

Jan. 14, 2020

To the Anthony Shadid Award Committee:

On April 24, 2019, the battered body of 5-year-old AJ Freund was found wrapped in plastic garbage bags and buried in a shallow grave. The slain boy's parents were charged with his murder and the grim details of his abuse soon came to light.

A Chicago Tribune review of the case revealed state child-welfare officials repeatedly failed to properly assess the dangers AJ faced in his home, and the beleaguered Illinois Department of Children and Family Services was forced to answer difficult questions about whether it missed opportunities to protect the boy. In the final hotline investigation, just four months before his violent death, AJ told an emergency room doctor when asked about a large bruise on his hip, "Maybe Mommy didn't mean to hurt me."

Reporter Christy Gutowski and her editors faced many ethical questions and reporting challenges to ensure the public knew the truth about what happened to this little boy: The judge overseeing the parents' criminal cases allowed many court records to be filed under seal. The coroner refused to release AJ's autopsy report, a decision the Tribune continues to appeal. Records regarding the family's contacts with DCFS, juvenile court and AJ's medical history are confidential and protected from public inspection in Illinois. And most of the important figures -- prosecutors, defense attorneys and family members -- had declined to talk to reporters.

For four months, Gutowski worked to obtain confidential documents and eventually received copies of evidence photos as well. These showed AJ during the investigation of a hotline call in which the boy showed a severe hip bruise to a police officer. The photos were disturbing, and editors were faced with the difficult decision of whether to publish them. Was it sensationalism to show AJ in this vulnerable state? Would readers and AJ's family be offended? Would it somehow be a disservice to the little boy's legacy or a distraction in the story?

Gutowski interviewed trusted child welfare sources, including a board-certified child-abuse pediatrician and an advocate who grew up in foster care, to get their thoughts. All agreed the public needed to see the photos. One responded, "You are not only his voice, you need to be his tongue." At the Tribune, the managing editor led a discussion with the large group of journalists involved in the project, including photo editors, to weigh the issues revolving around the photo. In the end, the Tribune would publish the photo. But we would only use one of them and it would be embedded in the story at the appropriate place, not made a centerpiece of the design in print or online.

Other ethical questions in this national story dealt with whether to name siblings, as other media outlets had, including an older brother who had recently turned legal age but was doing his best to have a normal life and focus on his college studies. The

Tribune chose against naming any of the children to protect their privacy. After months of conversation, each visit requiring nearly four hours of driving roundtrip, Gutowski also gained the trust of AJ's grandmother and is the only reporter to whom the family has granted interviews.

The grandmother, whose daughter is charged with murder, served as a crucial voice in the Tribune's two-part series on AJ's life. She was faced with tough choices when it came to her daughter and her grandchildren. She saved the oldest grandson, fighting a prolonged court battle for custody. Still, she struggles with regret for not realizing the danger AJ faced. Gutowski handled these interviews with compassion, patiently letting her reveal her feelings of guilt, grief and regret when she was ready, while not shying away from asking the questions that needed to be answered.

Besides the two-part series, the Tribune also published a shorter sidebar that revealed nearly one dozen contacts the child's mother had with DCFS officials and reported exclusive details about an internal state investigation that concluded with the recommendation of dismissals of three DCFS workers.

Despite the difficult subject matter and lengthy material, Tribune readers showed that long-form narrative writing still is coveted in this digital era of journalism. The AJ series had previously unseen engagement times with our online readers and were among the most read stories on the year.

"Keep the light on," reader Dudley Chappell wrote. "So many failures in the system and society." Another reader, Bill Ackerman, wrote: "I've been a daily subscriber for decades and the cost is a stretch, but journalism like this must be supported." And Jim Baumann, also a reader, wrote: "The AJ story shocked and stunned the community I live in and its ripple effects were felt across the nation. I've heard it said that people learn best from reading or hearing stories. Hopefully Gutowski's story is a good primer and metaphor regarding the synergistic effects of child neglect and abuse, domestic violence, and drug and alcohol addiction."

After AJ's murder, Illinois' governor increased DCFS' budget, allowing for more hires, training and better technology. A task force of state lawmakers is meeting to find systemic solutions. Time will tell.

For meticulous, sensitive reporting involving emotionally difficult material, I nominate the Chicago Tribune and reporter Christy Gutowski (cmgutowski@chicagotribune.com) for the Anthony Shadid Award.

Links to submitted stories are included. PDFs of pages also available.

Part One: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/investigations/ct-aj-freund-crystal-lake-parents-part-1-20191029-ptrqinmdjzf4fikayack65tfde-story.html>

Part Two: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/investigations/ct-aj-freund-crystal-lake-parents-part-2-20191029-fqep5pq5gjau7fpkxhgtyigu7e-story.html>

Sidebar: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/investigations/ct-aj-freund-dcfs-workers-20191021-h3s3z5awszbhbmffgzxsnvfvli-story.html>

(If you have trouble accessing beyond the [chicagotribune.com](https://www.chicagotribune.com) paywall)

Username: tribunejudge@gmail.com

Password: chicago123

Sincerely,

George Papajohn

Chicago Tribune investigations editor

312.799.0431

gpapajohn@chicagotribune.com