

THE SOUNDS OF NARRATIVE

Covering the El Paso immigration beat, KERA radio reporter Mallory Falk gives voice to the voiceless

STORY BY BRIANA CASTANON
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MALLORY FALK

Liquified butter turned rancid by hot summer days. It was a small detail in one of her interviews – two seconds of a four-minute story – but it spoke volumes to KERA radio reporter Mallory Falk.

“She tried lighting scented candles in the trunk, she kept Febreezing it... she had taken all of these measures to try to get the smell out, but nothing was working.”

Falk had interviewed a mom who was at the El Paso Walmart during the August 3, 2019 mass shooting which left 23 dead and 23 injured. The gunman was a white supremacist who drove 10 hours from a Dallas suburb to El Paso to specifically target Mexicans. The store’s parking lot was closed off as a crime scene for a few days, and the woman’s groceries sat in her car, untouched the whole time.

The butter was a detail Falk could not shake, but with less than four minutes of airtime to report on the shooting, it was left out of the story. The fact that it was so hot that day, and that the mom, amid such chaos, had to leave everything behind – the liquified butter was a simple detail that anyone could relate to and imagine.

Falk normally lets go of a story once she files it, but this time she kept going over and over the butter in her head. Later that evening, she discussed that one detail with a coworker, which ended up making it harder to let the butter go.

“I don’t think I’ve had another time where I’ve called an editor back and been like this: ‘I really think we really need to get this in there.’”

In radio every second counts and they count every second. Falk went back

through the final script to see if there was anything non-essential to take out. There was one detail about a girl who was excited to go back to classes – science was her favorite subject. It was a humanizing detail about how this girl was interested in weather. But Falk thought that in a month, no one would remember how much this girl liked the weather, and people would likely remember how this woman Febreezed her car to try to remove the rancid stench of decay.

So, the script was tightened. And with radio, Falk could always add more in the digital version, so the butter detail was added there.

The liquified butter ended up being one of the most commented upon parts of the Walmart shooting story. One listener reached out and paid to detail the woman’s car, just so her family wouldn’t have a constant reminder of one of the worst days of their lives.

Falk is a two-time Edward R. Murrow Regional Award-winner, a radio journalist

aired nationally, and a 2016 USC Annenberg National Health Reporting Fellow. Covering El Paso, she is part of the national Report for America project, a nonprofit whose mission seeks to save local journalism by sponsoring emerging journalists to cover underserved areas of the country. Her radio broadcasts have been featured on All Things Considered, Here & Now, and Texas Standard. Her first RFA assignment brought her to New Mexico where she covered education, healthcare and economic development issues for radio station KRWG. In her second year with RFA, she joined Texas News Hub, an NPR radio collaboration with other public radio journalists around Texas. She is based at KERA in El Paso, and focuses on immigration and border issues.

“When possible, I try to follow stories past the moment they break, after that initial rush of coverage,” she told Report Local, a monthly newsletter published by Report for America. “I also try to report on how national policies and

rhetoric affect people here on the ground, whether that’s college students wondering how they’ll get to class if Trump shuts down the U.S.-Mexico border, or county officials scrambling to house asylum-seekers who’ve just been dropped off by Border Patrol.”

FALK’S INTEREST IN JOURNALISM STARTED with “This American Life” – a podcast recommended to her when she was a high school senior, and the reason she fell in love with radio. The first audio project Falk did was in college with a friend of four years. It was the first time she engaged in active listening. In the course of their hour-long interview, Falk learned things she had never heard before from her close friend.

“That kind of space hadn’t been created for him up until that point. I think that was really the moment of like, oh, there’s something really powerful here, and this is something I’d like to continue doing,” Falk recalls.

That powerful feeling motivated Falk into a radio career. There was something about storytelling with voices and sounds. She loved how intimate audio could be, because the listener focuses on the story’s voices. To these voices are added details of what the subjects are doing, or what is happening in their surroundings. Background tracks also enhance the storytelling, such as children playing or the sounds of nature.

After Falk received her English and American Literatures degree in 2009 from Middlebury College, she worked for Kids Rethink New Orleans Schools, as the communications director of the youth nonprofit. She then pursued a position as an education reporter, but she found herself moving to El Paso for personal reasons, where she started freelancing.

In El Paso, Falk saw a need for immigration reporters, and asked herself how she could help – there were too many stories that needed to be shared and not enough people to help tell them. She decided she wanted to tell these stories through radio. “There’s this huge story here and I know how to do radio. And you know, it felt really critical to step in and report.”

One day, Falk was scrolling through Twitter and saw a tweet about an imminent deadline to apply for Report for America (RFA) from the news station where she freelanced. She had never heard of RFA, but it was an opportunity for a full-time reporting job. After applying, she quickly heard back and got the job. She would eventually become an RFA radio journalist for KERA in El Paso, joining the Texas News Hub, NPR’s first regional journalism hub, which would allow her to connect with other immigration reporters across Texas, also part of the hub. “Sometimes I can’t believe it... if I hadn’t been scrolling on Twitter that day, I might have never

[known about the job],” Falk says.

As an interviewer, Falk is amazed at how people open up on air when telling their personal stories. And with radio, there is not only an emotional closeness but also a physical one. The equipment needs to be directed right at them to have good sound quality. If people are uneasy, Falk has learned to say, “I want to make sure you sound good.” Other times she acknowledges their discomfort by telling them “Yeah, I know. It’s a little weird having a microphone right in your face.” It also helps to remind her sources not to be concerned with their appearance. After all, it’s radio.”

Another important tactic she employs as an interviewer is for her to listen without uttering a sound. Instead she shows her reactions with body language – that and creating a safe space where people feel comfortable being heard.

Falk finds that her most impactful stories are the ones that come after the breaking news. Journalists are quick to arrive at the scene of a breaking news event, but she will often focus on the days after rather than the day of. Going back later to speak with people involved in big events uncovers the stories needing to be told. News stories affect people well beyond their first moments.

When she is normally done with a story, Falk shares it with her family or friends. This is how she gauges what’s important in the story and what’s interesting to listeners. Or not.

She views El Paso as an underrepresented community and wants to humanize its residents so their stories can reach a national audience. “There are these huge stories happening here. I hope to play some small part in shining a light on these issues because other people are flying in and out to tell the breaking news stories. But I’m living here permanently.”

Although Falk has covered the border immigration beat for two years, her passion to report on the underreported keeps growing. While some may tire of the same types of stories, to her, that’s the point. These issues are still real and still happening. They keep needing to be told so change can come from them.

Falk says she empathizes with the immigrant’s struggle because of her Jewish roots. As a child, she would hear stories about how Jews would flee persecution and how many countries would deny them entry when all they wanted was a better life for themselves and their families. She hears similar immigrant stories from the people she interviews and her background informs how she tells them.

The Walmart shooting in El Paso resonated loudly with her, because it was reminiscent of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh where she grew up. Like the Walmart shooting, Falk believes that the tragedy at the synagogue had been motivated by anti-immigrant sentiment.

But not all of Falk’s stories end up tragic. Some even instill her with the hope she needs to keep doing her job. In the fall of 2018, many families were arriving at the U.S./Mexico border, and at the time there was not enough space in the Border Patrol facilities to hold these immigrants so the government just released them from custody. One El Paso nonprofit, Annunciation House, became a temporary shelter for these immigrants.

In the past, the government facility and area non-profits like Annunciation House would coordinate with each other about how many people were being released and when, so that the NGOs could provide aid to them. This time it was different. ICE dropped around 100 people at a Greyhound bus station downtown with no warning. Falk happened to be on her way to Annunciation House when Ruben Garcia, the head of the organization, called Falk to tell her the immigrants were at the bus station. Because she had all of her broadcast equipment with her, she made a U-turn and headed to the station.

Garcia was inside the bus station talking to the families and had managed to find a church within walking distance that would take the immigrants. He also assembled volunteers to meet at the church with free food, blankets, toiletries, and clothes. These families had been in custody for almost a week without being able to bathe or change. But at the church were warm food, juice boxes for the kids, showers, fresh clothing, and blankets. Falk remembers the crowd of people getting off the buses, parents holding babies in their arms and small children not knowing what was going on. Families were everywhere trying to make sense of a chaotic transition.

For Falk, it was powerful to witness these discarded people helped by the El Paso community.

“It was Friday evening – people just came together at the last minute with no advance notice to make sure all these families were fed and clothed, with a safe place to sleep for the night,” Falk says.

An unpredictable night turned into something special.

If Falk could write her own script, she would do more solutions-oriented journalism, explaining how and why certain responses are helping or hurting. News in El Paso, however, can oftentimes be tragic and hard. You can’t ignore it, nor can you soft-peddle it to make it more palatable. But what if she could help find a way to fix it? “I’m thinking about how not to have every story be the story of pain,” she says.

In the meantime, she sees herself continuing her radio stories from El Paso. Continuing to find real stories about real people to shed light on how government policies create real hardships. Continuing to document hope, with her headphones, audio recorder and microphone in hand.



Mallory Falk interviews an asylum seeker sent to wait in Juarez for his date in U.S. immigration court, as part of the Trump administration’s “Remain in Mexico” program. He doesn’t want his identity revealed. The masks and boom pole are COVID safety precautions. (Photo by Paul Ratje)