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One Reporter's Lonely Beat, Witnessing Executions

By [RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA](#)

Of all the consequences of shrinking newsrooms, one of the oddest is this: Fewer journalists are available to watch people die. But Michael Graczyk has witnessed more than 300 deaths, and many of those were people he had come to know.

An Associated Press reporter based in Houston, Mr. Graczyk covers death penalty cases in Texas, the state that uses capital punishment far more than any other, and since the 1980s, he has attended nearly every execution the state has carried out — he has lost track of the precise count. Whenever possible, he has also interviewed the condemned killers and their victims' families.

What makes his record all the more extraordinary is that often, Mr. Graczyk's has been the only account of the execution given to the world at large. Covering executions was once considered an obligatory — if often ghoulish — part of what a newspaper did, like writing up school board meetings and printing box scores, but one by one, such dutiful traditions have fallen away.

A generation ago, he had plenty of company from other journalists at the prison at Huntsville, about an hour's drive north of Houston, where executions in Texas are carried out. But then Texas executions went from rare to routine, and shrinking news organizations found it harder to justify the expense of what was, from most parts of the state, a long trip.

"There are times when I'm the only person present who doesn't have a stake in the outcome," he said.

Seeing inmates in the death chamber, strapped to a gurney and moments away from lethal injections, he has heard them greet him by name, confess to their crimes for the first time, sing, pray and, once, spit out a concealed handcuff key. He has stood shoulder to shoulder with other witnesses who stared, wept, fainted, turned their backs or, in one case, exchanged high-fives.

No reporter, warden, chaplain or guard has seen nearly as many executions as Mr. Graczyk, 59, Texas prison officials say. In fact, he has probably witnessed more than any other American. It could be emotionally and politically freighted work, but he takes it with a low-key, matter-of-fact lack of sentiment, refusing to hint at his own view of capital punishment.

Given a choice between the death chamber's two viewing rooms, he usually chooses the one for the victim's family rather than the side for the inmate's, partly "because I can get out faster and file the story faster."

"My job is to tell a story and tell what's going on, and if I tell you that I get emotional on one side or another, I open myself to criticism," he said.

The A.P. attends every execution, a policy that newspapers around the state encourage.

"Our staff is half the size it was three years ago, and so it's just much more difficult to send somebody," said Jim Witt, executive editor of The Fort Worth Star-Telegram. "But we know we can depend on The A.P., so I can send my reporters to something else."

Newspapers sometimes use The A.P.'s reporting rather than their own — or they do not cover the executions at all. What was once a statewide story has become of strictly local interest.

A few papers, like The Houston Chronicle, still routinely cover executions in cases from their home counties, but not those from other parts of the state. Only one paper regularly covers executions no matter which part of the state the cases come from: The Huntsville Item, a small publication based near the prison.

This year, the state has put to death five inmates in cases from Tarrant County, which includes Fort Worth. The Star-Telegram covered one, wrote about two other cases in the days before the executions, and on the remaining two did not publish any articles, either its own or The A.P.'s.

"It depends on whether the crime was particularly newsworthy," Mr. Witt said.

This year, a case from El Paso County resulted in an execution for that county for the first time in 22 years, but rather than send a reporter to Huntsville, some 650 miles away, The El Paso Times quoted extensively from Mr. Graczyk's report.

"We actually put in to attend that one, and we were granted a spot, but when the editors explained the case to me, and the local connection was minimal, I said it wasn't a compelling enough case," said Chris V. Lopez, editor of The Times.

He said the expense of traveling to Huntsville was not a major consideration, but "it has to be a case that has a lot of local impact," adding that the paper plans to attend a scheduled execution in a more prominent case.

Mr. Graczyk, who also writes on a wide range of other topics, developed his unusual specialty in the mid-1980s, a few years after Texas resumed executions after a long hiatus. He often covers the crimes, the trials and the appeals, immersed in details so gruesome it is hard to imagine they are real.

At first there were just a handful of executions each year, but the pace of capital punishment in Texas stepped up sharply through the next decade. The state has put 441 inmates to death since 1982, more than the next six states combined. That includes 334 since the start of 1997, a period in which Texas accounted for 41 percent of the national total.

"The act is very clinical, almost anticlimactic," Mr. Graczyk said. "When we get into the chamber here in Texas, the inmate has already been strapped to the gurney and the needle is already in his arm."

Witnesses are mostly subdued, he said, and while "some are in tears, outright jubilation or breakdowns are really rare."

They stand on the other side of a barrier of plexiglass and bars, able to hear the prisoner through speakers. And the only sound regularly heard during the execution itself, is of all things, snoring. A three-drug cocktail puts the inmate to sleep within seconds, while death takes a few minutes. Victims' family members often remark that the killer's death seems too peaceful.

But before the drugs flow, the inmate is allowed to make a last statement, giving Mr. Graczyk what even he acknowledges are some lasting, eerie memories.

One inmate "sang 'Silent Night,' even though it wasn't anywhere near Christmas," Mr. Graczyk said. "I can't hear that song without thinking about it. That one really stuck with me."

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