

To the judges,

How do you write about a teenager who wants his story told, when there is no safe way to tell it?

That was the dilemma underlying "A Betrayal," a compelling narrative by ProPublica immigration reporter Hannah Dreier about a gang member who secretly became a government informant, only to face death threats and deportation after federal agents reneged on their promise to protect him. Henry, a Long Island high school student, wanted to get away from his brutal gang, MS-13. He worked with law enforcement for about a year, helping police and the FBI arrest his fellow gang members, until authorities revealed his identity and used his own admission of gang membership to seek his deportation. He was jailed alongside those he informed on, and MS-13 vowed to kill him.

Dreier came across Henry's case in October 2017 while reporting on Long Island about the casualties of the Trump administration's bungled crackdown on MS-13. At first, all she knew was his gang name, Triste, the Spanish word for "sad." Henry's lawyer said there was no way to do a story and protect his client's identity, so Dreier just kept tabs on the case as Henry moved toward deportation to El Salvador, where he had been marked for death as an informant. But as the outlook grew increasingly grim, Henry and his lawyer decided that a news story might be a last remaining option to save his life.

Henry agreed to speak with Dreier in February 2018, when he had just turned 18. He was eager to talk, and from what he told her, his plight seemed like a strong illustration of how over-zealous immigration enforcement can undermine a criminal investigation. He called her from his jail ward dozens of times in the weeks after their first meeting, whispering into the receiver as other MS-13 members tried to eavesdrop. He arranged for Dreier to be given his cellphone, and she combed through years of text and WhatsApp conversations, as well as exchanges he had with his FBI handler. He helped her make a glossary of Spanish gang slang so that she could understand some coded messages.

She initially thought she would use only Henry's gang name. But Henry told Dreier he was willing to use his real first name as well; he didn't want to be Triste anymore. He also agreed to let ProPublica use a video and photos of him. He gave Dreier permission to call his friends and family, and to contact people whose names recurred in his Facebook chat history, which ran for 2,000 pages. It was extraordinary access. And given Henry's youth and deeply vulnerable position, Dreier wondered if it was too much.

TRADE OFFS

As soon as Dreier started reporting, she began thinking about how to balance Henry's desire to tell his story with the threat to his life. She consulted with gang and law enforcement experts and with Henry's lawyer to evaluate whether he might be exaggerating the risks he faced. She became convinced that what Henry said was true: He was a dead man walking. A story promised a sliver of hope that someone might intervene.

PRE-PLANNING

After Dreier finished her first draft of the story, top ProPublica and New York Magazine editors met to discuss the ethical considerations of running a story that could put a young person already in such significant danger at even more risk. In the end, Dreier and the editors realized they could not truly protect Henry by obscuring his face more or redacting his name; anyone in the gang who read the piece would know who he was.

The decision came down to the question of whether or not to publish. Dreier and her editors agreed not to run the story against Henry's will. He had already been victimized by the gang and the government; Dreier didn't want to cause him any further harm. The only way forward was to lay out for Henry and his lawyer all the possible consequences of publishing this story, and give them time to reconsider their choices. Dreier negotiated with ICE for a second in-person interview with Henry, so they could have this conversation in a private room, not on the phone, where Henry might not feel free to speak his mind. She made clear to him and his attorney that the piece would run on ProPublica's site and in print in New York magazine, and a video

would be circulated on social media. In the end, even given a chance to have the piece killed, Henry was clear: He wanted his story told.

“To put it simply, I feel betrayed,” he told Dreier. “This could help people understand what it’s like to try to get away from the gang. People think they know, but they can’t imagine what’s it’s really like to live this.”

EXTRA PROTECTION

In light of Henry’s youth and the pressures of the situation, Dreier adopted some restrictions that Henry did not ask for. She left out details about where he might go if he was released from jail, and refrained from contacting sensitive sources. ProPublica and New York didn’t publish his last name, or run photos that might reveal his identity. At the request of Henry’s lawyer, they agreed not to translate the story into Spanish, as ProPublica does with other immigration coverage, and Dreier declined requests to discuss the story in Spanish-language media.

MAKING IT COUNT

Dreier wanted the risk that Henry was taking to matter, to truly make readers feel they were walking in his shoes. So in addition to the 7,000-word narrative co-published with New York Magazine, ProPublica ran an 8-minute [video](#) in which he told his own story, while viewers watched it unfold in animation. It also published a [new story form](#) for ProPublica, the “Twitter film” — a Tweetstorm with animated slides that came alive with Henry’s text messages.

IMPACT

The impact was extraordinary. Hundreds reached out, offering Henry jobs and a home, and donating to a fundraiser that raised \$35,000 to help him find a safe place to live once he was released or deported. The Department of Homeland Security opened a civil rights investigation. ICE said it would stop creating detailed gang memos, which jeopardize informants, and offered to move Henry into protective custody. Officials who had refused to testify on his behalf in immigration court suddenly were onboard. Amid intense public attention, the judge granted all parties an extension. The story drew some 300,000 ProPublica readers, who spent an average of 27 minutes on the piece, four times the site’s average. One reader wrote, “For the first time, I feel compassion for an illegal alien.”

FOLLOW-UP

Dreier continued to follow Henry’s case after the story ran. At Henry’s asylum hearing, an ICE lawyer tried to get her tossed out of the courtroom, and repeatedly asked the judge if Henry really understood what he was signing up for by inviting a reporter to a proceeding that is ordinarily closed to the media. Did he know that a story about the hearing would be published? Had Henry seen Dreier taking notes, and did he understand what they were for? But, like ProPublica, the judge decided it would be patronizing and wrong to try to prevent Henry from choosing for himself if he wanted coverage. “Is it a smart move? Not a smart move? That’s subject to debate. But he has certain rights, and one of those rights is to waive his right to privacy,” the judge said.

In the end, “A Betrayal” may have saved Henry’s life. It didn’t stop his deportation to El Salvador; while expressing great sympathy for him, and confirming Dreier’s account, the judge ruled that Henry’s admission to police that he had been an MS-13 member barred him from staying in the U.S. But, with the money that readers donated and the extra time allowed by delaying the hearing, Henry was able to set up a plan to go into hiding in a safe third country. In another fraught choice, ProPublica has opted to hold off on publishing a news story about Henry’s deportation so that he can pass through El Salvador without the gang being tipped off.

For careful and empathetic reporting that balanced the imperative to expose bad policies and abuses of power against the danger to a teenager’s life, ProPublica is proud to nominate Hannah Dreier for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,

Dan Golden
Senior Editor, ProPublica

Story List:

1. A Betrayal ([4/2/2018](#))
2. Teenage MS-13 Gang Informant Heads Into Final Asylum Hearing ([4/5/2018](#))
3. Teen Who Faced Deportation After He Informed on MS-13 Gets Temporary Reprieve ([4/6/2018](#))
4. Were Henry's Civil Rights Violated? ([4/27/2018](#))

More in her full series here: <https://www.propublica.org/series/ms-13-on-long-island>

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