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To the Judges:

[A seven-part podcast](#), “Canary: The Washington Post Investigates,” explores the decisions of two women to share their accounts of sexual assault — and the spiraling consequences of those choices. Canary reveals systemic problems within the criminal justice system that illustrate how difficult it is for survivors to feel any sense of justice.

The story begins with Lauren Clark, a young hair stylist who was jogging in the District of Columbia when a stranger attacked her. After her assailant — a local chef — admitted to assaulting five other women, a prominent D.C. Superior Court judge, Truman A. Morrison III, sentenced him to just 10 days in jail, served on weekends.

After the chef was let off probation early without getting the required treatment, Clark took matters into her own hand — giving out flyers on the street with information about the case. Investigative reporter Amy Brittain dug into court records to tell Clark’s story. That was just the beginning of a two-year reporting odyssey that would become The Post’s first serialized investigative-podcast.

A 59-year-old baker from Alabama, Carole Griffin, read Brittain’s story and reached out with a stunning allegation: Judge Morrison had sexually assaulted her decades ago when she was a 16-year-old girl on a family vacation. The tip from Griffin sparked a new and uncharted reporting path: an original, audio-first investigative project that centered on Griffin’s decision to publicly accuse Judge Morrison of sexual assault.

Canary draws on over 75 hours of audio tape, gathered from reporting trips to three states, numerous phone calls with sources and thousands of hours of data-scraping to unearth sexual assault cases that Morrison handled over his 40-year career on the bench. Every phone call, car ride and late-night discussion around a kitchen table was recorded. The podcast shows what it takes to come forward with a claim of sexual assault, how journalists work to corroborate such an account, and why that reporting matters.

Embarking on an extended audio series about sexual assault was a decision that Post journalists did not take lightly. The path forward was fraught with possible ethical pitfalls. The intimate nature of audio has its obvious strengths, including the opportunity for listeners to feel a deep connection to the subjects and a personal investment in the outcome of the series. But the medium also carries clear risks. If every aspect of the story — from reporting and writing to sound design and music — is not handled with care, it has the potential to feel invasive, voyeuristic and even exploitative. Brittain and a team of Post producers and editors had extensive discussions about how to convey the messy reality of trauma in a way that did not sensationalize the pain, sadness and anger that was captured on tape.

In published accounts about sexual assault, the public sees only the final, polished version. It is common for survivors to be questioned about their motives. Why didn’t they speak out earlier? What’s in it for them? And reporters are often unable to convey the scope and depth of the interviews. Often, that’s because the most gut-wrenching reporting transpires during the initial months of negotiations with sources, when the fate of a story is uncertain.

The Post’s decision to air these sensitive and typically private exchanges is part of a larger philosophy we adopted in producing Canary: to proceed with radical transparency. There is no artificial suspense: rather than draw out the natural tension, all episodes were released in one batch. Sound design is not trumpeted up to raise heart rates. Rather, it is scaled back to let listeners sit in moments of frustration, anger and even failure. As former Life Magazine editor Bill Shapiro [tweeted](#), “Canary should be required listening for journalism students in terms how to tell a hard story with sensitivity.”

The Post broke the wall of the fourth estate by talking directly to listeners and exposing the innerworkings of our craft. When we take a deep dive into data reporting and dusty, old court files, we explain why we are pursuing these cases and what challenges we cannot overcome. Those limitations illustrate the larger, unsurmountable barriers in holding judges to account. As journalist Pamela Colloff [tweeted about Canary](#), “It’s a model of how to report on both individual stories of sexual assault and larger systemic problems in the criminal justice system.”

Here are some examples of the ethical decisions that the Canary team confronted. We have included the episodes and timestamps for your reference.

- The Canary team was acutely aware that, given the prevalence of sexual assault, many listeners would have direct experience with the subject matter. We did not want to trigger pain, discomfort or anxiety, but we felt a journalistic obligation to be specific — yet not gratuitous — in describing what happened to Clark and Griffin. The beginning of each episode includes a sexual violence content warning. In addition, right before we air the descriptions, we give listeners a heads up. Then we let Clark and Griffin tell their accounts, in their own words. ([Chapter 1: 4:35-6:55](#) and [Chapter 2: 11:53-19:52](#))
- Months into the reporting, Griffin considered backing out. “The onus, the pressure, the - the decision. I’m the arbiter somehow,” she said. She broke down in tears. Brittain knew that the publication of the story was at risk, but she did not try to convince Griffin to stay with the story. Brittain has since told curious listeners that, in the moment, she heard another human being suffering and felt that if her reporting was contributing to Griffin’s pain, she should back off. Brittain told Griffin it was okay if she did not want to continue. Ultimately, Griffin chose to go forward. ([Chapter 5, 0:40 – 6:47](#))
- [Judge Morrison retired during the reporting process](#), just three days after Brittain asked for comment. He sent several written responses but did not agree to be interviewed. The Canary team felt it was essential to present material that reflected a fair and full account of his legal career and personal reputation. Brittain conducted additional interviews with his friends, one of whom one criticized Griffin for not speaking out earlier. The Canary team had extensive discussions about how to treat this material, and ultimately decided that it would be a public service to air the raw exchanges — which add nuance and shed light on why many survivors stay silent. ([Chapter 6, 17:40-27:15](#))
- Griffin and Clark came together in an emotional meeting. Beforehand, Brittain and producer Reena Flores discussed how they did not want their presence to interfere with the authentic emotions of the moment. Some reporters may have felt tempted to steer the conversation to capture the perfect reactions. Instead, Brittain and Flores crouched on the floor, holding microphones to capture the audio, but did not say a word. Because of the journalists’ care to stay out of the way, an organic dialogue unfolded in which Griffin and Clark ended up asking each other questions. ([Chapter 7, 10:20-20:20](#))

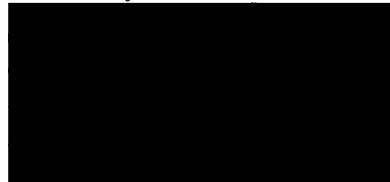
- In the final days before the podcast’s scheduled launch, a new piece of evidence came to light. The series had already been edited, fact-checked and reviewed by lawyers. The team held an emergency meeting. One option was to leave the series as is because there was so little time to make changes. But the final decision was unanimous: rip up the final episode and incorporate what transpired. It was our journalistic duty to proceed with transparency and fairness, not only for the subjects but for the eventual listeners who had a right to know how the reporting truly ended. The production team worked around the clock to re-write, re-record and re-score the final episode. ([Chapter 7: 20:20 –25:30](#))

After rough drafts of seven episodes were assembled and edited by the core Canary team, a team of eight journalists across our newsroom (who had no previous knowledge of the story) also listened. They served as a “backstop” to make sure we were handling the subject matter with the utmost respect, sensitivity and professionalism. We sent surveys asking: “What made you uncomfortable? Was this too much? Was this not enough? Are we being fair?” We then held discussion forums over Zoom that turned into lively debates over everything from phrasing and tone, to cuts and music, including the amount of silence needed to allow listeners to process the gravity of the material. Their concerns, critiques and sharp edits were taken to heart. Several episodes of the series went through over two dozen rounds of revisions.

The immense care that the Post team took in creating the Canary podcast has not gone unnoticed. Sexual assault advocates and mental health professionals have since hailed the series as an innovative journalistic endeavor that shines light on the often-hidden struggle of survivors and presents trauma as an authentic and complex human experience. Already, it has been used as a training tool for therapists, sexual assault prevention officers on an Air Force base in Florida and over 40 advocates who work in South Africa to combat gender-based violence.

The Washington Post is proud to nominate, “Canary: The Washington Post Investigates” for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

Sincerely,



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URL for podcast landing page: www.washingtonpost.com/canary

