
Kim Doleatto
Veteran Times reporter shines a light on the solemn and the silly

BY KIM DOLEATTO
NNB Student Reporter

ST. PETERSBURG – The homeless guy throwing the hotel room parties had amazingly fresh breath. His Social Security checks financed both the parties and his disability: alcoholism.

His drink of choice? Mouthwash.

Another man lived in a 6-by-8-foot hole in the ground because, he
told the reporter, “it just felt better” there.

In 27 years as a reporter for the Tampa Bay Times, Curtis Krueger has covered the silly as well as the solemn.

Krueger, 55, is from Bloomington, Ind., and has a bachelor’s degree in journalism from Indiana University. After working at the Fort Wayne, Ind., Journal Gazette for four years, he asked his wife, Vicky, a copy editor, where they should seek new jobs.

“Nowhere where it snows,” she replied. She is now director of interactive learning at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg.

Krueger has covered the homeless, social services, politics, space and science, and natural disasters. Now he covers the courts beat, following 60 to 80 cases at a time.

“When I write, I feel like I’m shining a light on something people should know,” he said.

He has shined a light on St. Petersburg’s juvenile gun problem. In 2011, 16-year-old Nicholas Lindsey murdered a police officer. In 2013, police say, an armed 13-year-old shot a 15-year-old three times for taunting him.

But perhaps Krueger’s highest-profile story was the murder of an 8-year-old girl: Paris Whitehead-Hamilton, who died in her home in a gang-related shooting in 2009.

“This story raises questions about where we live and why a little girl died,” he said.

He covered the trial two and a half years after the murder. “Unlike cop shows, it takes months to figure things out,” he said. Three men, all 21, were found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without possibility of parole. A fourth defendant, also 21, testified against the others and was later sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Shortly before the trial, Krueger got an interview with Paris’ aunt and guardian, Shenita Williams, who was at home with a sleeping Paris when the shooting – 56 bullets from two assault rifles – broke out.
“It’s traditional to talk to the family of the victim right before a trial,” he said. “It reinforces what it’s all about, and (why) we should feel that pain again.”

The family’s emotional state is usually still raw, and Krueger’s advice to young journalists is this: “Just say you want to talk, not for an interview – just talk.”

Williams was angry that the news media’s account of the murder included police suggestions that there was some gang involvement in her household, he said. But most “people will want to talk, tell their side of the story outside of the cold facts.”

Krueger and Williams talked over lunch at the Olive Garden. He learned about Paris the little girl, not the victim. He learned that the girl’s late mother – Williams’ cousin – had named her after the famous French city, which she visited while in the military. And he learned that Paris had read more than a thousand pages during a book-a-thon.

It was rich detail that – with Williams’ approval – Krueger put in subsequent stories.

“I like to see something most people won’t (see) and bring that image to life,” he said.

His coverage of the case included a slide show of images of the bullet-riddled home where Paris died, accompanied by recordings of multiple 911 calls to police that night.

“Appeal to the senses – the look plus the smell, the look plus the sound,” Krueger said. “Then you really get a full image.”
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