

# *Transformer*

*How Tragedy Shaped a Journalist's Mission*

Mark Massé

*It has taken the media industry far too long to realize that it is perfectly natural for journalists, like other people, to feel the effects of trauma... The media need to wake up to traumatic stress as a subject worthy of debate.*

*—Chris Cramer, former managing director of CNN International Networks*

Oklahoman Joe Hight is a throwback to a time when most men parted their Brylcreem-glistening hair, when only Elvis had sideburns, and when you kept your suit coat on and necktie taut until quitting time. The stocky fifty-one-year-old journalist with the high-pitched laugh may strike some as too ordinary a fellow to be a reformer. Others may correctly note that Hight didn't launch the movement to humanize newsroom culture and transform media coverage of tragedy and trauma. He was preceded by advocates in the United States and overseas. But Joe Hight learned the lessons firsthand and found a cause when terrorism struck his community, forever changing his life and those of so many others.

He was in the newsroom of the *Oklahoman* newspaper fourteen years ago when, at 9:02 a.m. on April 19, 1995, the Murrah Federal Building exploded, shaking the earth six miles away and sending a mushroom cloud over Oklahoma City. On that fateful day, Hight was the assignment editor at the Gaylord family-owned Oklahoman newspaper. Hours later he was serving as Victims

Team leader, assembling a corps of reporters from varied beats, including community, business, sports, and features, and directing coverage of the men, women, and children killed and injured in the bombing. He would oversee the writing of 168 “Profiles of Life” vignettes to honor the import of those individuals lost in a senseless, savage act. There would also be stories on some of the more than 850 wounded, including inspirational tales of the youngest survivors, such as “miracle” babies found alive in the rubble.

As an experienced journalist, Hight was no stranger to death and destruction. He had reported on grisly oil-field accidents, deadly natural disasters, and shocking murders. On August 20, 1986, he had supervised initial coverage of the Edmond (Okla.) Post Office massacre that left fifteen dead and launched the ominous phrase “going postal” into the American lexicon.

But Hight and the 150-person *Oklahoman* newsroom were in uncharted territory in April 1995. How to report accurately and compassionately on the devastating news day after day? How to cope with the emotional impact of such a tragedy on the families of victims, on injured survivors, on a traumatized community? How to help journalists covering these stories take care of themselves?

Hight and his boss, then managing editor Ed Kelley, watched veteran reporters in tears as they filed their stories. Others coped as best they could, denying their feelings, clamping down on emotions as they had been taught, driven by their work ethic, deadlines, and the belief that journalists were supposed to “just deal with it” and not bring their own “stuff” into the newsroom.

“Most of us aren’t very good at admitting we have a problem,” says reporter Ann DeFrance, a fixture in the newsroom since 1969. Another long-time staffer, Clytie Bunyan, agrees with that assessment, noting that in 1995, “Some people chose to stay stuck rather than talk about it.” Bunyan, the newspaper’s current business editor, had been in downtown Oklahoma City on April 19 when the 4,800 pounds of explosives (jet fuel and ammonium nitrate) packed into a yellow Ryder rental truck ignited, shearing off the face of the federal building, killing and maiming a thousand people, and damaging some three hundred structures for several city blocks. The *Oklahoman*’s page one headline on April 20, 1995, read: “Morning of Terror: City Struggles with Shock of Deadly Bombing.”

What made covering this tragic story so daunting was its scope and personal connection to the Greater Oklahoma City community. The victims

were ordinary people whose children attended the same schools as reporters' kids, whose families worshipped at the same churches, and who shopped in the same stores. The local media and their families lived with this sad narrative long after the stories had been filed.

"I remember going to funerals all the time in '95," says Nan Hight, Joe's wife.

Newspaper staffers (including clerks, copy messengers, secretaries, and production crews) worked overtime for weeks following the bombing. Many reporters ate meals at their desks and would have to be told by supervisors to leave and get some rest. Editors like Hight didn't get home most nights until after midnight, and they were at their desks early the next morning.

Some *Oklahoman* reporters such as Penny (Owen) Cockerell and Bryan Painter found it cathartic to write their stories, especially those about the youngest survivors, including three-year-old Brandon and two-year-old Rebecca Denny. It helped them to process feelings by putting words to page. Both reporters had spent long hours at the bombing site and even longer days talking to relatives and friends of victims. They each spoke of the lasting effects of covering the tragedy.

Painter, a tall, imposing presence whose appearance is softened by his sad dark eyes and folksy charm, arrived at the bombing site within minutes of the blast. He recalled the surreal scene as "a bad Sunday-night movie"—the air filled with the nauseous odor of sulfur, swirling clouds of dust, and streams of gray and blackened smoke from smoldering car fires. The cacophony of noise was deafening: police and fire sirens, building and car alarms. Stunned and wounded people walked about like zombies, covered with broken glass and blood. Medical personnel set up triage in the middle of downtown streets. Painter came home very late on April 19 with a bloodstained button-down shirt. He didn't say much to his wife, Teri, that night, and he wouldn't talk about his feelings about the bombing until months later.

"I kept myself away in 1995," he recalls. "But you take in that much emotion, and you end up staring at the ceiling tiles."

Four years later at thirty-five, when he was named by Hight to head another Victims Team to cover a string of Oklahoma tornadoes that killed forty-four people, Painter admitted to staffers that he should have sought counseling after the '95 bombing. He encouraged his coworkers to talk about what they were experiencing, to debrief about their reactions and emotions. Many of the stories they covered were heart wrenching, such as "Mother Sac-

rifices Life for Son,” which ran on May 8, 1999. *Oklahoman* reporters Mark A. Hutchinson and Ron Jackson wrote: “As a tornado sucked Kathleen Walton from beneath an H.E. Bailey Turnpike overpass Monday near Newcastle, she quoted scripture to her 11-year-old son, said, ‘I love you,’ and let go of his hand. Levi Walton never saw his mother alive again.”

A year after the killer tornadoes struck Oklahoma, Painter covered the death of a popular seventeen-year-old bronco rider named Tyler Blount. Painter had been at the rodeo when the pale chestnut horse kicked Blount as he dangled like a rag doll, his boot caught in a stirrup. Painter rushed to the Edmond hospital, where he would console the boy’s mother and father.

“I just put my notebook down,” Painter says. “You try to cover victims and their families with common sense and compassion.”

That night at the hospital, Pat Blount, Tyler’s dad, gave Painter the boy’s blood-soaked shirt and vest, which he took home and gave to his wife to dispose of. Within weeks of Blount’s passing, Painter talked to his editor about a change of assignments. The 1987 Oklahoma State University graduate, who had first worked at an Amarillo, Texas, daily, started his career with the *Oklahoman* in 1991 on the police beat, covering car crashes, domestic violence, petty crimes, and murders. Then came the bombing in ’95, the tornadoes in ’99, and Tyler Blount’s passing in 2000. By then, Painter was “tired of death.” He became the features editor and eventually a columnist for the paper.

“Sometimes you wade through life the hard way,” he says.

In April 1995, twenty-six-year-old Penny (Owen) Cockerell was assigned to the Law Enforcement Team. For months, she wrote front-page stories about the bombing and subsequent investigation. In her three years with the newspaper, the wispy, amiable University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) grad had gravitated toward the “tough” stories, the ones that got reporters noticed but often took their toll. According to Joe Hight, himself an alumnus of UCO (then Central State University), Cockerell was the “go-to-reporter” for crisis-related stories for years. Maybe she was an adrenaline junkie like others in the newsroom. Perhaps she saw journalism as more of a calling than a job. She now explains that the stories she covered years ago were “the more interesting ones.”

During the aftermath of the 1995 bombing, she says, she knew counseling was available and was grateful for management’s responsiveness, but she didn’t feel that was the right option for her. She didn’t want to call attention to herself as warranting pity. What she really needed during those demanding

days and nights, according to her account in a 2004 trauma journalism guide coauthored by Joe Hight, was “down time with fellow journalists . . . to talk through all the things that happened.” But she added, “By the time we slowed down, everyone was so tired of the bombing that we never really got [to] have that big hashing out session.”

Ed Kelley, the fifty-six-year-old editor of the *Oklahoman*, recalls a spike in absences and sick days starting about six months after the intense period of bombing-related news coverage. Other reporters noted that marriages and relationships ended and emotional problems ensued among staffers the year after the bombing. Some of those who had written stories on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in April 1995 were manifesting symptoms months later—recurring intrusive recollections, emotional numbing, and feelings of fear and anxiety.

Cockerell continued to cover the follow-up stories to the bombing, including the trials of the defendants in 1997 and the execution of Timothy McVeigh in 2001. She admits that her debriefings in those days would often follow the time-honored journalist’s tradition of meeting colleagues for drinks and after-hours commiseration. But that didn’t fill the emptiness Cockerell was feeling after years of emotionally taxing news coverage. In 1999, she moved to Dallas to head the small *Oklahoman* bureau there. She married a Dallas attorney in August 1999. Since 2000, when she received a national journalism fellowship to attend a week of intensive trauma training, Cockerell has worked to educate fellow journalists on the psychological effects of victim-based reporting.

Although Cockerell and Painter never sought counseling or a formal intervention in 1995, there were reporters at the newspaper willing to talk about their emotions surrounding the most devastating and deadly act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history (until September 11, 2001). Some of these journalists wanted to debrief with a professional. They appreciated when editors Kelley and Hight said a counselor was available on site. Coworkers, in particular, praised Hight, noting his sensitivity, credibility, and loyalty: “He established a sense of family here.” “He was very conscientious about how his staff was doing.” “Joe will stand by you.”

## **Trauma’s Impact on Journalists**

Charlotte Lankard, an Oklahoma City family-and-marriage therapist, met with newspaper reporters on the day of the bombing. The empathetic preacher’s daughter would return often in future weeks and months to coun-

sel staffers. More than a decade later, many would still call her a friend.

Lankard, today a buoyant seventy-year-old with more than a passing resemblance to the late actress Donna Reed, was raised to conceal her emotions, to be unflappable in the face of crisis. Her upbringing gave her insights into the journalistic code of detachment, of denying personal feelings and masking emotional problems when on the job. But the dramatic events in April 1995 challenged such newsroom codes, myths, and misperceptions.

On the afternoon of April 19, Lankard was called to the *Oklahoman* to conduct a crisis intervention with a reporter. “I remember just holding her hand and listening,” she says years later. The reporter had been three blocks away from the Murrah Federal Building when the explosion rocked the downtown. Within minutes, she was watching firefighters carry the dead and wounded, including infants, from the scene. Despite being shaken, she phoned in details to the newsroom. But when she tried to write her story hours later, she experienced what some described as a “meltdown” as sadness, shock, and guilt washed over her. Here she was working on the biggest story of her career while so many people were suffering. No one had prepared her for what she saw or experienced. Could anyone have been expected to?

Lankard tried to help the panic-stricken reporter and about a dozen others make sense of the senseless. She met one-on-one and in weekly group therapy sessions. In these voluntary meetings, Lankard tried to prepare employees for possible emotional setbacks, triggered by memories and sensory recall for those who had been at the site in the hours and days after the bombing. A group of women reporters met weekly with Lankard for more than a year. Several still gather with her annually for a reunion of sorts.

The *Oklahoman* newspaper’s efforts would attract the attention of an international trauma expert, Dr. Frank Ochberg, a Michigan-based psychiatrist and former associate director of the National Institute of Mental Health. In 1991, Ochberg had established a “Victims and the Media” program for Michigan State University students, faculty, media, and mental-health professionals. He had pioneered the study of PTSD in the 1970s and ’80s, and he had advised the FBI, Secret Service, and Scotland Yard on hostage negotiations. He also reportedly had coined the phrase “Stockholm Syndrome,” describing the potential for hostages to become emotionally attached to their captors.

But Ochberg’s enduring legacy would be to explore the application of trauma science to journalistic coverage of conflict and tragedy. He and a small cadre of researchers and psychotherapists would discover that the impact of

traumatic stories on journalists was similar in intensity to that experienced by front-line first responders, including soldiers, police officers, and firefighters.

In a November 2001 article in *American Journalism Review* (“After the Adrenaline”), Ochberg described the “heroic phase” for journalists when disaster strikes:

At first, there is a tendency to work intensely, adrenaline flowing with a sense of purpose that is crystal clear. This phase kicks in quickly and, depending on the scope of the crisis, can last for days, weeks, even a month or two. Then comes a period of mental exhaustion and burnout, of physical fatigue and a tendency to feel confused and depressed.

Ochberg noted that the potential for health and emotional problems for journalists engaged in traumatic news coverage mirrored those suffered by people in high-risk professions, including alcoholism or drug abuse, high blood pressure and heart attacks, eating disorders and depression, even PTSD and suicide. The Michigan-based psychiatrist’s passion for the subject would result in the founding of an advocacy organization known as the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, initially at Michigan State University and later at the University of Washington. Funding for the organization was provided by a charitable foundation of the Dart Corporation, a Mason, Michigan, manufacturer and distributor of disposable cups.

In 1997, Frank Ochberg and Joe Hight would meet for the first time. Hight had recommended that the *Oklaboman* sponsor a national workshop on coverage of disasters and tragedies, using the \$10,000 award the newspaper had earned in 1996 when it received the Dart Foundation Award for Excellence in Reporting on Victims of Violence. The annual award, for sensitive, responsive news coverage of those affected by tragedy and trauma, had been established by Ochberg two years earlier as a vehicle to raise visibility for the Dart Center. Although the *Oklaboman* would not win the Pulitzer, as many at the newspaper expected for its coverage of the 1995 tragedy, there were honors from the National Press Foundation and the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), in addition to the Dart Foundation.

Ochberg and Hight, two passionate overachievers, would present an interesting study in comparison and contrast as their lives, philosophies, and operating styles intersected for the next dozen years. Native New Yorker Ochberg, son of a shopkeeper, had graduated with honors from Harvard

College and, later, John Hopkins Medical School. He quickly distinguished himself in the mental-health field. Known worldwide for his vision, compassion, and humor, Ochberg is fondly called the “indigenous rabbi” of the trauma journalism reform movement. The ruddy-faced sixty-eight-year-old Ochberg, with his distinctive mottled-gray beard, is a charming, charismatic collaborative spirit. In terms of temperament and leadership techniques, the inspired, excitable Frank Ochberg is a foil to the reliable, more reserved Joe Hight.

Hight was raised as one of seven children of German-Irish-Cherokee heritage by a strict ex-Marine drill instructor father and a nurturing, protective mother in Guthrie, Oklahoma (the state’s original territorial capital and location for some memorable moments in the movie *Rain Man*). Hight has deep-set, piercing blue-grey eyes, a wide fleshy face and a full head of chocolate-brown hair. The one-time lanky high school tennis player has morphed into a thickly built man, who lists when he walks because of a chronic bad back. Hight’s personality is light and dark. He has a warm, caring nature, sparked by contagious bouts of cackling laughter and endearing colloquialisms (“funnest,” “dang,” “frickin”). But Hight’s smile can dissolve into a tight-lipped scowl, accentuated by an intense gaze. Although colleagues praise his patience, he does not suffer fools gladly, relying on a jab of sarcasm to keep people in check. A devout Roman Catholic, Hight draws on his faith and spirituality to bolster him on his dual missions: to reform journalistic practices and to raise awareness of mental-health issues.

### **The Newsroom’s Macho Myth**

The *Oklahoman*’s progressive attempts to cover tragedy and trauma were cited in a seminal article, “Confronting the Horror,” published in the January/February 1999 issue of *American Journalism Review* (*AJR*). Author Sherry Ricchiardi, a senior writer at *AJR*, professor at Indiana University–Purdue University in Indianapolis (IUPUI), and years later a Dart Center consultant, examined the psychological stresses encountered by journalists covering war, crime, and disasters and the traditional tendencies of front-line reporters.

“We’re taught in journalism school that this is a macho business, that you check your feelings at the door, that your personal emotions have nothing to do with it,” *Oklahoman* editor Ed Kelley said in the article. “Unlike anybody else in this society, we’re supposed to shut it out. It’s a myth. We can’t do it.”

Kelley was credited with recommending counseling services for his newsroom on the day of the Oklahoma City bombing and for the next year. A tall,



polished man with patrician good looks (imagine a bespectacled Jeff Daniels or Ed Begley Jr.), Kelley knows all too well the impact that extended crisis coverage can have on journalists.

His words were reinforced in the *AJR* article by Martin Cohen, a Tampa, Florida, psychologist: “You’re not just an objective journalist doing your job, but a human being who has been exposed to something awful. To whatever degree the compassionate heart still works, there are going to be consequences for seeing someone else’s suffering.”

The therapeutic community uses the term *transference* to describe the potential for a counselor to absorb a client’s emotional pain. This same potential exists for the journalist covering a tragic or traumatic story. Joe Hight refers to the “wall of grief”—the often-overwhelming emotional impact journalists face when interviewing victims of tragedy. Hight hit that wall as a young reporter in July 1985 when he spent seventeen straight hours covering the killing of three people in an IGA store robbery. The story had a personal connection for Hight because he knew one of the victims, a local graduate student. The next morning his managing editor, Ed Kelley, called him at home, asking Hight to go to the courthouse to write a follow-up story.

“If it’s OK with you, I’d rather not,” Hight recalls saying. It was an unusual exchange between a reporter and editor. In other newsrooms, it could have led to an ultimatum. But Kelley recognized that Hight was not shirking his responsibility. He was exhausted. He was asking for a brief reprieve, a chance to regroup before returning to his job. A decade later, both men would be confronted with similar reactions from reporters covering the tragedy in Oklahoma City.

Psychologist Cohen said that when covering horrific events, journalists are injected with a kind of “poison,” which can take its toll without an antidote, such as debriefing about experiences and feelings.

The *Oklahoman’s* Cockerell admitted to author Sherry Ricchiardi that she “almost fell apart [on] the first anniversary [of the Oklahoma City bombing]. I’m pretty tough; I’m not the whiny or emotional type, but this blindsided me.”

Ricchiardi’s *AJR* article discussed how “the standard newsroom script calls for stoicism” and the movement to reform journalistic practices “collides with the detached, dispassionate demeanor on which the profession prides itself.” She garnered commentary from journalists on concerns about being perceived by peers as too sensitive or empathetic. Chris Cramer, then

president of CNN's international news division, noted: "They fear being exiled as some kind of wimp."

In the *AJR* article, Rick Bragg, Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* reporter, acknowledged that the impact of chronicling human suffering is "one of the things I always dreaded talking about." Bragg, who went from covering the Oklahoma City bombing to a multiple murder in New Orleans, and later the March 1998 murders of nine children by two classmates in Jonesboro, Arkansas, said: "I never felt it was appropriate to whine. . . . I don't feel I have a right to call myself a victim."

If Bragg's comments reflect the prevailing journalistic demeanor about being emotionally affected ("We can't act like it, or we can't get the job done"), then Cramer's represent those in the profession who are trying to enlighten attitudes and operations. Ricchiardi's article stated that Cramer, "while head of the newsgathering for the British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) in London, helped launch debriefing programs for journalists handling high-risk assignments." These assignments included coverage of war-torn Bosnia and Afghanistan. The BBC's efforts, and those of other international news organizations such as Reuters and CNN, reflected innovative approaches toward trauma journalism, dating back to the 1995 establishment of an organization called the International News Safety Institute (INSI), headed by British journalist Rodney Pinder.

Veteran BBC reporter David Loyn is frank in his opinions on the role of psychological intervention for journalists. He sought brief crisis counseling from Royal Air Force psychiatrists twice in his career after harrowing assignments in Kosovo in 1998 and after being embedded with the Taliban during its takeover of Afghanistan. When his cameraman was executed before his eyes, Loyn knew he had to escape. He made it home safely but told newsroom management he needed a break from conflict reporting. He also required counseling to deal with his emotional trauma.

"I had to puke on the carpet," he says metaphorically and matter-of-factly.

Most reporters aren't as forthcoming as Loyn about the need for trauma therapy. For centuries, journalists have borne witness to war, violence and chaos, the unspeakable and unimaginable. Covering such stories is part of their duty and responsibility, they will proclaim.

"You're supposed to 'cowboy up,'" says Dave Forstate, a Pittsburgh-based news videographer whose camera has captured tragic events worldwide for almost thirty years. His first major traumatic story was the Kansas City Hyatt

Hotel Skywalk collapse in July 1981, where more than one hundred people died. Forstate says it never occurred to him that he could have benefited from a debriefing after spending hours filming death and destruction.

Other journalists like Jim Wooten, longtime ABC-TV News correspondent, speak of “bell-blue funks” and months of emotional “downtime” between trying assignments. Wooten’s “armpits,” as he calls them, included the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the conflict in Bosnia and Kosovo, Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, Afghanistan, Beirut, Chechnya, the Congo, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Granada, Haiti, Intifada I and Intifada II (West Bank and Gaza), Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, Northern Iraq, Rwanda, Somalia, and Uganda.

Wooten says that he was driven by the compelling nature of war and conflict stories, but he admits that for years he would “click off emotionally and just do my job.” Now retired, the seventy-two-year-old says he would have been better served if he had sought counseling along the way. However, taking that step would have required significant “consciousness raising.”

In an October 2005 online article “Trauma: Journalism’s Hidden Malady” (<http://www.digitaljournalist.org>), Ron Steinman, a contemporary of Wooten’s, who was NBC-TV’s bureau chief in Saigon during the Vietnam War, said that in his long broadcast journalism career he saw “breakdowns, near breakdowns and suffering by the men and women who covered these events for periods lasting just a few weeks to many years.” Steinman’s comments were reminiscent of those of famed World War II correspondent Ernie Pyle, who was killed in April 1945. Before he died, Pyle wrote: “I’ve been immersed in it too long. My spirit is wobbly and my mind is confused. The hurt has become too great.” In calling for twenty-first-century reform, Steinman said: “Every news organization should make trauma control part of the way it treats its staff. We in the media and the public will be better for it.”

## **Covering Community-based Violence**

On April 20, 1999, four years and one day after the Oklahoma City bombing, a new tragedy would dominate national headlines—the murders and suicides at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The horrifying event would generate renewed interest among the media about the psychological impact of reporting such traumatic stories.

In the 2006 book *Covering Violence* by Roger Simpson and William Coté, *New York Daily News* photojournalist David Handschuh admitted that the Columbine tragedy had a lasting effect, haunting him for months: “I cried at

Columbine. A lot of photographers stood outside the church that day and did a lot of self-reflection. We asked ourselves why we do what we do and how we do it.”

Two years later, Handschuh would be seriously injured by falling debris while photographing the September 11 terrorist attack in New York City. He would later be diagnosed as suffering from PTSD, unable ever again to take pictures of people in traumatic situations. Handschuh told his editors: “I’m not photographing any dead bodies anymore.”

An adjunct professor of photojournalism at New York University since 1995, Handschuh has been a Poynter Institute Media Ethics Fellow, a Dart Center Ochberg Fellow, and a researcher studying the effects of trauma on visual journalists. In 1994, he coauthored the *National Media Guide for Emergency and Disaster Incidents*. He currently serves on the board of directors of News Coverage Unlimited, an international organization that provides support for journalists exposed to tragedy and trauma in their work.

“Newsgathering can be hazardous to your emotional health,” Handschuh says. “My hope is that we become more aware and more helpful to others as journalists.”

During the last decade, Handschuh has joined Hight, Ochberg, Cockerell, and a network of activists engaged in the media-reform movement known as the “culture of caring.” In addition to journalists, other communication professionals have become actively involved. Case in point: Barb Monseu, president of the National Center for Critical Incident Analysis (NCCIA), which studies political violence, pandemic threats, and crises involving law enforcement and the media.

In April 1999, Monseu was an assistant superintendent in Jefferson County, Colorado, responsible for three school districts, including the one overseeing Columbine High School. Monseu implemented crisis-management and media-relations programs after the shootings. Her involvement in the Colorado tragedy would lead to her participation with the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma.

In fall 2001, she and Dr. Elana Newman, a University of Tulsa psychology professor and trauma researcher, would direct a six-month effort to assist journalists covering the September 11 attacks at Dart Center-Ground Zero (DCGZ) in lower Manhattan. Two years later, Monseu would serve as vice president on the international Dart Center’s executive committee.

“Journalists are the public’s surrogates as witnesses to grief, suffering, and

tragedy,” Monseu says.

## Trauma Journalism Research

At the end of the twentieth century, researchers began investigating the effects of traumatic journalism coverage. In 1999, Roger Simpson at the University of Washington and his colleague James Boggs published an insightful study about emotional stress, based on the reactions of hundreds of reporters, photographers, and editors. Nearly half of those surveyed said they were not prepared for their first “deadly” assignments, such as automobile crashes. The study suggested that the youngest reporters were often sent to bloody scenes, whose images and memories were the hardest to process. An earlier study by Simpson in 1996 of Michigan and Washington journalists had suggested that the incidence of PTSD among the 130 surveyed was comparable to that experienced by firefighters (e.g., estimates ranging from about 10 to 20 percent).

In a 2001 *Seattle Times* story (published after September 11), Simpson discussed how journalists covering traumatic stories are subject to the transfer of feelings and emotions from other first responders, victims, and survivors: “If you are an observer, it doesn’t matter how hard you try to be objective—you talk to survivors, police and rescuers; this begins to take a toll on your own emotional well-being. You are sharing everybody’s else’s pain without a chance to address your own.”

But Simpson in his book *Covering Violence* also acknowledged:

While some journalists are reporting on violence with extraordinary sensitivity, others do continue to treat victims as props for stories about human cruelty but props without a chance to affect the way the stories are told. It isn’t surprising that the public and the people in the stories complain about insensitive, callous and excessive coverage.

In January 2000, when the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma was established at the University of Washington, thanks to a \$200,000 initial grant, Simpson was named executive director of the advocacy organization, a position he would hold for six years until he was replaced by former East Coast investigative reporter Bruce Shapiro. By that point, the organization’s annual operating budget had grown to \$1.4 million.

## Tragedy Strikes Again

Joe Hight was promoted in 1999 to become one of two managing editors at the *Oklahoman*, overseeing features, research, and development (e.g., external relations). That same year he recruited Charlotte Lankard to write a weekly column for the newspaper. Readers would draw comfort from the words of the then sixty-year-old therapist who had known her share of pain and loss. At forty, she had almost died in a rock-climbing accident. At fifty, she was divorced after thirty years of marriage. Since 1996, she had been grieving the death of her second husband and former high school sweetheart, who had died unexpectedly of pancreatic cancer after just three years of marriage.

In her 2007 memoir, *It's Called Life*, Lankard explained her spiritual journey to healing:

I discovered my faith held me fast, anchored me, sustained me, and gave me hope when all I had was despair. I discovered a strength and courage within me that would not allow me to give up. I discovered that I am a woman who simply refused to wallow in self pity for very long, not because I am noble, but because I soon tire of it and find it boring.

Lankard and Hight, native Oklahomans, appear cut from the same sturdy cloth. Both have been buffeted by personal tragedies. And each has responded with a resilient spirit and gritty resolve. The same could be said for the Greater Oklahoma City community, which in April 2000 witnessed the dedication of the Oklahoma City National Memorial, an inspiring elegiac commemorative of towering black stone and soothing pools of water. The centerpiece of the memorial is the outdoor amphitheater arrangement of 168 metallic chair sculptures (including dozens of smaller chairs for the children who perished in the bombing) lining a grassy knoll where the federal building once stood.

For Joe Hight, the year 2000 would end with painful memories of yet another victim of violence. His oldest brother, Paul, a former Catholic priest and diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic, would be killed on a snowy night on December 14 in a confrontation at his apartment complex with Oklahoma City police. He would be the twelfth person suffering from mental illness to be shot by the police and the fifth killed in Oklahoma City in 2000.

Joe Hight didn't seek grief counseling after Paul's death. Instead, he said, he channeled his emotions into advocacy for mental-health reform in Oklahoma City and throughout the state. Six months after Paul Hight's shooting,

the Oklahoma legislature voted to give the state's Mental Health Department a \$12 million increase in funding, including money to be used for a mobile crisis-intervention team in Oklahoma County. In December 2001, the *Oklahoman* reported that state and local officials were taking steps to avoid deadly encounters, such as had occurred a year earlier when Paul Hight was killed. A new program was being launched to train up to one hundred officers of the Oklahoma City Police Department in how to defuse situations involving people with mental illness. The Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) police model had been pioneered in Memphis, Tennessee, a decade earlier. It provided police with alternative approaches to help stabilize mentally ill people in a crisis. In addition, CIT police officers were equipped with less-lethal weapons, such as Tasers, to help immobilize people needing to be subdued.

For several years since Paul's death, Joe Hight has served on the Oklahoma Governor's and Attorney General's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Mental Health, Substance Abuse, and Domestic Violence. He sits on the task force with police officials, representatives of the mental-health community, ministers, educators, and legislators who are trying to address the "escalating health and public policy crisis" in Oklahoma. He strives to honor the memory of his late brother by working to reform the system.

"What happened to my brother taught me that you have to fight stigmas in life, and overcoming those stigmas is a challenge worth pursuing," he says.

### **"Born to Lead"**

Joe Hight's substantive and systematic efforts after Paul's death demonstrated a steely resolve that had been instilled in him as a boy by his father, Wilber. When Joe tackled his next major issue—trauma journalism—he knew he would have to fight once again for what he believed in despite the consequences. Hight was no Hamlet. He knew what was expected of him. It was how he had been raised.

He had been groomed for leadership since childhood in the modest, red-brick ranch-style home on the outskirts of Guthrie, a town of about ten thousand. His larger-than-life father, Wilber, who had fought at Guadalcanal in World War II, dominated the Hight household. A neighbor recalls: "That Mr. Hight, he didn't mess around. And you didn't mess around with him."

The former Marine drill sergeant would deliver sermons to young Joe and his other siblings before Sunday Mass. This iron-jawed Oklahoman, who had won all-state honors in high school and left home at sixteen, wanted his six children to learn early and well that the world wasn't for the weak of heart. (A

seventh child, a daughter, had drowned as a two-year-old.)

*You were born to be a leader*, Wilber would say, pacing in front of his attentive audience. He expected the Hight kids to step up and be accountable. *You have to pay the fiddler if you want to dance*. Wilber's point was clear: the sooner Joe and his siblings learned those lessons, the better off they'd be.

Joe Hight remembers his parents as “amazingly resilient.” His father worked the 4 p.m.-to-midnight shift in the logistics (supply) center at Tinker Air Force Base. Then from dawn until early afternoon, he tended to the five-acre “garden” adjacent to their house. Joe's mother, Pauline, was a slight woman who was “the emotional foundation” of the Hight home. She also worked long hours in the garden, which provided the family of eight with much of their food. The garden was the “envy of the town,” according to Joe, who with his parents and siblings raised corn, okra, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, cantaloupes, and watermelons, as well as apples and grapes.

To earn spending money, Joe sold tomatoes to area restaurants. He also sold golf balls he would retrieve from the private golf course across the road from his house. The Hights were frugal folks who stayed close to home.

“My travels as a boy consisted of going to Wichita Falls, Texas, for glasses,” Joe Hight recalls.

Like many Oklahomans, Hight rooted for the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team (Lou Brock was his favorite). He also painted, wrote poetry, performed in high school plays, and had a stint as a teen-age disc jockey on a local radio station. The slender youngest son was considered too small to follow in his father's footsteps on the gridiron. But he would join his dad as a diehard fan for University of Oklahoma football. To this day, Joe Hight bleeds Sooner crimson every autumn.

Although he describes his youth as happy, there was little time for dawdling or daydreaming. *Get off your duff* was one of Wilber Hight's favorite expressions. He led by example as well as by his intimidating presence. (According to Joe, “My father was powerful in his physical strength and in his ability to deliver a message.”) When he wasn't working at the air force base or in the five-acre garden, Wilber was building furniture in the two-story barn he had erected behind the house. In later years, the elder Hight also taught woodworking and shop skills at the Guthrie Job Corps. For a couple summers, Joe coached softball and basketball in the corps' recreation division. He recalls being challenged by tough inner-city youth from New York City, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Dallas, and other urban areas. But Joe, a teenager himself,



never backed down, earning the respect of his players.

Hight had confronted racial issues at Guthrie High School, where whites barely outnumbered blacks. He tried to stay out of trouble, but he remembers getting into shoving matches and being on the receiving end of sucker punches.

For a man who would make journalism his career, one would envision the younger Hight as having had a newspaper route or penning stories for his high school paper. Neither was the case. At sixteen, he worked briefly in the circulation department of the Guthrie newspaper. But he wasn't drawn to the profession. In fact, he was somewhat adrift after graduating from high school in 1975. But that didn't last long, not with Wilber Hight on the case.

"My father sat me down one day and said: 'You have a choice. You can either go into the Army, Navy, or Marines. Or you can go to college.'" Wilber delivered the ultimatum from his rocking chair (which Joe still has today) while his obedient son sat on a nearby couch.

He recalls that it took about a minute to decide he was going to college. He speaks respectfully about that living room dialogue, his voice rising as he accents the recollection with noticeable pauses.

"I think he was saying that if I wanted to further my life, I had to make some decisions about doing that. He thought the military would be good for discipline. I thought college would be a better place for me."

Joe Hight chose Central State University (later named University of Central Oklahoma [UCO]), where he went to work at the student newspaper (*The Vista*) only at the urging of a classmate who told him it would boost his grade in a required communications course. But soon he was hooked. He started as a sportswriter and quickly became sports editor. By his senior year, the journalism major became newspaper editor and, he says, "one of the most powerful students on campus." When Hight graduated in June 1980, he was named "outstanding senior male student" and "outstanding journalism graduate." Dr. Terry Clark, current chair of UCO's mass communication department, describes Joe Hight as a "career-driven person of high standards and incredible loyalty."

When Hight talks of his values, he often refers to his hard-nosed father and the lessons he imparted. (In December 1999, Wilber Hight lost his long battle with cancer at age eighty-three.) Those lessons and his hardscrabble upbringing keep Joe pragmatic as the trauma journalism movement encounters entrenched attitudes, skepticism, and the status quo in perhaps the most cyni-

cal of professions. He knows that the same mindset that enables a reporter to ferret out information, to sort through the facts, and to write an accurate story on deadline may also prevent that same reporter from reflecting on the toll such coverage may be having on him and others. Hight also realizes that the average reader or viewer of the news doesn't necessarily reflect on the lives of journalists presenting these stories, just as the typical diner isn't interested in the personal side of waiters. Just bring me what I ordered. Take care of yourself on your own time.

### **More Time for Mourning**

The *Oklaboman's* experiences with community-based trauma would be shared with newsrooms on the East Coast after September 11, 2001. Nine days after terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center's twin towers, twenty miles due south of White Plains, New York, Henry Freeman, editor and vice president of the *Journal News* newspaper, spoke with Ed Kelley, Joe Hight, and other editors. Freeman was concerned about the impact of stress on his newsroom.

"The call to the *Oklaboman* was invaluable," Freeman says, sharing how he was advised to consider his news coverage as a marathon, not a sprint, despite the frantic pace of reporting in the aftermath of the tragedy. In the days and weeks to come, the newspaper would cover more than two hundred funerals, and reporters and photographers would speak of "fatigue factor" and "heart-breaking memories." Freeman had learned of the role counseling played at the *Oklaboman*. Within days, group debriefing sessions were held at the *Journal News*. Perhaps more importantly, Henry Freeman used self-disclosure to connect with his newsroom, sending out e-mails in which he talked about his own emotions and the impact of the tragedy on the southern Westchester County community. He urged reporters to treat victims' families with dignity, and he encouraged his staff to take care of themselves.

Elaine Silvestrini, who had received a 2000 Dart Center Ochberg (trauma journalism) Fellowship (along with Penny Cockerell of the *Oklaboman*), was working as a reporter at the *Asbury Park (N.J.) Press* on September 11. She was also an internal ombudsman at the paper, conveying concerns and requests from staff to management. One of her first tasks was to secure pizza for those who were working long hours after the terrorist attacks. A simple enough request, it seems. But Silvestrini remembers that some in upper management grouched about spending money for newsroom meals. She said that less than a week after September 11, one editor commented, *I think people*

*should be back to normal by now.*

Silvestrini, who currently works at the *Tampa Tribune*, knew better. She had been sensitized through her interactions with the Dart Center to realize the “cumulative effects of covering sad stories.” She e-mailed Joe Hight for his advice on validating the emotions of fellow stressed-out staffers.

“He was extremely helpful,” Silvestrini says about Hight. “It was like talking with a minister. He ‘walks the walk.’”

The unparalleled events of September 11 raised awareness of traumatic news issues among media reform advocates and researchers. Four days after the collapse of the World Trade Center towers, Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, posted the following statement on the Poynter.org Web site:

Journalists’ symptoms of traumatic stress are remarkably similar to those of police officers and firefighters who work in the immediate aftermath of tragedy, yet journalists typically receive little support after they file their stories. While public-safety workers are offered debriefings and counseling after a trauma, journalists are merely assigned another story.

In his 2003 book, *Dangerous Lives: War and the Men and Women Who Report It*, Canadian psychiatrist Anthony Feinstein observed: “Domestic journalists of all types post-September 11 had significantly more PTSD symptoms than domestic journalists pre-September 11.” In 2006, Feinstein updated his findings in an expanded study of war correspondents titled *Journalists Under Fire: The Psychological Hazards of Covering War*.

In discussing the benefits of “brief psychotherapy” (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy) for those reporters suffering from exposure to trauma, Feinstein notes that journalism is a very resilient profession that is resistant to intervention. “You can’t mandate therapy,” he says, recommending that as a first step affected journalists use informal debriefings such as peer-to-peer support.

Veteran reporter Jim Willis, who had covered the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, wrote a 2003 book, *The Human Journalist*, in which he spoke of journalism as “an evolving craft and profession.” He acknowledged the psychological effects of traumatic news coverage, and he referenced researchers like Feinstein and others who studied PTSD. But he also referred to what may

be titled “post-traumatic stress growth.” In other words, not everyone who is engaged in dangerous or stressful news coverage is negatively affected. The vast majority of individuals recover from exposure to trauma, and journalists are arguably sturdier emotionally than others. As Willis wrote in his book, “Many individuals flourish under stress, and if they have control, they are highly productive and enjoy the challenge.”

### **Trauma Journalism Ambassadors**

During the last decade, newsrooms in the United States and abroad have turned to international trauma journalism “ambassadors” Joe Hight and Frank Ochberg for counsel in response to tragedies such as Columbine; September 11; the 2004 Indonesian tsunami; Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; the Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, (Amish) school shootings; and the 2007 Minneapolis bridge collapse. The two men have addressed the press in areas of conflict like Northern Ireland and in communities shaken by tragedy, such as Port Arthur (Tanzania), Australia, where a man named Martin Bryant killed thirty-five people in 1996.

Joe Hight, who met with journalist groups on a two-week trip to Australia in 2006 on the tenth anniversary of the Bryant massacre, speaks of how the victims of tragedies (and their families) have touched his life and those of other reporters worldwide. “That’s the blessing,” he says, “not the tragedy itself but the people who trust you to share their stories.”

Hight’s and Ochberg’s target audiences have been journalists on deadline in harm’s way. Their message: promoting the ethical coverage of trauma and the ethical treatment of those affected by tragedy (including journalists). According to the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, of which Hight served as president for four years (2003-2007), “Reporting responsibly and credibly on violence and traumatic events—on crime, family violence, natural disasters and accidents, war and genocide—are among the greatest challenges facing contemporary journalism.”

In early 2007, then president Joe Hight had listed three primary concerns for the Dart Center in the months ahead: (1) Selecting his successor and electing an executive committee (EC) vice president and secretary, (2) Deciding on the potential relocation of the Dart Center from the University of Washington, where it had been headquartered since 2000, and (3) Hiring a consultant to conduct an audit of the Dart Center’s governance, management structure, operating principles and processes, and its long-term planning needs. This au-

dit would affect issues such as the role of Executive Director Bruce Shapiro, a possible reorganization of the center's staff, and its operations worldwide, including its expansion into Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

"They couldn't make this easy on me, could they?" Hight jokes months later, but his laughter is short lived as he evaluates the key tasks facing him and the Dart executive committee before his second two-year term ends. He wants to ensure a proper organizational structure to enhance future growth, but he's also committed to preserving the Dart Center's mission of being accessible to the "front-line journalist."

On a warm July 2007 morning, Hight sips cups of hot apple cider (never tea or coffee) as he works at his desk still wearing his suit coat. He routinely multitasks, checking phone messages and e-mail while working his BlackBerry. His two-room office overlooks the entrance to the sleek twelve-story dark metallic and tinted-glass headquarters building ("the tower") that dominates the adjoining low-rise commercial property on the outskirts of Oklahoma City. His office walls are lined by framed landscape photos of his native state, including beautiful sunsets and a decorated downtown Guthrie at Christmas. The most eye-catching photo is of a grizzled cowboy in leather chaps and a purple shirt at some rundown Western storefront, accompanied by his trusty white horse. Nearby sits an old blue-and-red Pepsi machine.

Joe is like a burr, a sticker, Frank Ochberg says, noting Hight's persistent, detail-driven operating style. Hight doesn't argue with that characterization. He gets a kick out of being called "a burr." Although his years as president of the Dart Center have been "gratifying," he says it has also been "exhausting" balancing that responsibility, his managing editor job at the *Oklahoman*, and his family life.

## **The Last Meeting**

On the afternoon and evening of November 10, 2007, Joe Hight presided over his last executive committee (EC) meeting as president of the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma. Days before the annual meeting in Washington, D.C., Hight had wondered aloud if the EC had "taken on too much" as his presidency came to a close. He sounded aggravated that several actionable items were either "mired in debate" or delayed. He said some committee members seemed "shaky and wary" about what would occur in D.C. "It's all colliding," Hight said, referring to the release of the consultant's report and upcoming decisions on relocating the Dart Center from the University of Washington.

At 3:30 p.m. on November 10, Hight looks calm and presidential in his dark suit, white shirt, and red-and-white striped tie. As he waits for the rest of the EC to arrive at the eighty-year-old Hotel Tabard Inn on quiet, tree-lined N Street N.W., he speaks eagerly about his successful presentation to the “Active Minds” group at Georgetown University earlier this afternoon. He discussed trauma and mental-health issues and talked about the death of his brother Paul. Afterward, he met a colleague of the late *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. The woman was touched by Hight’s remarks and interested in learning more about his advocacy.

The Dart Center’s EC meeting is in room 26 at the top of the Tabard Inn’s sagging, creaking stairs (lined by portraits of George Washington and former Soviet premiere Gorbachev). This quaint, historic (some would just say “old”) hotel is located in a nineteenth-century row house. Room 26 is suitably Victorian with its cranberry-colored walls, eggshell-blue ceiling, accentuated by white wooden cross beams, a wide mantle and large ornate mirror, antique loveseat, three multicolored oriental rugs, and an upright piano in one corner. Dinner will be served at 7 p.m. at the long dark wooden table where the dozen EC members and staff now gather.

Before the meeting begins at 4:30 p.m., there is laughter, chatter, and hugs all around. A spirit of bonhomie warms the drafty high-ceilinged room on this mid-November eve. Yes, there are serious matters to attend to tonight but also several people to honor. Four EC members are leaving the board: Joe Hight, Elana Newman, Penny Cockerell (who is unable to attend the event), and Mark Brayne, a former British journalist turned therapist who had headed the Dart Center’s European operations for several years.

“Tomorrow, you’ll be in charge, and I’ll be relieved,” Hight says at one end of the table to incoming president Deb Nelson, who sits to his immediate left. If Hight reflects a corporate style of dress and demeanor, Nelson looks like an academic, at home in Cambridge, Evanston, or Berkeley. She wears gray stretch slacks, black boots, a black jacket over a tan top. Her straight brown hair falls to her shoulders. She is slender and of medium height. Her long face appears serious, even austere, accentuated by dark-framed glasses. But when she laughs along with Hight and others in the room, her appearance brightens.

For the next ninety minutes, the EC listens to a presentation by New Hampshire-based consultant David Brown, who has hobbled in on crutches and a surgical shoe. He had planned on a PowerPoint presentation, but there

is a snafu with the computer projection system. No bells and whistles this time, just highlights of the nineteen-page operational audit for the Dart Center.

Though the report is well received, it appears the EC is still coming to terms with the Dart Center's evolution and organizational development from its early entrepreneurial-model history, when Frank Ochberg, chairman emeritus, was both founder and administrator. (A week later, Hight will e-mail the EC, expressing his hope that the Dart Center retains its individual and strategic outreach. "Frank taught me that, and I think it's worked tremendously through our formative years and will into the future. Throughout the strategic planning process, I think it's important to identify values and traditions that have generated success thus far and treasure them throughout the process. . .")

In room 26 at 6:35 p.m., a somewhat-heated discussion about Dart Center publications and other agenda items ensues, and the mood grows more intense. Ochberg, who sits at the opposite end of the table from Hight, appears glum as some of his comments seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Just then, the tall wooden double doors open, and a frazzled Bruce Shapiro bounds in, apologizing for being late (due to delays at LaGuardia). Rumpled in his tweed sport coat, the compact, erudite Shapiro still looks and acts like a reporter with his tousled brown hair, somewhat-frenetic style, and rapid-fire delivery.

"Chill out," Australian Cait McMahon says cheerfully at the table as Shapiro scurries to his seat next to Ochberg. "We're fine."

The last item on the agenda for today's meeting is an attempt to edit the language for the annual Dart Center award. The group spends several minutes debating whether to use "covering" or "coverage of" tragedy and trauma. Hight has been moving the agenda along fairly well until this delay. But now he laughs aloud, breaking the tension as his outburst fills the room. Any vote on this matter and the presentation of Shapiro's executive director's report can wait until tomorrow, when Deb Nelson will officiate the meeting. The group shifts gears, settles back, and prepares to dine on Dijon-crustured rack of lamb and roasted salmon filet, accompanied by free-flowing red and white wine. After dessert (caramelized apple crisp with dulce de leche ice cream), appropriately sweet tributes are made to the four honorees.

Joe Hight recognizes the efforts of many around the table. He thanks Bruce Shapiro for his energy and management ability. He acknowledges the invaluable support of Frank Ochberg. He jokes with Seamus Kelters, a fellow

Catholic, about how they attended Mass together in Northern Ireland years ago after a fairly heavy night of drinking pints of Guinness stout. (The next day, he and Kelters will attend 7 a.m. Mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral, a few blocks away, where John F. Kennedy lay in state on November 25, 1963.) Then, it's time to pass the wooden gavel to Deb Nelson, whom Hight praises for her ability to listen and to be assertive when needed. "I know the Dart Center is good hands."

Nelson replies that she has "learned from your patience and wisdom." Others chime in around the table. Hight is called a "workhorse, pioneer, and trailblazer." Ochberg stands and delivers an eloquent, emotional tribute, citing Hight's devotion to his presidency and his fairness. "You always knew where Joe stood on issues," Ochberg says, acknowledging that through the years they often had "heated disagreements," but they were always able to work through their differences and maintain mutual respect and a close friendship. "We are indebted to Joe for raising our standards and meeting our goals."

After the tributes, Hight says he is honored by the words and grateful for the gifts, including two black cast-iron typewriter bookends/paperweights. Hight sits ramrod straight, his hands clasped in his lap as Ochberg announces there is one more presentation for the evening. The doors to room 26 again open, and in strides a smiling Dr. Terry Clark from the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO). Hight is momentarily surprised by the unexpected appearance of his old friend Professor Clark. He jumps up, and the two men embrace as laughter and applause fill the room. Terry Clark announces that the Dart Center has established a \$10,000 endowment in Hight's name at UCO. The Joe Hight Award will be given each year to a junior or first-semester senior student showing outstanding promise in ethical journalism. Applicants will come from two journalism classes: Media Ethics and the Victims and the Media course. Hight listens, remaining dry-eyed and at attention in his chair. He will later say how surprised and honored he was with the UCO endowment. Eldest daughter and Georgetown freshman, Elena, who attended the November 10 ceremony, will call home and tell mother, Nan, and younger sister, Elyse, all about the honors bestowed on her father.

### **Coming to Terms at Starbucks**

The next morning, the Dart Center EC meeting continues in a conference room at the more modern and stylish Topaz Hotel two doors down from the Tabard Inn. Hight attends most of the three-hour meeting as a courtesy, but he leaves at 12:30 p.m.



“I had to get out of there,” he says, rushing out to the sidewalk, “before it got too emotional. I didn’t want to be in the room when the meeting adjourned.” With Elena by his side, Hight walks briskly up N Street toward Connecticut Avenue. On this sunny but cool Sunday afternoon, a nearby Starbucks looks inviting. Elena orders hot chocolate; her father orders hot cider without whipped cream.

Hight begins by summarizing some of the actions at the morning meeting. He is very complimentary of Deb Nelson’s first steps as president, citing her “terrific job today.” He then relives some of the events of last night, grateful for the recognition he received. After four years as president of the Dart Center, he seems a bit uncertain of his future role. “What do I do if someone contacts me because they still see my name as president on the Web site?” he asks, unable to answer his own question. He says that Ochberg and Shapiro are encouraging him to lead the center’s twenty-five-member advisory council of representatives from journalism and trauma fields. But Hight isn’t making any commitments just yet. He has more pressing matters to attend to.

Elena quietly sips her hot chocolate, studying her father as his voice drops and his pale eyes glisten.

“It cost me,” Joe Hight says, referring to his years as president of the Dart Center. “But there’s always a price to pay.” He seems unaware that he is channeling the words of his late father, Wilber, about the cost of commitment.

Hight explains he has recently learned he will be changing jobs at the *Oklahoman*. As of November 19, he will no longer be a managing editor, a title he has held since 1999. Now, he will have the twenty-first-century moniker: director of information and development. A man who has spent years trying to help journalists enhance their performance and take better care of themselves is being eased out of “news” and into “information.”

Hight says that because of his significant time commitment with Dart Center-related activities (on average, about twenty hours a week over the last four years), he admits he wasn’t able to have the “vision” regarding emerging developments at the *Oklahoman*. Because he was so tied up with his trauma journalism advocacy, he never told his superiors about his interest in pursuing the executive editor position at the newspaper (now a moot point because the position has been eliminated in the 2007 management reorganization). For the first time in decades, Hight won’t report to Ed Kelley, and he acknowledges he has had no recent conversations with Kelley about the job change.

“You have to be adaptable in this business,” Hight says a month later as

he is packing up his two-room office and moving to a smaller ninth-floor location on the northeast corner of “the tower.”

Ironically for Hight, the more he advocated for a “higher sense of what journalists should be,” the more distanced he became from certain members of the *Oklahoman’s* (now) two-hundred-person newsroom. Some would label Hight as “soft” and “detached.” Others would say they were unaware of his international media leadership. Even longtime friend and admirer Charlotte Lankard had confided in summer 2007 that, although she believed Joe Hight and Ed Kelley were striving to effect change, to raise standards, and to enlighten attitudes and behavior at the *Oklahoman*, they may not be doing as well as they think they are.

Joe Hight’s favorite scene in the film *Castaway* is not when Tom Hanks is rescued or when he reunites with his former girlfriend. Hight prefers the image of Hanks at the end of the movie, standing literally and figuratively at the crossroads of life. After some thirty years, the one-time hustling reporter finds himself at that place—in transition.

He admits that as a younger (“hot-headed”) man, he may have reacted differently to his job change. But now his first concern isn’t about himself or his career; it’s about those he loves. “How does it affect my family?” he asks. That’s how he makes his decisions these days. He’s also pragmatic: “I’m at a latter part of my career, but not the latter part of my life.” Hight says now that his service to the Dart Center has ended, he can begin thinking about other goals he has had to postpone for years, such as writing a book about his brother Paul and crafting short stories.

Just days before Christmas 2007, Joe Hight sounds upbeat, “relieved that I have this new initiative.” He’s having fun as director of information and development, something he hadn’t expected. But toward the end of the phone call, his tone shifts as he reflects on the toll of all the years focusing on tragedy and trauma. “I saw a lot of pain, and it really wears on you. These sad stories are never ending.” A few moments pass before Hight perks up once more. He is gracious and grateful for his opportunities to make a difference. “The amazing thing is the connections, those people you’ve helped along the way. That’s worth everything.”

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