

Tiana Headley

As I struggled to decipher Kevin Hayes's words over the phone early 2021, pangs of guilt beat in my chest. We were both confined to our environments, but I was protected by Vassar's campus bubble amid the pandemic. He was incarcerated in the Fishkill Correctional Facility as the coronavirus ran amuck.

These weren't ideal reporting circumstances. Meeting people face-to-face has been a core joy of my local news career in upstate New York. Nonetheless, Mr. Hayes's relentless optimism under a sadistic prison system was palpable from my Jewett dorm.

Distanced connection was a reality I'd accepted for my pandemic life. In fact, I've spent the majority of the last two years confined to some box: The bedroom I shared with my mom when money was too tight for a two-bedroom apartment; My own room once we'd moved to the cheapest place we could find on the edge of Miami; And the Vassar housing I was often too afraid to venture away from for fear of a campus outbreak.

It was from these boxes where traditional community vanished before me. A fallout in March 2020 with some high school friends (who weren't that great anyway) devastated my social life. President Bradley's announcement of a remote spring semester transformed my mother and I's shared room into an unbearable shoebox.

This disruption threw me into fight or flight mode. I'm not sure if this was fight or flight, but I decided that I'd embrace hyper-individualism. In other words, I'd just girlboss my way to graduation, pandemic be damned. In those early corona months I clung to reporting on covid's impact on Vassar. Ironically, this didn't draw me much closer to others. Nonstop writing only distracted me from the despair lurking in the back of my psyche.

My trauma response obscured why I loved journalism in the first place. But reporting on the converging national crises of 2020 helped me to remember. You see, journalism has always been a calling for me, never a "distraction." And as I observed the local reverberations of our pandemic-era revolutions, I was compelled to embed myself within the Hudson Valley communities endeavoring against injustices in their backyards. Thankfully, technology was on my side.

I've struggled back tears over Zoom, interviewing those working toward healing in their communities. I've shared laughter and quip-filled phone calls with those who recounted their anger and disappointment in local government actors.

But not all of these connections came easy. Technology often couldn't replace the nuances of human intimacy that interviews in a park or coffee shop allowed. Journalism's legacy of exploiting marginalized communities also didn't help. During 2020's police reform debates, politicians and law enforcement often overpowered the voices of Black activists and community members. And there I was, coming in to cover the explosive fallout of these debacles, with the extractive history of the press hovering over my head.

When I cold-called people out of necessity, I couldn't be sure of someone's prior experiences with or perceptions of reporters. These first phone calls are where I felt myself negotiating my humanity. How could I prove both my humanity and my pure intentions, when "reporter" has taken on such contentious connotations today? How could I show that despite not living in Warwick, Newburgh, Kingston, or Poughkeepsie city, I'm vested in the issues upending these communities?

Well, saying just that seemed to work. In other words, showing up as myself resonated with people. It's what I think made my conversations with Shawnee Moore, a former NYPD officer, flow so well. As I anticipated, the intersection of Ms. Moore's experiences as a Black woman and former internal affairs officer made for an insightful perspective on police reform in Warwick. It's why I sought out her voice.

I had first contacted Mr. Hayes in my curiosity and concern about pandemic-era prison conditions. Later I would learn that this concern was a blessing in Mr. Hayes's eyes. Our conversations, ranging from racial injustice to the cruelty of prison staff, are a blessing I believe we both shared.

Darwin Johnson, a Black resident of Delaware County, posed a question I've yet to hear from anyone else in my career. "Why are you covering this story?" he asked me on the tail-end of our phone call last spring. He'd just shared his fears over a package of pro-police laws backed by the Delaware Sheriff and condemned by civil rights organizations.

I'll admit that I was taken aback by Mr. Johnson's question. "I appreciate you asking me that," I said in response. Five or so seconds of silence had hung in the air as I further processed my fear that he was skeptical of my intentions. There I was, sitting in the box of my Jewett common room, about a hundred miles east of Delaware County, talking to Mr. Johnson through another box—my phone. Sure, I write for a magazine that covers the Hudson Valley and Catskills as a region. Plenty of newspapers and magazines cover metropolitan areas or whole states. But I had a feeling the scope of my coverage area wasn't the response Mr. Johnson was looking for.

Instinctively I knew this. And the answers came easy to me from there. There was the logistical reason: someone heard about my police reform reporting on the radio, and they wanted me to look into how those debates played out in rural New York. And there was my reason: that this work was my calling.

I can never advocate on behalf of those whose voices I weave into my reporting. But the trust bestowed in my ability to tell others' stories is a kind of belonging I've yet to replicate elsewhere. I'll always cherish it.