

USC Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism Story Behind the Story

"U.S. Pursues Case South of the Border."

ANNA CEARLEY

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THE STORY IDEA

Since I work in Tijuana, covering border issues for The San Diego Union-Tribune, I regularly see the results of cross-border crime. People commit acts in Tijuana and flee to the U.S. Fugitives wanted in the U.S. are apprehended in Tijuana by federal agents who deport them. I wanted to do a story that looked at how justice reaches beyond the border in cases like these, but I wasn't sure at first how I was going to approach it and from which side I was going to look at it from: A crime committed in the U.S. or Mexico? I also wanted to explore how the U.S. and Mexico is working together to address cross-border crime and justice issues.

THE STORY PROPOSAL

After going through numerous cases and talking to experts on cross-border justice issues, I decided I would focus on the Article Four concept, which allows for the prosecution of a Mexican national in Mexico for a crime committed in the United States. I had found very little literature on this particular option to extradition, and I thought the concept would be new and interesting to our readers, whom probably hadn't heard of it before. But I also knew I had to find a local case that would provide a gripping thread to allow me to explain how Article Four works, or else the story would be dry and legalistic. I wanted to make this into a story about family members seeking justice, despite a border divide, and the pain such crimes cause them on a personal level.

I figured I could do this in a 50-60 inch story . I spoke about the idea with my editor, Susan White, who felt it would be a strong Page One candidate.

THE PROCESS

Many Article 4 cases are sexual abuse-related , and I didn't want to do that because it would be impossible for me to use the name of the victims due to our privacy policy. Other cases were complicated because the victims were often in trouble with the law themselves, and hard to paint a sympathetic image of.

I got in touch with several people familiar with prosecuting such cases. One of them Juan Jose Briones, a former Baja California state police officer who now works for the San Diego County DA's office. He said they were in the middle of pursuing a case through Article Four involving a baby that was allegedly shaken or abused to the point of death by her baby sitter, who fled to Mexico. The case sounded compelling because here was a totally innocent victim. No one is going to judge a baby, who hasn't had time to grow up. It also had taken place ten years ago, and so here we had an example of the DA's policies changing under a current administration that allowed for prosecutors go forward with pursuing the case in Mexico . The fact that it had taken ten years to get to this point was a gripping point as well.

To prepare the story, I also met with County DA officials who provided me transcripts of the police and medical reports so that I could document the baby's injuries and death. And I interviewed experts in Sacramento. I also pulled together statistics on Article Four prosecutions in the U.S. and Mexico. I talked to the suspects' attorney in Mexico, as well.

But I had one crucial missing link: I had to convince the family of the victim to talk to me, and this took months. They did not want the case to be written about in the newspaper. I assured them that the story was really more about the process than themselves. I believe they were nervous because they had made some bad decisions that led to the baby being cared for by the baby sitter and they didn't want to be judged for that. Finally, the mother agreed to talk and I spoke with her about an hour. If she had a different personality/perspective, maybe the story would have become more of a narrative , but she was reluctant to speak and I spent most of our time convincing her that this piece wasn't targeting them. I did get a few quotes and clarifications that I was able to sprinkle throughout the story. But because of her lack of cooperation, the story became less about the family's own search for justice, and more about the legal process.

THE PRODUCT

Writing the story was actually pretty easy once I had all the information. I knew that it would follow a certain formulaic style because I was using the baby's story to anchor the piece. The story was presented in a semi-narrative form, using mostly information from the police and medical transcripts with a few quotes from the baby's mother. This is really more of explanatory-style journalism. I used the baby's case to illustrate the process of Article Four and some of the pros and cons. Towards late May I learned that the Los Angeles Times was working on a story touching on Article Four . (I think because their reporter heard I was working on this from one of her

Los Angeles sources) . But the story was already pretty much done, so it wasn't of concern to me. I felt the paper gave sufficient space to the article and ran it nicely on the front page.

THE RESULTS

My hope was to inform our readers of this form of border justice, and after the story came out prosecutors I talked to said that they did get calls from people saying they had cases that might be worth pursuing. I believe that most of the cases the DA hears about are just the tip of the iceberg. So, I feel that the story was helpful in informing our readers.

Because of the specialized reporting for this particular piece, I can't really say that anyone really influenced me and the story's development (from the fellowship experience). But by simply participating in the fellowship, it made me focus this germinating idea that had been floating around my head for many months. I also think the fellowship exposed me to all these other really amazing journalists and ideas. They were an inspiration for me on that level, and I hope they remain sources of information and perspective for me in the future.