

Laura Amico, founder Homicide Watch D.C.

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

Welcome to It's All Journalism. I'm Michael O'Connell.

Mark every death. Remember every victim. Follow every case. These are the words on the banner of Homicide Watch D.C., a community driven reporting project covering every murder case in Washington, D.C. Today we're joined by Laura Amico, the founder and the driving force behind [Homicide Watch D.C.](#) I'm speaking to her from New England, where she's currently a Nieman Berkman fellow at Harvard University. Good morning, Laura.

Laura Amico, founder, Homicide Watch D.C.

Hi, good morning.

Michael O'Connell

Your website kicked off in August 2011, where did you get the inspiration for it?

Laura Amico

We actually started it in September of 2010. We launched on Wordpress and we relaunched on the custom platform that you see now in August of 2011. That relaunch really gave us a lot of steam and created the website that we'd always imagined building. On the Wordpress site, we'd been able to learn the rhythm of courts coverage, of crime coverage and what the community was looking for. With the custom platform that we relaunched on, we built out the database features, the victim pages, the suspect pages, that had really become the heart of the site.

Michael O'Connell

You know, I really love this site and I hope that the people who listen to this check it out because it's ... some of my background is in community journalism and I can tell you that crime reporting, a., people love reading crime reporting; b., it's an incredible community service; and 3, it's just incredibly interesting and, we'll go to d., a lot of this information is available, and it really is just a matter of going out there and being a reporter and digging for it. So, tell me about your background and how you got into this.

Laura Amico

I started as an education reporter and then I moved to general assignment and then the crime beat, which was not a beat that I was interested in, but it was the job that was available, so I told my editors that it was my dream job and they believed me. The joke was on me because I really did just fall in love with the crime beat.

Michael O'Connell

Once you get into it, you suddenly realize the breadth of it and the impact it can have and just your coverage, but go on please.

Laura Amico

I was the crime reporter at the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* and Chris, my husband, was hired by the *PBS Newshour* out in Washington, D.C., so we moved from California to D.C.

Unfortunately, in 2009, no one was hiring crime reporters, let alone local reporters, for the most part, so I spent a year freelancing and sort of just really wanting to get back to this beat that I'd enjoyed so much.

I was trying to follow some homicide cases from my neighborhood, because I wanted to get to know the city that I was living in and who my neighbors were and what was happening in their lives, and whether or not my neighborhood was in fact safe. And when homicides happened in my neighborhood, I went to the local media to find out what there was to know. I found those reports to be very basic and lacking in what I was looking for, which was primarily the followup of what happens after the person was killed. How was his death being experienced in the community? And what was happening in the criminal justice system?

Because I was freelancing and not really enjoying the work that I was doing at that point, I started kicking around this idea for a website that would build more complete coverage and build in more voices from the community. I'm very fortunate that my husband is Web developer and we were able to work on this project together.

Michael O'Connell

In your impression, why was the local press sort of not going into the depth that maybe you thought that they should be? Do you have any idea?

Laura Amico

You know, D.C. has come down in the number of murders so, so much. There were under a hundred homicides last year. That's down from a high of 500 in the '90s each year.

Michael O'Connell

Back when it was considered the murder capital of the country.

Laura Amico

Right, exactly. And I think that that's a volume that's hard for anyone to really wrap their head around. But it also sets a standard of news values in terms of determining which cases to cover. And that as the number of murders declined, the media was still using those old news values of which neighborhoods were most affected, which homicides and which neighborhoods deserved attention and making judgments, perhaps, about what the root cause of various homicides were. And that as the crime situation in changed, those news values weren't and it created this gap within the community.

Michael O'Connell

Do you think that they were using sort of a racial or socio-economic yardstick and saying, "Well, these neighborhoods, we'll certainly report the murder. But these neighborhoods, these aren't our listeners or our viewers or our readers."

Laura Amico

Yeah, I think it had to do with so many homicides in the past having to deal with the crack epidemic, and that really not being so much of a problem anymore. We used to hear from people, "All of the homicides in D.C. are just drug deals gone bad." And that's really, really not the case anymore. But that was the assumption that was being used to justify or not justify coverage.

Michael O'Connell

So, I started out this interview stating your motto, which is, "Mark every death. Remember every victim. Follow every case." How do you do that?

Laura Amico

Well, the first step is by making the best use of our reporting as we can. What you see on the frontend is a very sophisticated backend of a database that collects all of the information that we're reporting.

So, the first step that a reporter does in covering a case is that they go into the database and they enter what they know. That might just be a date, a time and a location. It might include a victim name, age, race, gender, circumstance, who the detectives are assigned to the case, and so on, going through the criminal justice system.

Having that information in the database helps us keep track of 1., what we know and what we don't know; 2, where we need to focus our reporting efforts, if there are holes in the cases that we're covering; and, 3., help us just to keep track of where cases are. We always know the next court day for a case is. We always know the status of a case at any given time, and that helps us not have to redo a lot of the work again and again, when six months after the preliminary hearing, we're now in pre-trial motions, we don't have to go back and do a lot of catchup.

Michael O'Connell

And that's actually one of the things that I really like about your site is that it's not just, you know, John Smith here committed this crime. He's been arrested and you don't really hear about it until months later when there's a resolution. You can look up by the name. You can look up by the location and you can sort of follow that case as it progresses. Having followed this process, do you sort of have a greater understanding then of sort of how this unfolds?

Laura Amico

Yeah, one thing that I've learned through working on this site that's been really fascinating for me is that we've traditionally treated crime news as breaking news. And in reality, the community treats it as much more evergreen-type news, that we see people coming

back to these pages that we 're creating for victims and suspects, coming back to individual stories and photos and the photo galleries and the individual documents again and again. They're coming back to these resources on a timeline that I really can't anticipate.

I watch my analytics very carefully, and sometimes I'll see a spike in one particular story or a victim page or a suspect page. I'll think, "I haven't had anything new in that case in months. Why this sudden interest?" And I'll dig into it a little bit and see that, oh, perhaps it's the person's birthday or it's the mother's birthday or there's a family reunion, something like that.

And it's really just proven to me that, for the community, these stories don't end in the news cycle. They continue on two years, for sure, certainly, because that's about the length of time that it takes a case to go to trial in D.C. But on much longer than that as they continue to grieve and think about and try to understand these experiences.

Michael O'Connell

That's sort of the incredible thing that when you see something like this, it's not just a crime blotter, this is something that's sort of living. That it's a story that's constantly unfolding. That there are new things that you learn and that there are new parts of it that become prominent.

Laura Amico

I love that we can talk about a Homicide Watch site in terms of it being a living resource. I think that that's just really incredible.

Michael O'Connell

Oh no. You do get kind of inured to the statistics, the breaking news of, "There's been another shooting, wherever." And you'll see a face on the TV for a few seconds and it just sort of moves on. These murders, obviously, they impact the person who's killed, but they impact the family. That's one of the things that I really enjoy about your site or that I really admire about your site is that it goes that extra step. It sort of opens this up to feedback from the community. Can you tell me how that sort of works?

Laura Amico

Our goal from the beginning was to provide as much context as possible, because my belief is that more context builds more understanding, which builds greater conversations. And what we really want to have happen is to have people have deep, meaningful conversations that perhaps lead to change based on what they're learning and understanding from Homicide Watch D.C. My sense in both covering crime and reading crime news always was that I didn't have a real understanding of the context in which these crimes were occurring, again, determining the newsworthiness of any particular case. I didn't know how those decisions were being made. I think that with Homicide Watch D.C., what we try to do is provide as granular a level as your interested in, but then also that highest overview level that you might be interested in as well. My hope is that you

might come into Homicide Watch D.C., perhaps on a victim page or a suspect page and you'll see in either the lefthand or the righthand sidebar, some datapoints there. I'm looking at a victim page right now for a young man who died Nov. 17, 2012, and I see that he's 18-years old, male, black, and the cause of death is stabbing.

I might be interested in this particular case, but what I also hope would happen is that you might say, "Well, who else was killed in a stabbing? Who else was 18-years old? Or black? Or male?" And that you'd start going deeper beyond, "OK, this happened to this young man, who else did this happen to? What were the similarities and differences between these two cases? Why is one different from the other? And, what does that tell me about the problem of homicide in my neighborhood?"

Michael O'Connell

You present this data, are you doing any reporting or writing separate from just the coverage of these murders, looking at some of this data and saying, "Why are there suddenly all of these shootings in this area?" Are you writing any bigger stories, or are you just sort of presenting —

Laura Amico

Yeah. No, certainly, in December, we just published our second annual year-in-review package. I'm opening it up here now. We had a sit down interview, which we video-recorded, with Police Chief Cathy Lanier, where she talked about the specific homicide cases during the year that she had thought had been particularly meaningful, as well as trends in homicides in the District over time.

We also do a pretty deep analysis of our data. If you were to look at 2012 by the numbers, you see just a whole list of datapoints that we've been able to pull out of our database. For example, the first one, there were 92 homicides this year in 91 separate incidents. Four deaths were ruled self-defense or justifiable homicide by citizens and won't be counted in official statistics. Eighty-four victims were male, eight were female. The oldest was 69-years old. The youngest was a baby who died just after being delivered.

These are things that we can pull out of our database quite quickly, and we do it at other times during the year too, if we feel like there may be something specific happening, some sort of trend or something interesting. But, we also do it every December for a large, year-end package.

Michael O'Connell

What has been the response been from the community?

Laura Amico

Really, really interesting. When I started just a Wordpress site in September of 2010, I started it really quietly because I didn't really know what I was doing. I had this sense of I had these skills as a crime reporter, there was coverage that I was looking for in the community, but I was still very much an outsider. I had just moved to D.C. from Califor-

nia, and I didn't know if my needs were the same as the community's needs. We had 500 pageviews our first full month in October of 2010. Let me pull this up just now. We now average 10,000 pageviews a day.

Michael O'Connell

Wow. Wow.

Laura Amico

That's in 2-2 1/2 years of growth. That's with one reporter on the site. We have three interns on the site right now, equaling about 1-1/4 FTEs (full-time equivalents).

So, the community response was just tremendous. It was natural. There was nothing that we did as far as pushing the site out through promotions, through putting it on listservs, nothing like that. People found it on their own and still a lot of our traffic comes in through search. And I think this speaks to the ways that people in the community are trying to access and interact with information about these crimes is that they're putting names and addresses into Google. So they're saying, "I know something happened on Fifth Street last night. I know something happened to this girl Selina who I went to high school with." And they're putting that into Google and Google is sending them to Homicide Watch D.C. So that's been really interesting to me.

The other thing is that I knew coming in that as an outsider, that I didn't want my voice to be the primary voice on the site. So, I went with a very strict, very voiceless AP-style for all of the writing and reporting, and I tried to build a safe commenting community so that people would feel as though they could leave comments about the cases and the people and what they were experiencing. We try to highlight as many of those comments as we can by pulling them out of the threads and calling them "Comments of the Day," because we want to try and elevate the community voices and help people feel like they're a part of this conversation and that their experiences are valid.

Michael O'Connell

And I know that that's one of the important parts about this site that we've been sort of talking around, is that people do leave comments. People post photos. I think you said before, AP, keeping your voice out of it, I think that serves you really well, cause the that opens you up for people to sort of fill that void with their own stories, their own perspectives. Tell me about how that sort of grew as the site went on.

Laura Amico

Well, the comments got better and better and better. I worked really hard on our comments policy and we pre-moderate all of our comments. I think that that's helped us build a safe space. There's historically been a big problem with online comments related to crime stories. And, I didn't want this site to involve any of that, those personal attacks, the swearing, the language, that sort of thing, that you typically see. So, we decided to pre-moderate. What that has meant is that we're able to shutdown any problems before they start. If someone posts a comment, you know, it's a personal attack, a threat, any-

thing like that, it doesn't get posted. So, the comments never devolve down that path. But it's also raised the level of comments that people feel like this is a safe space for them to really say what they think and what they're feeling. And that's one of the things I'm most proud of on the site.

Michael O'Connell

Do you have a particular comment that you remember that sort of jumps out at you?

Laura Amico

Yeah. A couple. There's one from awhile ago now, maybe a year and a half ago, a suspect's father wrote in, actually, and said, "My son tells me he's innocent and I have to believe him." And that was a really meaningful comment for me because suspects' families so rarely have voices in coverage of crime. And I know from sitting in the courtroom with both victim families and suspect families, that in many cases, both families are experiencing losses. That victims' families are afraid of what's going to happen. They might not understand what's happening in the courts system, and they're trying to understand too how they came to be in this situation, and I love that we've been able to provide a place for them to feel like they can share those concerns and those experiences as well.

Another one of my favorite comments came from a nurse, an emergency room nurse, who wrote in saying that she had been on duty when a shooting victim was brought in and she didn't know this young man and she didn't know his family. But, she wanted them to know that they did everything that they could to save his life.

That comment to me showed just the incredible depth of this community of people that can be affected by these cases, and that it's perhaps a much larger community than we ever imagined. That it's the families, for sure, but it's also the nurses and doctors and ambulance drivers and teachers and social workers, everyone who's in this community. And it just reaches much farther than I'd thought.

Michael O'Connell

And I think that what you just described is what I find so amazing about this site. That, and again, your neutral voice serves this so well because any point of view that you would add to it is not going to raise the drama or the interest or the humanity of this moment of this story that's going on. You're just sort of providing this space for it to exist.

Laura Amico

Right. I try to remember, you know, these aren't my stories. These aren't my experiences, and it's not my voice that matters or how I tell the story that matters. The goal is to be a moderator, a space, a place to have the conversation.

Michael O'Connell

You've definitely caught the attention of a lot of people in media. You've received a lot of rewards. We started this out, you said that you're a Neiman Berkman fellow at Harvard. The Knight Public Service Award from the Online News Association. You were named an OpenGov Champion by Sunlight Foundation. *The Columbia Journalism Review*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times* have all written about you. As a journalist, what is your takeaway? How do you feel about that?

Laura Amico

Boy, it's incredible. We fought for so long for people to recognize the site as journalism. We did it outside of the traditional legacy newsrooms, without any grants or financial support. And there's a lot of questions for a long time and perhaps there still is about exactly what is this site. Is this a news service when it's not operating within the large media world of D.C.? The Nieman Berkman Fellowship, ONA, National Press Foundation honors, all of that, just proves that there's so many people doing journalism and doing good work on their own, outside of the traditional structures, and it's so great to have that recognized.

Michael O'Connell

You certainly can't imagine this being done economically in a print environment. Certainly, with the depth that you've been able to do it and the interactivity, I think the interactivity, which you're only going to find in an online environment, really, really serves you well in the way you're telling these stories and the way you're interacting with the community.

Is it journalism? Is it just a community blog? You know, what is it? I think people recognize that whatever it is, whatever this animal, whatever this elephant in the dark is, this is a very powerful vehicle for a lot of people. You mention sort of starting this site and you sort of mentioned the financial aspect of it, how is this financed?

Laura Amico

Yeah. Chris and I bootstrapped it for two years, just running it with spit and duct tape and whatever we could because we believed in it. We were lucky. Chris is working full-time for the *NewsHour* and then full-time for NPR as a developer and works nights and weekends on a project. His salary there allows me to work on the project full-time and build it into what it is today.

There's a point about a year-and-a-half ago when we were figuring out how to make it sustainable and thinking about applying to become a nonprofit and all of that. And I suddenly realized that we built this software. We built this product. And that these conferences I was going to, reporters kept asking me, "How can I do what Homicide Watch does?" And so, we realized, maybe we can combine that need with the product that we've developed and actually provide this product to newsrooms that those reporters can use this tool, which is how we're now supporting a business through those licensing agreements. We work with Digital First Media to do [Homicide Watch Trenton](#) in partner-

ship with the *Trentonian*. And now with the *Chicago Sun-Times*, to do Homicide Watch Chicago, which will be up and running in a couple of days now.

Michael O'Connell

And is that going to be part of their ... they're going to staff that with their regular reporters?

Laura Amico

Yeah. They're responsible for the staffing, all of the reporters and editors, and running the site's day-to-day operations. We provide the software and any consulting or editorial support that they need as far as approach.

Michael O'Connell

Now Trenton, Chicago, D.C., these are cities of a certain size. Is this a model that can be translated to smaller markets you think?

Laura Amico

Trenton is actually a smaller market. Let me look up her real fast how many homicides they had last year.

Michael O'Connell

I know Trenton's not Chicago.

Laura Amico

Yeah.

Michael O'Connell

But Podunk, Idaho, or wherever, who may have like one or two murders a year. One would hope that Podunk, Idaho that had one or two murders that their local paper would spend a lot of time covering that.

Laura Amico

Right. One would hope. The idea of the software is that it helps the newsroom provide that place for conversation within a community that is seeking to have that conversation. And we've seen that in Trenton, that there are people there who want to talk about the problem of homicide. They're looking for facts in context to have those conversations with and that Homicide Watch is able to become that place. We think that the same will be true in Chicago and we think that it's true of a lot of other cities too. You know, a city with one or two homicides a year is probably a different bag of chips.

Michael O'Connell

Do you see this model being translated in any other way to violent crime, to other types of, I don't know what I want to say, activities? Or a way to monitor some other type of situation?

Laura Amico

Yeah, no, it's funny. One of the requests that we get most often from newsrooms is, "Homicide Watch, yeah, that's great. Can you apply that to schools coverage and education coverage?" And it's really an interesting concept. We're working on a couple different projects right now actually where we take the heart of the idea, which is contextual database reporting tied to narratives and built around community conversations, and apply that to other subjects.

The software is great and the tool is an incredible resource for reporters, but I think it's also a journalistic approach of how you think about the purpose of your news, the purpose of your coverage and how you're engaging your community.

Michael O'Connell

One of the things about this type of coverage, which I think is important and, when it's done well, it can lead to change in places. Do you feel, have you got any inkling that there's been any type of change because of you've been able to provide this platform?

Laura Amico

That's a really hard question.

Michael O'Connell

I ask the hard questions I'm sorry.

Laura Amico

I know, I know. And that's one that people ask a lot. They ask, "Are there fewer homicides because of Homicide Watch D.C.?" Well, I don't know.

Michael O'Connell

Well, let me ask you a similar question but slightly different. What's your hope for this? That you set up a site like this, that you're reporting this, you're telling these stories, what is your hope?

Laura Amico

I have story that I can tell, actually. I was at the courthouse one day and a detective pulled me aside and said, "Laura, I've got to talk to you." I said, "OK, about what?" And he said, "Well, we pulled this kid in for questioning on a homicide last night." And I said, "OK." And he said, "We sat the kid down and the first thing he said was, 'I ain't done nothing. I've seen Homicide Watch. They locking people up for that shit now.'"

For me, that was an incredible moment because, you know, whether or not this kid decided to carry a gun or whether or not he decided to shoot someone based on his interpretation of whether more people were being arrested for murder in D.C., was really fascinating to me. I mean, they weren't locking anymore people up for homicides than

they have been before, it's just that this kid knew that these arrests were being made because he'd been on Homicide Watch and because that information is accessible. I think that that goes to that community conversation.

Michael O'Connell

Yeah, it's funny when you turn the light on what happens that people suddenly realize that, "Oh, maybe somebody's watching me" or "Maybe my neighbor is going to comment about me on a board if I get arrested for something." Suddenly, it becomes almost a self-policing mechanism. Very interesting. Very fascinating.

Laura Amico

Yeah, "My family will know. My teachers will know." Whatever it is. The other thing we see —

Michael O'Connell

Well, you see consequences.

Laura Amico

Consequences, exactly. The other thing is that we see the site being a resource for families that are dispersed, so families that live in multiple states in the area, we have a lot of families that are split between Washington, D.C., and North Carolina. And North Carolina is actually one of our highest traffic producing areas because those families are following the court's process of their victims and suspects through Homicide Watch, which is really interesting.

Michael O'Connell

Have you had much interaction with families, one-on-one, either in court or just in passing?

Laura Amico

Yeah, mostly at the courthouse which is where most of the reporting happens, but also through responding to comments. If a particularly good comment comes in, as it just happened this morning, a woman wrote in in memory of her friend who was just killed late this week. And I emailed her back and said, "Thank you for your comments. I'm so sorry for your loss. Do you have a photo we can use? Is there anything else that you'd like to say?" That sort of thing.

You get to know the families of both the victims and the suspects. There's a suspect's father who I used to see all the time. I'm here in Boston now and the interns are covering the courthouse, but when I was covering the courthouse I'd see this father at every hearing, which is actually fairly unusual. At the first hearing, I introduced myself. He said he didn't want to talk to me, and I said, "OK, that's fine. Here's my card in case you change your mind." And he said, "No, I'm not going to change my mind. You all knocked on my windows and put TV cameras into my bedroom window." I said, "Well, I don't have a TV camera, but I'm very sorry for that. Just so you know, I'm going to be here

covering the hearings. You don't have to talk to me, but you can if you want." And, we never had an interview, but seeing each other again and again, he knew who I was. I think he began to realize what I was trying to do, and we started to have conversations. Nothing for website and nothing about the case, but we just formed that relationship, which I was really proud of.

Michael O'Connell

It's just on a very human level. You have something shared. You know what's going on. He may not have somebody that he feels comfortable just talking to because there's always these unasked questions that he doesn't want to talk about. It's amazing. What have you learned about community journalism from doing this site?

Laura Amico

That's a really good question. I've learned that the community is much smarter than I am, that they know things before I do and they often understand them better. That's why I tried to elevate as many of their voices as possible and to make it as community driven as I can.

I've learned from sitting in the courtroom that victims families and suspects families are often equally at loss for what is happening and both trying to understand how they got to this place and that valuing both of their experiences as a community narrative of violent crime is really important.

Michael O'Connell

I'm going to wrap this up with sort of a question that we kind of like to ask everybody who comes in here. There's been a lot of talk, you always hear it, people saying, "Oh, journalism's dying." Because all these big papers are dying, they think that journalism's dying. I think yours is an example of very clearly that journalism can exist in this world in a different way and thrive in a different way. I'm going to ask you, are normal question is, "What do you think of the future of journalism?" But, what do you think of the future of crime journalism at this point?

Laura Amico

That's a good question.

Michael O'Connell

Do you want to just ask the journalism question ... what do you think is the future of journalism?

Laura Amico

I think that we're moving towards a more audience-centric, empathetic journalism. I hope it's the type that you see on Homicide Watch. Journalism that isn't just about the journalists going out and interviewing someone and interpreting what they say and telling a story about it, but journalism that builds community value in conversation over time.

Michael O'Connell

I think that Homicide Watch D.C. definitely is a site that is doing that and is taking journalism in a very different, new way in one sense, but in the other, you're actually doing really good journalism. You're covering something dispassionately. You're going into the courts and covering crime, where a lot of papers and other news outlets aren't able to do that as maybe they once were.

So, we've been speaking today with Laura Amico from Homicide Watch D.C. I highly recommend that you check out this site. How can people follow you on Twitter?

Laura Amico

I'm [@HomicideWatch](https://twitter.com/HomicideWatch) for Homicide Watch D.C. [@LauraNorton](https://twitter.com/LauraNorton) for journalism news and our website is homicidewatch.org.

Michael O'Connell

OK. Thank you very much for joining me today. I found this really fascinating.

Laura Amico

And it was a terrific conversation, thanks.