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TODAY/Gannett newspapers**

You can learn the intricacies of computer algorithms or spread sheet analysis, but if you don't take the time to know the person sitting to your left and to your right, you'll never understand the forces that shape our lives.

What I found was that behind every story was a real person.

All I needed to do was listen. And in the end, that would make all the difference in my career.

If I was going to design a class today, it would be on the dynamics of personal relationships.

Talking to people. Reading them. Making those critical connections – beyond emails and texts and Snapchat.

As reporters working on investigative

From evidence that we turned up, we found that her injuries weren't caused by a fall -- as alleged by the group home. A witness in the facility had seen a nurse strike the woman's head against a table.

Though the police had closed the case with no one arrested, the information we found was eventually presented to a jury, which rendered a \$2.3 million judgment against the facility.

Karen inspired us to keep drilling down on other assisted living facilities around the state.

After our series was published, the great

They hauled all his belongings to the curb: His medals from the Marines.
Photos of his wife. Even his TV and living room chair.

The company that foreclosed on hi

City officials began shaking him down for thousands in cash bribes to get his business license. To make sure he paid, they would send the police and code enforcement to his business.

He could have quietly handed over the money, and just kept working. Instead, he turned to the FBI and The Miami Herald.

Risking his life and the safety of his family, he began to provide information to myself and a fellow reporter.

Frank would pray in the middle of the night, afraid to sleep, while he collected information about the monsters forcing him and other struggling business owners to pay bribes.

Even when his son, Andy, died of cancer, the shake downs continued.

Finally, in April of last year, The Herald published his story: a front-page expose on the man who revealed the worst case of public corruption in South Florida in a generation. Months later, federal agents began arresting the politicians who preyed on Frank and others.

I still remember him calling us when our story was posted online. "When I didn't have a voice, you became my voice," he said, fighting back tears. "Thank you."

My reasons for sharing these stories with you are simple. The world may change, but we don't. We've embraced the new technologies, but without the handshakes and the face-to-face encounters, we'll never understand this world.

What was important to your parents and your grandparents generations is just as important to you -- and your future. The individuals who drive our work -- those who inspire us -- aren't just in journalism.

The teacher whose methods in the classroom were irrevocably changed by listening to that one student who dared to tell that teacher the lessons weren't sinking in.

The government auditor whose most difficult challenge was resolved by one brave worker who stepped forward to tell the truth about the missing money.

The politician whose career was altered by a single voter who dared to tell her that she was ignoring a critical block of voters.

What did they do? They found that the world is intricately connected to the person right next to them. They took out the earplugs -- and listened.

I love the young generation of journalists that I work with today. They can do magic with data and shorten the amount of time it takes to find critical trends. But too often I remind them that they need to do the "old school."

They need to get away from their desks and carry out the shoe-leather reporting or they will miss the heartbeat of the story. The Bennie Colemans and the Frank Zambranas will just be statistics.

For you -- the graduation class of 2017 -- your entire careers are ahead of you. You can accomplish whatever you set your mind to. That it's not about where you are -- it's who you are.

We won a Pulitzer Prize, with the support of our editors and publisher, at The Toledo Blade.

It's about knowing your strengths, your passions, and building on your goals -- day by day.

But you can't do it without people. The world doesn't revolve around abstract ideas. It revolves around personal relationships.

It's about connecting to that person to your right and to your left. God bless you.