the former Globe reporter now with The Post. You know, President Trump has said that he's at war with the press. And as Marty said, and it's beautifully said; We're not at war, we're just at work. You know. I mean, that's ...

Great line; great line.

It is a great line.

These are two kind of related questions. What are some of the investigative stories you most admire, and why?

I think I admire all of it. I think, you know, when you do investigative reporting, it probably is gonna keep you out of the paper or off the air for a while. And that makes reporters feel uneasy, because you're judged in part by your productivity. So, you have to hope you have the backing of a strong editor and publisher who recognizes that you may not see your byline for a while, you may not see that person on the air for a while, but hopefully what they deliver will have been worth the time.

Here's another question from an attendee. Given your experience, what do you think warrants deeper investigation in terms of investigative reporting? What's the contemporary iceberg that we need to go deep and see?

I think the past few months have clearly showed us government. I mean, it's gonna be harder than ever to get information. And the other interesting thing is ... I think that there's also another thing the media is going through is trying to decide, Okay, what is the value of sitting through a presidential briefing? You know, someone has suggested that maybe you send the interns to the briefing, they take down what was said, and really, what the reporters need to do now is do all the tough digging, and have to rely on civil servants to give them information. It's a very challenging time to be a reporter right now.

It is. And we've seen in debates and in other live coverage, a reporter will miss a factual mistake by a newsmaker, and then get called on the carpet for it.

Right. The media critic for The Washington Post is a woman named Margaret Sullivan. She used to be with The New York Times. And I think it was Margaret that wrote recently about how some of the NPR hosts, who are excellent, when they do live interviews, you can have a situation where the person you're interviewing says something that is incorrect. And even if you're very prepared for that interview, you may not realize that something incorrect was just said, and it's almost virtually impossible to correct after it's been said in that forum. So now, there's a debate out; should they be doing fewer live interviews, since you don't have the ability to fact check in time. Because of all the changes happening politically, it's making the media have to really rethink about it does its job.

After sharing the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for public service with The Boston Globe's Spotlight team, Sacha Pfeiffer left the newspaper in 2008 as the paper struggled financially. For six years, she worked for Boston's Public Radio Station. At the time of this conversation in 2017, she's back at The Globe writing about wealth, philanthropy, and nonprofits. Sacha Pfeiffer is a gifted journalist and author who is matter-of-fact about speaking truth to power. We've been very fortunate to share an evening with her in Honolulu. Mahalo to the Hawai'i Leadership Forum for conceiving and organizing this event. I'm Leslie Wilcox with PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short. Aloha, a hui hou.

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I think they did a ...

You know, what was really interesting was, most people only get to see these movie stars on the red carpet or in a movies. We got to see them prepare for these roles, and it was really impressive to see the amount of work they did. I mean, they spent time with all of us individually, we spent a lot of time socializing with them. And I realized later, what I thought was socializing was research for them. I mean, we all of a sudden were seeing mannerisms depicted on the screen, and we began to realize all the time they spent with us, they were dissecting, they were observing, they were analyzing.

So, they work hard to be as good as they are.

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