

# Exit of Illinois' longest-serving investigative reporting duo signals end of an era at the Belleville News-Democrat

It was a hell of a way to go out.

In [their final investigation](#) for the *Belleville News-Democrat*, one of Illinois' top investigative reporting duos found that East St. Louis was not only one of the deadliest cities in America, it also had one of the lowest rates for solving murders.

Through meticulous reporting that Beth Hundsdorfer and George Pawlarczyk were known for in their nearly 20 years together at the Metro East newspaper, the pair showed that the murders were concentrated around the city's public housing projects and also raised the possibility of a serial killer.

The series was published in its entirety on the paper's website in April and in five parts in the print edition for a week.

"Every year you see this," said Hundsdorfer, who noted that none of their sources in East St. Louis was surprised with the findings. "This affects everybody that lives in East St. Louis. Everybody. Everybody knows somebody. Everybody's related to somebody. It's so prevalent in the community."



The St. Louis skyline and Gateway Arch rise from the tree tops from this view across the river in East. St. Louis. Photo by Paul Sableman via Flickr.

The investigation began with a conversation about the [2017 murder of Alexis Winston](#) in East St. Louis, Hundsdorfer told GJR. In spite of strong evidence, the case was never solved. That same year, there was a spike in the number of East St. Louis murders, up to 37 compared to the city's average of 24. In a town of 27,000 people, the East St. Louis murder rate was projected at 96 deaths per 100,000 people between 2000 and 2018. By that measure, it was the most dangerous city in the country. Only 25 percent of the murders in that 18 year period led to convictions.

To figure out the prosecution rate, Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk had to dig through a trove of local court reporting and team up with former St. Clair County State's attorney, Brendan Kelly.

This, according to Pawlaczyk, was the most difficult part. "You might say, 'well, that sounds like it's simple,' but

nobody keeps track. And also the local media, including the BND did not always write a story about the murder.”

The initial plan was to do a series solving some of the East St. Louis murder cases which never led to convictions. But as Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk compiled a database of the murders, other larger narratives jumped out at them.

Two stories from the five part series did delve into individual murders, more closely reflecting the initial ambitions for the series.

Though the series was comprehensive – featuring the perspectives of victims, residents, law enforcement, activists and legislators – it garnered a mixed reception from residents of East St. Louis.

Tim Fox, the editor of the magazine I Am EStL, wrote a Facebook post that was spotted by BND city editor Gary Dotson, who edited Hundsdorfer and Palwaczyk’s series, and subsequently printed as an op-ed in the BND.

“The article did make some good distinctions about the changing nature of violent crime, but those distinctions can be made about violent crime everywhere,” wrote Fox. “When random shootings – of total strangers, by total strangers – are an almost daily occurrence across the country, why is East St. Louis singled out?”

Fox’s work at I Am EStL aims to showcase the positive side of the city. “Changing perceptions was [I Am EStL founder, Charmaine Savage’s] goal for the magazine, and it’s my goal as editor,” Fox also wrote. “Of course, the city needs more resources to investigate crime and fight it, but it needs resources for crime victims and everyone else in the community, too. Those resources will never come if people are afraid to go to East St. Louis.”

This sentiment was echoed, in starker terms, by the recently

sworn-in mayor of East St. Louis, Robert Eastern III, in an interview with the Gateway Journalism Review.

“It makes it seem like all East St. Louis citizens are a part of gun violence and stuff in that nature, but that’s a falsehood,” said Eastern. “It also gives the outside community a reason to think that East St. Louis [residents] are all bad people, and that’s not true. We are a city of champions. We’re a prideful community.”

But Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk see it differently.

“To single out East St. Louis, and to point out that it is the most dangerous small city in the U.S. ... is not a statement about the people that live there. It’s a fact.” said Hundsdorfer. “It’s not like we think this is a band of roving criminals. It’s not. There’s very good people in East St Louis who deserve better than what they’re getting.”

“No one knows that better than us,” Pawlaczyk added.

Over the course of their time at the BND, Pawlaczyk and Hundsdorfer worked on a dozen investigations, Dotson, said continued a tradition of accountability journalism at the paper. According to Pawlaczyk, almost all of these investigations led to legislative change.

In 2013, Tamms correctional center was closed following a report by Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk about the mistreatment of mentally ill prisoners. In 2006, the director of Illinois DCFS resigned a week before Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk published a series on child deaths related to DCFS negligence. Following the article, [a series of reforms were enacted](#).

“We had a long history of being a small, aggressive, watchdog investigative newspaper,” said Dotson, who’s worked closely with Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk’s for all their major investigations. “They not only enhanced it and solidified it, but they took it to the next level, in part because they

worked together as a team for so long and were so successful.”

Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk’s work at the paper earned them national recognition. Working together, they won a 2012 Investigative Reporters and Editors award, and were nominated for another six. In state contests, they beat out the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Sun-Times* for top prizes.

“Beth and I have never thought that we live in a small town, and certainly stuff we’ve done has had a national effect,” said Pawlaczyk. “If we find a story – say mentally ill prisoners being held in solitary confinement for a long time – that’s as true as the plot of *Le Misérable* or whatever. That’s worldwide.”

Pawlaczyk was referring to the duo’s 2009 series, “Trapped in Tamms,” about a supermax prison in a southern Illinois town with a population of roughly 1,000, which won the pair a George Polk award.

In March 2019, Pawlaczyk took a buyout from their parent company, McClatchy. Hundsdorfer moved to St. Louis Public Radio as an investigative reporter and coordinator. Even though they no longer share an office, they have no plans to stop working together. When I spoke to them for this story, Pawlaczyk had a draft of the duo’s upcoming true crime novel, their second after 2012’s “[Murder on a Lonely Road](#),” in front of him on his computer.

Nor do they have any plans to stop investigating in smaller towns, where papers increasingly lack the resources to carry out such time-consuming work.

“I hope that I’m able to fill that hole,” said Hundsdorfer. “I mean every job that you have can be investigative. I mean if you’re a cop reporter for a local paper, you can do investigative work. You gotta put in the time, but you can do it.”

After Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk's exit, Dotson still hopes to keep investigative and watchdog journalism a central part of the paper's identity. After Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk's exit, BND reporter Lexi Cortes, who recently earned a place in Editor & Publisher's list of 25 under 35, was reassigned as a full-time investigative reporter.

"We have tried to build [investigative reporting] into all of our beats and put less emphasis on going to a meeting and writing about what happened at the meeting," said Dotson. "And instead using our time and our resources in doing accountability journalism."

Yet the paper's shrinking resources, a spat of recent layoffs and restructuring could affect the paper's ability to continue such work. Between 2015 and 2017, the paper's daily circulation fell from 33,000 to 20,828.

"I'm not certain how it's all gonna pan out," said Hundsdorfer. "I guess we'll all see that. But, I mean, their problems aren't any problems that aren't being had by every Metro newspaper. The [St. Louis] Post-Dispatch has cut back. And they've lost a lot of their experience, and that's a little troubling. But what does it mean? I don't know. I don't know. Maybe you'll see some new young rock stars emerge out of all of this. I don't know."

When Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk were at the paper, Dotson sometimes had to defend keeping a team of two investigative reporters on staff to senior editors and publishers, though both Hundsdorfer and Pawlaczyk often covered daily and weekend beats between investigations.

"You have two people who were working on one thing for a long time," said Hundsdorfer. "If they needed us, we would step in, of course. We're not prima donnas or anything, but it's a thing to commit to. It's a lot. With the changes economically, I imagine it's even harder."

Hundsdorfer is now the investigative reporter and coordinator at KWMU. Her plans are to continue reporting like she has been and to hone her craft writing for the radio medium.

Pawlaczyk's plan "is real simple," he said. "Finish this true crime book, win the lucky day lotto, and find a really good story that Beth and I can collaborate on and win the Pulitzer."

**Editor's Note: Hundsdorfer no longer works for St. Louis Public Radio.**

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