Cass Corridor Evolution Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

Michael Betzold

Interviewed by

Danielle Ager

November 11, 2016

Detroit, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

Fall 2016

Brief Biography

Michael Betzold is a life-long resident of Michigan. His birth date is June 26, 1950 and attended Sacred Heart Seminary for high school, Michigan State University for his undergraduate degree, and Wayne State University for his graduate degree. Betzold was married from 1984 to 2011 to Kathleen Conway and they had two children: Patrick and Bridget. Betzold has worked for many local publications and continues today at the Motor City Muckraker (M. Betzold, personal correspondence, October 26, November 2, 2016 and oral history).

Interviewer

Danielle Ager, SLIS student.

Abstract

This is an oral history of Michael Betzold, a local journalist, done by Danielle Ager, a Wayne State Univeristy SLIS student as part of the Oral History course taught by Kimberly Schroeder. The interview goes over his career in journalism as well as the past, present, and future of journalism. The interview was conducted on November 11, 2016 in the Purdy/Kresge Library at Wayne State University.

Restrictions

None.

Original Format

Audio recording, WAV file, Mp3 file

Transcription

Done by Danielle Ager, November-December, 2016.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Information for Brief Biography from personal correspondence with the interviewee on October 26 and November 2, 2016 and the oral history. Verification of names information came from personal correspondence with the interviewee on December 7 and 9, 2016.

Cass Corridor Evolution Oral History Project

Walter P. Reuther Library

Wayne State University

Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted (November 11, 2016) with:

Michael Betzold, Detroit, Michigan

By: Danielle Ager

Ager: Hello. This is Danielle Ager and I'm here with Michael Betzold. It is November 11, 2016 and we are in the Kresge side of the Purdy-Kresge Library at Wayne State University's campus. Michael Betzold is a writer who has contributed to a number of publications from the Detroit area, including the Detroit Free Press and The Fifth Estate. He is also the author of a few books. Today we are going to talk about his experiences in Detroit journalism and views on journalism today. Thank you for meeting with me today Michael.

Betzold: My pleasure.

Ager: Alright so we're going to just start off with a few background questions. Um, when and where were you born?

Betzold: I was born June 26, 1950. I grew up in St. Clair Shores. I was actually born in Cottage Hospital in Grosse Point.

Ager: Alright and who were your parents?

Betzold: My parents, Eugene Betzold and Inez Ruwart.

(00:00:51)

Ager: Alright, so um when did you first become interested in writing? Or know you kind of wanted to go into journalism?

Betzold: Well, when I was a kid I used to, the most important thing is that we, like many people of that era in most cities, we got two daily newspapers every day. We got the Free Press in the

morning. We got the News in the evening and for a while I think we even got the Detroit Times, which was the third paper which folded in the early 60s. I avidly read those newspapers. I can even remember cutting out the main headlines from page 1 and keeping, pasting them to sheets of paper and keeping them for a year or two as sort of an archive of the march of history. I was really interested, I don't know how I got that interested, but I was always interested, immediately interested

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: And I used to make up my own pretend newspapers. And sport sections and things like that.

Ager: Really!

Betzold: So I was always interested in newspapers.

(00:01:55)

Ager: Um and then eventually when you got a little older you ended up going to Michigan State University correct?

Betzold: Yes.

Ager: From 68-73?

Betzold: That's correct.

Ager: And then you ended up going into psychology and interdisciplinary social science. Why did you decide not to go into journalism or was that not a degree that was offered?

Betzold: Right, we didn't, in those days, people in my cohort didn't really think much about careers, at least I didn't when I was in college. And in high school and at James Madison College, which was a residential college of Michigan State that I attended, I was the editor, coeditor at least, of what we called underground, alternative newspapers that basically attack the administration and usually used a lot of satire to do that.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: So in high school I went to Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit and they had a lot of (clears throat) a lot of rules that were easy to attack as being a Catholic seminary for the priesthood. And during the time I was there, the liberalization of the Catholic Church was underway so the rules were changing a lot. And anyway at Michigan State I coedited a similar publication. So I don't know why it never occurred to me to take journalism, probably because I was doing it.

Ager: Mmhmm. Ya.

Betzold: And I didn't think much about careers, it was just more like you'd sit down with a course schedule and it was sort of like a menu at a restaurant. What looked good.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: And what was at the right time.

Ager: Ya.

Betzold: And so once I graduated I had no idea what I was going to do.

(chuckles)

(00:03:37)

Ager: When you did graduate, what did you do?

(both laugh)

Betzold: Uh, I floundered around, I started a, with some other people, a communal household and was more interested in those kind of life style things that in a job per se.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: So eventually I drifted to working at The Fifth Estate.

Ager: Alright and then, so about when would you have been working at The Fifth Estate? It was mid 70s?

Betzold: Yes, it was in the mid 70s for about a year.

Ager: Ok.

Betzold: Between I think it was June 75 to June 76.

Ager: Alright, and what were your experiences like while you were at The Fifth Estate?

Betzold: Well, by the time I got to The Fifth, The Fifth Estate was this alternative newspaper that was started by Peter Werbe, who went on to be, to do a lot of radio locally and journalism, and a couple of his friends, and they viewed it as an anarchist publication. So in that period of time there were a lot of radical publications that also were advertised in, by local head shops. They were counter cultural publications and that's what The Fifth Estate was. But the problem was that by the time I joined it, the counter culture was dying. The head shops were closing, the advertisers weren't there and people were moving onto other things and losing interest in

the counter culture and so when I worked at The Fifth Estate, eventually we were down to a staff of three people.

Ager: Oh wow.

Betzold: The three people were a business manager, who came in once a week, looked in the desk and saw the few quarters that were there and put them in, put them in her pocket, myself and another brilliant reporter who unfortunately was a heroin addict. So that was it, the three of us. And we did everything at the paper: writing stories, signing stories, lining up the pages, everything but actually running the printing press.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: And um I serviced the coin boxes which were scattered, 80 so of them, across the metropolitan area which would mean I would mean I would drive way out to Westland or something, look in The Fifth Estate coin box and get the one or two quarters that were in there, and bring them back to the office. Occasionally Peter Werbe and the Franklin brothers [Alan and Ralph], who were the main forces of, the founders of the paper, pretty much ignored the paper except when they felt like coming in and doing an issue because they were not interested in doing a weekly paper, which is what we were. They were interested in a more radical anarchist type of situation. So during the period I was there the most famous thing they did, one of the most famous Fifth Estate things that Peter Werbe and the Franklin brothers did, was an issue on Easter Sunday that was headlined, screaming headlines that said "Christ's Body Found." And when that was published, I went out to the coin boxes the next week and people had driven cars into the coin boxes, smashed them completely. At least half of the 80 coin boxes were damaged or some of them were beyond repair because some people were so furious about that blasphemy of "Christ's Body Found". It was not, it was more like, more of the same in terms of journalism. More of the same meaning more satire, more irreverence for authority and I know that people there, and I learned this from other people who had worked there, routinely made up quotes to suit them.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: I know I even made up a whole story once. I decided that it would be a cool story to say that the defoliation of inner city Detroit due to Dutch Elm Disease was actually a plot to make it easier for the Vietnam era style helicopters to spy on black communities of Detroit. So I wrote this whole story and I went down to City Hall and did the, actually did the research on the progress of Dutch Elm Disease and the defoliation and the research, the figures I found matched my theory so perfectly that I almost persuaded myself that my made up story was true. So that was The Fifth Estate.

(chuckles)

Betzold: Eventually one day Peter Werbe and the Franklin brothers walked in and said that they were taking over the paper, that we had sold out to commercial enterprise and they were returning it to its true purposes and myself and the other members of the tiny staff basically heaved a sigh of relief and left. And that was The Fifth Estate and it continues to publish but it has many more readers internationally, like in Europe, than locally in Detroit because it's truly an international anarchist publication.

Ager: Interesting. Ya I kind of took some peeks at the website while I was looking it up. So how did you feel that The Fifth Estate either affected or reflected what was going on in Detroit at the time you were in it. Did it, or did you feel like it didn't?

Betzold: Well at the time like I said the counter culture was dying and The Fifth Estate was dying as a counter cultural paper so in that sense it reflected what was going on in Detroit and then the people who were running it decided they were more interested in what was going on internationally than really what was going on in Detroit. There was a time a few years before I was there that it did do local stories.

Ager: Mmhmm.

(00:10:01)

Betzold: Some of them fairly credible. But basically when I got out of there I was still in the same condition as when I entered which was a lack of basic journalism skills except what I was self-taught. And then what changed is I became employed by a newspaper called the Health Care News which was located I believe on Hancock right around Wayne State. The Heath Care News was a weekly paper that was distributed throughout the medical center and every major hospital in southeast Michigan and its mission was to report news of interest to that community, the health care community. So stories on consolidation, issues that affected the community but it also, because of the editor, had interesting things like a back page leisure section where I could review movies or review plays. And everything I knew about journalism I learned under the editor of the Health Care News, who was a gentleman by the name of Tom Ferguson. Tom Ferguson is my mentor in journalism. He's a tremendous journalist with a high sense of the ethical principles and is involved in every facet of newspapering. We got down with him and learned everything by doing it and that was the best training I could have had, much better than a journalism class. Because it was hand-on experience.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: And I got to do a little bit of everything: news reporting and also like I said, you know cultural reviews and that suited me just fine at the time and that's where I got my training. And from there I started to branch out and freelance more.

Ager: Mmhmm.

(00:12:03)

Betzold: In the early 80s, I did a lot of Detroit Free Press Sunday Magazine feature cover stories because they had a very active and lively Sunday Magazine at the time so I did a lot of those. I did some features for Hour Detroit and Metropolitan Detroit, which is now defunct but that was a competitive glossy monthly in the Detroit area at the time. And I also worked at, I also worked at, did features and stories for the Detroit Metro Times right from the beginning. I did cover stories and I did feature stories right at the beginning when they started as well as I was the first movie critic and a lot of people remembered me from my movie criticism more than anything else because I invented my own rating system for movies: stars, Ws, and Zs, 0-4. So stars were just like a normal if it was any good, Zs were how boring it was, and Ws were for how weird it was.

Ager: Ah!

Betzold: So that was my rating system at the Metro Times. So um..

(pause)

Ager: Do..

Betzold: I was learning by doing freelance work, and again a variety of different kinds of stories.

Ager: You had a lot of different variety in there for the kinds of stories you were doing it seems like.

Betzold: Ya, ya and even I remember in the early days of the Metro Times, Ron Williams and Laura Markham were the publishers. They became eventually millionaires by using the formula of an alternative weekly newspaper and spreading it to other cities. But they were also in a relationship and had problems with them. So one time Ron told me "I got to get my head together in Florida for a month, will you take over as editor for me?" and I said ok, I had no experience actually being an editor of a paper and I went and did it, was the editor for three issues. During that time, Laura approached me about an idea of doing a story. Playboy Magazine was doing a search locally so she decided that as a, she would do a feminist story of what it was like to try out for Playboy. I ran that on the cover, it was a great story, and Ron came back and was absolutely furious.

(both laugh)

Ager: So you kind of got put between their uh relationship issues.

(00:14:45)

Betzold: Right. So at the end of this period in the early 80s, now we are talking about 84/83, I got married um and my wife got pregnant with her first child and I decided it might be time for me to get a real job. And you know like I said I had been writing a lot for the Free Press, mostly the Sunday Magazine, and I remember walking through the newsroom and Brian Flanigan, who was sort of the star of, rabble rouser reporter of the day shouting out to me "Betzold, why don't you come and work on the paper. You do more stories than most of us who are on staff", which was somewhat true because I had to, to earn a living as a freelancer.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: So I took the test to work at the Free Press and was interviewed for the Free Press. And I was probably the last person I would think to be hired at a major daily newspaper who had never taken a journalism class and had never worked for a smaller daily newspaper in a smaller city which were the avenues by which you rise to the level that I got to. The reason I got hired I believe is because Tom Ferguson put in a good work for me. Tom Ferguson, because of his principles and his professionalism, actually got canned from the Free Press three different times. And they would fire him because he would get in a dispute with some editor about something and then you know six months or a year later the editors, different editors might say "Where's that Ferguson? Can we get him back?" So they'd hire him again. So I figured that's how I got the job because Tom was in the good graces at the time and he recommended me. I actually became a copy editor..

(00:16:46)

Ager: Ok.

Betzold: For the first 3 years. I had never worked as a copy editor before but I got put on the news copy desk and I worked there downtown on the copy desk for three years, which was an excellent way to train someone like me who didn't really understand first-hand how a daily newspaper worked. And it allowed me to see what went into a story from the other side. Now reporters and copy editors are often at odds because reporters think that copy editors mess up their stories and copy editors are pissed off because they never get credit for saving the reporter from making terrible blunders.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: But what it was like at the news desk then, I worked evenings because the deadline was 11 o'clock at night. That would be the first deadline. Because you know, a copy editor traditionally would get the story when the assigning editor and the reporter were done with it. You would get the story, you might have an hour to work on it, you might have 30 minutes, you might have 20 minutes, you might have two hours and you would have to, you would be the gatekeeper and check everything from spelling, punctuation and grammar, to facts and name spelling, to whether there's holes in the story. You would go back with the questions that you have and, like I said the reporters would think you were a big pain in the ass. But it was a great way to understand the process from the other side of being a writer. So it was a tremendous experience to be put on the copy desk. The last thing we would do is write headlines. Copy editors wrote the headlines.

Ager: Oh!

Betzold: You would get a headline order with maybe five, ten, fifteen minutes to go before you had to file it and it would be this many lines, this width and it was like a word puzzle. You had to fit that in there. I liked that, that was the creative part of the job.

Ager: So you said you did that for the first 3 years…

Betzold: Mmhmm

Ager: And then after three years, what did you do next?

(00:19:07)

Betzold: I became a general assignment reporter on the city desk at the Free Press and the general assignment reporter is just was it sounds like. It means that you go in in the morning and you don't know what you are going to do.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: And you could be assigned to any type of story. You could be assigned to just a news story that came up for the day, you could be assigned to help out a beat writer on a certain story, you know like a religion story or you know any other beat that, where they had a beat writer. And so again it was just like being on the copy desk and being at the Health Care News and freelancing. It was an exposure to sort of the wide world of journalism, not specializing in anything but seeing the whole picture and being ready to tackle any aspect of it.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: Um, and I remained a general assignment reporter for the rest of my ten years at the Free Press, but eventually I was transferred from downtown city desk to the Oakland County

Bureau. The Free Press had several different bureaus out in the suburbs and the Oakland County Bureau was one of those. Had a small staff of like four or five reporters and its own editor, a man named David Gibson who was a wonderful man and a great editor and basically I did the same thing there that I did downtown except now I was covering whatever came up in Oakland County. And what came up very quickly after I moved there was Jack Kevorkian.

(00:20:52)

Ager: Mmhmm

Betzold: Jack Kevorkian was the biggest story going at the time. He was the pioneer of his own brand of assisted suicide and I became one of the primary reporters assigned to the Kevorkian story. There were others who did the legal aspects of it as well and I basically covered the news of him assisting somebody else. And they would come in different, bizarre ways, different stories and I would go to the press conferences held by his attorney slash PR genius Geoffrey Fieger, who is still famous and very, very successful medical malpractice attorney in Detroit. Now in covering the Kevorkian story, it was like being thrown into the lion's den. Now I was covering a story that actually had some national play, a lot eventually. It was a big story. Fieger would have news conferences for all the TV, and radio and other reporters would attend and it would be like a big, a big show where he would present the whole story. Fieger was expert at shaping Jack Kevorkian's message. Jack Kevorkian was really not interested in assisted suicide at first. He was interested in doing medical experiments on people as they were dying. He started out by trying to recruit convicts on death row for his services and he really wanted to do things including organ transplants and he got interested in assisted suicide when he realized that here was another group of people, besides the convicts on death row, that he could to experiments on. Fieger realized early on that he had to talk for Kevorkian because if Kevorkian started talking, people would understand that he was a little bit of a crazy guy. So Fieger shaped his message to be one of a civil rights pioneer and he frequently mentioned people like Rosa Parks and put Kevorkian in the ranks of those people. And what he did very effectively is to make the Republican governor and Right to Life people who were no so happy with Kevorkian into these enemies who were trying to take away your freedoms, your right to die, which was not really a right but it was something that he convinced people was part of their, their rights and he, he wrote, I mean he basically gave the whole story to the TV. And the TV and the news would just, he would give such great sound bytes and they would just run with it and nobody really had to write the story, he wrote it for them. He had the enemy, you know he had the hero, he had the victim. The patient was always this horribly suffering patient in terrible pain and Kevorkian was the angel of mercy being persecuted by the evil religious right. Kevorkian was, I mean Fieger was a showman. He was motivated by trying to become more

famous than his brother Doug Fieger who was a rock musician with a group called The Knack who had a hit called “My Sherona”.

Ager: I have heard of that song

(both laugh)

Betzold: Ok! So he wanted to be, he was a showman, uh a lawyer of the showman type and he would use that to his advantage in court and would do the same kind of thing, you know painting the other side as the enemy and he, Fieger liked to play fast and loose with the facts. In fact I eventually came to understand that Fieger actually got a kick out of lying to people, or at least distorting things in a way that you know cast good light on him and see how much he could get away with. As the reporter on the story I had to check the assertions the next day and they frequently turned out to have a few holes you know.

(Pause)

Betzold: So that also was like I said a baptism by fire and a hell of a good experience. And during that time to make it even more amazing a story for me, one of the people that Kevorkian helped was my first cousin who I did not, the last, I knew her as a child and had played with her older sister a lot when we were kids and I didn’t even know she was terminally ill. And I happened to be, had the day off that day otherwise I would have been going to her house where the suicide took place. So that made it a very personal story for me.

Ager: Ya.

(00:26:10)

Betzold: And eventually I decided I was, again with some help from Tom Ferguson and some connections he had, decided to write a book about Kevorkian and I did so.

Ager: And it was called Appointment with Doctor Death correct?

Betzold: Appointment with Doctor Death, which I thought was going to be a huge bestseller but turned out not to be. Uh, it may have been that it was not properly promoted by and it was just a local publisher. And it may have been also that people loved to read about Jack Kevorkian in the daily newspapers or to watch the news about him but reading a whole book about him was maybe a different, a different thing that people didn’t want to do. In any event I wrote that book, wrote a cover story for the New Republic magazine, on how Fieger had accomplished this feat of packaging Kevorkian and that was probably the pinnacle, that cover story was probably the pinnacle of my career.

Ager: I read it and thank you for sending it to me. It was very interesting to read. What year did that book come out on Kevorkian?

Betzold: 1992, I'm guessing.

Ager: About that time, ok. So, you would have been, you were still at the Detroit Free Press at that time, while you were writing the book and everything?

Betzold: Yes, I took a leave to absence to write the book.

Ager: Ok you took a leave of absence.

Betzold: But not a long one, probably I think 6 months.

(00:27:49)

Ager: Ok, um and then I know, hearing about that there was the Detroit Newspaper Strike that went from 1995 to 1997.

Betzold: Yes.

Ager: Were you still on the Free Press staff during that time?

Betzold: Yes. That was the next chapter in my story, is July 13, 1995. I remember I cleaned out my desk at the Oakland County Bureau and the other people I worked with thought it was kind of fun, kind of crazy because they said "Ah we've had these strikes before and they, you know, only lasted a day or two or a week." Some people weren't taking it seriously. But other people had sort of informed me of what was going on.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Which was that the two largest newspaper companies in the country had joined together in a government approved joint operating agreement years before, and they had decided that they were going to make war on the unions in the you know, in one of the strongest union cities in the country.

Ager: Mmhmm

Betzold: And that was going to be an all-out battle and they would train all their resources to bust the unions and so we went. I left my job on July 13, 1995 and I never came back, as many people did not. Eventually the strike became a lockout and I was offered another job, but it wasn't comparable and was, also happened to many people so we didn't have to take our jobs back and by that time I have moved to Ann Arbor and I had no interest in returning to work to this decimated paper. During the strike, because I was living at Ann Arbor at the time, I didn't, I

participated in some of the protests out there and we had some interesting ones, but the main action was in Detroit. The main thing I did during the strike was I was one of the lead reporters at the Detroit Sunday Journal, which was the strike paper, the weekly strike paper that we had started and became quite a very successful enterprise that was featured in union households. And the problem was we were promised, I know, when the strike started, that we were going to have the strike paper immediately, but we didn't. It took like a month or two to get it up and running and that was valuable time that we lost in terms of advertising especially. But I did many cover stories for the Detroit Sunday Journal, uh including one where somebody had found some files related to the investigation of the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa.

Ager: Oh really?

Betzold: I did a big story, series of stories on that. So I worked for the Sunday Journal probably for three years.

Ager: Ok, ya I saw that it ran until about 1999?

Betzold: So maybe four years, ya. Three or four years.

Ager: So then, just to clarify, you said that, so when you were done writing there, you never went back to the Detroit Free Press. They offered you that job, but it wasn't comparable.

Betzold: Right.

(00:31:07)

Ager: So then what did you do after that, what…?

Betzold: Well we had moved to Ann Arbor, my family and I had moved to Ann Arbor, and I had started working for the monthly paper there, the Ann Arbor Observer, and I became eventually the deputy editor of the Ann Arbor Observer which was a monthly, independent, privately-owned monthly that is well respected in Ann Arbor. And I continued to work for them as a copy editor remotely from home.

Ager: Mmhmm. And now I know now you work for the Motor City Muckracker or you've done writing for them?

Betzold: I've done some writing for Motor City Muckracker which is an online publication started by someone who was also, who used to work at the Free Press but was fired. A guy names Steve Neavling.

Ager: So are there other, are you a freelancer journalist again then for the most part?

Betzold: Ya I call myself a semi-retired freelance journalist. So I am on Social Security at this point. I was on disability, I had a minor stroke in 2010 and that's when I stopped working full-time at the Observer. So you were interested in my thoughts on local journalism, now versus then?

(00:32:39)

Ager: Yes definitely! Could we just jump back real quick, I just wanted to clarify just for the listeners when you said you got married, who, what was your wife's name?

Betzold: Kathleen Conway. We are now divorced.

Ager: Alright. Thank you. And then, just another, one quick question. Just kind of going back to, I know you said that in the 70s you started working for the Health Care News, during that time you were also, you ended up going to Wayne State University to get your master's correct?

Betzold: Mmhmm, that's correct.

Ager: While you were at Wayne State, did you ever write for the South End, the local..?

Betzold: No.

Ager: Ok, I was just curious about it.

Betzold: No, that was a good question.

(00:33:22)

Ager: Alright, so now that we've kind of covered your career, briefly your career in journalism, just a couple things about journalism in general. How do you think that the internet has affected journalism, especially like in Detroit?

Betzold: Well, basically the internet has killed journalism because it killed the business model. When people can get news for free, they don't feel like there is any need to pay for it. The other thing that's happened especially recently since Facebook and Twitter have become so popular is that too many people have come to believe that they don't need journalists because they can be their own journalist. They can peruse the information and they can publish their own thoughts on it and so they don't have, there is no intermediary now, there's no, not as much of a role for professionals. And you know especially like with recent events like the election has shown that people don't trust what used to be the gatekeepers to tell them facts or news, they want to select their own facts. So now you can, you can live your life by just gravitating to the interpretations of facts or the information that you find appealing and you

don't have to deal with the stuff that other people have decided is, is work reporting. Now of course the old model, where there were these authorities, were mainly of course white males up to a time, where they decided what was worth reporting, that of course had a lot of problems in itself. But this new model where everybody just decides for themselves what the truth is, leave out a very important function of journalism. There is a need for professional people that are, like librarians I guess in a sense, able to discern the truth from you know the crap, able to have the skills to investigate and evaluated and analyze information and then communicate it responsibly to people. So I think there is a great loss generally.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: And in Detroit there's a huge loss because the Free Press and the News are shadows of their former selves, as most newspapers are these days. They don't have the staff that they used to because they don't invest the money in hiring good reporters. They don't have the resources they used to and they don't have the audience or the advertising that they used to. The business model, the advertising has also gravitated online so that's sapped that source of revenue.

(pause)

(00:36:35-37)

Ager: I'm just kind of curious, just because I know the internet has definitely affected how many people are getting the paper ones, but did, did the strike, the Detroit Newspaper Strike, did that affect circulation?

Betzold: Oh, tremendously. Tremendous affect because Detroit is a union town and a lot of people cancelled their subscription because that is what we wanted them to do and to subscribe instead to the strike paper and that's what many, many people did and the circulation has never recovered at the Free Press and the News from the strike. So you know we got everything that's happened in Detroit, you know the general decline of the city, the strike, you know the consolidation of the papers the recession. All that has combined to just decimate the two daily newspapers and so now people have to find other sources of information. I've been gravitating to Motor City Muckracker because Steve Neavling and I sort of share the same approach to journalism which I would basically, politely describe as speaking truth to power.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: Other people would describe it elsewise. But I've just moved back to Detroit a year and a half ago now from all my 22 years in Ann Arbor and what I found is you know thought I'd move back, all the places I used to write for are still, most of them are still here: Hour Detroit, Metro Times, Free Press. And I thought I could, do easily freelance and, but I've found it's a

different landscape. But the main thing I want to say is that there are a lot of stories in Detroit that are waiting there to be tackled but there are no resources and there's no, well the daily papers and the TV news, they don't have the interest in stories unless they're, many of them are kind of cheer, what I would call cheer leading for the powers that be in Detroit and the area. There is a lot of investigation that needs to be done but there's no, Steve doesn't have, you know he's self-funded. And you know it's hard to get people to pay for content so there's not enough money to pay a staff. He does it all himself. He does a great job. He investigated the whole Detroit Fire Department for an entire year by himself including counting the number of fire hydrants that are actually working, stuff like that. So he does really good, basic journalism and I would like, I would like to do more with him if I could find a source of income to make it work because like I said there are a lot of stories just lying around. I mean one of the ones I'm most interested in is who owns all this vacant land in Detroit? Who really owns it? Who knows what the plans are for it and what's going to happen? You know because most of the city is vacant land. It's a city where a million and a half people used to live and now it's minus those million and a half people but the property and the infrastructure are still there.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: So if I were running an enterprise with money for journalism, I would be putting resources into that story to really investigate who owns the land, what are the plans for it, who's going to make the decisions you know neighborhood by neighborhood, city wide. And that's just an example. There are so many stories in Detroit that are left undone. I mean Steve Neavling does two or three a day sometimes.

Ager: Ya.

Betzold: He'd done a whole recent thing here at Wayne State exposing what has been going on with the Mike Ilitch Business School and the administration here. And it's just a shame that there's you know so few resources to, to pursue that and people who've been in the profession like me, regardless of their points of view about you know what kind of journalism needs to be done, understand what a loss there's been. They understand that there's a terrible hole.

Ager: Mmhmm.

(00:41:22)

Betzold: You know in the world and that there is really a very increasingly important role for journalists. I mean I'd say journalism is more important than ever. I mean we've got presidential candidates up there you know spewing all kinds of false information and nobody calling them on it you know and we've got the same thing that's going on, that you see nationally, is going on in a microcosm locally.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: You know with nobody checking the facts, nobody running down the information and nobody talking to people and asking good questions about what's really going on. It just, I frankly don't know how society can continue to function very well without journalists.

(pause)

Ager: To find the truth?

Betzold: Being paid to do this job, because ordinary people cannot, cannot do it. It's like me when I started, it's like me at the Fifth Estate you know. I would make up stories and people would make up quotes and I don't know, you know we did it because we thought it was a joke.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: But now, if somebody did that, I don't know how many readers would be able to know whether it's a joke or not. They're not equipped to…

(pause)

Ager: To determine that just from reading?

Betzold: To have those skills. I mean maybe what needs to be done is to teach those kinds of skills you know in school from grade school and high school on so that people have those skills because there is nobody, nobody doing that work for them. I'll give you an example of something that just happed recently that I thought was pretty indicative of the change. The Detroit School Board was being reconstituted in this recent election earlier this week. Uh, Detroit has not had control of its own schools for ten years, they've been under state control. But now they've been reconstituted and a new School Board is being elected. There are seven seats on the School Board. There's no incumbents because it's a new board. It's a very important election because Detroiters now have the say in who's going to help run their schools for the first time in a long time.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: Fortunately I got an absentee ballot. I say fortunately because there were 63 candidates for the seven School board seats. So I'm going around trying to find information. Like I said, I've only been back in the Detroit area for a year and a half. I look at these people and I don't know who they are. I get literature in the mail from a few of them. I see a few lawn signs here and there. I try, I post on Facebook to my friends, "Give me some recommendations", I only get a couple names. There's only one person on that list that I actually know is a good person to vote for on my own. So a couple of weeks before the election

I see this story in the, there's this Free Press story that somebody posted online. And the Free Press in collaboration with WDET, with some independent freelancers, with some other institutions, has put together a team of like eight to ten journalists and they have done an investigation of these candidates. Including that they sent them all a questionnaire with three questions on it and gave the answers. But the main thing they've done is investigate their financial records.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: So the story comes out and is headlined "Half of the School Board Candidates have had Problems with Money" and the story talks about how some have been bankrupt, some oh, have been sued by landlords for back rent or have had other problems with their personal finances and that's the whole story. And then there is a link in the story where you can go to this database and you can look, you can type in the name of every one in the 63 candidates and get the answers to their questions. But that's like being the reporter yourself. I mean there's, there's nothing in the story to analyze what their answers are. There's nothing in the story about who endorses any of these people. What does the teacher's union think about these people? Have they endorsed anybody for the office? Not in there at all. The whole story is built around the premise that problems with your personal finances would somehow affect your performance on the School Board.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: And you know I guess there is a tenuous argument for that, that these people don't know how to handle their money, then they won't be good at handling the fiscal responsibilities of the office, but that's only a small part of what they're running for. And heck, they've live in Detroit and they've just been recently through a recession and if you've had a divorce or some other personal problem of course you're going to have these records. So I thought the premise of the story was faulty and I thought that they didn't do the job of you know guiding readers through all of this information. That's you see what I see if the job of journalism. There's all this information, you evaluate it, you analyze it and then you have to guide people through the path. You can't just put them in the middle of the forest and say here it is because people don't have the time to do all that leg work themselves and so I was quite critical of that story. Now I guess they later, and I didn't see, did actually do an endorsement, but that's an editorial function, you know an opinion function to do endorsements of candidates.

(pause)

Betzold: So I thought that was an interesting approach in that now with the internet you can do half the story and tell your readers to do the other half, do the evaluative half of it.

(pause)

(00:48:17-19)

Ager: With that in mind, what do you think like journalists or the newspapers need to do for there to really be like a strong future for newspaper and journalism since it's something we really need but..?

Betzold: Somebody needs to come up with a new business model. And I don't know how that would work, but somebody needs to come up with a business model that includes people paying for content the way they used to put the dime or the quarter in the coin box to get the daily newspaper. And that's all it would need to be, put a dime or a quarter or whatever, a dollar into the daily newsbox to get that information online, to get that delivered to you. That's one thing that has to happen and you know it has to include some role for advertising I guess. But I think there has to be also a reinvigorated concept of what's the purpose of journalism in a democracy.

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: What kind of stories do we need professional journalists to cover, to dig deeply into the information, to ask questions that aren't being asked, to explore what's really going on in business, government, the community and all other aspects of life. Um, and to do it a very sensible way, like I said speaking truth to power, you got to be able to uncover that truth in order to speak it.

Ager: Ya.

Betzold: And I don't believe that journalism has to be two equal sides to every story. I think that model broke a long time ago. So I personally feel that advocacy is a part of journalism if it is fact based, if it is based on good reporting because I think analysis is a very important part of reporting the news you know. If there is some analysis to be made, if you've discovered something important that is unknown and it's that, what you've discovered it, it's this politician is lying about this or this business is doing something that people don't know about, those kind of things. To report that is part of your job, it's not advocacy. It's up to the public to you know, institutions to figure out what to do with that information, but first they have to be equipped with that information.

Ager: Mmhmm

Betzold: And too many people are you know fumbling around in the dark or like I said choosing their own set of facts to believe. You know that's a dangerous situation.

(00:51:33-36)

Ager: Kind of going off topic from that, but uh it seems to be a topic you are pretty passionate about too. While I was looking through the Motor City Muckracker, I saw you wrote a couple articles about the Tigers Stadium.

Betzold: Mmhmm.

Ager: And you've also written a book about that correct?

Betzold: Ya, I'm actually, the second version of that book is about to come out where I collaborate with people. It's basically the same thing. But ya that's one of the things I've been writing about the end of that struggle for Muckracker. I've also been writing about Belle Isle and the Grand Prix, those are two things I'm passionate about. Now I can pick and choose my stories a little more, especially if I'm writing for somebody that basically I'm working for free so those are the few things I've been concentrating on. But ya I was actually, when I was at the Free Press I wrote some columns about baseball and the Tigers and I'm a big baseball fan and I was also working with an organization and I was trying to save Tigers Stadium. At the same time I wrote the history of that, of that site where baseball was played since 1896 until 1999. So ya, that was a passion project I guess you would say. And I've done a couple of collaborating books too where basically been the writer working with somebody who, you know writing their own. One actor was writing about pain, I wrote another one with a friend who wrote an oral history of auto workers. Those are two books I've worked on, and I've done a bunch of little things too.

Ager: The auto worker, was End of the Line?

Betzold: End of the Line.

Ager: I saw that in the catalog. I looked you up in the catalog and that came up.

Betzold: Good.

(pause)

Betzold: I basically kind of specialize, I kid myself I specialized in lost causes. (laughs) That's what it seems like anyway in retrospect.

Ager: So for that Tiger book, about the Tiger Stadium, when did that book come out?

Betzold: That was in the 90s as well. I would say maybe 89 or 90.

(pause)

Betzold: I've done a bunch of collaborative projects. Actually that book I had a coauthor with as well, so. That's fun.

Ager: Do you feel like, that your work with the stories about, and the book about the Tigers Stadium and the organization trying to save it, have you guys had any successes like with anything you've been trying to do with that site or is still a struggle?

Betzold: No pretty much it was a lost cause.

Ager: Ok

Betzold: Some people say we stopped the Tigers for five to ten years from moving out but eventually that happened and what's been going on lately as we have not, I have not been successful in persuading people that there needs to be a better use, reuse for the stadium than is planned.

(00:55:18-20)

Ager: Ok, I think there is one other question that I wanted to ask you that I had totally had jumped over when we were talking about some other things

Betzold: Ok.

Ager: So I'd forgotten to ask but I was just kind of curious, going back to when you were actually a student here at Wayne State, uh do you remember what, that would have been late 70s correct?

Betzold: Mmhmm.

Ager: What was the atmosphere like around Wayne State at the time? Like kind of like what was going on? I know from just a little background research I know there was that, it would have been like the Cass Corridor Art Movement around that time, but more towards the end of it. Just kind of anything that you experienced?

Betzold: I can't recall anything I was particularity involved in.

Ager: Ok.

Betzold: I was actually teaching remedial writing at the writing workshop which was to get people to write proficiency exams so that they could graduate. And while I was doing that, the reason I started taking linguistic classes is that I thought it would help me with teaching writing, but that was just, turned out to be a sideline. I didn't stick with that very much. Also, I remember I talked to the head of the linguistics program at Wayne state, which was a pretty small program

Ager: Mmhmm.

Betzold: And I said, “What can you do with a master’s in linguistics?” and he said “Absolutely nothing.” And I said, “Good, it will go well with my bachelor’s in psychology.”

(both laugh)

Betzold: But I don’t remember what was really happening around Wayne State in particular at the time. Of course there was you know throughout my whole time in Detroit there’s been talk about connecting the News Center to downtown, connecting Wayne State to downtown. And now it’s actually happening. Rebranded name, Midtown; I still think of it as the Cass Corridor. So now I see Detroit I see remnants of the old Detroit, stuff you know that’s changing and new, present and everything in between and all the vacancy, all the vacant land. So it’s a fascinating time to be in Detroit in a way. I just wish there was more examination of what is really going on. Who’s making the plans and who’s fighting the power? Ya, who’s battling to save the historic homes that are going down so that Mike Ilitch can build a new hockey arena? Stuff like that you know.

Ager: Which is where we need the journalists. Full circle, it goes back to, back to that.

Betzold: Ya, right.

(00:58:20)

Ager: I know, seems like there, some people feel very strongly about the change from being called Cass Corridor to Midtown. Seems to be kind of a hot topic.

Betzold: Ya.

Ager: Do you have any feelings about that?

Betzold: Ya I’ve been told that Midtown is a corporate brand.

Ager: Mmhmm. Ya.

Betzold: Ya, I don’t like it. I have trouble saying it.

Ager: I can see that.

(00:58:48)

Ager: I guess is there anything else you would like to share just regarding your experiences in Detroit, just as a writer in Detroit or anything else with journalism?

Betzold: Well, Detroit is a hell of a story, it's a hell of a story. I mean I've been thinking about how to write what's really going, you know like in a memoir type thing or maybe as a national story. You know I think about that all the time, but it's almost too big to get your arms around. Detroit is a very, very unique place in the world. I mean there's never been a city that's been so abandoned, a million and a half people gone. You know there's never a city that experienced in my lifetime, both such incredible wealth and prosperity and the epitome of the American dream for middle class working people, working class people, and then a total abandonment by industry and by residency and by government, total neglect. And now the stirrings of a different kind of city coming back. It's not like any other place that I know of on Earth. I think it has a very unique story, it has an incredible history. And I think the thing about Detroit is that Detroit keeps destroying its history, it doesn't value its history very much, especially its history of place, places you know. Because that's all that's left are the places that people hold dear in a lot of cases, like Belle Isle. Unmatched sort of cultural wealth, artistry from music to any other kind art that you can name. And especially what's great for journalists is that the people in Detroit are really worth writing about, really special people doing some incredible things and there's just so many stories that beg to be written about.

Ager: Mmhmm

Betzold: People who are working in their own neighborhoods, people who have stuck it out, people who have incredible, creative projects and ideas, interacting with the various institutions like the university or the art institute you know and the other foundations and things that still remain from the days when Detroit was, Detroit was… Detroit was the city that people from Toronto used to go to visit on the weekends because it was such an amazing place, you know back in its heyday in the early 60s. You know and you can still see that in the buildings that remain. The fabulous ruins of Detroit.

Ager: There definitely is a revitalization which is exciting to see.

Betzold: Mmhmm.

Ager: It still is a really amazing city to visit.

Betzold: Ya. So I still have in my mind writing projects if I can figure out how to tackle. It's like I envision being like a tour guide. If I could be a tour guide to my lifetime in Detroit, to the last 50 years or so in Detroit, that's lots and lots of stories there.

Ager: That would be. Well thank you so much for all this information. This has been really fascinating to speak with you.

Betzold: Oh.

Ager: And I really appreciate it.

Betzold: I appreciate your interest. It was fun, get to talk about myself.

(both chuckle)

Ager: Well it's been really interesting to learn about your experiences with these different newspapers and just your thoughts on journalism in Detroit in general. Thank you.

Betzold: Thank you.