

Maura Judkis – Weekend/Going Out Guide, The Washington Post

Michael O'Connell, producer, It's All Journalism

Welcome to It's All Journalism. I'm Michael O'Connell and I'm today here with Megan Cloherty.

Megan Cloherty, producer, It's All Journalism

Hello.

Michael O'Connell

I met today's guest, Maura Judkis, last summer when I pitched an interactive arts project to *The Washington Post*. An editor introduced us. While the project never took off, I was really impressed with Maura's enthusiasm for covering the arts' scene in D.C. So, I knew that sooner or later I wanted to ask her to be a guest on our podcast. How you doing Maura?

Maura Judkis, arts and entertainment reporter, The Washington Post

Good. Thanks for having me.

Michael O'Connell

Good. First things first. You were part of a pretty big story recently around a photo your father took years ago of Mister Rogers. It went viral and you ended up on *PBS Newshour*, even. Can you just sort of talk about what happened with that?

Maura Judkis

Yeah. It was so strange how it all happened, actually, because I cover these things that go viral all the time and I never really thought I would be part of one of them.

The shootings in Connecticut were very terrible, obviously, and that day, people were starting to spread around these quotes and different things on Facebook, as people do when these tragedies happen. And someone shared something that was in my Facebook newsfeed and it was a photo of Mister Rogers touching a little boy's face with a quote from Mister Rogers about how to teach children about violence. They look for the helpers, the people who are helping on TV or how to teach kids about violence and how not to be so afraid when terrible news happens. And I looked at it and I knew that it was my father's photo.

My father, he's been a photographer his whole life, and he has worked with Mister Rogers since the early '80s. In fact, it was actually the first photo he'd ever taken. And since then, he's done books with him and just had this friendship and affiliation with Mister Rogers' company too.

And so, a lot of photos of Mister Rogers out there were taken by my dad, but this one was kind of a particularly special one, not only because it was his first one, but just be-

cause it's like very, very candid. A lot of the other photos that he took were staged for a books and other things.

So, I saw this and I'm like, "That's my dad's picture." And it was in my Facebook news-feed and it had been shared by this group called [170 Million Americans for Public Broadcasting](#), and by the time I saw it, which was about Friday night, it had been shared by, I think, about 60,000 people by then. So, I was like, "Oh, this is really taking off."

So, I called my dad. First, I wanted to make sure it was his photo, cause there are other people who have pictures of Mister Rogers, before I said anything, of course. So I called him and I'm like, "That photo of the little boy, that's your picture, right?" And he's like, "Oh, yeah, what about it?" And I was like, "Did you know that thousands and thousands of people are reading it and seeing it online?" And he's like, "What do you mean?"

You see, my dad is not really a Facebook user. He has a Facebook profile, but he doesn't really understand what going viral means. So, I sort of explained it to him, and I was like, kind of, at that point, a little bummed that he wasn't getting credit, because it was going viral and it's such a wonderful photo. My first impulse was like, "Oh, I'm going to contact this group and see if they'll just add my dad's name to the photos so that people will know it's his." And I was really glad that it was being shared so much, but I just wanted him to have that.

And, it was the weekend, so they didn't get back to me, and then I told a few friends about it and then one of my friends saw it on *Meet the Press*. They closed out *Meet the Press* on Sunday with the photo. And at that point, I was like, "Oh, well, this is really something. I should actually just take control of it myself and just write about it." So, the next day, I pitched it to one of the editor's at *The Post*, and was like, "Oh, this is my dad's picture." By then, it had been shared by almost 98,000 people and it had been going on all these other sites too. So, they were like, "Yeah, you should definitely write about that."

I wrote a blog post. I interviewed my dad. The thing that impressed me so much about my dad too is he's a photographer, I don't think he's really been interviewed very much, but he came up with such wonderful quotes. It was really nice to interview my own dad for the first time ever, and he had this great quote about how like Mister Rogers and this little boy are looking at each other in the eye. And my dad said that it was like seeing the face of God was like how this little boy felt when he was looking at Mister Rogers. I was like, "Dad, that's so wonderful. You did a really good job."

So, I wrote up that. It was in the Style section and after that, it sort of like really blew up, cause I think when people see those images that go viral they don't really ever know where they come from, and so it's nice to provide that explanation. And then I got to go on *Meet the Press*, which was, I'm sorry. It was on PBS. *Meet the Press* was the day before. It also ended up on MSNBC and *The Today Show* and a few other places.

Megan Cloherty

Wow, that's incredible.

Maura Judkis

So, it was really cool. But then the missing piece of that puzzle too was that my dad never knew the name of the boy or like anyone in the room. It was just like kind of this quick photo op where Mister Rogers showed up. My dad was there. He took some photos and then they left. He never like found out any information about anyone there.

So I hoped by giving this a little bit of publicity that the family of that boy would come forward, because we never really learned what happened to that boy. And two weeks later, they actually did. So I wrote an update. It was actually a sad story but also a happy story.

The boy, he was adopted by a family. He had a lot of problems, but they weren't insurmountable problems. He was hydroencephalitic, which meant that there was fluid on his brain, so he had some motor skill problems. But he ended up being adopted by this family and living a pretty happy childhood, and he ended up working as a volunteer firefighter, not actually fighting fires, but he was in the office. And he was doing great but unfortunately he died in a bicycle accident last year. His mother found me and told me the whole story, so I ended up writing a little obituary for him and so it's nice to have that updated as well, so that everyone could find out the whole story of everything behind this photo.

Michael O'Connell

Wow. It's sort of amazing how something like that could happen. How do you feel as a journalist having something, once you noticed it and wrote a story about it, this wasn't really something you were a part of but suddenly you became a part of it, you were sort of sucked in as the thing went viral?

Maura Judkis

Yeah. I did sort of become a part of it. When I went on PBS, they didn't talk to my dad, they talked to me instead. Partly, that was because I was here and so were they and my dad's in Pittsburgh. But it did end up becoming sort of my story as well. That was fascinating, I thought.

It was also really nice to be able to have this tribute to my dad too. As a journalist, we don't get to write about our families that much. Not that we should write about of families all the time, but it was kind of the right moment to something really nice for my family, too, because they were really pleased to see how it all turned out. Of course, it came from such a terrible tragedy and we were sort of glad that if all the things that people could look to to like have a moment of light in this really dark day, during Newtown, it was something my dad had made. So that was pretty cool.

Megan Cloherty

Tell us a little bit about your career background and how you ended up finding arts as your specialty.

Maura Judkis

Oh, sure. Well, my parents are artists. My dad's a photographer, obviously, and my mom is an artist as well. She's an abstract painter. So, I sort of just always grew up with art in my household. My grandmother was also a painter, and I kind of grew up in museums too, because my mom taught art at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. And so, I would like to go to class with her when [I] was little and she taught all kinds of art history subjects and she also taught painting. It was just something I always had growing up, and it just sort of felt like a natural thing for me to want to write about cause it's where my experience has been.

So, I got into journalism in high school through television, actually. We had a great TV channel in my high school and wonderful teachers for that. But my high school TV teacher like on the last day of school, you know, I thought I was going to go to journalism school and go on television and be in television and be a producer or something, and he pulled me aside and he's like, "You know, what you really should do when you get to college is the first day of school you should go school newspaper and ask them for a job writing. You should really be a writer." And I was like, "Oh, OK, sure, I'll try that too."

So, I went to GW, George Washington University, and I did what he said. Maybe the second day of school, I went to the newspaper office and I asked to cover something and they were like, "Well, what do you like?" And I said, "Arts." Because that's what most of my experience had been in at that point. And so they sent me to a Guster concert, I believe. This was like 2003. This was 2003. That was the first thing I ever wrote for the *GW Hatchet* and I ended up becoming the contributing arts editor the year after that and then the arts editor the year after that. And sort of wanting doing some stuff other than college journalism, I started freelancing for *The Examiner* here when that started up and writing some arts stories for them and freelancing for like a few other places.

And then I saw this job opening for an internship for *The Washington Post* then called City Guide, now called the Going Out Guide, which is where I work currently. But I applied for this internship and it was an unpaid internship, but this was 2005 and I had also been working other part-time jobs for real money, not for free. And they offered me this internship and, you know, this is like such a different time when you could get away with something this cocky, but I was like, "Well, I really can't afford to work for free, so maybe you could give me a part-time job instead." And they were like, "OK, we can do that." That would never happen now. I'm pretty sure it would never happen, but was really fortunate to have been looking for jobs at that time.

So, I got a part-time job as assistant producer for the City Guide and that involved going through all the listings and putting listings and helping out with the blog and a few other things, kind of like Web testing, because they were actually transforming the site a lot at

that point. This was when *The Washington Post* was in two separate buildings also. That was where I kind of got all my Web experience from, because at that point they weren't teaching as much of that at GW too. Now, I think they've totally transformed the journalism program a lot. But, at that point, I learned it all on the job and I'm really grateful for that too because it's how I was able to get all of my subsequent jobs was from that kind of on-the-job training.

And so, I was part-time for two years there while I was in school and also freelancing for *Express* and *City Paper* and a few other places. They couldn't offer me a full-time job right after graduation, so I ended up going to *U.S. News & World Report* working as a producer there for the Money and Business section for about 2-1/2 years. And that was cool too because that was a very different type of experience and I was there during this really interesting time in *U.S. News & World Report's* history, because we had gone from a weekly to being every other week to being monthly. And then, right after I left, they ceased publications. So it was a very, very tumultuous time there and I got to be, it was a really sad time too because a lot of people got laid off while I was there. But now, everything seems to be stable there.

And so then, while I was at *U.S. News & World Report*, I had still maintained some ties with *The Washington Post*, cause I actually sat really close to [Jim Brady](#). I think you've had him on the show too.

Michael O'Connell

Right.

Maura Judkis

Yeah. So Jim and I knew each other and then I had heard about the the new thing he was starting up at the time, which was TBD.com, and so I think I kind of ambushed him at an event he was speaking at.

Michael O'Connell

I think he gets ambushed quite a lot.

Maura Judkis

I think I'm not the only person who did it, but I was like, "I want to be a part of what you're doing." I'm sure 10 million people were saying that to him at the same time.

Michael O'Connell

Gave you a job to get you away from him.

Maura Judkis

Yeah, I also ... So I'd been freelancing for *City Paper* a lot. I had been doing a lot of freelancing for *City Paper*. Pretty much every week I'd been writing like art reviews and feature stories for them too and my editor at *City Paper*, Andrew Boujon, ended up getting hired by TBD too. And I was like, "All right, now I really need to be a part of this

thing. Two of my favorite people that I've worked with are in charge." So, I talked to both of them. I ended up going over to TBD in June before it launched and that was a dream job. It was really fun while it lasted.

Michael O'Connell

We just had Mandy Jenkins in and she said it was like the *Freaks & Geeks* of journalism.

Maura Judkis

It really was. That's a wonderful description. Mandy's the best.

Michael O'Connell

Thirteen weeks and everybody moves on to something bigger and better. So, how did you end up at *The Post* at your current job?

Maura Judkis

So, I was with TBD for a while and I was covering theater and visual art and culture for TBD and having a really, really good time. But then, as everyone knows, everything started falling apart. I was not one of the people who was let go in February. Unfortunately, a lot of my coworkers were let go then. But, I think for all of us who were left the writing was sort of on the wall so everyone was looking. I knew a lot of people at *The Post*, at this point too. Peter Marks, who's the theater critic there, he kind of gave me a hand. He is someone I had known from GW also, because he used to teach there. And so, he started sending me job openings and there was a producer opening. And so, I applied for that and that's how I ended up at *The Post*.

Between TBD and *The Post*, I did a fellowship at the University of Southern California. It was part of the National Endowment for the Arts and it was an arts fellowship and it was really, really cool. It was two weeks in California and it was pretty intensive on theater and social media and a lot of other things. So, that was like a really good break in between the two jobs. And I started at *The Post* as a producer for the Style section and did that for about a year and a half. And just recently, two months ago, I switched over as a reporter to the Weekend section.

Michael O'Connell

What does that beat entail?

Maura Judkis

All kinds of stuff. Really, just basically all the fun stuff that any reporter would get to do. It's really a dream job. I'm having such a good time. I cover theater and art and now food, too, so I'm going out to eat for work, which is something that I'm still getting used to.

Michael O'Connell

It's a dream job.

Maura Judkis

It really is. It's been a really good time. We also blog a lot. We have the Going Out Guide blog and we usually write about two posts per person per day for that. And that can be on anything from arts happenings to restaurant reviews. I'm not a restaurant critic and I'm not a theater critic. The Weekend section's role is more previews than reviews because the critics all work for the Style section. So like if a restaurant opens, I or one of my coworkers will be one of the first people to go check it out, but then later Tom Sietsema will be the person who writes the official reviews. So, we sort of get people excited about things, I guess.

Michael O'Connell

You may interview the chef or do a little featurey preview.

Maura Judkis

Yeah, interview the chef or the designer.

Michael O'Connell

More of a newsy aspect.

Maura Judkis

It's definitely more newsy for sure and it's definitely things that happen in advance, too. So, if a show is opening this weekend, I will not have seen it yet, but I'll have interviewed the costume designer or the director.

Megan Cloherty

What role does social media play in your job?

Maura Judkis

Oh definitely, I get so many stories from social media. A good example, I'm actually trying to solve this mystery that I found out about a few days ago. I saw it on Reddit. I kind of troll Reddit a little bit. This woman posted, I ended up [writing](#) about this, this woman posted that in the 1980s her mother had painted a painting of this breakdancing instructor that she took breakdancing lessons with in like 1983. And, she only knew him by the name of "California."

Megan Cloherty

Oh man.

Maura Judkis

And she's trying to find him to give him this painting that her mother had made of him, but she has no information, other than the fact that his name is California. That's a great

story. I want to find this California. Actually, it kind of relates back to this [cover story](#) I had written for *City Paper* like three years ago where I found this lost painting for a show at the Katzen. That was a really weird thing too. It took a while. Because when it comes to finding paintings or finding people connected to paintings, there's no electronic records. You kind of have to find people who knew that person and call them. So, it took a long time to track down this other painting, which is a fabulous painting by the way. It's this painting of Washington under this atomic bomb mushroom cloud. It was painted, I think, I don't know, in 1977 or something.

Michael O'Connell

So it's a political statement.

Maura Judkis

Yeah. And so, that painting, it took me a long time to track it down, and for the *City Paper* story, I didn't end up finding it until three days before my deadline too, so I was not even sure it was going to happen. I ended up finding it in this guy's house and I wanted to go see it because like, "Wow, we finally found this painting after calling 10,000 people." Not really, but a lot of people after all these months. And he's like, "No, no, I really can't have you come see it." I was like, "I just want to look at the painting. I'm not going to disturb you. I just want to make sure it's there." Eventually, it came out that he was actually a hoarder and that the painting was buried under all of his stuff. So, with the *City Paper* and the gallery that wanted to show it, we ended up hiring some art movers to come in and like extract it from his house. But anyway, that's a side story.

Because I'd found that other painting for *City Paper* and now I'm kind of on the hunt for the person with this painting. It's kind of different because now I have this painting but I need to find the person. So that's something I pulled off of social media recently, but also all kinds of blog posts and events that we didn't know about. There are so many events in the city. At the Going Out Guide, we have to just be on top of all of them because we want to have this complete listing and database of like anything a person can possibly do in any given night. So, we're always on the hunt through Facebook and through Twitter and all the time to find new events.

Michael O'Connell

Do you guys feel like you're in competition with other types of blogs and services? Things like Yelp, where people will do reviews things that are out there that *The Post* is trying to, I don't want to say "catch up," but they've got to address that area of social media?

Maura Judkis

With Yelp, it's tricky. I personally do not like Yelp because I feel like everyone who reviews things on Yelp has sort of, it's all about like, "I am writing a review on Yelp," but not like, "I am trying to give you an experience that I had." People make fun of reviews on Yelp all the time because, I'm sure you've seen that one blog, that's like, "My boy-

friend and I" It's really about them trying to make themselves heard rather than give you an accurate experience. I think we are a little more objective.

But at the same time, I totally recognize there are so many other places that people can get entertainment news from and can get reviews of new venues from. I realize that people can go to those places instead of us and also that the role of the critic is just so different these days than it used to be, because now everyone can be a critic. Obviously, Yelp is the best example of that, but I mean on any blog or any site people can be a critic and it does diminish the role of a critic. And I kind of think that's OK too, because I also think that when it comes to arts criticism, a critic can say whatever they want, but people are more likely to get those kinds of ... how to say this? People are going to think what they think about a movie or a piece of art or whatever because they might not look to that critic's opinion. They may look to their friends instead. I think that's something that journalism has to adapt to really is that the critic is no longer this voice that is --

Megan Cloherty

Omniscient.

Maura Judkis

Exactly.

Michael O'Connell

We were talking about this on another podcast. It was actually about the election. They were talking about the role that Facebook played in the election and the fact that a lot of people rely on the opinions of their friends. That has so much weight. Do you find yourself sort of competing against that? Or are you trying to tap into that?

Maura Judkis

This is something that we talked about in my arts journalism fellowship a lot, actually. What role will the critic have in the next 10 years? And I think the role of the critic is definitely diminishing, also, partly because, as many newspapers can't afford to have critics anymore too. So that necessarily will diminish their role. But I also think, one thing we talked about in my fellowship that is something that I try to practice all the time in the stories that I write is that, sort of a way, people are going to think what they think about a movie. If they want to see some movie that has Adam Sandler in it and they think it's "The Best Movie Ever," they're going to think that. Nothing a critic is going to say will change their mind. But I also feel like one thing that journalists can provide that your average Internet critic who's just some guy who's seen that movie who does not have the access of a journalist, what we can do is provide more of a behind-the-scenes kind of look. That's something that people who are writing on Yelp don't get.

They don't get to talk to the chef. They don't get to see the dish being plated. They don't get to find out how this work of art was made. All they have is the finished product. But journalists have access to the entire thing. And so, I think that that is kind of the way that

arts journalism could move in the next however many years, because I think that that's the way that we'll be able to differentiate ourselves from people who are writing on Yelp or people who have their own blog. That's something I try and do. It's something I experimented a lot at TBD and it's something I'm trying to do currently in my job.

For TBD, I did this one series about this play called [*One Flea Spare*](#). It was put on by the Forum Theatre here in D.C., and they were very generous. They gave me access to the entire production from the first table read to the very end. So I actually came in and sat in on everything they were doing. And it was very educational for me as just someone who had never had that kind of access to see what that was like. But I also think that most people who go to the theater, who see a movie, they don't necessarily know all the work that goes into it too. So, I ended up writing this series. It ended up being maybe 10 posts or so, kind of just walking people through how this play was made. The play ended up not getting very good reviews too. That was fine, I thought, because it was for me more about showing people what went into this and whether or not it was going to get good reviews didn't matter because some people still really loved it and Peter Marks didn't end up liking it, but that's Peter Marks. Every critic, it's their own opinion, but people who see the play still might end up really loving it and wanting to know what went into it.

Megan Cloherty

Do you think as an arts reporter, obviously, you have a team and you have people who specialize in different, you know, in theater or in ... well, help me.

Maura Judkis

Visual arts, classical music.

Megan Cloherty

There is so much. Do you think on a smaller scale, as an arts reporter you need to prioritize, make sure that you cover different forms of art or do you think you kind of have to listen to your audience and say, "You know, my audience keeps responding to music and to the latest exhibit that's coming out, so maybe I don't cover the new restaurant opening or ..." Do you think there's sort of a prioritization that goes on as far as the arts world goes in journalism?

Maura Judkis

Well, so first, the critics, there will always be those critics and they will always have their specialties because you wouldn't expect Anne Midgette to suddenly write about food. They should have their specialties and I think that's the wonderful thing about critics too is that they have this huge depth of knowledge that I do not have, for example. They've been doing this for years and they have a much more informed opinion than the people who are writing on Yelp or who are writing their own blogs. But I also think it is good to listen to your audience. So, with the Weekend section, for example, we have found that our audience really, really responds to food stories more than anything else. People love food, especially now that D.C. is getting this really interesting foodie culture.

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Maura Judkis

There's so much more to do when it comes to restaurant openings and cool little pop ups and everything. We do listen to that and we are writing a lot more about food and that's why I've started to do a lot more food stories recently.

Michael O'Connell

Well people, people have to eat. The bottom line is that everybody likes to eat something tasty, but not everybody goes to a movie or a play or reads a book. I mean, it's a common human experience that I think just at a very basic level.

Megan Cloherty

Did you ever feel like, especially when you were coming up before you got full-time jobs at *The Post* and at TBD, that you were kind of fighting for what you wanted to cover? Because I know a lot of times, I mean, smaller papers are closing their sports sections, closing their arts sections, I mean, it's a harder thing to specialize in. I'm kind of looking for advice for someone who maybe is coming up and is interested in covering art and covering culture.

Maura Judkis

Yeah. I think I guess advice for someone who wants to cover the arts is to be able to cover a lot of different types of arts, because I think there are a lot of people who go into this and they're like, "I really want to be a music critic." But there are so many people who want to be music critics, so many people. It's like if you can write a little bit of everything, you have a better chance of diversifying your skills and maybe getting a job that might not be a music critic. It might be a producer for the Style section, for example, but then you get to write some music reviews and then you get to write some art reviews and other things.

For me, I guess I was a little bit lucky in that my area of knowledge was visual art because of my parents and growing up. And there are fewer people who are trying to get into that, but also there are fewer jobs for that too. I mean, if you want to be an arts reporter, you might have to wait a little bit longer, unfortunately.

Megan Cloherty

Freelance, like you said.

Maura Judkis

And freelance, yeah.

Megan Cloherty

And kind of make it work, right?

Maura Judkis

Yeah, yeah. So when I was at *U.S. News & World Reports*, we don't cover the arts at *U.S. News & World Report*. But, I sort of actually found ways to fit arts into things I was writing too. So, an education story about arts education or when I was covering environmental news for them, the film *Wall-E* came out and that ended up getting on our blog. So, you can kind of find ways to make other beats a little bit, you can tailor things to your interest a little bit too.

Michael O'Connell

So, how much do your readers play into what you cover? Just feedback and your interaction with them?

Maura Judkis

With the Going Out Guide, more than any job that I've ever had probably. The Going Out Guide, there is so much give and take between readers and our staff. We do a chat every Thursday where we just take questions where people say, "My mother's here. We need to find a brunch. It can't be too expensive." And you have to think off the top of your head and be able to give them exactly what they want. So that's a great example of how we're constantly interacting with our readers. But also, people send us emails like that too, where they just need to find something and we'll help them out.

Michael O'Connell

It's this thing called Google. You should check that out.

Maura Judkis

But Google may not get you the perfect thing.

Michael O'Connell

Oh. OK.

Maura Judkis

We try for that. But also, a lot of our stories involve readers too. So we're doing a story coming up, I'm not actually writing this up, but one of my coworkers is. And it's something we do every year, called "The 40 Best Eats in Washington." This is another food example, but people go so crazy for our food stories. It's picking the 40 most essential dishes that everyone should have, whether it's a Ben's Chili Bowl half-smoke or whatever. So that's a crowdsourcing, pretty much. We pick our things. Each of us pick a dish, but the rest of it comes from readers and we talk to readers and find out what they think is the best thing that you should have to eat here.

Michael O'Connell

Do you have an experience in food of somebody telling you about something and you were just blown away by what it is? Do you have any of those experiences?

Maura Judkis

Do you mean in a particular dish that I've tried?

Michael O'Connell

Yeah.

Maura Judkis

Well, I'm pretty new to food, actually, so I've only been doing the food --

Michael O'Connell

Or art? Is there any art, has anybody tipped you off to an art story that you weren't aware of that you suddenly, it was, "Wow, this is a really cool thing."

Maura Judkis

Yeah. So, a couple of things that I've been interested in in covering art stories, this is another thing that I wrote for TBD, actually. There is this artist named [Victoria Gaitan](#) who, she's really cool. I had met her through the arts scene and she does these really kind of spooky, sort of eerie portraits, and they're often women who, she has the models put like corn syrup in their mouths and they dribble it down the front of their body.

Michael O'Connell

Oh my God.

Maura Judkis

And it sort of looks like they are bleeding from the mouth a little bit. Yeah. It's not totally accessible to everyone, but you guys are making some really funny faces right now.

Megan Cloherty

Sorry.

Maura Judkis

No, it's OK. And so, I was really kind of interested in her work and I think someone told her that I was. When you look at her photos, you kind of think, you think about what she's trying to tell you and about the darkness of the photo, but you also, like on this kind of baser level, you're like, "What is that like for that model, who has to spit this stuff out of her mouth?" I think someone kind of tipped her off that I was interested, because she ended up asking me to model for one of the photos. And that sort of launched this thing for me where I've become very interested in sort of experiencing artist's work in the closest way possible. Because, there's no way that you can really describe what it's like for those models. You can interview them, as much as you want and they'll be able to tell you, but like you won't really know until I had that corn syrup in my mouth and I

was dribbling it out and my hair was covered in all this other goo. And it was pretty gross. It was actually really gross.

Megan Cloherty

And that's like a really personal experience to be able to write that way.

Maura Judkis

It was super personal. Yeah. It ended up being a really cool story and it ended up taking a long time to come together because I ended up talking to every single one of her models. And they all had totally different things to say, cause I was like, "Did she tell you what she was going for?" No one said they did and they all had their own idea. But the, when we put all of our experiences together, we sort of realized that she was acting out this sort of bad dream through each of us. We were sort of becoming her avatar in a way. And that was something I never would've learned through just reporting and that's something I try to keep in mind when I write stories is that I want to get as close to it as I can.

Let's see, some other examples of that with *The Post*.

I went to Fashion Week this year for the first time. When you read Fashion Week stories every year, they have their own cliches. It's like, "Who's sitting in the front next to Anna Wintour?" And like, "This year, the big parties are whatever." And it's like you don't want to write that kind of story again.

So, when I went to Fashion Week I was not interested in those kinds of things. What sort of emerged during the few days that I was there were that there are so many people on the fringes of Fashion Week who are just like total wannabes who'll just hang onto anything they can get. And so, it's become very interesting there too with all of these style bloggers, these streetstyle photographers that have emerged. It's sort of this self-feeding ecosystem of like the streetstyle photographers will show up, but they're not [Bill Cunningham](#), you know, they're not like "The Streetstyle Photographers." They're just people with blogs who are really interested in fashion.

And then these style bloggers will show up who are really just pretty girls who have really nice clothing and they'll show up and the streetstyle photographers will not realize that they are not someone famous, because when you're at Fashion Week, everyone is well dressed. Anyone can be famous if you don't know who they are.

Michael O'Connell

You have to cover your bases to make sure.

Maura Judkis

Yeah, so they end up getting photographed by these streetstyle photographers and everyone else thinks that they're famous. But then the girls who are dressed up, they don't

necessarily know that the streetstyle photographers who are shooting them are not like famous bloggers either.

Megan Cloherty

Working for like *Elle* or something.

Maura Judkis

So it's like this kind of cycle of you don't know who's, neither of them know who each other is at all. And it was fascinating cause you'd watch this happen at every single show and none of these people had tickets to actually get into the show too.

I was able to get tickets to go into the show as press, but I ended up not writing about that stuff as much as what was happening on the outside. And then it kind of really cemented the whole experience for me when I was photographed by these people. I am nobody. I have never been to fashion week before. I am not a fashion person. I just work for *The Washington Post* and I was literally wearing pants from The Gap. They were like red pants. It was a nice outfit. I don't want to undersell myself.

Michael O'Connell

You did have to get dressed up. It was Fashion Week.

Maura Judkis

Yeah, I tried really hard. I was wearing red pants and this like white silk blouse and like a mint colored blazer. So it was kind of cool colors and I had like a really nice purse, too. But they were all the nicest things I owned, basically.

Michael O'Connell

This is it. It's your one shot.

Maura Judkis

So this guy, he takes my picture and he's like, "So, tell me everyone that you're wearing." And I was like, "Well, these pants are from The Gap." And he's like, he kind of rolled his eyes and he's like, "Well, what about your shirt?"

Michael O'Connell

JCPenney.

Maura Judkis

I like paused because I didn't want to say it was from H&M, you know. And he was like, "I'll just write that it's vintage." And it just was such an example of how Fashion Week worked to me. So, I ended up writing about myself for Fashion Week, in the same way that I wrote about Victoria, in that you kind of understand things a little bit better when you end up being in the story.

Megan Cloherty

Is that OK, though? From a journalism perspective, I know that if I was covering like a, obviously, it's very different, but if you're covering shooting or something, nobody cares about how you feel.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, but George Plimpton used to write stories like that all the time. It's a different type of journalism.

Megan Cloherty

It's a different type of journalism.

Maura Judkis

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

Do you find yourself drawn to that kind of?

Maura Judkis

I think the nice thing about arts journalism is that you have so much more flexibility and creativity. You know, I do not have to write in the inverted pyramid style. There's no formula. As long as, there's certainly a line to cross when it comes to self-promoting, like the tone of the story was not, "Look at me. I was photographed at Fashion Week." Because that would be terrible and I didn't feel that way either. That would be silly. So, no. You have to have the right tone and you also have to make sure that this is not self-promoting. And I think it is also the same when I ended up writing about my father. The story was not about me. The story was about my father, but I was the only person who could tell his story in that way.

Megan Cloherty

Right.

Maura Judkis

So I think it's like that's sort of the litmus test, is like, "Are you the only person who can tell this story in this way?" Then it's OK to include yourself in the story. It's certainly not — it's something I use very sparingly of course too. It's not like —

Megan Cloherty

Edna's Stories.

Maura Judkis

I'm not a memoirist. No way. No. Most stories I write are not like that, but I feel like some of the most interesting stories I've had that kind of interesting perspective just because it was something that happened to me and it was about the arts.

Megan Cloherty

How do you feel about the future of arts journalism? Not only in just D.C., but, do you see that there are a lot of people still interested in writing about it, interested in reading about it? Where do you see arts journalism going?

Maura Judkis

This sort of goes back to what I was saying about critics, too. I think there's definitely an appetite for arts journalism. I think people are always going to be interested. Also, I mean in entertainment journalism, too, in what they can do this weekend, what the best concert is, what they should see and what they should hear, and what they should be experiencing, and culture, just in general. I mean, there's so many people who write cultural essays and those end up being the things that are the most shared that I see a lot of times. So, I think that it's important that we should always have that.

But I also think that critics need to listen to their audience and arts journalists need to listen to their audience and also provide something that is different. And I think that's something that we're all trying to do, is have a different voice and not just be a critic, but be someone who can provide something a little bit more.

Megan Cloherty

A relatable experience or get somebody to understand what it would be like to be that, right?

Maura Judkis

Yeah. Yeah. And I mean I think behind-the-scenes stories, those have always done really well. People are really interested in like taking things apart piece by piece I think. So, that's something critics can do that is different, and I think that's the key to arts journalism surviving is listening to our audiences and being different and being interesting, of course.

Michael O'Connell

So you don't think you're going to be replaced by just a whole series of blogs about people writing about stuff?

Maura Judkis

I hope not. I don't know. I mean, I don't know. I hope not.

Megan Cloherty

I feel like there's a space for them and a space for more traditional coverage.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah. There's plenty of room. The Internet's huge.

Maura Judkis

Yeah.

Megan Cloherty

Plenty of room. Plenty of room.

Maura Judkis

I think we are to a point where like people, if they want to know, "Should I see this movie?" They might be more likely to ask their friends sometimes. But, at the same time, when it comes down to it, when you want to see what movies are going to win an Oscar, you know, your friend might not know that, but a critic would know that. So, it's sort of a difference between like posterity and your personal fun this weekend. That might be something you really rely on your friend or Yelp or any of the other places that you could go. But, when it comes down to how we look at this artist in history or how will we remember this film or who will win this award, that's when we need arts journalists and critics for.

Michael O'Connell

Before we wrap up here, I did want to ask you about what you're working on this week. This is Inauguration Week is when we're recording this. Inauguration is a couple of days away, and I understand that you're sort of going to be involved in some of The Post's coverage of that.

Maura Judkis

This weekend is madness. It's like total madness.

Michael O'Connell

What have you got to look forward to? And Megan, you as well are going to be covering some inauguration stuff.

Megan Cloherty

I am going to non-official and possibly official balls.

Maura Judkis

Which ones?

Megan Cloherty

The Green Ball, Starry Night.

Maura Judkis

I went to that last time, four years ago. I went to The Green Ball. It was fun.

Megan Cloherty

I'm looking forward to it, especially finding the story that I hope is going to hit me when I'm there, because I don't want to do, like you said, a traditional, you know, "This is what people were wearing."

Maura Judkis

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

This is our peek into Washington journalism. Every four years we get to have a big party.

Maura Judkis

Well no, every year we also have the White House Correspondent's Dinner.

Michael O'Connell

Oh, that's right.

Maura Judkis

So, that's the other journalist's --

Megan Cloherty

Yes, Michael. How could you forget?

Maura Judkis

That's always fun to cover too. This year, no, this weekend, I'm covering four inaugural balls and also like one party during the day. And sort of the way *The Post* had done our inauguration coverage is we've mobilized tons of people to be just out and about, reporting back from parties and, um, feeding The Grid. I don't know if you guys know The Grid, which we used a lot on election night.

Michael O'Connell

Oh yeah.

Maura Judkis

It's kind of this Instagram and video and all kinds of other things will feed into The Grid. And so, that's what our job is. That's my job for the whole weekend is just find things to feed The Grid. It makes it sound like this terrible monster.

Michael O'Connell

It's The Matrix.

Maura Judkis

So, I'll be out taking Instagrams and tweeting and also just filing small reports that will go into a larger story that someone else will be in the office compiling too. So, tonight I'm going to two inauguration parties that are not balls. And then Sunday, I'm going to the Hip-Hop Ball and Peace Ball. And then Monday, I'm going to a watch party at the Canadian Embassy and then I'm going to the official Inaugural Ball and then I'm going to the HRC, the Human Right Ball.

Michael O'Connell

Wow.

Megan Cloherty

It'll definitely be interesting, especially because you're getting almost the same story from multiple different perspectives.

Maura Judkis

Yeah. Yeah. I was talking to a lot of coworkers who have been covering inaugural balls for like 15 years, like the Reliable Source columnist. They seem so over it, whereas I'm still like, "Cool. I'm going to the Inaugural Ball. I have my pass. I have my security clearance and everything."

So, I mean, I think our sort of thing that we're going to be doing is to get stories that are overheard moments, kind of things that are unique to each ball. Because, like you said, all these balls are really kind of the same. It's just a difference between which celebrities are there and what people are wearing. So you have to look for the interesting moments and the moments that are unique to the ball and sort of explain the ball and explain Washington at the same time. That's the best part is when you find someone who's saying that one perfect quote that explains the entire night. So that's what I'll be looking for.

Michael O'Connell

Interesting. I was talking to a [WTOP] reporter and she talked about covering the inauguration in the past and covering some of the balls. But she said one of the fun times for her was the morning after, going down to Chinatown and interviewing people who were on the street in their formal gowns from the night before talking about the whole experience.

Maura Judkis

Oh yeah. That's a great idea actually. We were actually told that one of the best places to catch people is coat check lines, because they're prisoners. They're like captive. They're stuck with a reporter cause they're not going to get out of that line cause that line is long, so I might ambush someone.

Michael O'Connell

And they're going to be needing their coats.

Maura Judkis

Yeah. It's really going to be cold.

Michael O'Connell

Well, thank you for coming in Maura. This is really interesting.

Maura Judkis

Thank you for having me.

Michael O'Connell

Where can people follow you on Twitter?

Maura Judkis

Oh, it's just my full name, Maura_Judkis and the same with Instagram.

Michael O'Connell

All right. I'm Michael O'Connell with Megan Cloherty. We've been talking to Maura Judkis of *The Washington Post* and thanks for joining us.