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TODAY

# Boston Globe Spotlight Team Gives Emerson Students Scoop on Investigative Reporting



Current and former *Boston Globe* Spotlight journalists, left to right, Brendan McCarthy '04, Patricia Wen, Walter Robinson, Stephen

**By Melissa Russell**

What does it take to be a top-notch investigative reporter? A spine of steel and a healthy “sense of moral outrage” to start, according to some of the nation’s top journalists.

Emerson’s student journalists heard from past and present members of the

***Boston Globe Spotlight Team***

**([https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/investigations/spotlight/?p1=BGMenu\\_Sections](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/investigations/spotlight/?p1=BGMenu_Sections))** in a recent panel co-hosted by the Department of Journalism and the New England Society of Professional Journalists.

The *Boston Globe* Spotlight team, founded in 1970, is an award-winning investigative unit with a strong reputation for holding government, companies and powerful people to account. Their ground-breaking stories include child sexual abuse by priests in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, FBI corruption, the Massachusetts housing crisis, substandard care at veterans’ hospitals, Boston’s reputation for poor race relations, and how Aaron Hernandez, star of the New England Patriots,

Kicking off the conversation was **Lu Ann Reeb** (<https://emerson.edu/faculty-staff-directory/lu-ann-reeb>), chair of the Department of Journalism, who introduced the Spotlight team's investigative work uncovering the whereabouts of Boston mobster and FBI informant Whitey Bulger, who had eluded capture and lived in hiding for many years.

"It is remarkable and very real work that they have done, literally world-renowned," she said. "When someone gets a call from the Spotlight team, let's just say, they know why."

Current Spotlight editor **Brendan McCarthy '04** (<https://today.emerson.edu/2021/10/04/pulitzer-prize-winning-alumni-reflect-on-the-value-of-good-storytelling/>), author of *Snitch City*, an account of the clandestine world of informants working with the New Bedford police department, won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for Spotlight's work exposing governmental failure to monitor the country's most dangerous drivers. He said it takes a special type of reporter to do investigative work.

"They are pissed off at things that are wrong, at injustice," he said. "You have



**Emerson Journalism students and members  
of the Spotlight team, past and present.  
Courtesy photo**

### **Look for the ‘muffin choker’**

Walter Robinson led the Spotlight team’s coverage of the Roman Catholic Church clergy sex abuse scandal of the early 2000s, winning a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. He said he is a firm believer in the “muffin choker” — a story that is so shocking or surprising, it makes the reader choke on his or her breakfast muffin.

He has found that the most arresting investigative stories tend to be about failure of government.

“That’s where I almost instinctively want to look for stories. What is the government supposed to do, what are they actually doing, and who gets hurt? Most of our great stories have to do with institutions and failures,” he said.

priest who had been convicted, quickly led to the discover of other priests also charged with sexual abuse of children, Robinson said.

“By the time we started writing, we already knew we had close to 100 priests who had abused children, just in Boston,” he said. “Obviously, it became a national story right away and since has become an international story. We didn’t understand then, when we finished our reporting and did our writing, that it was the dawn of the internet age.”

The story went viral, and the Globe received emails, phone calls, and letters from all over the country and all over the world, from people who had their own stories about priests to tell.

### **Wait for it...**

Stephen Kurkjian, Spotlight editor from 1979 to 1986, and author of *Master Thieves: The Boston Gangsters Who Pulled Off the World's Greatest Art Heist*, was one of the original founders of the investigative team. He said the unique nature of Boston, where much in political circles operates through personal connections, made an investigative team viable and valuable.

not immediately present themselves as big stories, but revealed themselves over time and through investigations.

“It’s not obvious at the outset, but you dig and dig and dig and all of a sudden, this monster of a story presents itself,” he said. “[We ask,] is this going to get people’s attention and does it affect a lot of people? Does it affect a large segment of our society?”

*Boston Globe Magazine* writer Patricia Wen spent seven years as editor of the Spotlight team, where she oversaw a seven-part series on race issues in Boston.

“When you really dig into something, it’s kind of a gamble. You don’t know if it’s going to pan out, or if it will pan out to the depth or impact that you hope it will have,” she said.

“Sometimes there are dead ends that we go down and maybe it doesn’t become a Spotlight story. It might just be a story we can put in the Metro section, but the goal is for it to have high impact,” Wen said.

**Afflicting the comfortable, comforting  
the afflicted**

when it comes to community reporting.

“Our job is to hold people in power accountable, and we do that by asking tough questions and not taking no for an answer,” Robinson said.

The professionals advised Emerson’s aspiring journalists to gain experience, build their portfolios, and be prepared for the legal and ethical complexities of a career in journalism. They encouraged the students to challenge themselves by reporting on communities and beats different from their own backgrounds to broaden their perspectives.

“The best thing I ever did was leave a staff gig at a big newspaper after an internship and [go] to New Orleans,” McCarthy said. “It was right after the [Hurricane Katrina] flood, and I thought it would be the greatest challenge, and it was. It made me a better person and a better journalist. So, feel free to break out of those comfort zones and try something new.”



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