

Chicago Tribune creates podcast to lure younger demographic to investigative series marking 40th anniversary of Tylenol murders

Earlier this week, a friend of Chicago Tribune investigative reporter Christy Gutowski was walking past her 22-year-old daughter's bedroom and heard Gutowski's voice. Gutowski hadn't stopped for a visit, however. Her voice was coming from a podcast the news outlet launched in an attempt to reach a younger demographic of its in-depth reporting.

The eight-episode [Unsealed](#) podcast, which debuted last week, is paired with a series of investigative stories about the Sept. 29, 1982, [Tylenol murders](#) that killed seven in the Chicago area. The killings caused a nationwide panic and forever changed the way over-the-counter drugs were packaged in the United States.

"We're all storytellers, and we want to create different ways to reach different audiences," Gutowski said. "It's an honor to get to do something in the 175-year history of the Chicago Tribune that no other journalist has done."



(Photo by Katy Warner via Flickr)

Gutowski first proposed the idea of investigating the unsolved Tylenol murders five years ago, in time for the 35th anniversary. But then she and Stacy St. Clair, another Tribune investigative journalist, both got assigned to the trial of Jason Van Dyke, the Chicago Police officer who was ultimately convicted of killing 17-year-old Laquan McDonald. About a year ago, after covering the trial of Kyle Rittenhouse in Kenosha together, they picked the idea up again for the upcoming 40th anniversary of the crime.

They knew that this time, the story was more urgent because of the age of the story.

“Witnesses were dying, memories fade, records get lost and one of the main suspects had already died, another is in his mid 70s, and we thought ‘time is running out, let’s take a look at this’ and that got us started,” Gutowski recalled.

At about the same time, former Chicago Tribune senior editor Amy Carr was talking to At Will Media, a New York based podcast production studio, about doing an audio series about the Tylenol case. Carr reached out to Chicago Tribune Executive Editor Mitch Pugh to find out if the Tribune would support the idea, Pugh told GJR in an email. Pugh, who became

top editor in August 2021, agreed and enlisted two of his best reporters – Gutowski and St. Clair –to write the newspaper stories and script and narrate the accompanying podcast.

The Tribune is publishing the stories online on Thursdays and in the print edition of the newspaper on Sundays for six weeks. The first story in the print series is free and unmetered, meaning it doesn't count against the number of free articles a reader has access to before hitting the paywall. The second part two is metered and parts 3-6 are behind the paper's paywall, Pugh said.

The 8-episode podcast, which debuted with two episodes on September 22, will drop one episode a week going forward until October 27 and is free to listen to and download. Pugh and Will Malnati, founder of [At Will Media](#), will serve as executive producers for the podcast. Additionally, the podcast is made in association with [audiochuck](#), a company that has produced several highly rated podcasts.

Podcasting to go along with investigative stories is becoming more popular for traditional media outlets, according to Diana Fuentes, executive director of Investigative Reporters & Editors, an nonprofit group that is supported by the Missouri School of Journalism.

“People tend to be interested in serials and investigative reporting lends itself to that,” Fuentes said.

She added that interest in podcasting among traditional media outlets has forced her organization to schedule training and workshop sessions on the topic at its annual meeting next summer.

Gutowski and St. Clair estimate that they have worked together on more than 100 stories in careers that saw them first team together at the Daily Herald. The duo teamed up again at the Chicago Tribune in 2010 when Gutowski was hired by the Tribune. (St. Clair joined the paper three years prior.)

Among the stories the two reporters have teamed together for include, for the Daily Herald, the 1993 Brown's Chicken massacre in Palatine, Illinois in which seven were killed and the 1999 story about Naperville mother Marilyn Lemac, who was convicted of killing her three children. While at the Chicago Tribune, they worked together on the Rittenhouse trial and the trial of Chicago Police officer Jason Van Dyke, among dozens of others.

During the Van Dyke trial, the Chicago Tribune teamed up with WBEZ to produce "[16 Shots](#)," a podcast about the murder of Laquan McDonald and surrounding issues. However, for the podcast about the Tylenol murders, it would prove to be a very different experience for the two reporters.

"With 16 Shots, WBEZ had a vision and the expertise," Gutowski said. "They knew the story that they wanted to tell and how to tell it. When we got involved, we helped with the reporting end of it. We didn't really help put together the narrative. So, we had to learn a whole new form of storytelling."

St. Clair agreed and said it was both exciting and terrifying.

"Christy and I worked on 16 Shots with WBEZ and that was a great learning experience, but this was different. We had to figure out the audio, how to be audio storytellers," St. Clair said.

She added that from the beginning, the Tribune took the reporters off having to do daily stories and gave them nine months to totally focus on the Tylenol case and complete the stories and podcast.

"We had the backing. Mitch Pugh wasn't in the newsroom that long and basically said, 'we're going to take this chance with the two of you, go out and show us what you can do.' That's pretty thrilling at this point in your career when you are allowed to try something new. Thrilling and terrifying."

Greg Pratt, a Tribune City Hall reporter and leader of the outlet's union, said he is happy to see the Tribune dedicating resources to a project like this.

"This is a very collegial newsroom where people are happy to see each other do good work," Pratt said. "That's the reason we stick around. It's certainly not the good pay. So, people are happy to see the support."

Although Gutowski and St. Clair have been print reporters for years, a podcast required them to employ different skills than they were used to using.

"Podcasts are very conversational," Gutowski said, adding that when writing for print there is much more attribution and reliance on documents.

An example of conversational storytelling in the first episode of the podcast is when the listener is taken inside a small rental car with Gutowski and St. Clair on the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts during a 5-hour stakeout of the main suspect in the unsolved case. Then, suddenly the man appears on a sidewalk and the reporters approach – something hard to convey in a newspaper story and something unusual for both reporters.

"You're not going to find a lot of first-person clips with our bylines on them, that's just not how we roll as reporters," St. Clair said. "So, it is a little bit strange to involve ourselves in the story but we've learned that podcasting is such an intimate relationship between host and storyteller. You're literally in their ear so we had to let them get to know us, at least a little bit."

St. Clair also said a lot of things that are often praised in print do not translate to audio storytelling.

"One of the things that was hardest to learn but also most interesting to learn was that a sentence that looks beautiful

on paper can be just awful when spoken. Finding the beauty in simplicity and telling a story in an audio way has been really challenging for us and also really fun.”

Both reporters also credit At Will Media producers Claire Tighe and Jessica Glazer for helping to keep their writing conversational and “easy on the ear,” along with voice coach Christina Shockley for teaching them how to enunciate and talk slower than they were previously used to.

The podcast required both reporters to do another thing they had never done in their careers before – have sources sign releases allowing the recordings of the interviews to be used in the broadcasts. They both said that they did not receive any pushback from sources and took special care to ensure confidential sources would remain just as protected in the podcast as they are in the print stories.

Gutowski and St. Clair also said they are excited to reach a younger demographic than traditional newspaper readers through the podcast, like the daughter of Gutowski’s friend.

Fuentes agreed, but added it’s not only the younger generation who is attracted to podcasts.

“I think it does help attract a younger demographic but I also think it attracts an older demographic too,” Fuentes said. “People who remember the old radio serials, the old classics, because those were always popular.”

While the podcast required Gutowski and St. Clair to do a lot of different things than what they were used to, old fashioned shoe-leather reporting and getting details certainly was not something unusual for them.

“I think Stacy and I are both the type of reporters and writers that get the name of the dog, notice the color of somebody’s hat,” Gutowski said.

While the podcast is largely new ground for the Tribune, the serialized format of the print stories is something Gutowski and St. Clair also had never done before.

“People have to follow it to the very end to find out certain things that aren’t addressed until later,” Gutowski said. “It’s a very different form of writing and it’s very long. Readers have to follow the course of the stories over the next several weeks, which is really exciting.”

Ironically, although the plan was to stick to the serialized format, during the course of their reporting, Gutowski and St. Clair learned that investigators were pushing prosecutors to press charges against a long-time suspect in the case. The Tribune published a news [story](#) Sept, 22.

“We didn’t put it all out because we are committed to this serial effort but we knew that this week being the 40th anniversary there would be a lot of competitors, so we wanted to break some of our news,” Gutowski said.

So far, feedback from their sources, victim family members and readers have been very positive, St. Clair and Gutowski said. Although numbers on listeners and readers were not disclosed, Pugh said the Tribune is keeping an eye on things and are pleased thus far.

“We will certainly have access to podcast downloads versus UVs/PVs/single-copy sales/direct subscriptions from the series,” Pugh said. “What we would like to see is a general increase in the amount of search traffic we might expect from a project like this and significant referral traffic from social accounts and other platforms related to the audiochuck empire. So far, we’re pretty happy with what we are seeing in terms of audience trends on our site.”

Bob Chiarito is a Chicago-based freelancer who has written for The New York Times, Chicago Sun-Times, Agence France-Presse and Thomson Reuters.