

Profile in Public Integrity: Addendum

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You began your career as an aerospace engineer. What made you decide to pursue investigative journalism, and how did that take you to the Balkans?

I had been a structural dynamicist for Rockwell Space Systems in the Los Angeles area for about six years. It was a good job but the aerospace industry was shrinking in the 1980s when I started so it was hard to get interesting new projects. I took a night class in investigative reporting at UCLA and then started helping out the instructor, doing video and reporting at night. Back then, after the union crews stopped work at 10:30 PM, roving bands of crazy freelancers would cover the city to shoot footage of car crashes, fires, murder scenes, or other mayhem. If you got good video—flames or bodies on stretchers—you could sell it to local TV stations for the morning news. You could make good money, especially if you were willing to work in neighborhoods like South Central. This was a year before the LA riots, so the city was a little rough. I got caught up in the excitement of the news. Around that time, the *Los Angeles Times* started doing amazing work about Iran Contra. Seeing the *Times* take on the government made me decide I wanted to be a journalist.

I signed up for the masters program in journalism at the University of Missouri and the first day there I went into the offices of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) and volunteered to do anything they needed. I did the same at the Missouri Institute for Computer Assisted Reporting (MICAR). I leveraged my math and computer skills and I was able to get a research fellowship. When IRE took over MICAR and rebranded it the National Institute (NICAR), I became systems director. It was a great gig where I learned a lot and had to help a lot of journalists. When the Associated Press started an investigative team, I went there and later to the *Tennessean* working first as a city hall reporter and then investigative reporter. I spent about eight years as an investigative reporter with about half of it in data journalism.

I was at the *Tennessean* and I got called by my former boss at IRE, Rosemary Armao, to teach data journalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina for IREX, a journalism NGO. It sounded fun and I had never been to Europe, so I went a few times there to teach. It was fascinating. While stories in America were about quality of life, in the Balkans they were about life and death. I couldn't believe the stories I was hearing and nobody was doing them.

When IREX asked me to come back again, I told them I could easily teach local journalists computer-assisted reporting. This was in the pre-Google days of the late 1990s, so I was teaching journalists how the internet worked and how to use early search engines. Most of the journalists had been caught up in the Yugoslav wars and they were just getting around to understanding the uses of the Internet. I sometimes had to start with how to use a mouse. IREX agreed to my plan and asked me to train their trainers for four months. The *Tennessean* balked, so I quit because I wanted to do it. We successfully set up a program and I came back to the US and knew I couldn't go back to the *Tennessean*. Then I decided to try out stand-up comedy which had been a hobby for a few years. After a year on the road (going broke), New York University asked me to come back to the Balkans and train some more. One thing led to another and I ended up working at as a media development specialist with IREX for a couple years.

As the IREX program closed, I pitched an idea for an investigative center in Sarajevo. IREX wasn't interested but the local USAID office liked the idea and the Center for Investigative Reporting in Sarajevo was born. I teamed with Paul Radu, a great Romanian journalist and a real pioneer investigative reporter in Eastern Europe. We founded OCCRP because we understood that organized crime crossed borders but reporters didn't. Our first project won the Global Shining Light award, and we realized, "Wow, this works." So we raised more money and got more and more journalists involved.