Hannah Mercanti 0:00

This episode of Dear journalist discusses stories about sexual abuse. Listener discretion is advised.

Kevin O'Keefe 0:06

No one is ever going to come and tell you that you've done too much and you need a break. That never happens. There's always more to be done. The TV media never gets full. It's always hungry.

Yezua Ho 0:22

Welcome to Dear journalist. This is a show where we talk of longtime Canadian journalists about their careers, they'll share with us some of the lessons they've learned from their years in the field. I'm Yezua Ho.

Christina Apa 0:33

I'm Christina Apa,

Hannah Mercanti 0:34

and I'm Hannah Mercanti. For this episode, I spoke with Kevin O'Keefe, an award winning reporter, and producer at CTVs, W five, known for his current affairs, television, investigative work and documentary filmmaking.

Yezua Ho 0:46

You want to get right to that. So make sure you stick around after because we're going to come back and chat more about what we heard.

Christina Apa 0:52

Here's Hannah's interview with Kevin O'Keefe, on Dear Journalist.

Hannah Mercanti 0:59

Hello, Kevin, and thanks for joining us. How are you doing?

Kevin O'Keefe 1:02

Good. How are you? Thank you for having me. I'm doing well. Thanks for asking.

Hannah Mercanti 1:05

Just to get us started. Could you just tell me what initially made you interested in investigative work and how you got started in the field?

Kevin O'Keefe 1:12

Wow, how long do you have?

I think we were just talking before we started rolling about Daily News. And I've actually never worked in daily news. It's my secret. And I think, I think, the thing that really got me interested- and we all see these headlines, we see the news go by, and a lot of them go, "that doesn't make any sense." Like why is this guy so opposed to this? Or why is this woman so interested in that, like, to me, that's what that's what I want to know more about, I get the headlines, and I have a lot of colleagues that work in daily news, and they do amazing work. But I always say that doesn't really add up to me like what else is going on there. So I think that's kind of that first, where I got that first spark, I guess, to dig a little deeper. And then once I started working in more investigative stories, just like building those relationships with people, you become part of their lives, I think we're so lucky in this industry to get a license. Like I would never in my life, ask these kinds of questions to people. You know, tell me about the day you were attacked? Or how did it feel when your baby died, or whatever, like these really deep personal stories, and I think people for whatever reason, I think everybody wants to be heard. That's what I've come up with, after 30 years, and just giving them a platform to be heard, I think not only can help us, the audience, but them getting their voice out there and tell their story. So I feel Yeah, so I feel incredibly privileged to be the person the conduit to be able to give people a voice and have their story be heard.

Hannah Mercanti 2:45

So a lot of the work that you've done in documentaries deals with kind of like sensitive topics, or marginalized groups like the one on the women abused in the Catholic Church, or the first openly gay Roman Catholic priest. So how do you kind of keep that reporting ethical and veer away from like, parachute journalism or stuff like that? How do you kind of build that relationship with the sources?

Kevin O'Keefe 3:06

Yeah, like, those are two great examples. Thank you for asking. It took me the Gabrielle McCarthy. I mean, I'm Roman Catholic, I'm gay.

So it was an I actually had a friend once who had a brunch. And this is a true story. And that was about 10 gay men sitting at brunch, and not one of them could name a Roman Catholic priest, they knew who was not gay.

What about father McNeil? No, he's gay. What about father? No, he's gay. So I just again, I guess it's it's definitely a topic I was very comfortable with, for a whole host of reasons. I was lucky enough to work at Vision TV at the time, which was very open, gay positive organization really interested in this story. And it took a year. And this is again, you asked me at the beginning about why like investigative work of building a relationship with that priest before he would come out. So he was the first openly Roman Catholic priest in Canada to come out and say he was gay. And most of the priests he knew were gay.

So So yeah, it was a year long conversation working with him. And let's be honest, he had his ducks in a row. So he had retired, he had his pension, he had his health benefits. So he made sure he knew there would be a huge backlash when it came out. So we worked with him to make sure he had all his ducks in a row that, you know, there would be huge backlash, but he would be safe and well taken care of he had transitioned to different. I won't get into details, but a different form of the Roman Catholic Church. So he had a congregation that was opening it. So you know, all these things were put in place, I wasn't going to come in and just destroy his life and disappear. And then it was through a story I had done on the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church. Again, another very controversial story. And I asked one of the women why this was so important to you to have no because the church only ordains men and she says, well, because

As I was sexually abused by a priest, and it's hard for me to go to a priest for a marriage for a confession for a baptism, all the sacraments in the church, knowing that a man in robes, doing these things sexually abused me. And I was like, Oh, that's interesting. I didn't think of that. And then,

after talking to a number of women and a number of experts, I realized, and this is a fact, and again, not a lot of people we talked about Daily News know about more Roman Catholic priests abuse women than little boys. I'll say it again, more Roman Catholic priests abused women and girls than little boys, but nobody knows and nobody cares. And again, the abuse of little boys by Roman Catholic priests is a horrible, tragic thing that's happened. And it deserved to be exposed. But what I discovered and what really fascinated me was number one, they say, Oh, thank God, it was a woman, and not a little boy. And number two, well, it's, it's a woman's fault. So immediately blamed the woman and she somehow seduced the priest. And it was her tempting the priest and the poor priest. And again, that took months and months of trust building with the women to feel comfortable coming out. I talked with Enza supermodel Anderson, and she really got her. I asked her why she's so interested in drag, and it came from serving in the church, being an altar boy. And it was her first time she could wear investments and be in drag. And she also said, like the elevated like, be so superior to the people around her. And I think for a lot of Roman Catholics, young men questioning their sexuality, you don't have a lot of options back in the day, and you could take on a role where you're going to be seen to be above the local population, or you don't have to have sex with women. So it kind of solves a lot of your problems. So yeah, it really struck me when a friend of mine said that everyone at the brunch knew. couldn't think of a priest that wasn't gay. And even it got to the point where he ran a bed and breakfast, and the bishop was gay. And if he knew two of the priests were having a relationship, they could have a weekend away at his bed and breakfast. Like it was this whole subculture of like, gay guy priests set up. Yeah. So yeah, especially with like, to answer your question, like both those stories, you have to really work hard to build trust with these people. It's not an overnight thing, you're gonna get a lot of nose, we get a lot of nose in this industry. And they both said, No, initially, both the people I profiled in those stories. Okay, think about it, I'll call you back in a month, you know, call them back, how's it going? How are things going? So you do really, I mean, you know, with all due respect, like, they're trusting you with their story that maybe they haven't told their immediate family. I will tell you, one of the really nice things that came out of that was, after I did the story on the women who are abused, I got a letter from somebody who said, I was I was abused.

And I haven't told anyone, and I just ordered a copy of her documentary, I'm going to show that to them. And then I'm going to come out to them, because

no one believes me. And no one understands why it's taken me so long to tell. But the women in your story explain so clearly why they kept it a secret for so long, and how difficult it is to come forward and destroy everybody's not only, you know, they gotta accept that their child was abused by the one man that they trusted. And now this, what does this mean for their faith? I like it just, it's a atomic bomb and the whole family's life. So that made it worthwhile.

Hannah Mercanti 9:04

And a lot of these kind of stories or investigative work can be very hard on your mental health. It can be stories where people have experienced a lot of trauma. So how do you kind of protect your own mental health when you're entrenched and a bunch of stories that are really traumatic for you to just listen to?

Kevin O'Keefe 9:21

Yeah, I mean, that's a really good question. And it's becoming more and more important, I think. I think you have to know when to say no. And that's really hard when you're starting out, and you're given an assignment

that, you know, makes you feel really uncomfortable, either as a woman or a gay person or a person of color or trans person, and you're told to do this thing that's going to really affect you, I think. I think in some ways, I think your boss would have more respect for you. If you can say to him, you know, I've thought about

With this assignment, and I thought about my mental health, and I think that's a bit much for me right now, if it's okay, I'd like to pass on that one. But I'm happy to do this one in this one. So I think saying no is really important. There's never, no one is ever going to come and tell you that you've done too much, and you need to break. That never happens. There's always more to be done. The TV media never gets full, it's always hungry. So if you think there's going to be a time when your boss comes to you and says, you know, Hannah, you've done so much work this week, I think you deserve some time. It's not gonna happen. A good boss. But even a good boss would say that. I mean, Rita Devereaux. When I was at vision, I worked so much I didn't have time to water my plants. And everyone who knows me knows my plants are really important. So they all died. So our code word was like Rita, I just need to go home and water my plants. And she would say, Kevin, go home, and what are your plans? And that was her code for I just need a couple days off. Like, yeah, that's important. But it can like you said, it can be hard when you're like, just starting out and trying to make a name for yourself. And yeah, but like, I've been Boston people, if I had, and I have said this, like a W five. I said, I don't think I can do that story. I don't think I can go undercover to a gay conversion therapy camp.

Hannah Mercanti 11:18

Yeah. That.

Kevin O'Keefe 11:20

Like, I don't think I can. I did go to the conference. And that was really hard. And then after that, I just said, You know what, I can't go to this camp. Like, yeah. So we hired an actor, and they went, so the story still got done. I still worked with the story. I still contributed. And I think I think knock on wood. Like, I think my boss respected that I just said, you know, from a mental health point of view, I don't think that's a good decision for me. And he said, Okay, no problem. So I, I think I know, it's hard when you're starting out, or it's hard, even for me, but I think

you showing that you're on top of your mental and physical health is actually I think your boss would respect you more, not less. Yeah. And you've mentioned, this is like the only industry you know, you've been doing journalism for quite a while now. So what is kind of the most valuable lesson you would say that you've learned? Since you started? After graduating in 1992? Like my first job was at Vision TV with Rita Deverill, who I'm still very close with who's still my mentor. And I'll never forget, I mean, God, I was talking to someone about this this morning. And I learned this like, 35 years ago, I had my first job interview with her. And she said, Well, how do you think you did this year? And I said, Well, I don't think I made a lot of mistakes. And she said, "Kevin,"

anyone who knows Rita is "Kevin," the way she talks, "never say that." And I was like, "Why?" And she said, "That's the only way you're going to learn."

Hannah Mercanti 12:58

That was my conversation with Kevin. Yezua. Christina, what did you take away from it?

Yezua Ho 13:03

Say that was a really good interview with Kevin. And one of the things I appreciate is that throughout this podcast series, we talked about knowing when to take a break from when you're working on a story, knowing when to shut down that laptop screen and just doing something else in the meantime, but you've never really discussed knowing when to say no, and knowing where your boundaries lie as a journalist, and that just because you could do something that can elevate your story, doesn't mean you have to, like Kevin discussed, I'm choosing not to participate or act in that gay conversion therapy camp, just because he didn't want to. And it's very important to know that as journalists, you don't have to do everything just for the sake of your story. And that's very hard to learn. Because like when you first start journalism, your whole responsibility is to basically find that story and making sure it's the best possible story you can write. But we don't really consider what those decisions will how those how those decisions will affect us after and whether or not the toll and what and the toll that takes on our well being afterwards.

Hannah Mercanti 14:04

Yeah, it's like Do the ends justify the means? thing, like I'm also a gay journalist, and I don't know if I would be able to put myself in a conversion camp for a story like Syria, like, I really don't think I could do that. And like, back in our first episode with Kevin Newman, when he was talking about how, sometimes like, they put the newer reporters to, like, you know, go knock on someone's door and get photos of the dead person, like you have to do whatever it takes to get the story. And I'm like, that isn't necessarily true all the time. Like, just because something will make your story really good or could make for an interesting piece like doesn't mean you have to do it. Like just just because you can doesn't mean you should the ends don't always justify the means someone else can take it on, you know, and that idea that like, no one's going to come up to you and say like, you've done too much work, especially in a career like this where we're freelancing, and so much of it is just like, done at home. No one is going to tell you to stop doing extra rihriswork. So you need to be able to do that for yourself.

Yezua Ho 15:02

Yeah,

Christina Apa 15:03

Yeah, I also really loved how he kind of gave advice to young journalists as well by saying, like, you can say no if you want I because I think especially when I was in first and second year, I felt like I had to do everything and be a part of so many things, in order to kind of get my foot in the door and to like, be be seen as an established journalist. But I don't think that's necessarily what you have to do. Because at the end of the day, you have to also focus on your well being and your mental health.

Unknown Speaker 15:31

And I also really loved how he talks about using code words. So example for an example he talks about like he has, I think it was his friend or a colleague, where he was like, if I'm not feeling well, I'll be like, I have to go water my plants. And that's a way to take a break. Because although you shouldn't be embarrassed to want to take a break. I think sometimes you don't want everyone to know all of you. Right? Like, it doesn't matter if it's not about being embarrassed. But like sometimes you don't want to stand up in an office full of like half strangers being like, I'm stressed. Yeah, I'm having anxiety. I'm having depression. That's a little much. Yeah. Yeah. And it's a bit ironic, because if you do everything we can as journalists to make sure our sources are well account where they say, well accommodated for sure they're okay. But sometimes you just forget about ourselves in that moment, and not consider that like, Hey, maybe I shouldn't spend like another hour at like, after 2am working on the story, and sometimes I should take a nap or something like that. And he also meant like, and it's like, and I just realized something too, as I listened to your interview, the word no doesn't only apply to sources. Journalists also have that should also have the opportunity to say no well at any given point in terms of their story and knowing that just because you could do something doesn't mean I mean, if you can do something, but it makes you uncomfortable, you should be given the ability to say no at any point.

Christina Apa 16:58

This has been Dear Journalist for the Review of Journalism. For more episodes, subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. While you're there, check out Reviewed. It's a celebration of 40 years of the Review of Journalism, with conversations from feature writers and emerging journalist.

Yezua Ho 17:13

Make sure that you also pick up a copy of the 40th anniversary issue of the Review of Journalism available on newsstands across Canada in April 2024. You can have the reviewofjournalism.ca to find out more. For extra online content, you can also connect with Review on X and Tik Tok.

Until next time, I'm Yezua Ho.

Hannah Mercanti 17:33

I'm Hannah Mercanti.

Christina Apa 17:34

And I'm Christina Apa. Thank you again to Kevin O'Keefe, for talking with us. And thank you, Dear Journalist for listening.

Transcribed by https://otter.ai