

Audio Transcript
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with Mike Blinder
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[Navigating tragedy and transformation: The Uvalde Leader-News' Craig Garnett](#)

The massacre at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, on May 24, 2022, left an indelible mark on the community, claiming the lives of 19 children and two teachers. The event not only shocked the nation but also profoundly impacted the small town of Uvalde and its local newspaper, the Uvalde Leader-News. Craig Garnett, owner and publisher of the Uvalde Leader-News, shares his experiences during this harrowing time, discusses the challenges and transformations that followed and speaks about the experience of having his team featured in the new ABC News documentary: Print in Black.



0:00:03.9 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884. Serving newspapers, broadcast, digital and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:20.6 Mike Blinder: Warm greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine. As always, we urge those listening on podcast platforms to follow, watching on YouTube. There is a subscribe button below, bell to the right. Please interact with those and you'll get an update each and every time we upload. A new episode of this weekly vodcast series we call E&P Reports and it's always centered on news publishing. A very interesting program today because somber yet insightful. Craig, are those okay for ways to describe where we're gonna be today? I think so. I mean, we're gonna revisit May 24th, 2022 in the town of Uvalde, Texas. Craig Garnett, the owner, publisher of the Uvalde Leader News, welcome to our program.

0:01:11.1 Craig Garnett: Thank you, Mike.

0:01:13.1 MB: Just to give our audience a quick update, although it'd be hard not to know these details, on May 24th, 2022, Robb Elementary School in Uvalde was the seat of an 18-year-old gunman who opened fire, killing 19 children and two teachers. Obviously, this shocked the nation, but most importantly, as far as this episode is concerned, I guess it completely changed a very small community in Texas that, Craig, you are highly invested with. You are the owner and publisher, as I said earlier, of the Uvalde Leader News. You've been there since 1989.

0:01:50.8 MB: Since then, and even before this incident, the news has been highly recognized by state associations and others for its wonderful journalism. You personally received the 2023 Tom and Pat Gish Award for Courage, Integrity, and Tenacity in Rural Journalism for your coverage of the Uvalde school shooting. You've penned a new book that's not out yet. Is that true? It called... It's coming out, It's called Yovani's Darkest Hour. It's gonna be published in October, sir?

0:02:20.4 CG: That's correct. Texas A&M University Press will release it in the latter part of October.

0:02:25.4 MB: And the reason for the timeliness of this interview is just recently, ABC News has released on Hulu a documentary, which I just watched, and I'm warning all that when you do watch it, be prepared to be very, very emotionally affected by, I think, an amazing, just amazing show. And Craig, with your kind permission, we're gonna take a quick break for our commercial. We're going to come back and unpack all of this with you on the backside of this.

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0:04:02.6 MB: All right, Craig, a documentary. It features your staff. It centers on Kimberly Rubio, who I would say is the major character. She is a... Is she still with you? Is she still working at your paper and advertising now?

0:04:23.3 CG: Yes, she's in our advertising department now.

0:04:25.6 MB: At the time, she was your crime reporter, but most unfortunately, she was also the mother of one of the children that lost their life on that day. It also features her husband, Felix, who at the time was an auxiliary sheriff. Am I correct in that?

0:04:43.0 CG: Sheriff's deputy, yes.

0:04:43.4 MB: Yeah. And of course, you as the publisher, Pete Luna, a very interesting character on the program, the GM of your paper, but one who keeps his hands in photojournalism. He's not only your general manager, but he's won awards for his photojournalism, correct?

0:05:01.5 CG: Monster child for multitasking.

0:05:02.0 MB: Yeah. Megan Garcia, your managing editor, Julia Keeble, your crime reporter, Norma Ybarra, your classified manager, and James Voltz, your sports editor. This is a very small team, but I pretty much cover them. Craig, first of all, before we unpack this, how did this happen? Did ABC approach you? Did you suggest it to them? How did this documentary get started?

0:05:27.7 CG: Yeah, so one of the producers was here covering the tragedy. She happened to have Eovaldi Roots, and we knew her. In fact, she dated my son at one point, Megan Street, and she came to me a month after the attack and suggested that they wanted to leverage our knowledge of the community to improve their reporting, and that they intended to stay for a year in Eovaldi to complete a series of features called Eovaldi 365. My initial response was skeptical, of course. I said we'd think it over. A month later, another ABC producer met with us by the name of James Hill, and we sort of tentatively agreed to discuss it in detail, and within the next two or three weeks, we had sort of settled on a route that we would pursue to do it, and it involved them embedding with us a photographer whose name is Andy Fredericks. He's a veteran documentarian, and he and Megan essentially were at our side for the next year.

0:06:47.3 MB: I watch this documentary and I saw six separate documentaries at once. Maybe you disagree with me. The beginning, it starts off, which I love with the delivery of your local paper, someone just driving it to the local stores and that's how it ends, which is fascinating. So it, wraps itself around the power of local journalism, the necessity of it. And you kind of kick it off that way by talking about how many, and I think there was actually graphics on the screen of how many small towns have lost their voices over the, creating news deserts. Or in today's world, we even have ghost papers if you wanna use another euphemism. And I think it's a fascinating story of what the impact and the necessity of a local journalism is. But then it goes in so many different directions. It's also a personal story of Kimberly and her tragedy and her evolution. It also is a story

about a fracturing of a community. Do you agree? Because it's...

0:07:41.9 CG: Yeah, it's multifaceted.

0:07:43.2 MB: I mean, 'cause there's a fracturing in your town actually. And we're gonna get into that where it seems like half your community just wanted to put this in the past and half wanted to keep, finding an answer and keep using this as a way to make change, especially in gun control. And then there was this part in there that I wanna start to focus on with my first question. It was almost like revisiting, and I don't know if you're familiar with Thoma's Wolf Wolf's book from way back in the '80s. They actually just did a remake of it as a spinoff show, but a bonfire of the vanities. You know what I mean? Where the media just takes a story and just goes nuts with it to make it flame up. And one of your employees actually said at the time of the tragedy media from all over the world was inundating you like, and, may I use this as used car salesman. They were coming at you just trying to sell you and giving you, having you give them their... Your stuff. Is this what went on instantly at the time?

0:08:42.9 CG: Yeah. There was a just an onslaught of news entities calling, showing up, got walking in the front door. They wanted, primarily in the beginning, they wanted the images that Pete had taken. 'cause He was the only journalist at Rob for the first hour. And we were sort of, off ballot about that because we didn't know what to do with those images. I mean, we didn't have any kind of publishing rights available, any kind of, document that we could follow up. So we wrestled with that and we decided simply to give them to the 30 or 40 top or most qualified news outlets in the nation at no charge. Our feeling was that it would be a disservice to the families for us to look like we're trying to make money out of this tragedy. So that was the first sort of serious decision we had to make about how much to share and what to share. But...

0:09:40.7 MB: Let me ask your opinion on all this because, we've had many people on this show from some of the top networks down to small town journalism. The problem in today's world is, is people equate local journalism or journalism in general, media in general with CNN, MSNBC and Fox News. You're not CNN, you're not MSNBC, you're Fox News. You are that final check on power in a small community. You're that voice, I know I'm going off and, like, the Scripps logo, that spotlight that tries to get into corners. You serve a community. How did your community feel about all these, this onslaught of reporters that just embedded themselves in there? What was the reaction first?

0:10:26.5 CG: Well, there were different reactions of course, because many were off put by it. The families of victims and survivors were bowled over in some cases by people simply showing up at the door and knocking and coming in, even if they weren't invited. That happened.

0:10:42.0 MB: Chasing that headline. Yeah.

0:10:44.0 CG: Chasing the headline. And then there were the funerals where they lined up outside of the church and one of the funeral homes asked the fire department to park their emergency vehicles between the church and the reporters. So they couldn't film all of this, and then they tried to follow them to the cemetery. So there was that aspect of it. But there was another aspect which was some of these families, including Kimberly, embraced the opportunity to use those media

people's voice or cameras as a megaphone. Kimberly invited ABC to follow her very soon after the tragedy. And that was part of the reason that we also joined because of her commitment. And she said, "I'm going to speak to the national press at every opportunity because that's Lexi's voice."

0:11:35.4 MB: It was fascinating to watch the cameras be allowed to be in Kimberly's life.

0:11:40.6 CG: Yes.

0:11:41.4 MB: And be inside her family like that. Is that who she is? Is she someone who...

0:11:46.6 CG: She was never that comfortable.

0:11:51.6 MB: In the spotlight before.

0:11:52.6 CG: She went to work for us as a journalist when she was 21.

0:11:55.2 MB: Right.

0:11:55.9 CG: And she didn't have a college degree. And she created this persona who was an incredibly great journalist, won lots of awards, but she was not the one who would go and search herself in front of a camera. That was not Kim. That was her speaking for Lexi.

0:12:14.0 MB: Through Lexi.

0:12:15.2 CG: Yeah.

0:12:16.2 MB: Lexi the daughter. And the tattoo that she got her daughter. On her arm. Were you actually during the, during the documentary, you see Kimberly actually get her college degree. And then she comes back to your office and takes on a sales role.

0:12:33.1 CG: Yeah.

0:12:33.9 MB: And she wasn't a salesman before, but now, and she ran for mayor. Is that true?

0:12:38.3 CG: Yeah, she ran for mayor. I mean, she was a transformation of this young woman. And if you hear her speak, she's so articulate and bright. And she's...

0:12:46.5 MB: Now you've got a community though that eventually, I mean, you're Texas. I mean, you're [laughter] gun capital of the world. And, Kimberly has become, a massive voice now for gun control. She's going to what, the cameras follow her to Washington DC Right. Where she's doing lobbying to try to get rid of assault weapons. So I have that correct. How does your town feel on this issue now? Is it still very polarized?

0:13:16.5 CG: Therein lies the division, after the town doesn't like this advocacy. They don't agree with it. They think we dwell on it too much. And Another half is more in tune with what she's trying to do. They say that people can't appreciate tragedy unless they experience themselves. And



we've learned that in spades, that you can't convince somebody to be empathetic and sorrowful for these families or any others, victims of gun violence unless they somehow been connected with it personally.

0:13:58.4 MB: You have a challenge now in your community because of course you wanna be the unfettered independent voice. But of course, the story was embedded in your newsroom with Kimberly. And of course Kimberly was family to you, and you see that in the documentary. You were all very tight, very close. I mean, you all knew the family and you all shared this sorrow together. How has it impacted your, and I gotta speak as a publisher, a fellow publisher. How does it impacted your brand in the community? Are you, have you lost advertisers? Have you lost readers? How's the brand doing? If I may ask, sir.

0:14:45.4 CG: We've not lost advertisers that I'm aware of. And may be that some simply melted away because lineage doesn't exactly go up every day.

0:14:54.4 MB: I know, of course.

0:14:55.8 CG: [laughter] So, and nor does circulation increase on a weekly basis. But people have tended to be respectful, I think. They have not been very vocal or even written letters that castigated us for our positions on things. It's there though. We know it's there. The other day I wrote, I write commentary quite frequently, and I wrote something and my wife said she ran into a person who said, "I'm so glad Craig could still write about something other than Rob."

0:15:26.9 MB: Yeah.

0:15:27.1 CG: So that's the underlying sentiment of a lot of people.

0:15:33.8 MB: All right. So you're a publisher like many with the challenges of today's world with advertising moving more digital to Google and Facebook, people seeking out social media more and less seeking the power of the press, if I may use that term. You've had to cut back on your print frequency recently, is that correct, sir? And how is the operation going financially? How do you feel about, okay, lemme just say it straight out. How do you feel about the future of being in your chair today, serving a small community as its independent voice?

0:16:16.8 CG: Yeah. Mike, obviously it's a struggle, but I'm extremely optimistic. We have two Gen X interns with us this summer.

0:16:28.1 MB: Good for you.

0:16:29.3 CG: One is two times earlier, she's a student at Dartmouth and on their reporting team, really wonderful young woman. She created a podcast for us that's now being reached in 23 states. So, and they come to work and the other young lady, her name is Lisandra Gonzalez, the other one's Ariana Diaz and Ariana goes to New York University. And so, to have that kind of enthusiasm in your newsroom with young people who are very bright and very excited to engage in journalism, it gives me so much hope. And we have an RFA reporter named Sophie Zema who came to us from the University of Missouri. She is so... It's like somebody shook her up in a test tube about rest of

you. She's incredible. And guess what beats we gave her? We gave her the crime beat.

0:17:21.2 MB: Gave her crime.

0:17:22.2 CG: And the education beat the two hardest beats in the city after all. And she...

0:17:26.9 MB: For those that don't know the acronym, you said, if I just may say RFA Report for America, where they embedded those journalists so you've got her covering crime. That's fascinating.

0:17:37.4 CG: Yeah. So I'm absolutely upbeat about what journalism will do. And our content is incredibly good. These people are amazing. And it how we package it that we have to discover.

0:17:51.0 MB: Let's discuss that packaging now. I mean, during the, when I was watching you in the documentary being you, a lot of it was focusing on getting the pages out, getting the pages out, the print, the print, the print. But you must have been shoveling some of this news on the website instantly. Correct. Getting it in your email blasts. I mean, where are you at today between being having the latest breaking headlines digitally and then summing up the week in your weekly pub? Is that where you're at right now?

0:18:25.0 CG: We went to school on Rob National Media, overnight we became 24/7. 'Cause That's what we're up against. So much of our content goes right to our website now, breaking news. We don't wait with the Sunday edition. We also started a daily update, which is a digestsive news of the day. Extremely popular. We've got thousands of email subscribers there. So it's like having our own daily paper. So yeah, we've been transformed by it.

0:18:58.4 MB: All right. So let me ask you this. I mean, obviously we've featured you in a piece in our magazine just now. Gretchen Peg, one of our associate editor did a wonderful piece on this.

0:19:14.4 CG: He did.

0:19:14.8 MB: You're now getting national coverage with the release of the documentary, got a book coming out. What's it been like for you personally? Has the world been calling you? Are you getting, are you interacting now with Pulitzer Prize winners? I mean, what kind of interaction are you getting as far as the journalism industry today?

0:19:37.9 CG: Well, my life would bore you to death. I'm not speaking to bullet of private leaders or anybody else. I'm speaking to you, and I'm very grateful for that. So nobody's knocking on my door. The documentary has been out there for a while and we haven't received that much feedback, honestly. The book, we'll see about the book, but I'm, the book is just a record. I felt like this tragedy deserved a permanent record, some kind.

0:20:06.8 MB: That's amazing. The documentary is called Print It Black, and I should have led with that. Now I'll, and we show it on the website and we have a copy thanks to you of that amazing front page. You were against it, weren't you? I saw that in Doctor, not Against It, but Your mind, you, I heard you say to your team, "Wait a second, that's not our job. Our job is to get the news on

the front page." And your team convinced you to put out in the next edition a complete black front page, correct?

0:20:37.5 CG: That's correct. Yeah. I mean, it went against my instincts to use our best journalism. But at the end of the day, after it was published and was so widely embraced, I thought these guys were absolutely right.

0:20:53.0 MB: Unbelievable. I mean, you said it in this interview. And I wonder, this whole thing really turned you guys into a whole new operation, didn't it?

0:21:04.4 CG: You know it, and I said this because we were so close before, and had we not been that close, we would've fallen apart.

0:21:12.8 MB: Right.

0:21:14.8 CG: And it made us, we got a real education. I mean, we've been to investigative reporter and editor seminars. We got an, our assistant editors going to a radical rural seminar in New Hampshire.

0:21:28.2 MB: Oh, it's great event. Yeah.

0:21:29.9 CG: So we've got all this exposure to the real way to do investigative journalism and the way to be a more professional team. We were great before, but we're better now.

0:21:42.4 MB: We're gonna leave it at that. The documentary is called Print It Black. It's on Hulu. I urge, pray that everyone watch it because it's just a, it's a symphony of so many different parts that come together brilliantly. Amazing production. And we're all gonna look in October for your books. Matter of fact, I'm gonna have you back on the show if I can, when the book comes out, so we can help you sell a few copies.

0:22:05.6 CG: I'm glad if you do that.

0:22:07.2 MB: And our guest today has been Craig Garnett, the owner and publisher of the Uvalde Leader News. Craig, thanks for your time today.

0:22:14.0 CG: I'm very grateful Mike