

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN O'NEILL

Interviewed by Ford Risley

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## Interview with Brian O'Neill

- Risley: Okay, it's August 27, 2020, and we're here in Pittsburgh doing an oral history interview with Brian O'Neill. We'll start at the beginning. Tell me when and where you were born and a little bit about your family.
- O'Neill: I was born in Flushing Hospital in Queens on March 22, 1956. I was the second of four children, the first son. Girl, boy, boy, girl. My dad worked in the post office and my mother was a full-time homemaker. When I was not yet four, we moved, with everyone else, out to Long Island to this little slice of suburbia called Carle Place, which is literally a square mile. All it is a school district, but it was a great place to grow up.
- Risley: Where did you get your education?
- O'Neill: Public schools: Carle Place School District. It was the middle of the baby boom, so we went to school with the same people from kindergarten through twelfth grade. There were three schools on this campus in the center of town. From the time I was in kindergarten, like the third or fourth day of school, I started walking to school with a small platoon of kids from the block and did that forever. I graduated in '74 from Carle Place High School and went to Syracuse University and majored in journalism and English.
- Risley: And how did you get interested in journalism?
- O'Neill: I was the kid in school whose compositions were read at the front of the room. I always liked reading and writing. I assumed, like a lot of other deluded souls, that I would one day write the great American novel. I thought that journalism would be a great way to make a living until I wrote that great book, which is still unwritten [laughter]. And it's '74, you know, when Woodward and Bernstein were taking down Nixon. When I got to Syracuse, which was a really good school for journalism, I got interested in the role of newspapers. I was always a newspaper reader. We got at our home, two newspapers a day: The *Daily News* in the morning and *Newsday* in the afternoon. So, I grew up reading newspapers, starting with the sports page and then moving on to other stuff.
- Risley: Did you work for the student newspaper or work in journalism while you were in school?
- O'Neill: I sort of did, yeah. I mean I worked for the high school paper first. I wrote a column; I think it was called "Party Line." I would write about the parties that everybody was going to [laughter]. It was a liberal time, and they let me, you know, tell the truth: who was drinking, who wasn't drinking. My subjects liked being in the column, so that was a lot of fun. At Syracuse I took

all the journalism courses. But I was also in a fraternity, which was a co-op fraternity. It was the cheapest place to live on campus, Alpha Chi Rho. To live there, you had to work in the house. You had to either clean up, cook three meals a week, or clean up for three meals a week. Given my talents in the kitchen, I was the guy cleaning up. I also worked in the dining halls. I was a reasonably serious student, so I didn't do enough for the school paper. I was going up to get my diploma, you know, when you realize you forgot something? It was like, ugh, I forgot to work for the school paper [laughter]. I'd written like half a dozen stories in four years, so when I got home, I wrote for the weekly newspaper in my town.

Risley: Back on Long Island?

O'Neill: Back on Long Island, while I was working in a delicatessen. And I saw this friend of mine who had gone to Washington & Lee. He got a job in a place called Danville, Virginia. He told me about a job opening in Danville, and I had already been turned down for sports writing job with the *Finger Lakes Times* covering Class A baseball. So, I got a job with the *Danville Register*, in what is literally the last capital of the Confederacy. You know the song, "The night they drove Dixie down / Virgil Kane is my name, and I rode on the Danville train." After Richmond fell, I think Jefferson Davis hid under a bed in Danville for two days or something. Anyway, it was the last capital of the Confederacy, but it was a great place to start because the city government that I covered was both incompetent and corrupt. It was a good place to learn.

Risley: So, you covered local government?

O'Neill: Yeah. And I got to write a column once a month on local government. And that turned out to be a lot of fun.

Risley: Do you think that's where you got the columnist bug?

O'Neill: I got the columnist bug in college when I was reading *The Daily News*, and they had the greatest one-two-punch in the history of columns: Jimmy Breslin and Pete Hamill. Each doing it three times a week, so six days a week. These incredible storytellers were covering the city of New York in the 1970s, where there was plenty to write about. So that's how I learned what a column should be.

Risley: How long did you stay in Danville?

O'Neill: I served a year and a half, fifteen months [laughter]. I actually recommend this to all young journalists now: I got caught in a flash flood and got sucked through this culvert into a stream in the middle of the night and came out the other end. Not to spoil the ending but I survived. And instead of going to the

Doobie Brothers concert in Greensboro, North Carolina, the next day, I wrote a story of how I almost died in a sewer Saturday night. It ran all over the state. I wound up quitting my job just about a month after that because there was this corrupt circuit court clerk who was running for reelection and he'd been running a microfilming business out of the clerk's office. He was selling microfilming services on the side, and the city was buying all this stuff from his company. So anyway, there was a story about the obvious conflict of interest there. I'm the only guy in the history of journalism who quit over a circuit court clerk election race, but I had the goods on this guy. He was a real swine. He had fired women for not sleeping with him, but those women backed out before I got that story to print. I never had that story, but I also knew it was true. So, I had the story about his corruption basically. Then I heard that the owner of the paper hated the challenger's father-in-law, so they weren't going to run the story until after the election. And I said to the editor, "If they don't run this story, I'm going to quit." I was only making \$175 a week so it wasn't hard. I was single. And the editor, who had three kids — one, a newborn — said, "If they don't run the story, I'm going to quit, too." He said, "But take the rest of the week to flesh it out, get everything you can. And then we'll see if we run it." There was a meeting with the company lawyer, and the publisher. And the lawyer said, "Politically, it's dynamite but it's a solid story. Then the publisher said, "But we're going to run it after the election. It wouldn't be right to do it before the election without giving him enough chance to respond."

So, I quit that night, and the editor quit. We gave the story to the *Gretna Gazette*, this weekly up the road. I gave all my notes to this TV/radio reporter in town, a woman who was from Danville and knew the stories of this guy, and the women. But the story became the censorship of the news. So, you know, who cares who the circuit court clerk is, right? Does this guy alphabetize better than that guy? But the people in Danville didn't like that the newspaper was quashing this story. The guy, Tommy Tucker, lost after twenty-seven years in office. And then we're all out of jobs, which I thought was fair [laughter]. I went back to Long Island. I was on the couch watching the "Gong Show." My mother and father had backed me on quitting. So, anyway, I got this call from Hal Tarleton, the editor who had quit with me. He was working in Wilson, North Carolina, and he met this guy with Landmark Newspapers, which owned the papers in Roanoke, Greensboro, and Norfolk. The guy said he was looking for a reporter for the *Roanoke Times & World-News'* New River Valley Bureau in Blacksburg, Virginia, where Virginia Tech is. Hal told him about me, and the guy said, "Well, how old is he?" He said, "Yeah, I think he's 23, 24." "Nah, we're looking for someone with a little more experience." Hal said, "Well he's the guy that got sucked through the sewer." "Oh, really? That was a good story!" [laughter]. I drove down, interviewed and got the job, so I was only out of work for a few months.

Risley: What did you do in Roanoke?

O'Neill: I started out in January 1980 covering the town of Blacksburg and the city of Radford, which is nearby, also a college town. I covered business and feature stories in the *New River Valley Bureau* for two years. I got to write a column once a month. It was supposed to be not on your beat, so it was a features style column. Then I came to downtown Roanoke and became a feature writer. I covered all kinds of stuff. I was doing that about a year and a half, and in the summer of '83, they were looking to hire a columnist because the previous columnist, who was very popular, had been fired two years before. I was the youngest one to apply, and they thought it would be good to have a young columnist because "We'll get younger readers that way." Of course, that's never true. Columnists are read by, you know, gracious, older women generally [laughter]. So anyway, I got that job as a columnist in Roanoke, and I did that for about five years. And one day in '87, one of the editors came over to me, with an article in *Editor & Publisher* that the columnist for the *Pittsburgh Press* have been fired for plagiarism. So, the editor brought it over to me and said, "Let this be a lesson to you." And I thought, well, the lesson is, there's a job opening in Pittsburgh [laughter]. I had a couple of cousins in this area, and one owned a bar. I thought, boy, this would be a good place to go. I had been to Pittsburgh once before for the "all-important" All-American City Conference in '81, when Roanoke and Blacksburg were both up for the All-American City designation. I had been here and I liked it, but I never applied. I had called the *Press* and they said they weren't sure what they were going to do. I thought about getting some columns together and sending them. But I had a girlfriend, I had a house, I had a dog, I had a life in Roanoke. I thought, eh, I'm happy here, so I never applied.

And then I think it was the following year, I got a call from Matt Kennedy of the *Pittsburgh Press*. I'm like, wow, I don't even have to apply, that's how good I am. I called him up, and he says, "Yeah, Brian, thanks for returning my call. What can you tell us about Darrell Laurant of the *Lynchburg News*? Lynchburg is about sixty miles from Roanoke, and I saw this guy's column occasionally. I liked it, so I was telling him that. I said, "Well, you know, I don't see his column all the time, but I like it. I know he has a following. I think he's good." But then it was that scene from "Animal House" where there's a devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other. And so my devil says, "Take his job!" And the angel said, "No, you can't do that to Darrell!" So, I don't know what to do. I want this job. I say to Matt, "Did he put me down as a reference?" Because I couldn't imagine why. I'd only met him a couple of times. He said, "No, I'm just doing my due diligence. I'm calling, other columnists and journalists around Lynchburg to see what they think of Darrell. I said, "Well, I'll tell you what, were it not for me, Darrell Laurant would be the best columnist in Virginia." He goes, "Really?" I said, "Yeah! How do I apply for this job?" He told me, and I sent some clips. They flew me up for an interview and I got the job.

Risley: And what year was that?

O'Neill: Halloween 1988 was my first day in the office. They gave me a month to learn the city which was very wise of them. The first month was just learning the city, going to council meetings, going to Steeler games. Going everywhere I could go to learn Pittsburgh. I wrote a handful of columns before my first one appeared on December 1.

Risley: What was your first column about?

O'Neill: It was a muddled mess. It was one of those, I'm introducing myself columns. The thing I didn't tell you was I flipped my car over in Maine during the month between leaving Roanoke and arriving in Pittsburgh. When I got the job, Angus McCarran, a wonderful guy, was the editor of the *Press*. He was from Memphis and was like Lou Grant with a Delta accent. When Angus called me, he said, "You got the job. When can you start?" I said, "Well, it's always been a dream of mine to see the country. Would it be okay if I took a couple of months to travel around before I came?" He said, "Well, you know what, it's always been a dream of ours to fill this position, so if you're not here in a month, you don't have the job" [laughter]. I said, "I'll see you in a month." So, I had this idea, I was going to see my older sister in deletion here Rhode Island, and my younger sister in Maine. But between Rhode Island and Maine, on a beautiful day like this, I still don't know how I did it, I was obviously going too fast, though. It was midday and I was sober as a judge. But in merging from one interstate to another, I flipped the car over and totaled my car. (I learned too late that I can't drive in states with one syllable.) I had to go back to Roanoke and buy a car and drive it to Pittsburgh.

So, it was a terrible first column. I'm introducing myself, and it's like, where is this guy from? Is he from Long Island? Is he from Roanoke? It didn't make any sense. For my second column -- I think was my second column -- Ed Asner was in town for a play, *Born Yesterday*. He was playing the Broderick Crawford role, so I interviewed him on a weekday morning. I met him at his hotel. He's in his bathrobe and he told me to come on in. We were going to Rainbow Kitchen in Homestead. deletion We are going there to, you know, see people down on their luck. I go with him, and then we go to this famous bar then in Homestead called Chiodo's. He's having a vodka on the rocks. I don't drink when I'm working, so I said to him, "You're Lou Grant now. Tell me how to cover the story." And he said, "The story isn't Asner. Asner is not the story. The story is all these other people. That's the story. How did they get here." So, I shared that conversation and thoughts of the patrons of kitchen and it was a good column. I wish that had been my first column.

Risley: It was a good way to introduce yourself.

O'Neill: Yeah, because I said to him, "You know, as much as Woodward and Bernstein, I was influenced by Lou Grant." So that worked out really well.

Risley: Did your editors give you any direction or marching orders in terms of the column?

O'Neill: Angus was very smart. He didn't want thumb-sucking columns, which I didn't want either. He wanted me to go out and talk to people. And there were two things he did in that first few months or so. Once I went down back to Roanoke and I got in a couple of altercations in one night, didn't come to blows, but it wasn't good. It was an interesting homecoming. I wrote what I thought was a pretty funny column about how you can't go home again. I turned it in, and Angus said, "We're not running this. Nobody gives a shit if you went down to Roanoke and had a few drinks. That's not what the people pick up the *Pittsburgh Press* for." So, I wrote something else.

Risley: Do you think he was right?

O'Neill: Yeah, he was right. I argued and said, "Well, you know, I'm introducing --" He goes, "We're not running it!" I mean, I think it would have worked, but even if it was a good column, singularly, it wasn't what I was there for. That's what he was telling me. And then later he would leave little notes on my keyboard. One just said, people, "P-e-o-p-l-e." That's it, that's all it said. I had done a few too many thumb-suckers for his taste. I was writing four columns a week, which is really hard.

Risley: Yeah.

O'Neill: What was the other thing he did? Oh, he called me in one day. My column ran at the bottom of the page, so it was fluid. It could be 800 words, it could be 1000 words, there was room. I guess I got a little long and he called me in one day, and he said, "Your column is growing a lot faster than your readership. Cut it." [laughter]. So that was good advice too. That became what I tell all writers: "Cut the good stuff. Leave the very good stuff. If it's 1,000 words, chances are it could be 850 words."

Risley: That's good advice.

O'Neill: Yeah. I learned how to be an economist with my words.

Risley: What was the *Pittsburgh Press* like when you joined the staff?

O'Neill: It was a lot of fun. It was big -- 550,000 [circulation] on Sunday, 220,000 during the week, maybe. It was the biggest paper in the Scripps Howard chain. It had won a couple of Pulitzer Prizes and would win another one for photography while I was there. We had Rob Rogers, a great cartoonist who

was fresh out of CMU at the time. Robert Bianco was a terrific TV critic and later went on to *USA Today*. We had all these other people, you know, just doing the daily grunt work of journalism, really good stuff, holding the city's feet to the fire, and the hospitals.' too. Good work.

Risley: How would you describe your style, your voice?

O'Neill: I'll say it's conversational. I mean, I wouldn't use this word, but it's been called folksy. I try to tell stories, if I can, like you would if you're sitting next to me in a diner. I'm telling you what the real story is. Here's what's going on in Pittsburgh, here's why you should care about this person, here's this really crazy thing that happened at the ballgame the other night.

Risley: What was your process like for writing a column?

O'Neill: Fear of not making the mortgage payment. [laughter] I used to call it feeding the beast, particularly when I was writing four columns a week. I thought of it as kind of this monster. You know, like, on *The Munsters*. I obviously watched too much TV as a kid. On the *Munsters*, Eddie had this pet, Spot, that lived under the stairs. It would just growl and scream and you would throw it food. And it would be satisfied for, you know, a day. And that's how I thought of my job. You know, you've got to feed the beast. I was like the only person in the world whose favorite day was Monday, because Monday was the one day I didn't have any column due the next day. So, I would come in on Monday and start working on two or three columns, so that I would have, four for the rest of the week. Somehow I did it. I still don't know how.

Risley: You would write a couple columns at the same time?

O'Neill: I would start a couple. But, you know, if I have three hours to write a column, I take three hours. If I have eight, it takes eight hours. You can always make something a little better, I think. Sometimes making the extra phone call. A lot of times, a column is better if they don't return your call [laughter] Because then it, oh man, there is another side to this. Okay. So yeah, you try and get it right.

Risley: What was it like when the *Post-Gazette* and the *Press* merged?

O'Neill: In 1992 I think there were 450 Teamsters working at the Press but delivering both newspapers because of a joint operating agreement, 450 Teamsters delivering the paper, which was too many. I mean a lot these guys could do their jobs in like three hours, and a lot of them -- not all of them -- but a lot of them had second jobs because it was just too easy to do the job. So, Scripps Howard said, "We don't want 450 drivers, we want 150 drivers." Well, there's no union in the world that would say, "Oh, okay. We'll lay off two-thirds of our workforce." So that was the beginning of what should have been



negotiations, but they didn't negotiate, as I saw it from the outside. I was not in a union. The Teamsters walked, and then there was a lockout, so there was no paper. We, the loyal non-union workers of the *Press*, continued to report to work, continued to get paid. It got a little ugly and Scripps Howard was not interested in talking to us when we tried to buy the paper. We had a very serious employee stock ownership plan. We wanted to buy the paper and they wouldn't talk to us. They wouldn't have the first meeting with us. When I say us, I mean like the couple of hundred people in the *Press* newsroom. Scripps Howard decided they wanted this off the books by the end of the year. They sold it and sold the *Press* to the entity that would kill it, the *Post-Gazette*. And the *Post-Gazette*, naturally enough, absorbed the *Press*. They hired more than 100 of us. They had been a six-day a week paper prior to this. So, I went to work for the *Post-Gazette* in January of '93.

Risley: Did it affect your job?

O'Neill: I had the same job I always had. But now, instead of being the only columnist, I was one of four columnists. Peter Leo, Tom Ritz, and Sally Kalson also had a column. I was doing it three days a week. I think I was the only one doing it three days a week, which was nice instead of four. Tom and Peter had a thing where each would do like three one week and two the next. And Sally had, I think, one a week. All of a sudden, I was one of many voices instead of the only voice. But that was okay because I did it in a different way than they did it. I wasn't as political as Sally. Peter was a humorist. And Tom, bless his soul, was a crank. You know, just screaming at the world [laughter]. The angry white man at his desk. They didn't go out, they mostly stayed in the newsroom and wrote, which was fine with me because I did it a different way. Yeah, I did it the Jimmy Breslin and Pete Hamill way.

Risley: So, you felt like writing reporting was a big part of writing your column?

O'Neill: Absolutely, yeah. It's much harder to do a straight humor column. Peter Leo was great, but I have no idea how he did it because it's really hard to sit at your desk and come up with three colorful, funny things a week. And I wouldn't have been able to do it. Occasionally I'd write one from my desk. I'm not going to lie. And people liked those, too. But I think the way to learn a city and teach people about their own city is to get out there and talk to real people.

Risley: What do you think the role is of a local columnist?

O'Neill: I would say it's explaining the world that we live in *now*. I wrote a book based on the work I've done called *The Paris of Appalachia: Pittsburgh in the Twenty-First Century*. It's not a collection of columns, but it's largely based on what I learned came from doing my job. I like to say it's a biography of the city. It's why Pittsburgh is unique in the world, like no other city, in my view.

I guess every city is unique, but Pittsburgh, in particular, is a singular place. You know, when I arrived here, the region was still reeling from the implosion of the steel industry and it was reinventing itself as more of an “eds and meds” kind of city. It was hard, but collectively the stories I wrote were getting at the personality of Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh, alone in the United States of America, is the only metropolitan area that nearly straddles three regions of the country. We’ve got Ohio, right, you know, right down the road where the Midwest begins. We’re officially part of the Northeast, although we’re a six-hour drive from the beach. And the Mason Dixon line is deletion less than an hour’s drive south of us. So, the South, the Midwest, and the Northeast meet in Pittsburgh, which is why Pittsburgh, Pittsburghers, are different from anyone else, I believe. You know, we have the work ethic of the Midwest. We’re friendly like southerners. My brother, when I was trying to get him to move here, he’s a suburban guy, lives on Long Island. This was like thirty years ago. We’re driving in some suburb in the North Hills into a cul-de-sac. He’s here with his wife. I’d found in the paper houses for sale, just to show him what you could get, and we’re driving to one. We’re driving into a cul-de-sac. Some guy is coming the other way. He waves to me. I wave to him. My brother goes, “You know that guy?” “No, he’s just being friendly. “Just being friendly!?! What is this?” He goes, “I’m a human being, you’re a human being. Now I’ve gotta wave to ya? I can’t live here” [laughter]. And he was serious. That was it for him. He did not want to be in a place where, you know, you were saying hello to everyone who walked by. So, we’ve got that from the South, but we can also get in your face like Northeasterners. My role is to tell these stories to Pittsburghers and help them understand where they live.

Risley: What were some favorite subjects or favorite columns that you wrote?

O’Neill: I don’t know what I’d call my favorite. My epic failure over a twenty-year quest was to reduce the size of America’s largest full-time state legislature -- the Pennsylvania General Assembly -- 253 people. I was unsuccessful. They had this kabuki dance where there was a constitutional amendment to shrink the statehouse that passed both houses. But a constitutional amendment has to be approved by each house in consecutive sessions. It passed the Senate a second time. All it had to do was pass the House again. It was going to reduce America’s largest full-time House from 203 members to 153 members, which would still leave us more than, you know, New York, California, Ohio, Michigan. It was still a good-sized legislature. And it was all a sham. The Republicans didn’t need any Democratic votes to pass it, but enough of them bailed when all the Democrats did. So, it didn’t pass.

Risley: That’s a subject you wrote a lot about?

O’Neill: All the time. I mean, like I must have written three or four columns a year for years on this. All the Republicans in western Pennsylvania voted to shrink

the house, all but one. There's nobody in western Pennsylvania now who does not know we have America's largest full-time state legislature, overpaid, bloated, with per diems. It's just a horror show. They got all those people that can't get out of their own way. They don't get the budget done on time. That was my epic failure. But most of the stuff I did was just, you know, singular columns on a particular person. And those are the most fun.

Risley: Are there any people that are memorable?

O'Neill: One got more responses than any column I ever wrote. There's this guy in town, Cyril Wecht, who was the coroner, elected coroner for Allegheny County, and then was later the appointed medical examiner. I like him, but he's really full of himself. Never met a microphone he didn't like. He was running against Jim Roddey to be the county's first chief executive after we switched from the three-commissioner system. Everybody always calls Cyril brilliant. He's not brilliant. He's accomplished. he's very smart. He's a doctor and a lawyer. He's not brilliant. A brilliant guy does not bring in Johnnie Cochran three days before the election. When you're running in a county that's mostly Democratic, that you're going to win, you don't bring in Johnnie Cochran to campaign for you. So, he lost to this guy, Jim Roddey, a Republican. Anyway, somebody wrote a short letter to the editor saying basically that he was glad Jim Roddey was the executive. So, Cyril, on county stationery, writes a letter to this guy, one long run-on sentence. It was a thing of beauty. I mean, it was like over fifty words long. He found the guy's address and send it on county stationery, to this guy at his house. The letter said more or less: "You know, when I'm traveling around the country and giving speeches, meeting important people, nothing makes me feel better than to come back home and read a letter from some insignificant asshole like you." Period.

So, the guy sends me the letter. It's on county stationery, it's Cyril. Here's a column. I call Cyril and, of course, he doesn't respond. So, I write this column. I quote the letter verbatim. I give it the context of Cyril and it runs. Everybody loved this column. I mean, we ran "asshole" in the paper, in quotes, the full quote. Nobody complained. We didn't get one single complaint that I know of about using that letter in the paper [laughter]. People knew Cyril was famous for sending these letters. I said, "Anybody else have any letters? Send them to me." I have this whole file somewhere in my house, of all these letters. It was just crazy stuff. Cyril, of course, feels I've wronged him. He writes me a letter and says, "You couldn't even be elected block leader. I've been elected and reelected, blah, blah, blah." So, there was another column. I'm happy to report that when that column ran -- it was just before Memorial Day -- my neighbors elected me block leader. They got me a sash. I got another column out of that. I mean, Cyril was the gift that kept on giving.

Risley: That's great. Yeah. Did you write any columns that you later regretted?

O'Neill: You know, you sent that question, and I remember this one I regret. I found out that there was a guy in prison, pretty old guy who had like the world's largest four-leaf clover collection. I was able to talk to him on the phone. And he had done something in his youth that was bad, it was terrible. As I recall, he carjacked this couple with their kid in the car. I don't think they were hurt, but it scared them to death. So, he got a long prison sentence. He'd been in there for maybe twenty years or more by the time I was writing about this. I wrote this column after talking to him on the phone. He was nice. He was at this point in his life where he was pretty gentle. His sister had connected me with him. I don't even remember his name. I don't expect he's still alive. In writing the column, I couldn't find the couple, but I felt like I had to say that I didn't approve of what this guy did back when. I called him a loser because clearly, he was a loser. But there was something about the way I did it that seemed unkind, un-Christian. And his sister, who was really sweet and had visited him often, called me and told me how much reading that had hurt her. I regretted it immediately because I didn't have to call him a loser, I didn't have to say that. I tried to find that column because I don't even know exactly what I said, but I regret that. The way I approached it was wrong.

Risley: How did you respond to readers who didn't like what you wrote?

O'Neill: When I was in Roanoke, I did this column. I rode around with a state trooper after a state trooper had been killed in the line of duty. I rode around one night with this state trooper named -- the greatest name -- Gus Necessary. He was a country boy, a good guy. He and I could not have been less alike, but we liked each other, I think immediately. I watched the way he did his job this particular night and not a lot happened. But I was struck by how good he was at his job and all these aspects of the various things he was doing. He said to me, "Well, you know, I give people as much respect as they give me. I open kindly. If I get that in return, that's the way it stays." And he did. Everybody was respectful of the other on this particular night, and he seemed really good at his job. And so, that struck me. That stayed with me: I'm as respectful with people as they are with me. I thought, that's a good way to approach my job too. So, if people write me letters and disagree with me, but aren't jerks about it, I say, "Well, you know, we don't agree. Here's why I disagree. I appreciate the tone of your letter. Thank you for writing." But occasionally they aren't like that. I didn't get to do this often enough, but I did this at least once, maybe more than once: This guy's screaming at me on the phone. I don't know what it was about. I just said to him, I said, "Sir, this next sound you hear is one I expect you hear a lot." And I just hung up the phone. Click. That was fun.

Risley: Where did the term "The Paris of Appalachia" come from?

O'Neill: I did not coin that term. I'd heard it as a put-down. Like, that's the Paris of Appalachia, like the sexiest guy on *The Lawrence Welk Show* or something. But I couldn't figure out why that should be an insult. I mean, I've been to Paris, it's nice. You know, they don't know how to pronounce "Versailles," but it's nice [laughter]. In Greater Pittsburgh, the borough of Versailles is pronounced VER-sales. And Appalachia is a beautiful part of the world. It's just, in the public mind, it's poor and rural. And deletion it's more complicated than that. Yeah, there's there are poor rural parts of Appalachia, but there are also cities. The best I can determine is a guy who does a bluegrass show for the public radio station, Bruce Mountjoy, coined the term, "Paris of Appalachia." The original title of my book was, "I love Pittsburgh Like a Brother, and my Brother Drives Me Nuts," the editor very smartly said, "You know, the book you've written here doesn't fit the title anymore. Your title is here on like page five when you talk about 'The Paris of Appalachia.'" I already had the cover art, and the title fit the cover art very nicely. It worked out.

Risley: And what inspired you to write the book?

O'Neill: Well, my daughters were born in 1998 and 1999. And I took paternity leave for each of them. On one of those paternity leaves, I think it was the first one, my daughter Curran, I thought, well, at this point, I'd been covering Pittsburgh for ten years. I thought it's time to put out a collection of columns, so I went to the editor. I think I wrote him a letter. He called me and said, "We're not doing that." I was like, "But you did it for -- ." "Yeah, that's why we're not doing it." [laughter]. "Look. People don't want to read something they've already read before. We're not doing it!" So I'm about to hang up the phone and he says, "You want to write a book, write a book!" I thought this involved two things I really try to avoid in my off hours: thought and effort. So, I just forgot about it. Then years later, I'm doing a column on this guy, Bob Regan, who wrote a book about the steps of Pittsburgh, the public steps, the city steps. There are 45,000 steps on more than 700 public staircases around the city. And I thought it was a nice little book. He was talking about the book, and I asked who published it. It was this mom-and-pop operation in the neighborhood called Shadyside, The Local History Company. I approached them, and I said my idea would be to have a collection of columns. But now it's been like fifteen years, and I've watched Pittsburgh change over the course of that fifteen years, and I can tell my own story in between the columns and have a narrative that sort of unites the columns. They thought that was a good idea and I turned that in. Then the editor, Cheryl Towers, tells me that though there was a lot of good information in the columns, they are getting in the way of my story. You're going to have to write a book, she said. So, I wrote a long narrative. I had all the reporting, nearly all the reporting done. I went and found what had happened to some of the people I had written about in the past, where they were now, and I wrote a book about basically how far Pittsburgh had come.

Risley: How did the newspaper business change during your career?

O'Neill: Completely, entirely. I was born at the right time. I got to work in newspapers for forty-two years. And I used to joke, "Well, they only have to last until I'm 65." I'm 64. It's awful. We don't know how to make money anymore. And it's funny because when it started happening way back in the 90s, I would take solace in what computers still couldn't do. Jackie Mason had this great bit about, "What are you talking? Computers? They're gonna' have people tellin' me all this information. All the world is on the computer. So what? I get this thing delivered to my house every day. They take all the information. They put it in one nice thing, and I can take it into the toilet if I want."

Risley: That's a good impression.

O'Neill: Yeah, right [laughter]. So, I thought yeah, people aren't going to read online on their computer when you know, it's not portable. Well, then it became portable. And every time I would go into a bar, which was often, somebody else had an answer for what newspapers needed to do. And I always thought, one of these guys is bound to be right eventually. I've heard a thousand different ways newspapers are going to make it. Well, they were all wrong. Craigslist killed us. Newspapers never recovered from that. That big cash cow of classified ads just disappeared.

Risley: Did it affect how you worked?

O'Neill: It didn't. I kept my head down and kept doing my job the same way I always did. There were certain columns that worked better online. I remember when the mayor, Luke Ravenstahl, was at odds with city council. His stance reminded me of this great Groucho Marx scene, in one of the movies, I forget which one, where he'd sing, "Whatever it is, I'm against it!" In an online column, you can link to Groucho Marx doing this bit. So, you know, stuff like that was fun for me, learning how to do that. But it was, it was largely a waste of time, too, because very few people clicked on the link after you found it. Right? So, it became less fun. And I knew we were circling the drain when I started hearing from people, asking me, "Are you still working for the paper?" Yeah, well, obviously, you're not getting the paper. Jeez.

Risley: How did the ownership issues change business?

O'Neill: Well, it didn't help. You know, morale is terrible. And there's, there's no leadership. I mean, I don't want to talk too much about J.R. Block. But he's a very shy person. I mean, like, I worked for the *Post-Gazette* since '93 and I probably didn't have five conversations with him. He doesn't do small talk or banter. He's in his office, he doesn't address people. So, there's no leadership. And what we do get is counterproductive. There are a lot of unforced errors

like firing Rob Rogers as the cartoonist. I didn't see any hope, I didn't see any plan for success.

Risley: You obviously have great affection for Pittsburgh. What is it about the city that you love?

O'Neill: It's just the right size. I had a good childhood and I liked growing up on Long Island. But then when I moved to Virginia, and particularly Roanoke, Virginia, and would go back, I didn't want to live on Long Island. The housing prices were crazy, the traffic was crazy. It wasn't laid back, like Roanoke was, which was more of my personality. But there were all these things I missed about New York. And when I found Pittsburgh, it had all those things, nearly all those things I missed about New York, apart from the beach. You know, it had corner bars, live theater, major universities, major league baseball, major league sports, people who understood that St. Patrick's Day is a holiday [laughter]. And the culture of Pittsburgh is informed by Catholicism in a very big way, Friday fish fries and everything. Whereas the culture of Roanoke, as much as I loved it, is informed by Southern Baptism, which is fine, but it's not my, it's not my core, you know. So, I fit in. I fit Pittsburgh more snugly than I did Roanoke, which I didn't really realize until I left. I mean, I had a good time in Roanoke. It was a really good paper. We've had a lot of people work for that paper when I was there who went on to win the Pulitzer Prize.

Risley: That's great. Is there anything you'd like to add that we didn't discuss?

O'Neill: I hope what I did for a living all these years -- thirty-seven years as a columnist, almost thirty-two in Pittsburgh -- I don't know that anybody's going to be able to do that anymore. It wasn't until blogs were invented that I realized, holy cow, I was writing a blog [laughter]. You know. I looked around and there was this cacophony of voices out there. Yet I don't think people are as well informed as they used to be on local issues. Because though newspapers now can be updating 24/7, the product has lost something. I was complaining about this in one of my favorite bars, Mullaney's Harp and Fiddle in the Strip District. I'm in there one day, and I'm talking about how the millennials forgot, again, to post my column online. Sometimes they would just forget to go online, like the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. I would find out like on a Sunday afternoon. I've read the printed paper and then I go online, and it's not there. So, I call and they say, "Oh, okay, we'll get it on." But I realized that the reason is that they never see a paper. The people putting the website together, for them, it's just this river of stuff coming at them through their phone. You know, there's Facebook, there's Twitter, there's the *Post-Gazette* itself. But it's all mixed up. It's this river of information coming at them. And I was complaining about this to a friend of mine a guy named Marty Kiley, who's just an avid newspaper reader. And he said something like, "Yeah. They're

on a river. I'm on a lake. When I'm in a newspaper, I'm in a lake. I go in, I explore. You know, I go to the sports cove, or I go over here. And when I come out, I know I'm done with it. There's a sense of completion." I'm like, that is exactly it! There's no sense of completion.

Risley: That's a great way to put it.

O'Neill: Yeah. And that's a real loss. And I said in my final column: if you think the government is bad with us watching, wait 'til you see what it's like when we stop. I mean, it's going to be really bad. You can already begin to see it. Stuff that doesn't get covered. And people are going to get away with stuff, and they always have in Harrisburg, but it's going to be happening more and more in local government, not just here in Pittsburgh.

Risley: Great. Thanks so much.

O'Neill: Thank you, Ford.