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JOURNAL SENTINEL

To the judges:

On Feb. 28, 1976, 14-year-old John Zera walked out of study hall at Franklin High School and disappeared, launching a frantic search first by his family, then police. His body was found eight days later, unclothed, in a nearby park, launching an ill-fated investigation that left the crime unsolved.

The case would have gone forgotten, and the deep flaws in the investigation unknown, but for the determined reporting of Gina Barton of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. She received a tip about the case, spent years cultivating law enforcement sources, and ultimately persuaded three jurisdictions to fully open their case files, knowing that her reporting would highlight their own errors.

And hoping it might help them, finally, catch the killer.

Barton dug through some 6,000 pages of documents – witness logs, police reports, interview transcripts, medical examiner files, case notes – and watched 25 hours of videos from the interrogation of key witnesses. She did her own interviews, dozens upon dozens of them: family, friends, police. She was even able to persuade key suspects to talk, one from prison where he is serving time for a different crime.

The result is “Unsolved: A murdered teen, a 40-year mystery,” a stunning investigation – written in a serial narrative style – that captivated readers in Milwaukee and across the country.

It combines deep and detailed reporting with a deft writing touch, shifting readers between the crime scene, the initial investigation and a cold-case effort years later to solve the crime. It puts readers in the stationhouse as small-town detectives are overwhelmed by a wave of tips, in the basement of the home of a child molester when police find a creepy display and in the interrogation room as detectives fail, repeatedly, to get the confessions they seek.

Barton’s examination found major flaws in the investigation by police, including:

- The sergeant in charge of the initial investigation spent two years focused on a construction worker with an alibi, while having an affair with one of the suspect’s friends.
- The police in the 1970s relied heavily on lie detector tests, some of which were incorrectly administered.
- The medical examiner at the time failed to properly preserve evidence.
- Crime scene investigators failed to photograph the word “Hell,” written in ballpoint pen on the boy’s wrist, making it impossible to compare the writing with that of multiple suspects.
- The cold-case detective who reopened the case in 2001 suffered from tunnel vision, continuing to focus on the same primary suspect as his predecessors.

Barton’s reporting underlined – in a vivid way – how important it is for local crime investigators to know and follow the fundamentals of their jobs, keep up with scientific and technological advances, and share information across jurisdictions.

Indeed, Barton’s reporting led police last year to reopen the case for a second time.

In retracing long-forgotten tips, police have identified a serial killer who was never seriously pursued as a suspect in the wake of the crime. And, prompted by questions from Barton, they

have turned to a new technique that could allow them to glean skin cells from the victim's clothing for DNA testing.

Barton's extraordinary reporting was matched by the care she and a team of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel journalists took in presenting it in a comprehensive and fair manner. Here are some examples of the ethical issues we faced and how we addressed them:

- **Tackling the story:** To present the story as a narrative, we needed the support of family members to tell it. We did not begin until we had that. We worked closely with Zera's older brother to present the enduring pain and impact of the case on the family. Because the parents, now elderly and frail, did not want to be interviewed, we found a decades-old TV news series that reflected their views at the time. This way, their views were included, but they did not have to be interviewed for the series.
- **Identifying flaws in the investigation:** This is not a story where the police and other investigators are portrayed as heroes. They made mistakes along the way. Many of them. To describe what went wrong, Barton had to build deep trust with each law enforcement source so he or she knew the situation would be presented fairly. We were determined to present errors and hold those responsible to account and did so.
- **Key players who have died:** Some of the key participants have died, others simply could not be found. Or, they were found, but declined to be interviewed. In these circumstances, Barton did extensive searches of the documents to accurately reflect their views at the time and consulted outside experts who were able to provide insight into policing tools and techniques of the time. This can especially be seen in the segments explaining the dawn of lie detector tests and the way police used them.
- **Transparency:** Each installment included a box explaining the source of information and, where appropriate, our basis for being able to describe what people were thinking at the time. Online, we linked to dozens of documents that provided more depth to the story. Before posting those, we scrubbed them to avoid publication of any stray names.
- **Avoiding damaging comments from readers:** This type of story can prompt reader comments that speculate on other potential suspects, trash the suspects or even demean the victim. As such, we did not allow online comments. Instead, we set up online chats with the reporter and a chief detective in the case, a dynamic in which we could avoid damaging and potentially inaccurate information from being published on our site.
- **Naming suspects and witnesses:** Finally, we took a thorough and reasoned look at how and why we were naming people at each step in the process. A mental health patient whom police agreed a suspect was trying to frame? Unnamed. A swim coach who inserted himself at every step of the investigation and was later convicted as a serial child molester? Named.

Just as the police were presented in full, with their foibles and foul-ups on display, the suspects were not presented as cardboard bad guys. Three of the four primary suspects are living. Barton was able to persuade each of them to talk to her, a remarkable feat in itself.

In the end, Barton's story builds suspense with exquisitely crafted scenes, develops characters with well-chosen details and, with each chapter, leaves readers going faster – even as they don't want the story to end. It reads as a mystery novel, but reflects the highest journalism standards.

Consider: One of the primary suspects was a substitute teacher who went on to a career that included time as a scout for the Seattle Supersonics, only to see his opportunities collapse time and again as police took their years-long suspicions of his involvement to his employers.

He had never been publicly named as being tied to the case. If we were to obscure him entirely, the characterization would have been so generic it could have pointed to many people who worked at the school at the time. And we would not have been able to explore the aggressive manner used by police as they pursued him, and the devastating effect on his life. In the end, we decided to use his name, but to take steps online so that it would not pop up in Internet searches. (He is still working in California).

After the story ran, he wrote a letter that congratulated Barton and the Journal Sentinel on the "story's accuracy and fairness, even though a tough part of my life was discussed." It noted that he found Barton, throughout, "to be in search of the real story and how it altered my life greatly."

Finally, it is important to note the immersive online presentation (www.jsonline.com/unsolved) that lets readers keep digging deeper into the story – to a cast of characters, a timeline, maps, police documents, even a flip-through version of the journal of one of the main suspects.

This includes a weekly podcast – featuring Barton as the narrator – that unspooled with the print story over seven consecutive Wednesdays in November and December. You will see that the same care and attention to fairness is carried throughout the entire project.

I am making this nomination as the editor who oversaw the project, and who directly consulted with Gina Barton and others on the decisions along the way.

Thank you for considering Gina Barton for the Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,

Greg Borowski,

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