ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BAER

Interviewed by Ford Risley

Conducted under the auspices of the
Pennsylvania Newspaper Journalists Oral History Program
Department of Journalism
Penn State University
2020

Risley: Okay, we'll get started. It's June 18, 2020, and I'm here with John Baer doing an interview for the Pennsylvania Newspaper Journalists Oral History Program. And we're doing it here in his home in New Cumberland, Pennsylvania. So, we'll just start at the beginning. Tell me tell me about when and where you were born, and a little bit about your parents and family.

Baer: Right, I was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, June 25, 1947. So, I will be 73 next Thursday. Only child. Father was a newspaper reporter. Mother was mostly stay-at-home. Worked a little bit for the state near the end after I, I think, once I was in high school. Mount Saint Mary's College, when it was all men. Master's from Temple. Two great fellowships. Both competitive. One a congressional fellowship under the auspices of the American Political Science Association. And the other was the first Journalist's Law School Program at University of Loyola in California, which was terrific. Both very good experiences. Everybody in journalism at some point ought to do some kind of fellowship just to broaden, you know. Grew up here. Both my wife and I grew up here. Both were only children. So, once we had children—two sons—the prospect of us leaving this area was really dim because both sets of grandparents were still alive. And so, we ended up making this our home.

Risley: Great. I'd like to talk about the fellowships a bit more, but tell me about your father and what he did.

Baer: Well, I'm probably unique in Pennsylvania politics and journalism for the reason that he worked in the Capitol Newsroom from the time of my memory. So as a child, 7, 8, 9, 10 years old, I would be in there on a Sunday because we would go to mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral, which is right down the street from the capitol. We lived within walking distance of the capitol. So, he would do freelance work, and I would play on the phones. And when I told that story as an adult and as a journalist, people invariably would say, so basically you're doing the same thing: going into the capitol newsroom and playing on the phones. But there aren't many, I dare say there probably aren't any who can say they worked in the same state capitol newsroom that their father did. And you've probably been in that newsroom.

Risley: I haven't.

Baer: Oh, you should. Only because there are photographs, it's the oldest association of capitol journalists in America. It's still in existence as an association. And there are photographs dating back to the Civil War, which I know is something you're interested in. People who covered the Civil War from the capitol newsroom would go back and forth. So there are pictures on the wall of my father's classes in there and my own classes in there, the, you know, the groups, and of course in his day there were no women, and there were three times as

many reporters. And everybody looked basically the same, and in my day that was completely changed.

Risley: Was he always pretty much a freelance writer? Was he associated with a newspaper?

Baer: Oh yeah. He also was with the *Patriot*. Those guys made so little money. He said he actually made more money doing freelance work than he did on salary.

Risley: So, this was on top of his job at the *Patriot*?

Baer: Right. And he basically covered politics and national conventions. And in his day he would cover national politics by getting on the train in Philadelphia with whoever was running for president, and taking the train across the state to Pittsburgh, because I've seen his datelines that will say, like, "in route with Stevenson," you know, by John H. Baer. So, that was kind of cool.

Risley: I guess It's fair to say you were inspired to go into journalism because of him?

Baer: I guess it was kind of unavoidable. I mean, there were always newspapers around the house, including the Pittsburgh and the Philadelphia newspapers. And so, I grew up as a Philadelphia sports fan reading those sports pages, and there was never a lack of information just sitting around the house. And of course, accompanying him, get to see the capitol, get to feel that government feel, you know, so I guess that kind of hung with me. Ironically, my father-in-law was the art director at the *Patriot News*.

Risley: Oh, really?

Baer: Yeah. So, there were a couple of ties there.

Risley: Did you go into journalism right after school?

Baer: No. When I graduated from college, it was 1969, basically the height of Vietnam. I graduated in June and was getting married in August. I had no idea what I wanted to do or where, but I knew I didn't want to do anything in southeast Asia. And, at the time, Catholic schools could get deferments if they needed lay teachers. So, Bishop McDevitt High School, which was the only Catholic school in the area when I was growing up, had a sister school that opened while I was still there. But if you started at Bishop McDevitt, you could finish at Bishop McDevitt. And the Susquehanna River was always a big boundary here. So kids that grew up on the West shore of Susquehanna River would now go to Trinity High School, which was a new Catholic high school. And so, coaches and teachers that I had at Bishop McDevitt started coaching and teaching at Trinity. So right after college, I got hired as an English teacher, and a JV basketball and football coach at Trinity. Did that for three years. The hardest three years of my life, even though other people who actually taught, said, "Yeah, you're not a teacher, you know,

you're with 96 percent college-bound kids." They'd say, "You want to be a teacher? Come down to Philadelphia."

Risley: What was teaching like?

Baer: I had a ball; I loved it. I still have contact with some of the students that I had. Recently, a person came up to me in the street and said, "You taught my father." And the guy looked like he was 50 years old. I thought, "Oh God!"

Risley: I know what you mean.

Baer: So, I did that for three years. I was coaching two sports and teaching. Teaching is, as you know, I mean, it's performance art, right? And you do it six, seven times a day, five days a week, and then grade the homework assignments and plan the curriculum. It was really getting thin. There was an opening at the *Patriot* for a general assignment reporter. My father left there maybe eight, ten years before I got there, but my father-in-law was still there. And both of them had pretty good reputations with the publisher, so oddly enough, I got hired. And the timing couldn't have been better because I was hired in June of 1972, literally days before Hurricane Agnes, which devastated the area, including the *Patriot News* building. The presses were flooded. We were working out of satellite offices but immediately plunged into significant news stories. It was a great way to get into the business. It was also of course, the summer of Watergate. So, interest in politics was sky high. So, that was my introduction. I started out doing general assignment reporting and then started gravitating to politics. And I had the good fortune of being a new guy, which meant you worked weekends. I worked Saturday nights for the Sunday papers. In those days – we're still talking early seventies – the Sunday papers were so big that all they wanted was copy. They needed to feed the beast. So, anytime there was any way to write something political, a candidate coming through town, a press release, you know, something I could get my hands on to make a Sunday story out of. Which was great training and great exposure and great experience and all that. So, even though your natural instinct would be to complain and bitch about having to work the weekend, if you're starting out, it's to your benefit, or was in those days.

Risley: Do you remember some of the early stories that you did that were memorable?

Baer: I do because at that time again, in the early seventies, environmental law was a big issue. And Maurice Goddard, who became a legend in Pennsylvania, was the Department of Environmental Resources' secretary. I always had a good relationship with him and always managed to get pretty good stories out of that. Invariably, they would be tied to politics. I learned very soon that anything that was getting done in terms of policy relied on politics. And so I did a lot of environmental stuff. And any campaign, the local campaign for house, or state senate, congressional, I would try to get my head in the door and write about that.

Risley: What interested you about politics?

Baer: Well, first of all, the memory of my father coming home from conventions with buttons, right? As a young kid, that was kind of cool. And the old-style buttons had the ribbons on them, so they were, you know, colorful. But also the realization, like I just said, that if anything, policy-wise was going to get done or going to get changed, it's going to be done through politics, not necessarily on merit. The lesson early was that what's good for the state, for the county, for the country, isn't enough. It's got to meet the standards of politics. And so, I figured, all right, this is where I ought to direct my attention because everything important gets done that way.

Risley: How many people were covering politics or government at the *Patriot News* at that time?

Baer: Several. There was far more interest—still is—in state politics and politics generally in this media market, than say in Philadelphia or Allentown or Johnstown. And so there would be people that would cover certain departments. There'd be an education reporter; there'd be a labor reporter; there'd be a utilities reporter—stuff like that. City hall had a person, but I bet state government had six, eight, ten, people covering the news. I mean the *Patriot* and the *Evening News* were both pretty fully staffed in those days.

Risley: I guess I should know this, but did they have separate staffs?

Baer: They did.

Risley: And you initially were with the *Evening News*?

Baer: Yeah, I was initially on the *Evening News*, which meant you came in at seven in the morning and ostensibly worked till three. But if you're working on a story, if you're going to interview somebody, you worked later. So, they were separate and, in many instances, competitive.

Risley: When did you start writing a column?

Baer: Not until 2000. I was a government reporter for the *Daily News* for I guess, twelve years, and a columnist for twenty.

Risley: And how did the columnist gig happen?

Baer: Zack Stalberg, have you ever experienced Zack Stalberg? Well, you know, he's crazy, right? I love the guy, always have. I mean we became good friends, and after he left the paper, anytime he was back in Philly, we would have dinner or at least drinks and a cigar. Even after he moved to New Mexico, we've stayed in touch. He is probably as good a politician as any politician that I ever covered. He was very good at managing his own staff, and he was very good dealing with politicians. I

worked for Bill Scranton when he ran for governor, I was his press secretary when he ran for governor.

Risley: After you left the Patriot *News*?

Baer: I did a Congressional fellowship and went back to the *Patriot News*. But my editors said, "He's got Potomac fever. He's not going to be of any value to us anymore." So I ended up being assigned to cover West Shore municipalities and things like that. I had an offer to work in public television at WITF, which was then in Hershey, as a producer. I ended up getting my own news talk show.

Risley: What year was this?

Baer: This would have been '78. Okay. So I spent five years with the *Patriot*, one year in Washington, and then WITF where I spent five years. We won a couple of national awards for documentaries. We did a documentary on Three Mile Island, which the *New York Times* reviewed. The accident happened in March 1979; we were on the air nationally in September. Then, on the first anniversary, we did a live national nuclear debate with Jim Lehrer as the host from The Forum in Harrisburg. We were headed to a point where we were becoming a national presence in the PBS structure. Then we did a bunch of things with Charlayne Hunter-Gault, did a monthly thing called Pro/Con that won some awards. The MacNeil/ Lehrer Report was going to become the news hour on PBS. They invited us—WITF—to be a regular part of that in terms of providing pre-produced material. But the board of directors at WITF at that time said, "No, we are a local community entity. We are going to serve our community. We're not interested in doing national stuff." To which I said, "You know what? Enjoy."

I had met Bill Scranton; I was a contributing editor to *Philadelphia Magazine* for a couple of years. And they asked me to do a piece on him when he was running for lieutenant governor in 1978 with Dick Thornburgh. And all I knew about him was a one-page thing that said, "Yale University and transcendental meditation." And I thought, "Oh, yeah," because if you knew *Philadelphia Magazine* in those days, it was about as snarky as you could get in the state. So, I fully expected to have a lot of fun with the story. I spent some time with him on the campaign trail and liked him a lot. Very generous of spirit, down-to-earth. You couldn't tell he was wealthy, but smart, thoughtful. So, I wrote a piece that reflected all that. And we stayed in touch. I would talk to him on occasion, socialize on occasion. So, at the time when WITF was deciding it didn't want to do any national work, he said, "You know, I'm going to run for governor after Dick's time is up. Why don't you come and do it with me?" So, I was ready to do something else.

I hated it within a month because of the meetings, because of the endless sign-offs, because government just ain't fun. You know, I mean, anybody who has ever been a reporter and really loved being a reporter, knows there's nothing else that's ever going to compare. So that's where I was, very unhappy. This would have

been ’83 or ’84. But once the campaign started, then adrenaline kicked in, and it was a great campaign running against Bob Casey in 1986, whose campaign manager was James Carville. It was his first win ever. He had just come from losing in Texas. Sitting across from him negotiating the details of the debates was like dealing with an alien. I just remember walking out of a meeting and saying, “That guy is fucking crazy!” And it turned out, of course, he was. But we stayed in touch for many years afterwards. He's actually a delightful person. He is funny and smart and all that. So, Bill loses by a very slim margin on a very questionable ad. I wrote a piece for *Philly Magazine* about the campaign that was a behind-the-scenes thing, without knocking anybody or anything like that. But it was an insider's view of the campaign. And Tom Ferrick, who was then a political writer for the *Inquirer* called and said, “Well, I guess you’re not going to stay in politics, huh?” And I said, “It’s not my intention Tom.”

So, I wrote four letters: to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Pittsburgh Press*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Philadelphia Daily News*. The only response I got was from the *Daily News*. Zack Stalberg said, “Yeah, when you’re in town, stop in.” Zack and I had had some conversations. So, at that time, Ford, you have to remember that nobody was going back and forth [between journalism and politics.] That was just unheard of. It was so rare, that after I got the job, there was a guy finishing up his thesis at Harvard who called, and he was interviewing four people in America who had made the jump from journalism to politics, back to journalism. And he had a whole bunch of pros, including David Broder, who said, “It should never happen, shouldn’t be done!” You know? And would I agree to be interviewed? And I said, “Yeah, sure.”

So, the *Daily News* hires me to be in the newsroom—the capitol newsroom covering Casey. So, you can imagine how well that was met by the administration, and all the people in the newsroom, who would soon be my colleagues, were very suspect too, [asking] “Is he coming with an ideology?” That took some time. I mean, that took a little bit of smoothing out. But my point on Zack was, the person that Casey hired for his first press secretary, was the *Daily News* person in the capitol newsroom. So, I’m thinking Zack is sending a message that, “Oh yeah, you think our guy was soft on Casey, and that's why he got hired by Casey? Well, guess who's going to replace him?” You know? And I think I accused Zach of that years later and he just said, “What else would you like to drink?” So that’s how that happened. And I truly just had a ball at the *Daily News*. I just loved it.

Risley: Let’s talk about that. But, before we do, what did you learn in working on the campaign that helped you in terms of journalism?

Baer: Yeah, that’s a great question. And it was of enormous value. You know, it is absolutely true: unless you do something, you don't know what it's like entirely. But if you spend a couple of years doing something, you get a real sense of the people who are in it, why they’re in it, the good, the bad, and the ugly, you know,

the whole thing. I mean, what I learned in those couple of years was how the political system works, how important fundraising is, how you maintain fundraising, what you have to do as a candidate to win in a state as diverse as Pennsylvania. I also got to see the entire state, because obviously we went everywhere, every county, and tons of people, who later became great sources, at least on the Republican side. And got to know the motivation for policy. What is it that drives policy? And nine times out of ten—it's politics.

When people say, well, is it as bad as people think it is? And I would always say "Yes!" The motivations to do anything in government and politics tend to be *not* pure. There certainly are people who have pure motivations, but to move the whole system—again, going back to what we said earlier – it takes more than just being right or just being good. So, that was a great asset to go through that. And particularly in terms of access to people. Having met them, having dealt with them, I knew them, they knew me. I could call and they would take the call. So, starting out for a major metropolitan newspaper covering politics, I could call the national Republican committee person and he would take the call. So that was a great help.

Risley: What was it like working for a tabloid? Were you given a direction or instructions?

Baer: No. I've always said I had no adult supervision and it was wonderful. The more edgier you could be, the more it was appreciated.

Risley: Were you ever told that in so many words?

Baer: No, no.

Risley: So, it was something you just figured out?

Baer: I think they have a sense of people. At least Zack, I think Zack had a sense of who he was hiring.

Risley: He knew that you could deliver the goods.

Baer: Based on our conversations earlier, he somehow got a sense. And again, I had done a bunch of stuff for *Philly Magazine* well before this, and, and immediately before that, too. And I'll tell you a great story quickly that explains this. Zack was hiring for a reporter and he was looking at this guy coming out of New Hampshire. The guy drove to Philly; it was the dead of winter. He walks into Zack's office. And the first thing he says is, "Mr. Stalberg, I'm so sorry. I had a tie, but when I opened my trunk to get it and pick it out, it cracked and broke in half." And Zack said, "You're hired!" Zack was *crazy*, but he was usually right. You know, the tabloid thing, it really is different. It really does touch people. It's a great way to communicate with people. I think a lot of the *Inquirer* people were jealous of the kinds of stuff we did. There was never a doubt of what the *Daily*

News was or what it was about. Never a doubt. I've always had the impression, the *Inquirer* just couldn't find what it was, you know. Was it an international paper? Remember they had foreign bureaus back then. Was it a national paper then?

Risley: How would you describe the newsroom when you joined it?

Baer: Well, remember I was up here [Harrisburg], but when I went down there, it was diverse, which was unusual. And this is now 1987, even in 1987 it was very diverse and just loud and raucous and nuts. The guy who gave the final approval for the front page – front page headline of course – sat in there every night and he was just stone-faced. I don't know if this is a myth or legend or fact, but it's too good not to share. They would put the front page down in front of him. He would look at it. And sometimes he would just pretend to be wiping his ass with the thing; and then other times he would just not. Then they would say, "We're good."

Risley: That's great.

Baer: Zack had the wonderful habit of tearing the page out, scribbling a note on it, and sending it to you. If he liked it, if he hated it, if he loved it. And I told him, after he left, I told him, I said, "Do you understand how important that was to people?" And he said, "Yeah, that's why I did it." And, that was great, and the other people who worked there, the idea of having experienced both newsrooms, well, the difference was the *Inquirer* felt like a corporation. In its look, in its feel, in its communication. And the *Daily News* felt like a frat house, a co-ed frat house. And there really was a sense of the only thing that matters here is the product. I'm not going to stab you in the back, you're not going to stab me in the back. We're not playing politics here. Now, granted, my perspective is probably skewed because I was in a newsroom a hundred miles away, but I never got the sense that I was competing against any colleagues of mine, or that they were competing against me. I found later that when Zack named me a columnist, he was thinking of either me or Will Bunch. I didn't know that at the time. I don't think Will knew it at the time. And after the 2000 campaign was over, then Zack said, "Can you meet me in Lancaster for lunch?" And I said, "Sure." And then he said, "I'd like to make you a columnist." And that was that.

Risley: But you covered government for the *Daily News* up until 2000?

Baer: I also covered all the politics in terms of state races, national conventions.

Risley: But as a reporter, not as a columnist.

Baer: As a reporter, although it's the *Daily News*. When I told the Dwight Evans I was going to be a columnist. He said, "How will we know the difference?" Because the *Daily News* had a lot more, you know, flexibility, than the *Inquirer* did.

Risley: So what were some of the memorable stories that you reported on?

Baer: I was witness to the last execution in Pennsylvania, Gary Heidnik, a serial killer from Philadelphia. Because the media witness list is weighted to the jurisdiction where the crime took place, so Philadelphia got two media witnesses. And that was extraordinary. And it was one of those same-night things where the witnesses came out afterward and briefed the rest of the press. And then had to write the story. That was unique and that led the newspaper. Also, I was in the gallery for a day of the Clinton impeachment, which was unusual and unique and an experience that most people don't get to have. The national conventions before 9/11 were great fun. Because of the access, you could literally walk up and talk to anybody and kind of build your contact list. I loved those. So, those were kind of unique experiences, not necessarily the most important or valuable things that I've written about, but just in terms of personal experiences, they kind of stick out.

Risley: How would you describe Pennsylvania politics during that time?

Baer: It was the glory days. I tell people that at the same time I covered [Rick] Santorum, [Arlen] Specter, and [Ed] Rendell at the same time. And now we have [Pat] Toomey, [Bob] Casey, and [Tom] Wolf, which I've described as going from covering the World Series to covering a tee-ball tournament. You know, the difference, the energy, the personality, the political drive, the political acumen. Rendell, Specter, and Santorum—extraordinary, each one of them. Today, these guys are now so cautious and so careful. Politics, like everything else, has changed dramatically. It just isn't like it used to be, not nearly as much fun as it used to be. And I just enjoyed the heck out of it. To be in the middle of it and to have the kind of leeway to write for a tabloid during that time was wonderful.

Risley: So, talk about becoming a columnist and the kind of things that you looked for and liked to write about.

Baer: Yeah, it was interesting. Stalberg told me when he named me columnist, "It will take you a while to find a voice." He said, "It could take you five years." And I thought he was crazy but I think, it actually did. I mean, it takes a while I think just to kind of settle in. Because at first you're kind of thinking everybody in the world is going to be reading this, and this is all on me. And you know, of course, that's nonsense. But you just take yourself too seriously, at first. Philadelphia was a great place to be a columnist. And the *Daily News* was too, because readers felt they had access to you. I mean, I heard an awful lot from readers all the time—calls and emails. People think they know you if they see your picture in the paper a couple of times a week and they get to know you if they read your stuff. But it takes a while and it probably took me a couple of years to settle into a consistent voice, and to settle into areas where I was most comfortable and cared most about in terms of writing. And those areas would be, I mean, they're broad areas. They would be accountability. They would be, stupidity. I mean, anytime that people do things, people always do things that are amazingly stupid in politics. And I, of

course, would thrive on that. But the accountability issues and trying to let people see the inside of the game in Harrisburg, in terms of policy, and in politics, in terms of campaigns. They kind of became my focus as a columnist. But it took a while.

Risley: How would you describe your voice?

Baer: It's interesting. When somebody asks me, "How should I write if I'm a columnist?" I say, "Try to write as if you're talking to your best friend, but somebody who doesn't trust you at all is listening." You're conversational. You're not showing off. You're just telling a view, a story. But you're doing it knowing that somebody is going to check on you. So, you can't go off on some wild-ass tangent. You know, anything you say, you got to be prepared to back it up or provide some attribution. And I still try to write conversationally so that it's not talking down, but talking to people. Sometimes it works well and sometimes it doesn't.

Risley: Are there any columns that are particularly memorable or you think had significant impact?

Baer: That is a great question and I really did put some thinking into it. And the interesting thing to me is after I thought about it, they were not columns that I won awards for, but they were, to me, the most significant things I've done. One was in 2008, the day after the Super Tuesday primaries when the Democratic nomination was far from resolved. Super Tuesday that year had been a mishmash for both Hillary Clinton and Obama. I told my editor, Gar Joseph, I said, "I want to write this." He said, "Fine." I wrote a column saying that Barack Obama would be our next president and here's why. I just went back and reread it. It was actually pretty good. But it laid out an argument, not based on kind of fan-based stuff, but on what to me seemed to be realistic politics about why he was right for the time, not only for the Democratic party, but also for the country. It led the newspaper and the headline was something like "Obama, Our Next President?" There may have been a question mark. But shortly after that, I was in Philadelphia doing a lecture at Drexel. I was walking from 30th Street station up to the Drexel campus and a young African American woman stops me and she says, "You're John Baer!" I said, "Yes," she said, "Can I give you a hug?" I said, "Yes, sure but why? And she said, her mom teaches elementary school in West Philadelphia, an all black elementary school. She said she picks her up at the end of the day to take her home. She said, "I walked into her class one day and the front page of your paper, your column, was up on the bulletin board." And she said, "Mom, why is that up there? I mean, we haven't even had the primary yet let alone … and my mother said `It doesn't matter now. To these kids, that means something.'"

The other story was about Arlen Specter. He was funny, he was irascible, and a great politician. I dealt with him for years. I'd written a couple of profiles on him. And, I got a letter from a mother whose daughter was 3 years old in a children's

hospital in Philadelphia and had terminal cancer. And she said that she had been dealing with Specter's office to try to get him to co-sign legislation that would increase, I think, double the amount of money that NIH would spend on childhood cancer research. And Specter was refusing to even respond to her and was *not* a co-signer on the bill even though it has a lot of bipartisanship and, you know, you need sixty votes right? They had like fifty-seven and it was stuck. So, I said, this doesn't make any sense. I mean, Arlen is a cancer survivor—twice. He had just written a book about never giving up, or something, you know? So, I got in touch with his staff and they said, "It doesn't sound familiar. Let us look into it." And I said, "Well, let me talk to him." They said, "Well, he's doing this, he's doing that—maybe." And I said, "Well, I still want to talk to him." So, I'm getting ready to write and he calls. I said, "Seriously, what's the deal?" and he said, "My position on research funding has always been the same. My position is I want the scientists to decide how and where to spend the money that we appropriate. I don't want the politicians to decide." I said, "That's not unreasonable, but have you seen this case?" He said, "Yeah, I'm sure I have." And I said, "Have you talked to this mom or responded to his mom?" He said, "It doesn't ring a bell. I've asked my staff to look at it." I said, "Okay." So, I'm writing the story, literally writing the story. It's on the budget, it's going in the next day. It's like 5:30 and Specter is in New York getting ready to go on to the *Daily Show* to promote, oddly enough, the book about him having cancer. So, he calls and he says, "I'm going to sign onto the bill." And I said, "What happened?" And he said, "I looked through the file." And I said, "You saw the pictures?" And he said, "I saw the pictures. I saw the mother. It's clear this is important to the mother. She wants my support. I'm going to give it my support." He signs onto the bill and the bill passes. And my email from all over the country just goes absolutely bat shit after the piece appears because, I mean, think about how many people have children or no children or a family, you know, who know about that, and have been following that for months and months. And it was stuck and now all of a sudden it's going to move. And you just think, wow.

There was a case of a woman in Northeast Pennsylvania, whose husband was a state policeman who had a heart attack in the line of duty and the state was not going to pay his pension benefits – his death benefits – because they said it wasn't related to his job. I pounded the shit out of that, two, three columns. Met with Rendell who was governor at the time. And they got it reversed. And the letter I got from her was, well, memorable, So none of those columns probably got a lot of attention in terms of awards, but I think they just pointed to the rewards of journalism.

Risley: That's great. What do you think is the role of a political columnist?

Baer: I'd like to think it's to provide some context and some perspective that is beyond what the average person might consider. When they think about something political. You know, Ford, it's changed so much. It doesn't matter what you write in the last couple of years. Somebody's pissed off about it and you're an idiot and it's "fake news." So it's not nearly as much fun, but I think it's still very important. I always quote Elmer Smith, who was a *Daily News* reporter. He

started out doing boxing and then went to politics, which I thought was appropriate. He used to say, "I don't write to make you think like me, I just write it to make you think." And tha'ts what I try to do. Just raise questions and direct people to think about this thing or the other? And if you can do that, I mean, I think that's something of a service.

Risley: I guess it's hard these days because everybody is in their own silo.

Baer: Boy, they really are. People read what they want to read. I mean, you can literally *not* bring something up and take shit for it. I do take pride in, throughout my career as a columnist being labeled both a crazy lefty communist and a right-wing asshole, you know, depending on what I was writing about.

Risley: So, you tried hard not to be labeled?

Baer: Yeah. I mean, I've always been a registered independent, always made a point of it if somebody starts to bark about something. I'm not a fan of the here's-how-it-ought-to-be kind of journalism in terms of politics. I don't care about ideology so much as I care about accountability and trying to get stuff done. Everything is now about ideology.

Risley: What's it been like writing for the *Patriot News* again?

Baer: Oh, very different. It's a completely different market. The criticism is much gentler than in Philadelphia. I guess these folks think they're tearing me up, but I mean, come on. It's a different audience and I try not to reflect that in my writing, but I mean, subconsciously I might. A lot of people said when the *Inquirer* started running me, I didn't seem to be as much fun. And again, psychologically, maybe that's true. Maybe I've changed a little bit. But my defense was, well, it's not me. It's just everything else isn't as much fun. And when you do try to have fun, you get used to getting laughs. Now I get barbs. You know?

Risley: Do you still like to write about the same things? Have the subjects changed?

Baer: Yeah. The subjects have changed. It used to be pretty cut and dry about where is the money going to go, right? And covering, especially state government, that's kind of the argument. How much government are we going to have? Where is the money going to go? And if you take those two broad umbrella issues, and you can put all of the state budgets, all of the state campaigns under those umbrellas because that's where the fight is. And now, it's everything. Everything is a fight, everything is an issue. And it just breaks down. Right, left, and nothing in between. Compromise was a common element of politics. Rendell used to say "Politics is the art of the possible." And that wouldn't be popular now if he was running, you know?

Risley: Who are some of the most memorable people you've covered? I mean, you've talked about some of them, but I'm also thinking about people maybe who

aren't as well known as a senator or governor.

Baer: Yeah. There were people coming up there at the same time that I was coming up. I mean, there's a young African American representative from Philadelphia, Gordon Linton, who unfortunately left—a lot of good ones leave. But he always seemed to be somebody who was in the right place. Dwight Evans who has spent his life doing this stuff always struck me as somebody who was in the right place. But it's hard. You get overshadowed by the personalities of a Rendell or a Specter who have the whole package. Who have both a firm understanding of politics and a firm understanding of what works as a politician, both policy *and* politics. Most people are—there's two kinds of successful politicians, the ones that will do *absolutely anything* it takes to win and ones that are really smart. You *rarely* get *both* in one politician. Rendell and Specter were both of those things.

Both relentless in policy and in politics. John Fetterman strikes me as somebody who is really, really interesting, given his background. How he came to the positions that he holds now. And I just think the guy is one of those people who is in public service for the right reasons, wants to do the right thing. And just is *so much more*. I mean, I wrote about it the day he was sworn in as lieutenant governor. I said, look, what is unique about him is *not* the tattoos or his size or the shaved head. What is unique about him is his *outlook* on public service. And here's where it came from. So, yeah, he's definitely, *definitely* somebody that's on the, on the all-time list of people fun to write about. But campaigning with Rendell, there's just nothing like it.

Risley: Are there stories or columns that you look at after they came out and think, that just didn't work?

Baer: It's also a good question. And I thought about that hard too. There was one. I wrote a column about Sandra Schultz Newman, who was a state Supreme Court justice. She was a very wealthy Philadelphian who did something [questionable]. I forget what she did. I think it was in the "don't-you-know-who-I-am" category. But I wrote about it and took a lot of shit from the Jewish community in the city, because she was at the time the column came out sitting Shiva for her husband. I got really beat up for that. I did not know that, but I mean, maybe somebody on the desk could have caught it. I don't know. I also wrote a comparative thing between Governor Bob Casey and Governor [James] Florio in New Jersey. This would have been in 1991. And it was not flattering to Casey. They both had sports backgrounds. Florio was a boxer; Casey played basketball for Holy Cross on the same team with NBA Hall of Famer Bob Cousey. Florio was 54 at the time; Casey was 60. Florio was bold and aggressive; Casey cautious and deliberate. Florio energetically tried to steal Philadelphia's NBA and NHL teams. Casey, half-heartedly tried to steal Lee Iacocca for a senate seat after John Heinz died. He tried to recruit Iacocca. Part of the reason for the difference is that Florio faced re-election, whereas Casey was term limited. But another part of the reason that the piece made clear was personal style. Florio was pugnacious and hyperactive;

Casey was reserved and dull. Florio looked fit; Casey looked ill. And if this wasn't clear enough to our readers, our graphics folks ran side-by-side pencil drawings of the two: Florio looked like a statesman; Casey looked like a stick man. After the piece ran, a letter-to-the-editor from the governor's press secretary just hammered me. The governor's chief of staff wrote me a letter, a personal letter, saying it was vicious and despicable. The governor's general counsel, Jim Haggerty, wrote me a handwritten note that said you ought to be ashamed of yourself. And the reason was that they knew what I did not know – and that was how sick Casey was. We didn't know he basically was dying and had been, you know, diagnosed with the disease that required a double transplant, double organ transplant. I did reconcile with all three of those gentlemen and the governor. I went to have lunch with Casey in Scranton after he left office. He met me with one of his sons, and we had lunch up there and talked for about an hour and a half. So in the long run, it came out okay, but in the short term, that piece was probably unfair.

Risley: As a journalist, when you write something you regret, what do you? Do you try to try to make it right? Do you try to learn from it?

Baer: Yeah, I think you learn from it. I think if somebody accurately points out bad phrasing or something implied that you didn't intend to imply, that's really helpful. And I mean, I do tell people that write me critically, that I want to hear from people who don't agree with me. And it is helpful. And I used to write every year, I would write at the end of the year, a mea culpa column.

Risley: Oh really? I didn't know that.

Baer: Yep. These are the mistakes of judgment or fact that I made during the year just ending.

Risley: Talk about that. Why did you do that?

Baer: I think everybody with a voice ought to be responsible for the voice and not only the next day in a correction that appears an inch-wide in the paper or online. And I've always felt strongly about that. It was extremely popular, I mean, people always commented on it. And the semi-frightening, and it sounds arrogant thing about it was, that each year there seemed to be *less* to write about. I had to stretch it sometimes, you know, to make a point. Which is heartening personally, it just, you know, it wasn't, it didn't come across with the same force it did when I did make mistakes. But it was a good exercise. I kept track of stuff all year long. And if it's a factual thing, of course you correct it the next day. But in a column like that you can put the context with it and you can say, this is why this happened. Or, it was bad journalism on my part. Or, this is why this happened and I should have said this *also* happened

Risley: This is a big question but how did the newspaper business change during your career?

Baer: It's changed so dramatically. It used to feel like public service. You'd be proud to tell people that you were a reporter or journalist and people would be deferential almost. You were there to help people. You were helping people understand, help people to get their say, help people to make government responsive. And now it's, I mean, it stood out to me when we were going to Cleveland to [Donald] Trump's convention. We were told to hold on to our credentials walking through crowds because people were coming by with scissors to take them. And I just saw the [John] Bolton book quotes the president as saying, in reference to journalists, "These people should be executed." I fear for stuff like that because there are people who will take that as leeway and people have. I have an "Enemy of the People" coffee cup. On the one hand, it's funny and cute. On the other hand, it's destructive to our business and to our country. And that's a change I never thought I would see. But I could feel it, you know, as the internet became a source of information, maybe halfway or two-thirds of the way through my career, you could feel a sense of competition coming from sources of information. You know, someone would say, "I saw this," "I read this." "Why don't you report this?" "Why don't you report that?" Which hadn't happened in the past. So, you could feel something coming, but I didn't think it would turn out to be almost a hatred of people that practice what we do.

Risley: I meant to ask you this earlier, but going back to your years with WITF, what was it like to jump into television and make that move?

Baer: Yeah, it was an interesting learning experience because the writing became secondary to the image. I had to learn a new way to communicate. And there were good people working in public broadcasting that I worked with and that helped me along. I mean, my instinct as a journalist was, this was the story, but the way to tell it relied on the smarts of other people. But in doing public policy documentaries especially, I knew who to talk to and who to go and interview. And then these guys, the cameraman, and camera crew, knew how to present it. But it *was* interesting and I enjoyed it. Although being a producer—once you get a project, as a producer you're partly responsible for also getting funding, applying for it and so on. So, while you're working on one project that's funded, you're also looking for funding for the next project.

Risley: So you had to do that kind of thing?

Baer: Well, I mean, I had to help with the applications. This is what we want to do, this why it's important, that kind of stuff. I wasn't going into boardrooms begging, but I was helping those that were going to do that and say, this is the argument you need to convey, and this is why it's important, but it was a great learning experience.

Risley: Did you have leeway in the kinds of stories you could pitch?

Baer: Yes, absolutely. We did some nice pieces on criminal justice, some nice pieces on education. The documentary on Three Mile Island was told from the perspective

of people who lived through it here, and people who lived around the plant, and the neighbors of the plant. We went and talked to families, talked to individuals about how they felt at that time, what was their story at that time? Photographically, it was beautiful. We hired a big time narrator out of Washington. Went down and recorded in a studio down there. It turned out very well and, you know, suddenly this little station in Hershey is popping out some work that PBS is carrying around the country. So, it was a lot of fun.

Risley: What do you look back on with greatest pride about your career?

Baer: I guess what I told you earlier, that people would be hard-pressed if they read a body of my work to say what my [political] ideology is. That I covered the most ideological profession without being ideological, or, at least tried to and try to offer some balance. I mean, Scott Wagner, who ran for governor against Tom Wolf, told me after the thing was over that I was the fairest person to him. Scott Wagner was by many standards the last person that ought to be governor of Pennsylvania based upon his own, you know, personality. But I got along with the guy because I think I treated him fairly. I would say to him, "Look, that's just crazy. Why would you do that?" And he would talk it out. And I don't know, I think too many journalists, particularly younger journalists, don't get to that stage where you can just talk to people like they're people, you know, which is really helpful to your story or your column to do that.

Risley: Well, is there anything you'd like to add that we didn't discuss?

Baer: No, I think I think you hit kind of everything.