

Check It Out! Podcast Transcript
Episode #43
“Newspapers and journalism with The Herald’s Phillip O’Connor”
Sno-Isle Libraries, Oct. 11, 2019



Jim Hills: 00:00:00 This is Jim Hills and in this episode of the Check It Out! Podcast, we speak with Phil O'Connor, the new executive editor of The Herald newspaper. Phil is going to share with us his experiences working for some of the great newspapers in the Midwest and the Kansas City Star in St. Louis and The Oklahoman in Oklahoma city. We're going to get a chance to hear from Phil about his experiences as a foreign correspondent, working in Afghanistan, in Iraq and in Haiti. Phil's also going to share with us his views of what's coming for the future of journalism. We'll be right back with Phil O'Connor.

Speaker 2: 00:00:53 Welcome to season two and episode 43 of Check It Out!, The Sno-Isle Libraries podcast for lifelong learners with inquiring minds.

Speaker 3: 00:01:00 The views and opinions expressed on this podcast may not necessarily reflect the official position of Sno-Isle Libraries.

Jim Hills: 00:01:08 We're here today with Phil O'Connor, executive editor of The Herald newspaper and out of Everett, Washington. Very excited to have Phil here in our sumptuous podcast studio, Check It Out! Podcast studios here in Marysville, Washington and welcome Phil.

Phil O'Connor: 00:01:27 I appreciate it. Thanks for inviting me.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:01:28 Glad to have you here.

Jim Hills: 00:01:30 We also have here, that third voice is Kurt Batdorf, also from Sno-Isle Libraries and away we go. You are new to the community.

Phil O'Connor: 00:01:42 I am, yeah. Started on July 1st. I haven't spent a lot of time in the Northwest prior to this, but loving every minute of it so far.

Jim Hills: 00:01:51 Well that's because we had much, well actually we had kind of a cool summer, right?

(Continued)

Kurt Batdorf: 00:01:54 It wasn't that bad. It was cool, cooler than some.

Jim Hills: 00:01:57 Yeah, cooler than lately.

Phil O'Connor: 00:01:59 I had to laugh because the first time somebody said, "It's going to be really hot today, it's going to be like 80," it just makes me laugh. That's 20 degrees less than what I'm used to this time of year.

Jim Hills: 00:02:13 What are you used to and where are you used to having that be?

Phil O'Connor: 00:02:16 I'm a Midwesterner for sure, so I grew up in the suburbs of Kansas City. Went to college at Kansas State University, graduated from there, went to work for my hometown newspaper in Kansas City, worked 15 years there. I was in Kansas, in Kansas City for pretty much the first 40 years of my life. Then moved to St. Louis to work for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Spent a dozen years there and then moved to Oklahoma City in 2012 and spent seven years there.

Jim Hills: 00:02:52 Yeah.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:02:52 You've been a lifelong journalist?

Phil O'Connor: 00:02:54 I am a lifelong journalist, absolutely.

Jim Hills: 00:02:56 From the beginning, right? I mean, was that your path all the way along?

Phil O'Connor: 00:03:00 No. When I went to college, I thought advertising was going to be where I wanted to go, and so my first year, first year and a half were really sort of in that field. Then in my sophomore year, my second semester, I had a class that was basically introduction to journalism. My professor in that class was a former Chicago Tribune reporter, who just inspired me. Just the stories that he told, the experiences that he'd had, the life that he'd lived, I was just like, "Wow! That could be really fun." Yeah.

Jim Hills: 00:03:42 People can go do that?

Phil O'Connor: 00:03:42 Yeah, exactly and they'll pay you. It was really interesting. His name was Robert Daley, and he really inspired me. The great part of this story was probably, I don't know, three or four years after I had graduated, I was back in Manhattan for a football game. I'm at a restaurant, and I look over and there's Bob Daley. I was the kid that sat in the back of the classroom. He wouldn't

have known me from Adam, but I loved his class. I was just kind of a lurker in the back that was taking this as an elective.

Phil O'Connor: 00:04:12 I got the chance that morning to walk up to him and say, "Hey, I just want you to know how much... That I work for a newspaper now, that I love what I do, and it's all because of you." I loved having that opportunity to thank him, and it's been a wonderful, marvelous, magical career.

Jim Hills: 00:04:33 What a wonderful moment I meant for him also, but for you too to be able to say, "Hey, you know what, thanks very much."

Phil O'Connor: 00:04:39 Yeah.

Jim Hills: 00:04:40 We should tell our listeners that this is almost like a...

Kurt Batdorf: 00:04:45 Kind of a reunion.

Jim Hills: 00:04:46 [inaudible 00:04:46], so both Kurt and I are also Herald alums. I feel like we've got the... Kurt and I have done some other things, you've stayed the path with the journalism. I do feel once you've done the work, you're always there a little bit. You carry whatever skills you gained and experiences you had forward into everything else you do in life. I kind of feel like we got three newspaper guys sitting around here, that we're talking here.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:05:13 It's kind of funny because my Facebook feed showed up today with a photo from six years ago. It was my last day at The Herald really, as community business editor. I still miss that camaraderie there. I've never had it anywhere else on any other job. I can't even describe it.

Phil O'Connor: 00:05:31 Not to get too insidery, but I often don't think the public understands how dedicated, hardworking, committed that a lot, I would say, the majority of people in this profession are. Especially now when the numbers are, I mean I think we lost another 65,000. I mean our numbers have been devastated over the last decade. I've seen so many friends who are brilliant reporters, great investigators, have long distinguished careers, see them shortened and not by their choice. It's just really sad.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:06:13 Yeah, Jim and I were sort of in the same boat with our journalism careers.

Jim Hills: 00:06:18 Yeah. You've got to see what's coming, and how things changed. I really want to ask you this question. I don't want to [crosstalk 00:06:29].

Phil O'Connor: 00:06:29 Not to get too maudlin, we should look forward.

Jim Hills: 00:06:33 Things did change, but I don't think people's thirst for knowing what's going on has changed.

Phil O'Connor: 00:06:40 No.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:06:40 No.

Jim Hills: 00:06:42 I'm wondering how you view that and how you view any changes that have affected how we get to tell people what's going on.

Phil O'Connor: 00:06:51 Well, another thing I always tell people too is about today's journalists, is that they are more skilled probably than any generation we've had. In terms of, it's not just about carrying a reporter's notebook and a pen anymore, and writing down what someone says. Then going back and thinking about it, and having the rest of the day to compose and think and move. Now they're expected to essentially tweet it while they're doing the interview. Come, tape it, come back, put something up immediately as quickly as possible. Come back and do something more lengthy, then maybe put it in a different format that's more palatable to a digital audience. Then maybe step into the podcast studio and do something, and then oh yeah shoot a stand up video that we're going to want to put, embed in your story on the web.

Jim Hills: 00:07:42 That's a lot. It's a lot.

Phil O'Connor: 00:07:43 That really is, and so you think of the talent that we have or the talent that we demand from our reporters is pretty amazing. The amazing thing is these people who've grown up in our digital natives, they're teaching us stuff every day. It hasn't changed. You're exactly right. Look, we provide information, it's what we do, it's what our audience wants. Yeah, at one time they may have wanted to look at the ads as well. That model is no longer sustainable for us. Certainly we need advertisers, but obviously with the changes in the advertising model, that's just not a sustainable path. We've got to look for ways to engage with our audience. I look at the metrics every day and what I know is that local content is what our readers are interested in.

Jim Hills: 00:08:39 Exactly, right.

Phil O'Connor: 00:08:42 That's a big part of my effort, is to try and direct all of our resources or as much of our resources as we can into providing local content. That means rearranging some things.

Jim Hills: 00:08:56 Asking for some different skillsets.

Phil O'Connor: 00:08:57 Asking for some different skillsets. As we look and move to a digital model, which, look, we all eventually will, we need to have a digital experience that people are going to enjoy and don't find frustrating. That gives them the same great, well reported, available, nowhere else kind of stories that we do.

Jim Hills: 00:09:30 Yeah. Dependable information.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:09:32 Yeah. I think The Herald's always been very good about that. They've always focused on Snohomish County as a community first for all of their coverage.

Phil O'Connor: 00:09:40 Yeah. I agree.

Jim Hills: 00:09:41 Awesome, and I'd love to know a little more about how you got to that point, that perspective. You were talking about, you've worked for some amazing newspapers in the Midwest, Kansas City, Kansas City Stars a legend, St Louis is the same, Daily Oklahoman, actually I call it The Daily Oklahoman because it's just now The Oklahoman.

Phil O'Connor: 00:10:09 I guess we used to call it The Everett Herald too. Yes, it's changed, it's The Oklahoman now. The Oklahoman has had a checkered past and history and reputation and stuff, and some of it well-deserved. Obviously it was for a long time owned by essentially the first family of Oklahoma, the Gaylord's and a different kind of newspaper, different kind of way of doing things. Maybe not the highest of journalistic standards, but that was a long time ago.

Phil O'Connor: 00:10:40 It's changed hands many times since. It's a GateHouse property now. In the time I worked there, it was owned by Phil Anschutz, one of the wealthiest men in the country. Who was out West 90% of the time and who we rarely heard from, had little, had no impact on the newsroom. We were able to do amazing work there that I'm very, very proud of.

Jim Hills: 00:11:05 It's interesting that you talk about ownership, because ownership these days is really, really important, isn't it?

Phil O'Connor: 00:11:09 It is. Absolutely.

Jim Hills: 00:11:10 Yeah. GateHouse is big, is huge.

Phil O'Connor: 00:11:15 Getting bigger.

Jim Hills: 00:11:15 Yeah, and The Herald is part of a big group too.

Phil O'Connor: 00:11:18 Yeah, Sound publications.

Jim Hills: 00:11:20 They're not just here in Washington. They've got a significant number of publications in Canada.

Phil O'Connor: 00:11:26 Alaska.

Jim Hills: 00:11:28 Alaska.

Phil O'Connor: 00:11:29 Hawaii.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:11:29 Hawaii, yeah.

Jim Hills: 00:11:30 Hawaii, and do they still own a daily in the Midwest or?

Phil O'Connor: 00:11:34 I'm not familiar with that one.

Jim Hills: 00:11:35 Yeah. I think maybe they sold that piece, but they have a very strong history of being local.

Phil O'Connor: 00:11:43 Yeah. I mean their footprints are obviously smaller properties, but those papers they seem to have are pretty embedded in their communities. Good brands to have, I would say. Again, that's Josh's part, the other O'Connor.

Jim Hills: 00:12:01 The unrelated [crosstalk 00:12:02].

Phil O'Connor: 00:12:02 I'm still trying to figure out where half of these places are. I hear these names it's like, "Yeah, I've heard of that." Then I go into my office and look at the map to try and make sure, okay, yeah, down South. Okay, got it, right.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:12:13 Other side of the south.

Phil O'Connor: 00:12:14 Yeah, so I'm learning.

Jim Hills: 00:12:18 When the other unrelated O'Connor, Josh got in touch with you, what was attractive about coming out here?

- Phil O'Connor: 00:12:27 I have been positioning myself for the last... When I left St. Louis and went to Oklahoma partly it was because of an opportunity that my wife had to go there. Actually I stayed in St. Louis, and then a position came open at The Oklahoman. I told them in our conversations, "Hey, look, if I move here," I wanted to change my role because I'd been a reporter all my life up to that point." I said, "If I'm going to move to a smaller property, I don't want to do what I'm doing now with fewer resources and a smaller place. I would talk to them about opportunities to move into management.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:13:03 Anyway, long story short, eventually it worked out really well, and I took on just a growing number of duties there. By the time I left The Oklahoman, I was overseeing our breaking news enterprise and investigative teams. I was editing the quarterly magazine, and then I was also in charge of sort of instilling the digital culture in our newsroom. I worked with, a lot with the folks in audience development who basically are the people who look at all the numbers. Tell us how to build our audience and what stories are driving our viewers.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:13:41 Anyway, trying to sort of learn the tools of that trade and to understand. Essentially a lot of our readers don't come to us and pick up a paper anymore. Of course as everyone probably knows that, audience continues to grow older and older. People today engage with our product on their telephone, on their iPad, on their laptop, on their desktop and that's a totally different medium. The way you present stories should be much different, because it's a different medium. Those were a lot of the things that we worked on in Oklahoma. Were strategies and tools and storytelling methods, and things that we saw that drove our digital audience, that our digital audience responded to.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:14:39 Explain, what kind of changes does, I guess maybe work practices or reporting and editing that you've had to make for The Herald to bring this kind of more social media, video driven reporting?
- Phil O'Connor: 00:14:55 Well in terms of like nuts and bolts?
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:14:57 Yeah, I mean it's more than just like, "Here, go take a video to run with the story."
- Phil O'Connor: 00:15:02 No. I mean, again it's, if you're talking about instilling a culture, so we've changed... I mean one of the first things we did was, we changed our meeting structure to where we now gather first thing in the morning. Rather than just going over a story budget,

what we do is we look to see, okay, what content do we have coming in over the next few days? What value added can we bring from the digital perspective? Does it need a video? Can we do a poll with this? Is this something we should solicit reader input on? Do you have a story to share? Do we want to create a slideshow that goes with this? Do we want to create a map that moves among multiple locations? If we're trying to describe that animation, do we want to do something along those lines?

- Phil O'Connor: 00:15:53 Just all the digital tools that are out there that we can play with. Then it's talking to staff about expectations and refreshers on video training. What we expect them to do, be able to do with their camera. What we expect them to come back to the office with from every interview in terms of video. I mean I can get way down into these things we've been doing. It's being aware, it's being aware of our opportunities. Making sure our staff understands the opportunities that are out there to gather that kind of content and to get it.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:16:27 Yeah, that's just a lot different than when I left.
- Jim Hills: 00:16:30 That can be a big cultural shift as well.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:16:32 It is a big cultural shift, but again, as I say, I'm dealing now for the most part with a staff they're digital natives. That part actually comes pretty easy to them. It's combining that with the journalism side and making sure that we're sort of... They're totally comfortable with the technology.
- Jim Hills: 00:16:58 I have been noticing standup videos from reporters. Some increased number of presence of digital content from The Herald on their website. It seems really recent, like maybe July first or so.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:17:14 Yeah. We've created, well, it's not near as nice as this luscious studio, but we've got our own studio that we've put in. I have my own weekly show. You can tune into Herald Headlines, that's just basically trying to get our reporters in front of a camera. Talk to them about one of our stories or a couple of our stories that readers are responding to. For me it's a chance to get, for the public to get to meet the people who come to their community, which I think a lot of people don't have any idea.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:17:48 Yeah, and it helps to explain how the stories happen as well.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:17:50 Sure, and that's what we try to do... Sometimes we don't get there, sometimes we diverge, sometimes we talk about what

their favorite beer is. I don't know. It veers off every now and then, but that's okay. I like to see, it personalizes our people and they live in the community, and I think that's good. We try to have fun with it, but we talk about like I said, some of the stories that have really registered with our readers.

Phil O'Connor: 00:18:15 We're really trying to pour some effort into our high school football coverage, so we have two new video shows that we do. One comes out on Thursdays, where we talk about the games that are coming up that weekend, that are big games. We do another one on Monday, that goes over the highlights and it's our high school sports reporters. A three man crew that does that show. We put that out as a podcast. We're beefing up the number of photographers we send out to games. We're trying to increase the number of galleries that we include on the site, so there's a lot more photos that people can look at and buy if they'd like to.

Phil O'Connor: 00:18:53 Yeah, I mean we're trying a lot of things, because we know people care about that. It's amazing how many newspapers and of course TV pullback on high school coverage. When I talk about local coverage here in Snohomish County, that's important to people.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:19:11 It's always been, always been.

Phil O'Connor: 00:19:12 They want to read about their high school football games, and so we try to give them what they want.

Jim Hills: 00:19:18 You said they want to read about them and I think it's a catchall phrase, because they want to know about them. They want to know about them in the way they want to get that information. It sounds like that's where you...

Phil O'Connor: 00:19:30 Exactly.

Jim Hills: 00:19:30 It's funny you should mention the high school football. I was just talking about it with my wife over the weekend. My wife loves The Herald, as do I. I mean, part of it is working there, but, so we were looking at the Sports Coverage over the weekend. She loves football, and looking at the high school coverage. Then looking on the site and seeing really the kind of richness that's available, the digital coverage that's available on the site and I was surprised. I hadn't really delved into that. Well, high school football is just getting going right now. I thought, "Well that's pretty innovative. That's kind of cool."

Phil O'Connor: 00:20:06 Well we're a little hamstrung in some ways because of our deadlines on Friday nights, which for lack of a better word, it's not good.

Jim Hills: 00:20:18 Print deadlines of all [crosstalk 00:20:19], right?

Phil O'Connor: 00:20:19 Yeah, and it's terrible. Sometimes we get lucky, this week is an instance of that, where we have a five o'clock game. It's a really good, interesting game. Please don't ask me who the teams are, I just know it's a good, interesting game.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:20:30 It started at a good time, so we could finish.

Phil O'Connor: 00:20:33 Yeah, somebody's playing somebody, I know. That'll be great, because we'll be able to have a story on our sports page on Saturday that is an actual game story, and we always appreciate that. I know readers are frustrated when we can't have their scores, but that's why we always try to tell people, and we put a notice in the paper that says, "Look, go to the website heraldnet.com. There's a lot of great stuff there, including the games from last night and all the roundups and all the scores and the stats and the pictures and video, it's good coverage." It's just, again, people know where to look. It's interesting.

Phil O'Connor: 00:21:14 I encountered probably be my worst week this week. I made the decision, and I'm still fine with it. I've heard from some readers, and it's not a large number, but I made the decision to pull our stock table. That was a conscious decision that I made, because it gives us, and I literally have them sitting on my desk so that when I talked to these readers, I can explain to them. My feeling was, in this day and age, stock information is widely available at all times-

Kurt Batdorf: 00:21:52 Online.

Phil O'Connor: 00:21:52 ... everywhere. If you have a phone, it's right in your pocket. I mean, it's not hard, and I just feel, again, speaking to local content, wanting to provide us more space to sort of beef up our national and international wire content a little bit, which I thought we were a lacking in. It gives us essentially every day room for two to three more stories. To me, I felt the reader can get and I've heard from these people and I understand they're upset. I understand it is a valuable tool to them and I get that, but I still believe that it was the right decision.

Phil O'Connor: 00:22:37 I think the stories that we've been able to put into print this week are stories that are meaningful to our readers. They're

from the region, they're about issues that we care about and I'll probably continue to hear from the rest for a while about that. I don't want to make it sound like there's been a huge outcry. I've heard from less than a dozen, more than a half a dozen.

- Jim Hills: 00:23:02 I was going to say, I think newspapers in general, it was in my family for a long time. My dad worked at The Times a long time ago, so did my mom. My uncle was in the business many years ago, which is kind of why I call it The Daily Oklahoman, because both my dad and my uncle worked there for a little while.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:23:21 Really?
- Jim Hills: 00:23:22 Many decades ago, but everybody thinks that it's traditional business, but it's always evolved. It has always evolved to meet the needs of the community and respond, and it continues to do that. Things like the stock tables, well, you can actually probably get an update on the stock market from the president's tweets. Yeah, it's everywhere.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:23:50 Yeah. Well I'm not going to talk any more about that today.
- Jim Hills: 00:23:54 Okay.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:23:55 I'm sure when I get back to the office, I'm going to probably have to talk to some more people about that.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:24:00 I mean when you look in the journalism crystal ball, I mean what do you see for the future of journalism?
- Phil O'Connor: 00:24:06 I think we have to have a model that's supported by subscribers, and this is just me talking. I'm sure there's a corporate strategy, but I believe in the end we still need an advertising base in some way. It's just become more and more clear that we needed more of, to me, kind of like a public radio sort of model, where we actually get a more committed audience. I mean we have a very committed audience already, but I just mean in terms of, I think it becomes more on the subscriber.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:24:42 I think there's the question of, as we continue to transition to a more and more digital model, of course there are savings in that in terms of distribution and purchasing of print product and all those kinds of savings. Again, the advertising model will not, I don't think sustain the digital model. You have to have some other source and that has to be some sort of a subscription model I would say.

Jim Hills: 00:25:18 People are loving it. We're going to take a quick break.

Phil O'Connor: 00:25:22 Okay.

Jim Hills: 00:25:22 Then I am really interested in hearing from Phil about some of his experiences, because I know he's had some around the world, and we'll be right back.

Speaker 6: 00:25:34 Join business people from around the region, who are taking advantage of free expert business advice through Business Pros classes from Sno-Isle Libraries. Find a Business Pro class at a library near you by searching online for events at Sno-Isle Libraries.

Speaker 2: 00:25:52 We love hearing from our listeners and subscribers, especially if you enjoyed a guest or have a suggestion for a future topic. Drop us a line at checkitoutpodcast@sno-isle.org. Again, that's checkitoutpodcast@sno-isle.org and let us know what you're thinking. Don't be surprised if we read your comment or answer your question on a future podcast episode.

Jim Hills: 00:26:15 Okay, we're back here with Phil O'Connor, executive editor at The Herald. Phil, I really wanted to get a better sense of some of your personal experience. I mean, you worked for some great Midwest papers and you've also had some experience covering news overseas. When you think back to things that you've covered, firstly, let's talk about Kansas City, St. Louis, maybe Oklahoma. What are some of those stories that you say, "Yeah, that was some really great work or that was particularly weird,"?

Phil O'Connor: 00:27:01 I can still remember my very first front page story I ever did... Let me back up. I was hired as a bureau... Let me back up even further. My first job in professional journalism was, I would come in on Friday nights at 10 o'clock and work three hours for \$5 an hour. You were called a 15-er, and it was to take sports calls from the high school games and do agate, which is that tiny little print that's in the sports page.

Phil O'Connor: 00:27:29 I would write up high school box scores, and I was so exceptional at it that they brought me in to do Saturday afternoon college games. That was a huge promotion.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:27:38 Did that make you a 30-er?

Phil O'Connor: 00:27:40 I was a 15-er who worked twice a week. Anyway, for some reason they liked me. Somebody took a shine to me and then I

became a bureau clerk. That was my really first full-time job. I would come in, because it was an afternoon paper.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:27:57 Yeah, afternoon paper.

Phil O'Connor: 00:27:59 I would come in at like, I don't know, 5:30 in the morning and do bureau clerk work, obits and calendars and all those things. I did that and then got promoted to his own reporter. Anyway, so my very first front page story on the Kansas City Star was about a man who was suing the NBA. He had been a referee and he was suing them alleging that they had fired him because his complexion was too dark.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:28:34 Wow!

Phil O'Connor: 00:28:34 That was my very first front page story, and this will tell you how far the industry has come. To do that story, they allowed me to take him out for a steak dinner that was like \$70. I think if my reporter came back today with a steak dinner for \$70 with the sauce...

Kurt Batdorf: 00:28:47 You would question the expense.

Phil O'Connor: 00:28:49 I would question the expense. Anyway, that was my first one. Then my career there, I remembered having some, I covered everything there, so it was the old traditional system. You became a zone reporter, which was essentially you worked out in the suburbs and you covered everything. Then you got promoted to a bigger bit and a bigger bit. I was there for 15 years and sort of covered everything. Did a lot of great, a lot of fun stories.

Phil O'Connor: 00:29:15 There was a giant, probably one of the big ones that I really remember was, there was a labyrinth of caves, limestone caves that were used for storage. Just because the temperature remains constant year-round, like a 50 degrees, so it's full of food. There was this massive fire that burned for weeks. When they finally got it out, we got a tip that they were smuggling out this food and that it was contaminated. Sure enough, as we got more and more state records and we had an inside source who was feeding us stuff, it was true. For that story, we went to Atlanta. We went to Minneapolis to cover the company who had done the work.

Phil O'Connor: 00:30:01 One of the great parts of this story was, there was actually a guy who worked for the Salvage Company in Atlanta, who was going to the business at the end of the day, every day because they

fired him and going through their trash and sending it to us. There were all these emails and correspondences and printouts of strategy and us, and what they were doing. They hired private investigators to call us and pretend to be other journalists from other sources, trying to find where we were and what we were doing and what information we'd gathered. It was all so bizarre.

- Phil O'Connor: 00:30:49 Anyway, I worked with Mike McGraw on that project. Mike was a Pulitzer prize winner, and it was one of the great experiences of my life to work with Mike. That was fun.
- Jim Hills: 00:30:59 That's a big deal, yeah.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:31:01 That was a fun one. That was probably one of the more fun stories I did when I was in Kansas. There was a theme here. My wife got a good job in St. Louis again, so I've had to move to St. Louis and that's what got me out of Kansas City where I'd always lived. It ended up being sort of the greatest break of my life. We moved there in 2000 and really what changed everything for me was September 11, 2001.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:31:26 I remember being at home, it was around Thanksgiving, a month and a half after the attacks. My parents had come over because this was our first Thanksgiving over there, if I remember right, yeah I think so, first or second. I just remember my parents were there and it was like a Friday night, and like seven o'clock. We're sitting there and the phone rings, and I had to go in the kitchen and answer it. That again dates me, because I was out in the kitchen.
- Jim Hills: 00:31:54 You had to go answer it.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:31:55 I had to go answer it, and it was my boss, it was Kathy Best. She said, "Hey, I was wondering if I could, would you be willing to go to Afghanistan?" I just said...
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:32:09 Like to open a bureau?
- Phil O'Connor: 00:32:10 Yeah, I just said, "Absolutely." It just sort of always been this dream of... I'd been a young reporter when the first Iraq war happened, and I saw guys from Kansas City who were really are great reporters get sent over there. I just thought, "Man, I can't imagine," and so this was my chance. I'd always joke, the reason they came to me was I felt that probably I was the most expendable. I think there were a few ahead of me that-

Jim Hills: 00:32:44 Might have said, yeah.

Phil O'Connor: 00:32:46 ... chose not to go, and so I am sure I wasn't the first pick. I remember hanging up the phone and walking into the dining or the living room where my parents were sitting. I just said, "Well, I guess I'm going to Afghanistan." My mom looks at me and she goes, "I've raised an idiot."

Kurt Batdorf: 00:33:10 Yeah, I think my parents would've said the same thing too.

Phil O'Connor: 00:33:13 I mean, I really kind of choke up whenever I start talking about this stuff, because it does take me back and make me think about things. From there it just kind of took off, so I spent a month in Afghanistan or on that trip in November and December of 2001. We were traveling with an American doctor most of that trip and that was freaky weird. It's just everything you'd think. I didn't even have a passport. I remember I'd been to the Caribbean, I'd been to Mexico, I'd done things like that, so I had to get on...

Jim Hills: 00:34:00 Which wasn't required back in those days.

Phil O'Connor: 00:34:01 Yeah, I know.

Jim Hills: 00:34:01 You could go places like that without a passport.

Phil O'Connor: 00:34:04 Right, so the day like that Monday after that Friday where she asked me to go, I went. I got up, drove to the airport, got on a plane, flew to Chicago, got on a train, went downtown, walked into the passport office. Explained to the woman what I was doing and why I was there and why I really need this passport. You had to go in person to get that passport expedited. Once she found out where I was going, she became the nicest, loveliest, sweetest person. That happened again and again, it was really weird.

Phil O'Connor: 00:34:41 It's gone away since, but even like the flight back, I just remember being on American Airlines flying home from Afghanistan, from Europe or wherever I'm flying across. Just the stewardess was, there was nobody on the plane for one thing. People forget, [inaudible 00:34:58] forget, but just the kindness it was weird. Anyway, we got to do our last, we left Afghanistan and this other crazy story had sort of gotten to us in that.

Phil O'Connor: 00:35:13 On September 10th, there had been a group of Pakistani immigrants who had been already approved for refugee status in the United States, which we don't really do anymore. I think it

was 62, these were refugees who'd already been through all the rigors of the state department, vetting and everything. Had been told, "You leave tomorrow to start a new life in the United States," and then this happened.

- Kurt Batdorf: 00:35:41 Then this happens, yeah.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:35:43 They're basically told-
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:35:45 No.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:35:46 ... no. One of the stories we wanted to do when we left Afghanistan, was to go to Pakistan and find those families. These people who were going to be our neighbors, and so that created this lasting friendship that I've made with Anisa Popal, who was a mother of four. She had been a judge in Kabul and her husband had been a judge as well. He was murdered by the Taliban, and she had fled with her children and had essentially escaped and was living in Kuwait-Pakistan, where we found her. If you know about Kuwait-Pakistan, that's essentially the heart of the Al-Qaeda shura place. That's where Osama bin Laden spent a lot of time when he was in Pakistan.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:36:28 You go into downtown Kuwait, it's just nothing but black flags flying on every staff. It was scary, and she was living in the midst of all that as well. I got to know her and we did her story and the struggle that she was facing in Pakistan. The life she was forced to live. The good news on that was eventually those people did get to come to the United States. The great story that we got to do there was to fly to New York and meet Ana and gosh! It's weird. I don't mean to get emotional, but I just think about... These were really things that when I look back on them, it's just like very meaningful to me.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:37:15 Anyway, she came, and her four children came to the United States, and they settled in a South St. Louis neighborhood. We would get together every now and then, and went to her daughter's wedding, and so it's become a friendship. I haven't talked to her in a while. The crazy thing is, I had lost track of her for a while.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:37:33 Then the nice thing is that, our stories prompted a group of judges in St. Louis before she had ever even come, because we had written her story. When she came, she did not have the typical immigrant experience, because she had this powerful group of women. These powerful civic leaders who are all attorneys, judges, legal community members, who stepped up

and adopted her essentially and looked out for her and her family. I lost track of Anisa for a while, but she was fine.

- Phil O'Connor: 00:38:05 When I finally did catch back up with her, I found out what she was doing. She had gone back to Afghanistan as an interpreter for the US military. I'm like, "Are you nuts? Are you nuts?" The money was very good for her and she felt called to the work and anyway.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:38:24 Do you know if she remained?
- Phil O'Connor: 00:38:24 It's weird to see the kids who I first met are now Americanized, and it's weird. It's weird because I met them and I think the oldest at the time was probably 17, and the youngest was probably seven. Now, of course, they're all adults, which it's just hard to believe.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:38:47 Yeah.
- Jim Hills: 00:38:48 Thank you so much for sharing that story.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:38:49 Yeah. Then obviously once that happened, we went into war with Iraq, so I ended up going there and having more experiences along those lines and meeting people and doing weird things.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:39:05 You went to Iraq too them?
- Phil O'Connor: 00:39:07 Yeah. I went to both twice, and we would spend about a month each time. Then I went to Bosnia, St. Louis has the largest diaspora of Bosnians outside of Europe, people may not know that. The Bosnian community in St. Louis is huge. Probably about 75, 80,000 people now. Maybe even larger now. Obviously the Bosnian conflict was a central story for a lot of our readers. I think it was on the 10th anniversary of the massacre, it's Srebrenica, which is like the worst. It's the largest genocide in Europe since World War II were a bunch of Muslim men and boys were slaughtered at a UN camp in Bosnia.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:39:57 Some families were going back because their family's remains had been recovered from a mass grave. That year, that previous year and on the anniversary, they hold a big ceremony where all of the remains from that year are buried again. That was really a heavy trip and there was a freedom march that they do. Anyway, I mean, it was an amazing experience. They're always sad, but they're amazing experiences.

Jim Hills: 00:40:28 I've always been very curious about... My own experiences that really aren't on that same level. When you talk about doing the work in Kansas City or St. Louis or Oklahoma, I understand how that work happens. What I don't understand is how you take that skillset, that level and transfer it into the story you were telling about how to go from Kabul to Pakistan. To a village where you stick out like a sore thumb and how you do that work. How do you do that work in a war setting? Where do those stories come from? How do you do that?

Phil O'Connor: 00:41:16 Well, it's the same sort of premise of the local. I mean, whenever I would travel overseas, we went to Haiti after the earthquake, same thing. We typically try to find our people, local people that we can connect our readers to. For example, when I went to Afghanistan that first time, I was with a doctor from St. Louis, who was traveling in to provide aid to... That was how we got across the border essentially. We told her story.

Jim Hills: 00:41:48 Yeah, so it's really a local story?

Kurt Batdorf: 00:41:49 Localizing a national [crosstalk 00:41:51] story.

Phil O'Connor: 00:41:51 While we're there with her, we're off doing all these other things too. The first trip to Afghanistan actually, the great story that happened for us there, it's terrible to say. We were in a small village where the Northern Alliance had been bottled up and in the very North of the country. If people don't remember that essentially that the Afghan war was fought by about 600 US soldiers. 600 US Special Forces soldiers who came in and provided laser-guided capability, and that's what turned everything. There had been a trench warfare going on between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance for years over these planes, just in the Northern part of the country and it was a stalemate. These Special Forces came in and because they could point a laser at exactly where the bunkers were that they needed to take out, that's what eliminated the stalemate. Nobody was telling the American people that the Special Forces were on the ground. People don't remember that either, but for the longest time we weren't even acknowledging that we were there.

Phil O'Connor: 00:42:54 We're there in this village with this doctor. Two boys are out playing, pick up an old Russian machine gun round and do what boys do, hit it with a rock.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:43:05 A rock, yeah.

Phil O'Connor: 00:43:06 It explodes and part of it perforates the belly of one of the boys, and the other part shreds the thumb of his brother. Their father comes to our compound and asks us for help, because we have the American doctor with us. A couple of days before, we had been at the [inaudible 00:43:26] River, which is this crossing the, anyway deep river that you have to forward across to get down into the Southern part of the country.

Phil O'Connor: 00:43:34 There's kind of like a little traffic jam there all the time. We're in this traffic jam, we see this truck. In this truck are these very Western looking people with big, dark beards, camouflage pants, very muscular. We're like, "Hey."

Kurt Batdorf: 00:43:51 "Hey, you're not local."

Phil O'Connor: 00:43:52 "You guys don't look like you're from around here. Where are you from?" The one guy goes, "Delaware," and the other guy goes, "Texas," and it's obvious. They throw up in the thing, not for us, but we see there's two Polaris ATV sitting in the back of it. These are obviously Special Forces soldiers wading across the river. No one has really spotted them yet, so we write this story that, "Hey, there are US forces on the ground here," and dah, dah. Okay, so they are in our village. We can hear their ATVs, so we know they're kind of around us. When this hacked accident happens, we don't have surgical equipment. We don't have anything like that. Our doctor isn't carrying anything like that. One thing we know, the Special Forces guys know how to do is like operate.

Phil O'Connor: 00:44:47 Somebody approached them. It wasn't us, I think it was one of the village elders. For some reason, these guys who had... Let me back up. In between that had been Christmas Day.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:44:57 Oh my gosh.

Phil O'Connor: 00:44:59 We walked to the compound where we knew they were, because they had a lot of Afghan guys standing outside. They weren't that far away from where we were staying. Again, this is just a mad hut village with maybe you know, it's not very big. We go down, and we tell the guards, "Hey, can you ask the commander to come out, tell him it's the other Americans." These two guys come out, and we say, "Hey, it's Christmas, we just want to come down and say Merry Christmas, and we had some candy for you guys."

Phil O'Connor: 00:45:28 They were jerks, they were jerks right, they said, "Yeah, okay whatever," and they turned around and walked away. This all

happens with the kids, so we find ourselves now in a room about the size of this studio. We spend about the next 11 hours in the middle of the night operating on these two kids with rudimentary... Their skin is so difficult and it's so thick and toughened, the surgical needles were bending. They were having trouble piercing the skin.

Phil O'Connor: 00:46:04 Anyway, they patch them back together as best they could, but of course the next day infection set in because they had no antibiotics or anything. The hope was that they could fly them out to Kabul or somewhere. The special forces guys were calling back and basically they were telling them, "No, we're not doing that." They said, "What we can do is fly in some supplies." We're like, "Hey, can we go?" They're like, "Well, we can't let you do that, but if you happen to be at dah, dah, dah at this time."

Jim Hills: 00:46:36 The doors open.

Phil O'Connor: 00:46:39 They basically gave us like a crossroads, it was outside of the village and said, "Be there like 10:30." Man, we weren't really big ongoing out at night, that just did not seem safe at all to us. We got in this old rickety van that the driver for the doctor had, and drive out into the middle of nowhereville. All you hear is just dogs, just dogs barking, that's about the only sound.

Phil O'Connor: 00:47:08 We're out in the middle of nowhere and all of a sudden you can hear that, because nothing runs well in Afghanistan. There's like no engine that doesn't sound terrible. Then you hear just these finely tuned ATVs just 12 of them coming down the road or whatever. Sure enough here they come, you can see them and then they just, they turn and we just pull in behind them. We got out into this big flat area, and they park over here and we park there. He comes over and he goes, "Okay, now listen, here's what's going to happen. These ships are going to come in. Whatever you do don't hit the flash on your camera, because they will take that as a muzzle flash and you just don't want that. If something happens, come into the middle of the circle and you'll be okay." I was like, "Trust me we will be in the middle of the circle all right."

Phil O'Connor: 00:48:04 You can hear them coming and first it's a couple of Black Ops and they come in, they just do what they call this racetrack pattern where they just parallel each other in a circle around the landing zone. Then here come these two giant Chinook helicopters and they just, you can't see them because they're all blacked out. You can hear them and then you just see this shadow moving. It's really weird, because they drop this rope to

the ground. I guess it's the static buildup on the road or whatever is the reason they do it.

- Phil O'Connor: 00:48:33 When that rope hits the ground, sparks fly from the routers. It was the most amazing sight and the photographer actually captured that moment.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:48:41 [crosstalk 00:48:41].
- Phil O'Connor: 00:48:41 That was our lead photo the next day in the Post-Dispatch. Anyway, we're doing this life saving story about these Special Forces soldiers who aren't here, are working hard with our St. Louis doctor to save the lives of two boys who had blown themselves. It was this amazing story to be honest. Same thing, I became friends with those guys. I stayed in touch with them when we got back. Five years later I went back to Afghanistan, I found the brothers who are both fine. Had recovered from their injuries, were living the Afghan life. Just experiences like that were just amazing really. Yeah, that didn't really answer your question about how do you do it, but it is.
- Jim Hills: 00:49:38 It did, right?
- Phil O'Connor: 00:49:39 It gets back to my point of localizing it, did the same thing in Haiti. In Haiti, we followed a man from a charity in St. Louis who worked, it was a church sponsored charity. His goal was always to go to natural disasters and go to the places where eight organizations weren't getting to. Okay, that sounds kind of cool so essentially we followed him. Of course that leads you to other stories. You're on the ground and you just do what reporters do.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:50:12 Always looking for something.
- Phil O'Connor: 00:50:13 Yeah, it's the easiest reporting I've ever done, because everything is so vivid and just vivid. The great advice I got from Allan Sudbury, who is the editor at the Post-Dispatch who was sending me overseas for the first time. Was he said, "Please just give our readers a sense of the people and the place." That helped me so much really to frame my stories. I did a lot of profiles of people. I did a lot of descriptive writing of what of the scenes I was seeing. I mean I included that in the stories I was reporting, but it really did help me.
- Jim Hills: 00:50:57 I'll just share that, thank you again, but that makes so much sense to me. That in my experience in newspapers, the assignment that scared me the most and I had a great respect

for our sports writers, who would go to a game where there were 70,000 people and another God knows how many hundreds of thousands who saw everything that they saw. Then they had to tell that story, and how many people knew if they got it right or wrong. Versus, going anywhere else, where you might be the only one talking to them and you're getting to reveal something that nobody else saw. That's not pressure to me, the sports guy, that's pressure.

- Jim Hills: 00:51:42 I'm reminded of, this is a long, long time ago, when The Herald had a south Snohomish County Bureau. I was city editor there, we'd taken a staff lunch done in Edmonds. We're talking about how do you go find a story? We made a bet that I could find... They were complaining, so the staff was complaining, like, "No, there's nothing down here. Nothing goes on in Edmonds. Nothing goes on in South County."
- Jim Hills: 00:52:11 "Look, I'll make you a bet," we bet, it was a dollar. "That I can walk out on the fishing pier, find a story. Get a story and a photo on tomorrow's front B section." He said, "No, way." Done, I go down and I find a guy who's looking over the railing into the water down a rope. I was like, "What are you doing?" "Fishing." "For what?" "Shrimp." "Shrimp? I have lived here my whole life, I had no idea you'd get shrimp off the dock in Edmonds." Talked with him for a while, he pulls up the thing and I go, "Where do you get a pot like that?" "Oh I make them." "You make them? Where do you make?" "In my apartment here in Edmonds."
- Jim Hills: 00:52:56 We go back to his apartment, the guy had six freezers in his living full of shrimp because he got more shrimp than he could possibly eat. He's welding up and wiring up these shrimp pots in his living room in an apartment in Edmonds. His deal was to go down and he'd give his pots away to these other guys that are out on the pier and he had all these freezers lined up full of shrimp. Great art, funny story, one B, no problem, dollar in my wallet.
- Jim Hills: 00:53:31 What I'm hearing from you is, you went and your editor asked you to be sensitive to what's going on. "Just be sensitive and tell us that story, find the story of the people." Which is exactly what The Herald, what The Star, St. Louis, I mean it's all about telling stories to the people.
- Kurt Batdorf: 00:53:49 It's community journalism.

Jim Hills: 00:53:51 Back to my original question was like, how do you go do that work in a war zone? It never occurred to me it was just go find the story of the people.

Phil O'Connor: 00:54:00 I mean that is definitely true. I mean there are certain things I would always say, because they're the most compelling stories, it's like we tend to gravitate towards hospitals. Or we tend to gravitate towards those who are providing the care. Let me tell the serendipitous stories about how you find stuff.

Phil O'Connor: 00:54:22 When we went to Haiti after the earthquake, again, I was with a guy from St. Louis who was, his job was to get to like a remote location, a village that hadn't been reached. Then organize the aid that would be delivered there, that was his mission. Part of our mission too was we knew that, the big thing that happens in earthquakes are crush injuries. We wanted be able to tell that story at some point about that angle. We had this ongoing debate, because the guy that we were with was obviously a very spiritual person, very spiritual person. I guess I would say I'm not a very spiritual person.

Phil O'Connor: 00:55:08 We have this funny debate going on the whole time, because things would happen, and he would joke. All these things would just... a lot of fortuitous things would happen. He would always go like, "You see, that's God lighting our path." I'm like, "No, man that's just..." We're having all these stuff and so we're finishing up with Pat, and I love Pat, Pat Bradly. We've written several stories about his efforts and everything. We're staying at a landing pad where the Marine Corp is flying in, ferrying in supplies from a relief ship out in the bay. It's me and my photographer, and we're just leaning up against some pallets or stuff. Was like, "Okay, where are we going to start on this crush injury thing? Where do you think we ought to start looking?"

Phil O'Connor: 00:56:01 One of the guys that's leaning on the pallet on the other end goes, "Well I'm a doctor working at a hospital, I'm dealing with a bunch of crush injuries, would that help?" Sometimes it's just literally, Chris Barach, he was a doctor who was down there from Indianapolis I think. We spent about the next three days with Chris Barach and writing these just devastatingly sad stories about watching amputations.

Phil O'Connor: 00:56:41 I watched a woman come in, have her leg amputated, and five hours later right off on the back of a motorcycle.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:56:53 Oh God.

Phil O'Connor: 00:56:56 Those roads aren't exactly smooth.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:56:58 No.

Jim Hills: 00:56:58 No.

Phil O'Connor: 00:57:00 It was after an earthquake you know, so it was like, oh man. We saw some Marines rush up with a tiny little baby in their arms that just didn't make it. That was the one trip where I came home and I was like... I got home one day, it's like two days after we got home. I just remember pulling in the garage, closing the garage door and just starting to sob. Don't really know why, nothing at the moment, just I don't know, just hit me at that moment. It's just like, and that scared me because it was like, not that I don't get emotional when I talk about it, but it has never affected me I don't think. At that point I realized, okay, that's not right, this isn't good.

Phil O'Connor: 00:57:52 I just remember going to work the next day and finding the photographer who I travel with a ton and going to him and just saying, "Hey, this happened, and I don't want to tell him because I'm afraid they won't send me anymore." I never did tell them, but at least I had JB to talk to about it and that helped.

Jim Hills: 00:58:17 Always good to have an outlet.

Phil O'Connor: 00:58:18 Yeah, for sure, but I mean the idea that that does take a toll. I mean I look back at him and it's like, they're the greatest experiences of my life for sure. Other than the birth of my daughter and my marriage to my wife. I wouldn't trade my career for anything. A lot of it's sad and a lot of it was the worst of humanity. Also, you've to opportunities to see the best of humanity too, which was pretty cool.

Jim Hills: 00:58:48 Thank you so much. You know one thing that I'm taken with in listening to those stories is that the passion and the personal impact for you.

Kurt Batdorf: 00:59:01 Yeah and the emotion too.

Jim Hills: 00:59:04 That why you're here today.

Phil O'Connor: 00:59:07 Hey, I want you to know, I am okay and I don't cry every time I go, whenever I talk to people. They mean a lot to me. They're great experiences, as like I said, I wouldn't trade them for the

world. It's the kind of career that I hope the journalists that I'm helping training now get the opportunity to have.

- Jim Hills: 00:59:32 Yeah. Well the other thing I was going to say is that, how lucky this community is to have someone with your experience, your passion, your commitment at a time when the work that you're doing, the work that The Herald is doing or the journalism, the role that journalism needs to play in our communities is so critical. That having you here to bring all of that to bear in a different kind of way, in a different context, with all the different challenges in front, but that commitment. We're just so lucky.
- Phil O'Connor: 01:00:15 Well people don't think we care about our work. They're wrong, we care deeply about what we do, and we carry it with us. We realize the impact we have and the responsibility we bear and we don't take any of that lightly.
- Jim Hills: 01:00:33 Phil O'Connor, thank you so much for coming to share. Would you be willing to come back sometime?
- Phil O'Connor: 01:00:37 Sure.
- Jim Hills: 01:00:38 That's great.
- Phil O'Connor: 01:00:39 Love to.
- Kurt Batdorf: 01:00:39 Great having you Phil.
- Phil O'Connor: 01:00:40 Thanks. I appreciate it.
- Speaker 6: 01:00:42 When you give to the Sno-Isle Libraries Foundation, your gift touches generations. Your donation helps turn babies and young children into readers, turn students and first time entrepreneurs into successes. Helps maintain the lifelong learning of adults, seniors and our home bound neighbors. You can be part of the change you're looking for. Your one time gift, monthly gift or memorial gift can make all the difference. Please consider investing in children, seniors and others through the Sno-Isle Libraries Foundation today.
- Jim Hills: 01:01:20 That was amazing right?
- Kurt Batdorf: 01:01:22 That was.
- Jim Hills: 01:01:22 I was not expecting that depth of personal involvement with his experiences in really...

Kurt Batdorf: 01:01:33 In war.

Jim Hills: 01:01:34 In war, yeah and in significant natural disasters in Haiti. The other part that I found really interesting is, the work that he'd been doing in Oklahoma that he's bringing here in moving journalism forward into a new age, a new digital piece.

Kurt Batdorf: 01:01:52 Digital kind of...

Jim Hills: 01:01:55 The whole package of experience that Phil brings to this community and to move journalism forward in a way that's going to work in the future.

Kurt Batdorf: 01:02:07 Yeah, it's an optimistic tone.

Jim Hills: 01:02:10 Very much so. Yeah, I think he definitely sees a path forward and a way to serve community and readers and listeners.

Kurt Batdorf: 01:02:19 Yeah and we'll all be better off for it.

Jim Hills: 01:02:21 Absolutely.

Speaker 2: 01:02:22 Thank you for listening to the Check It Out! Podcast. For free resources and materials connected to the day's guest and topic, head over to the libraries' website and search for the word podcast. The libraries' website is sno-isle.org/podcast.