

CASE STUDY

“Seeking Safety”:

A Solutions Approach to Crime & Public Safety Reporting in Fayetteville

If you’ve heard of Fayetteville, North Carolina, it’s probably for one of two reasons: (1) Fayetteville is home to Fort Bragg, the military base which boasts the 82nd Airborne Division and the training center for the Army’s Special Operations Units; or (2) it has one of the highest crime rates in America for a city over 100,000 people, with sky-high rates of larceny (8th highest in the U.S.), burglary (6th), and property crimes (5th) (according to 2012 FBI statistics). The second reason is more pernicious. For decades the city known to many outsiders as “Fayettenam” has battled its reputation as a crime-ridden metropolis (population 204,000) – and for decades, well-meaning officials and community leaders have tried to work together, but usually ended up battling each other, jockeying for power and trying to implement policies that eventually died when cooperative efforts disintegrated.

In November 2013, the *Fayetteville Observer*, the oldest continually published paper in North Carolina and one of the largest family-owned papers in the country, launched a year-long series covering issues of crime and public safety in the city. But rather than dwelling on well understood problems — drug abuse, political corruption, or the glaring absence of community and police resources — “Seeking Safety” looked at effective solutions to crime in similar cities, and how Fayetteville might implement them. The series took reporter Greg Barnes to thirteen cities in seven states as he produced one in-depth feature a month.

The result was a series that changed the newsroom culture, engaged readers, and connected community leaders in collaborative efforts to try to tackle the problem and implement some of the solutions. Here’s what we learned.



I. THE BIRTH OF A SERIES

Mike Adams is executive editor of the *Observer*. He’s worked at the paper for more than two decades, overseeing the paper while winning all manner of journalism awards (the *Observer*’s won the North Carolina Press Association’s top award for General Excellence three out of the last five years) as well as the respect of Fayetteville residents for smart and tough coverage of issues that matter most to the community.

Adams had known for some time he wanted to do a series on crime and public safety. “We’d been kicking around ideas of how to approach meaningful coverage of Fayetteville’s crime problem,” Adams says. But the typical, problem-obsessed, frame wasn’t intriguing. He wanted something different.

Observer publisher Charles Broadwell supported a new take. “Everybody knows that we have a crime problem here, so we don’t want to just do a same-old, same-old series,” says Broadwell.

During this “kicking around” period, the newsroom participated in an online workshop with the Solutions Journalism Network. In the one-hour webinar, SJN co-founder Tina Rosenberg covered the basics of reporting a solutions story, talked about how readers typically engage with solutions stories differently, and what forms solutions stories can take.

Adams had long been intrigued by this type of journalism, but now it finally had a name.

“I think we’ve done some of it before, not knowingly searching for solutions or using the principles of solutions journalism. We’d done some stories where you try to find the answers or you look at what other communities were doing. But [solutions journalism] really gave a framework.”

After the webinar, Adams knew he wanted to frame the series from a solutions angle. He wanted to tell the story of crime in Fayetteville through the lens of “does it have to be this way?”

On Sunday, November 17, 2013, the *Observer* launched “Seeking Safety,” taking two-thirds of its front page that day to announce: “From community forums to campaign events, it is clear that Fayetteville is fed up with crime. Today, the *Observer* launches a yearlong project to search for solutions to one of the community’s toughest

problems.” Under a stark, black-and-white photo of a person in hand cuffs, Adams’ letter to readers explaining the project was paired with Barnes’ first feature, describing the state of “a city under siege.” The game-changing project was on.



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II. REPORTING SEEKING SAFETY

Greg Barnes seemed like a “natural fit,” to Adams, to take on “Seeking Safety.” A self-described “old-time investigative reporter” and the winner of five North Carolina Press Association Reporting Awards in 2012, he had done several investigative series on mental health and soldiers, spending four to six months on each one. He knew the long days, the in-depth research, and the tenacity required to do good investigations.

“The project part wasn’t new to me,” Barnes says. “The solutions part was very new to me.” He was skeptical about solutions journalism; Adams had to push him to do it. (“I want to do this; if you don’t, I’ll get someone else who will,” Adams said. “I’ll do it,” Barnes replied, “but I just don’t understand what it is.”)

But Barnes discovered that the solutions approach jived with his existing methods: The in-depth and lengthy nature of the series required that he get to know his sources well and build trust. “I certainly spent a year talking to the same players over and over—the police chief, the mayor; the leaders in town who had a say in crime. It was going back to the same people a lot of the time.”

The investment paid off. Barnes found stories by asking sources what was working well against a certain problem, then doing more research to see if the responses they pointed him toward would make good stories — and, more importantly, to find solid evidence that demonstrated those responses were working, or not. “I would spend a week or two just doing research on what the solution might be and who was doing it best. It’s very hard to figure that out,” he says.

He made explicit connections between the places he would write about and how it was relevant to the *Observer’s* readership. “Usually I framed it by setting up what they did, that they did so well... and then I would explain, okay, this is the problem that Fayetteville faces. Then I’d throw a lot of stats in there and a lot of research in there, to look specifically at our community and what we are or are not doing.”

Initially, Barnes and Adams disagreed about how the series would take shape.

“[Mike said,] ‘I want you to do this in monthly installments.’ [I said,] ‘I don’t think that’s possible.’ It’s just too much research and getting to understand. These are 12 separate issues. To begin to understand them, and go



somewhere and write about it, and bring it back, I don’t think it’s possible. [Mike] proved me wrong again. In that time frame, for what we did, I would say I can’t think of another way to do it as effectively as we did.”

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WHY “SEEKING SAFETY” WORKED

PUBLISHER BUY-IN

Often, an ambitious project that requires special resources won’t go anywhere without publisher support. In this case, Mike Adams and publisher Charles Broadwell talked for months about what a series could look like before deciding on a frame. “I told him it was an audacious effort, and it carried some sense of risk, but what I liked is at some point, you gotta take a chance,” says Broadwell. He committed to fully funding the project (about \$10,000).

RIGOROUS REPORTING

Greg Barnes dove into the series with vigor, spending days researching an issue and story before he even began to report it. Deep-dive solutions reporting requires as much rigor as an in-depth problem-based investigative piece. How exactly did a city make this program work? How exactly did the mayor get the police chief to work with him? How exactly did the teachers improve student behavior to reduce suspensions? Barnes understood this scrupulousness instinctively. “[Barnes] was researching all the time,” says Adams. “When he wasn’t reporting and writing, he was researching where he was going to go, who was doing what, what issues we should address.” Barnes calls “Seeking Safety” “the hardest and most rewarding thing I’ve ever done.”

EDITOR ENTHUSIASM & COMMITMENT

Editor Mike Adams’ vision was essential to “Seeking Safety” coming to fruition. Adams is committed to distinguishing the mid-sized, family-owned paper from its peers, and elevating its coverage so it doesn’t become “just part of the noise.” For the crime project, Adams saw solutions journalism as a particularly unique opportunity to add value to the paper: “Suddenly you find the language to talk about what you’d love to have your newspaper doing. As much as anything, that’s what I felt like we got out of this.”

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III. IMPACT

The *Seeking Safety* series had impact on multiple levels, most importantly on the culture of the newsroom, but also within the community as a whole.

Sustained Practice

While Adams admits that the *Observer* is still not (and probably never will be) entirely “a solutions journalism newsroom,” he also says that there’s no going back to the old way of doing things—reporting solely on the problem, on what’s broken, without also looking at what people are doing to fix it. He notes that the *Observer’s* newsroom is very enthusiastic about these types of stories.

“There are reporters in the room who are chomping at the bit to do solutions journalism stories. They understand it—they want to do it...

the solutions journalism model is something that we all ought to be doing.”

Since the original series ended in November 2014, the *Observer* has produced several other solutions pieces, many appearing under the headline “Seeking For Safety.” Though they’re not as in-depth as Barnes’ “Seeking Safety” pieces, they represent attempts to incorporate solutions stories into daily coverage.

Community Response and Collective Impact Board

Solutions journalism can lend itself well to audience engagement. Solution stories’ straight-forward focus on what’s working, who’s doing it, and how it’s being done give a fresh (and welcome) perspective to readers on old issues.

“Seeking Safety” was no different. When Adams was envisioning the series, he noticed there was an energy in Fayetteville waiting to be tapped. The question was, would he tap into the anger and frustration? Or into forward-thinking optimism?

“When we started the series, we knew we were going to engage the community in some way...we’re doing this crime project not just to have a big package in the Sunday paper once a month, but because we are citizens of Cumberland County. This is our home. This matters to us.

Harold Medlock, the chief of Fayetteville’s Police Department, thinks the paper’s historical significance and role in the community make all the difference. “[*The Observer*] owes it to the city of Fayetteville to improve the city and make it more viable and I think it showed in the series,” he said. “I think they are much more vested than a national media chain that owns several publications.”

Anecdotally, the *Observer* team noticed that their audience seemed more engaged in the issue during the series. Many readers told Adams how happy they were that the paper was tackling the topic from a different angle:

“Again and again, I’ve heard people say ‘I can’t tell you how much I appreciate what you’re doing. That you’re not just slamming Fayetteville again or pointing out our problems, but you’re out there saying, ‘Hey, there’s people doing good stuff.’ And these are usually influential people in the community who kind of understood and really got what we were trying to do and appreciated it—appreciated that our newspaper would commit the time and the resources to doing

something that had the potential to be positive for the community. To Medlock, the series raised important questions and “conscious thought” around issues of public safety and brought a lot of people into the conversation who hadn’t participated before. He thinks the series presented policing in a different light: “The series opened us up, exposed us, made us more transparent to the readers...[and] improved our relationships with the community... Not to say that everything I was necessarily happy with, but I think it was a fairly accurate portrayal.”

Fayetteville Police Chief Harold Medlock aims to **transform the way the city fights crime** by building trust between **law officers and residents**. It’s an approach he brings from **Charlotte, a national model** for community policing.



Willy Clark, who was arrested on drug charges, is detained while police search his Link Street home in the B Street neighborhood. The neighborhood is one where Fayetteville police have struggled to build connections with residents.

A TRUE SENSE OF COMMUNITY

The opening up of public discourse led to more structured conversations – with the *Observer* taking the lead. In one of the earliest pieces in the series, Barnes looked at how Memphis had tackled similar issues of blight, crime, and poverty. That southern city’s answer had been a collective impact board (CIB), a strategy used to tackle complex problems. Memphis was using the strategy to reduce crime, boost economic development, and make government more efficient.

Reform efforts had failed in the past, but they also hadn’t had the backbone of a formal CIB. Adams asked community leaders to give the approach a try. He runs the meetings, and the paper, he says,

provides neutral territory for all parties – literally, since meetings are held in a conference room in the *Observer’s* headquarters. Participants include most of the key players mentioned in the “Seeking Safety” series and, arguably, in the future of the city: the chief of police, the superintendent of schools, the mayor, community leaders, president of the Chamber of Commerce, religious leaders and more.

Adams is aware that something like a collective impact board can take a long time to get off the ground. He points to Memphis, where it took a decade to really gather steam. But for now, as of July 2015, the group still is meeting periodically and trying to determine next steps. Everyone is aware that this is the beginning of a very long process, but everyone is at the table, all aiming for a safer Fayetteville.

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IV. TAKEAWAYS

I. Having a solutions frame can add newfound vigor to a tired issue.

The way news organizations report on issues has enormous impact on the way people respond. *The Fayetteville Observer's* "Seeking Safety" series took a solutions lens to public safety and crime in the community, and in doing so, changed the way the community thought and talked. Barnes' reporting showed that these were not problems unique to Fayetteville; other cities had tackled blight and poverty, had drastically reduced violent crime, or had rethought zero tolerance policies for juveniles—all with limited resources and opposing political forces as in Fayetteville. "Seeking Safety" surfaced knowledge about effective programs and policies and brought that intelligence back home, where it might help leaders and citizens drive effective change.

The series is, of course, only one force of change in the community. Police were making progress before "Seeking Safety" started. A new mayor was working toward uniting parties and making government more effective. The school superintendent was trying to lower the dropout rate and tackle discipline issues. But stories about these varied efforts weren't always conveyed in

II. Look at what other communities are doing to solve a problem your community faces.

the most productive ways: many were problem stories focused more on what's broken than on how to fix it. "Seeking Safety's" focus on what can work, community leaders say, has decreased alienation and bitterness, and has given the community a forward-looking lens through which to view longstanding problems.

Adams recognized the value of solutions journalism for his paper, saw a gap in their coverage, and took initiative to reimagine the paper's journalism—something that, in the end, benefited both the paper and the city.

"We're like many newspapers: we're trying to figure out who we are in a rapidly changing world. As long as I'm here, part of who we're going to be is solutions journalism. The significance of this type of storytelling in our community is hard to match. It may not break the web, but we know that it matters. . . . It's some of the most exciting stuff that I've been personally involved with in my years as a journalist. I think that we did really, really good work, and meaningful work. It's nice to feel good about both of those things."

III. Having a topic in mind for a story or series makes it easier to apply the solutions frame.

Case study reported and written by SJJ Network Curator Samantha McCann.