

January 16, 2024

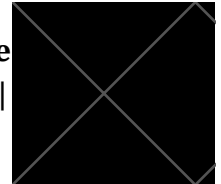
Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics | Center for Journalism Ethics  
School of Journalism and Mass Communication | University of Wisconsin-Madison

To the Committee:

Please accept these materials to support the nomination of [America's Dairyland](#) for the Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics.

**1) Name and contact information of the nominators and their relationship to the**

- Steve Mills | Deputy Midwest Editor | ProPublica | [steve.mills@propublica.org](mailto:steve.mills@propublica.org) |
- Ariana Tobin | Engagement Editor | ProPublica | [ariana.tobin@propublica.org](mailto:ariana.tobin@propublica.org)



**2) Names and emails of the reporter or reporting team that produced the report**

- Melissa Sanchez | Reporter | [melissa.sanchez@propublica.org](mailto:melissa.sanchez@propublica.org)
- Maryam Jameel | Engagement Reporter | [maryam.jameel@propublica.org](mailto:maryam.jameel@propublica.org)

**3) Brief description of the story and a link to it online.**

In [America's Dairyland](#), reporters Melissa Sanchez and Maryam Jameel of ProPublica investigated the treatment of immigrant dairy workers in Wisconsin. From revealing how language barriers contributed to officials wrongly blaming a dairy worker for killing his young son in a farm accident to showing how workers are often fired and evicted from their homes when they are hurt at work, the yearlong series of stories exposed the horrors and tragedies of Wisconsin's dairy industry.

What's more, the series was innovative in how it reached the community. Reporters used postcard callouts in Spanish that they left at Latino groceries, restaurants and other businesses where workers gathered. We published all of the stories online in Spanish and commissioned Spanish-language audio versions for some. For the story of the boy's death, we printed a small and beautifully-designed booklet that we delivered around the state.

The three stories we'd like to get the closest consideration are:

- **Death on a Dairy Farm | Feb. 23, 2023**  
<https://www.propublica.org/article/wisconsin-dairy-farm-jefferson-rodriguez>
- **Wisconsin's Dairy Industry Relies on Undocumented Immigrants, but the State Won't Let Them Legally Drive | Aug. 3, 2023**  
<https://www.propublica.org/article/wisconsin-dairy-undocumented-immigrants-drivers-licenses>
- **"Once You're No Good to Them, They Get Rid of You" | Dec. 20, 2023**  
<https://www.propublica.org/article/wisconsin-dairy-farm-immigrant-workers-injury-safety>

**4) Description of conflicting values encountered in reporting the story**

The stories in [America's Dairyland](#) presented a challenge: persuading undocumented immigrant workers — nearly all of whom feared losing their jobs or being deported — to speak with reporters in such a way that they could write with authority yet without disclosing their identities and putting them in harm's way.

It was a journalistic tightrope walk. Other news organizations have named their sources in similar circumstances, leaving them vulnerable to job retaliation, law enforcement or immigration action.

In the series' first story, [Death on a Dairy Farm](#), about a man wrongly blamed for a farm accident that killed his 8-year-old son, reporters Melissa Sanchez and Maryam Jameel found the worker who had actually caused the accident but who sheriff's deputies never questioned. As an undocumented immigrant, he was afraid of being deported and didn't want his identity or whereabouts known. In addition, he said he hadn't told his family what he had done.

So we had a choice: correct an injustice and not fully identify the worker, or fully identify him from records and say he declined to comment.

In the other stories, our sources were almost exclusively undocumented immigrants whose immigration status made them vulnerable to various harms: costly ticketing by police for driving without a license; retaliation from a farm owner after a workplace injury; or, worst case, deportation. We spoke with dozens and dozens of workers, and nearly every one asked that we not identify them in our stories. In many instances, the people continued to work on farms where they'd been hurt; they were afraid of getting fired or evicted from farm housing if they spoke publicly. Some who had left those farms had relatives still working there; they didn't want those people harmed. But we had to be able to explain to police or employers what had happened so we could get their side of the story.

Finally, workers often asked Melissa and Maryam how their reporting would help them, the kind of question that often forces reporters to talk about improving systems rather than immediate help for the people they're interviewing. Some workers asked for direct assistance, which of course we could not provide. Difficult conversations.

### **5) Options considered to resolve the conflicts**

As I said, the first story presented a stark choice: right a wrong in which a father had been publicly blamed for killing his son and not fully identify the worker who had been responsible, or fully identify him from our reporting and say that he declined to comment.

Not identifying the worker also would have allowed us to give readers his perspective as well as crucial information that underscored some of the flaws in the police investigation.

The other stories in the series offered similar options. We could play hardball and use workers' names against their wishes when we found them in public records. Or we could agree to not fully identify them, which might raise questions about our credibility but would mitigate some of the risks for workers who agreed to speak publicly.

Finally, many workers asked Maryam and Melissa what the point of our reporting was. We didn't want to sugar coat the reality; we told them we hoped to expose wrongs and create systemic change, that our journalism might not help their own situations and there was even a chance that our investigations could lead to unforeseen consequences.

### **6) Final decisions and rationales behind them**

We actually prepared two drafts of the first story: one that fully named the man who was responsible for the accident that killed the boy but did not include his account, and another that

only partially identified him but included his detailed version of events. It was clear that the second version made for a more complete, more compelling story, and we believed that readers would stick with us if we explained how we made that decision. By the point in the narrative where we showed how the boy died, we believed that our readers would understand the stakes at issue and why an undocumented immigrant would be reluctant to be identified. We identified the man by one of his two last names, Blandon, a common surname in his home country, Nicaragua.

Not identifying the worker let us fill in other blanks in the story. We provided a complete accounting of the events of that night and explained how the police investigation fell short.

For the other stories, we decided that showing the scale of our reporting — that we had spoken with dozens of workers — would be more important than providing fuller identification.

For the ticketing story, for example, we didn't fully identify a single one of the more than 100 workers we'd talked to who'd received a citation for driving without a license. We showed readers that the cases we featured were real by citing police and court records and interviewing law enforcement and court officials about those incidents. We added muscle to the stories with court data and interviews with close to a dozen farmers who acknowledged that their workers were undocumented and couldn't legally drive but did so anyway.

For the story about workers who are fired and evicted after they're injured on the job, we spoke to more than 60 workers who had been injured at work — numbers that allowed us to write with authority. We wrote with more depth about one worker who agreed to be fully named. In that case, we spoke to the owners of the farm where he got frostbite and included their perspective; to bolster the worker's account, we also spoke with the owner of a Mexican store that later helped him and lawyers who had reviewed the man's case. When we included anecdotes from other workers who did not want to be fully identified, we worked to document them in other ways: photographs, medical records, court records, law enforcement records, as well as interviews with witnesses, co-workers, relatives, interpreters, lawyers and community members.

We didn't use some worker stories when we could not fully vet them because workers were afraid of what that would entail. For example, one woman who was trampled by a bull said we could write about her experience as long as we didn't tell her lawyer she had talked with us. She had gone to trial over a lawsuit she filed, so there was ample documentation about her case. Still, her conditions were unworkable for us; we were quoting her attorney about another case.

We worked to be fully transparent with sources. We repeatedly told people we weren't attorneys, social workers or otherwise advocating for them. We explained that we wanted to expose systemic issues, some of which workers pointed us to, and we needed to show scale to be persuasive — particularly to a public that isn't aware of the workplace conditions on farms.

Finally, we were committed to getting all of our work back to these same workers in a way they could consume: in Spanish, in a commissioned audio format, and in paper booklets and leaflets we distributed personally to some 70 Latino stores all across the state and in other businesses where we knew dairy workers gathered. As people saw our stories over the past year, they expressed more trust and understanding about our goals and began reaching out to us to share their experiences. Each conversation got easier as people became familiar with our work and appreciated its value.