When Writing Becomes High Stakes: A Grassroots Literate Activity Interview

Laurel Krapivkin and Randy Hasper

In this interview, Laurel Krapivkin interviews her father, Randy Hasper, about his time writing for the *San Diego Reader*. Specifically, Laurel asks Randy about his writing practices and the genres he became familiar with while working for the *Reader*. After, Laurel reflects on the interview and her own experiences with the places her father wrote about.

LAUREL: Hey, Randy, how are you doing?

RANDY: Laurel, I'm good.

LAUREL: Good, well thanks for agreeing to let me interview you. So, just go ahead and introduce yourself. Maybe say what you do. And we'll go on from there.

RANDY: Yeah, I'm Randy Hasper, and I'm a teacher and a writer. I understand we're going to talk about an article I wrote for the *San Diego Reader*.

LAUREL: Yes, I'm interested in hearing more about the specific kind of literate activities that you engaged in surrounding your publication of the article for the *Reader*. So, just tell us about the article in a nutshell, and then tell us about the *Reader* as a publication.

RANDY: Okay, so the *San Diego Reader* is a local San Diego magazine that comes out weekly and features articles on the history and culture of San Diego as well as other items of interest. I published an article called "The

Last Developer Gets the Park," which is about the Sweetwater salt marsh, in the city of Chula Vista, just south of San Diego. The salt marsh has been damaged by development, and there's one little tiny piece of marsh left in the San Diego Bay. I wrote the article about the need to protect that bit of marsh as the rest of the waterfront gets developed along San Diego Bay.

LAUREL: Great, so what genre would you say was produced—like, what genre was that article? I mean, obviously it was a *Reader* article . . .

RANDY: Yeah, a feature article in the *Reader*. I'd say it was an exposé, expository writing, and research writing. I was definitely arguing for a specific point of view.

LAUREL: I'm interested in hearing about some of the physical tools that you used as you were writing the article. What did you use those physical tools for?

RANDY: OK. One is transportation; I drove to the marsh to walk as a researcher and also to interview businesses down there. I used a computer to do research, and I used pen-and-paper to record interview information.

LAUREL: Can you talk a little bit, too, about what specific tool you'd say was most powerful in your activity and why?

RANDY: Yes—without a doubt the computer. I needed to research the history of the bayfront, the Sweetwater salt marsh, writings from a biologist at San Diego State named Joyce Zedler, what the government had decided about the area, the coastal commission—it's a National Wildlife Refuge and I had to research things about that, about zoning laws, about a power plant that is sitting right on the bay there that was run by a local power company. So, by far, the computer was my access to all kinds of valuable factual information that helped me write the article.

LAUREL: So obviously you did quite a lot of research to write the piece. Did you know going into the article that you needed to complete the research before you began it, or did different needs for research evolve as you went through that writing?

RANDY: It definitely evolved. My interest in the area started by just walking the salt marsh, looking at the egrets, ducks, crabs, and all the fun creatures that were down there. And that interest evolved into, like . . . *Well, I wonder about the history of this area.* So I just did personal fun research on Gunpowder Point. There's a gunpowder plant out there built in World War I—just fascinating stuff! There are remnants of that as well as the nature interpretive center that eventually got located on the bay there. So, I just researched out

of my own interest for a while. And then suddenly, I thought, *sheesh, this is worth an article*. I'm a writer, so why don't I do a piece on the salt marsh, the coming development, and the power plant that needs to be torn down? I just felt the marsh had this history of being damaged by industrial use and extremely undervalued, so I actually got up to my eyeballs in technical information. It got to be more than I bargained for. That was the one hard part. So I decided I needed to keep writing.

LAUREL: Would you say that the part of the activity that was tangled, troublesome, difficult, or negative was that it started as something you loved and then it became sort of a chore?

RANDY: Yeah—and writing gets that way, you know; it's a recursive process, where you're going back over it again and again. And once I got the idea that I could submit it for publication to the *Reader*, then I realized that it was going to be a feature article and needed to be factual and correct. We're talking about impact on businesses, the government, and local citizens. People are going to read this. So once I realized that it had an audience with some expertise, then it became more difficult because—like: ahhh, I got to get this all right. It's a little tedious at the end of the process, but still, I was passionate enough about it that I just pushed through that phase because that's what writing is, it's hard work.

LAUREL: So when received the news that the *Reader* had accepted it, you worked with an editor. Who had the most control over the writing activity, or maybe the editing of the article? And why do you think so?

RANDY: I was surprised that they picked it up. I sent the query in and a couple of weeks later, pretty quickly, I got a response that they wanted to publish it as a feature article. I was kind of blown away. Mom and I were traveling in Europe and I was like, "Oh sheesh, I got to get back to these people." So they did a fact check with some people who worked with the *Reader*, and then they sent me a draft with some correction, but they weren't really corrections of fact. I was really happy that I had gotten the facts right. It was more just grammatical stuff, spelling, punctuation, so they didn't really alter the article at all. I've had other editors that, you know, eat your stuff up—make it the size they want or change it because they want to put their perspective in or something. But in this case, I felt like I was in control and they really respected my research and my point of view.

LAUREL: Describe the primary goals of writing this article and whether or not you think they were achieved.

RANDY: So, one of my goals was just personal. I have a fascination with the Sweetwater salt marsh and its development, and I felt like it had been

neglected. So in a sense, I feel like I found my voice, and it went out to San Diego, and there were responses to the article—online writers writing in and some disagreeing, some agreeing. Because I was trying to balance the points of view of business and environmentalists.

LAUREL: And those were comments online?

RANDY: Comments online came back, and it was kind of rewarding to see that people read it—not as many comments as I wanted, but people responded, and that was satisfying to me. The fact that it just went out there to San Diego as a feature article in a magazine a lot of people read—that was satisfying. I hoped for a political consequence. I hoped that the San Diego City Council or the mayor or something would pick it up and they would go, "As we develop a master plan for Chula Vista, we're going to really take into account some of the things this article argues for—for example, not doing what San Diego did to their bayfront." Just putting a bunch of rock walls up, put daikondra and palm trees, making it look like some pseudo-Hawaii—you know. My point was: let's have walking paths that go along the edge of the marsh and natural plants there—and keep the egrets in the mudflats. People don't realize the mudflats are beautiful, but they are. So, you know, fish the shopping carts out of the mudflats and leave them be. Have people walk there, ride bikes along, and don't alter the natural landscape. But I don't really know that this happened. Chula Vista developed a massive masterplan and then, just this year (which is a number of years after the article was published), they initiated development of the Bayfront and they did take down the power plant, which I had argued for (it was a massive, horrible, ugly industrial structure), but I don't know that the article caused them to take it down. Now, they are developing a giant retail space, convention center, condos, hotel rooms, restaurants, shopping, as well as bike paths and walking paths—and I think it's going to be beautiful. They're honoring the marsh, and they're staying away from creating a buffer between the marsh and the development. But I don't know that my article actually influenced them, and I don't know in the end whether they'll really get it right. In other words, I don't know that they'll really honor the national wildlife refuge there by preserving what you might call the transition zone between nature and civilization. Can we get that transition zone right where you are respectful of the ecology but you let people have access to it? That remains to be seen. I think the buildout will take time and is going to cost billions of dollars over the next twenty years. And I'm not confident that they'll get it all right. So in that sense, I don't know that I really had any impact on the decisions that were made.

LAUREL: Did you learn anything from writing the article? And then, this may be kind of a strange question, but if the answer is yes, how do you know that you learned that?

RANDY: Well, I learned that I love to write about things I'm interested in: nature and ecology. I think though it was a little bit of a downer to me too and maybe suppress me a little bit to realize that when you want to have a voice and say something, you can get printed and still it doesn't necessarily mean that you will influence things. The print media has power, but it doesn't have as much power as sometimes we want it to. Literature is ephemeral—particularly articles that get published in journals like that, and it just passes off the scene. Voices need to be heard, but, unfortunately, they don't always have a lasting impact. And maybe it's a little disillusioning to see you can do a lot of research, you could write a good article, it could get some press, but it could maybe not make an immediate difference in the world. I haven't given up on trying to make a difference in people's lives and communities. But if the article had more impact, I think it would've inspired me to do more like it. Yeah. I'm still writing. I haven't given up on that, and I still have a voice.

LAUREL: The last question I have for you is: was there any knowledge or were there any skills you gained through this activity that could be useful in some other kind of writing or literate activity? Not necessarily writing another article but, you know, writing in a different genre?

RANDY: Yeah, I think so. I think the article had an artistic voice. And I was able to blend factual content with my own narrative. I talked about kayaking on the bay with my wife—seeing turtles there and watching the egrets—and I felt like that blend of my own experience, my passion and voice gave artistic expression to the article. It was well written—factual,yes, but also interesting. I felt blending that with scientific factual information was possible and they kind of came together in a way that I really liked. And I think that we can cross and mix genres sometimes. You can write about something factual and yet it can be artistic.

LAUREL: Yeah, the hybridity of genres. If I think about it, around that time is when you started your own blog. Or maybe you had it going before, but you definitely have embraced the more artistic style of writing in your blogging. I wonder if the article was in some ways a catalyst or if you transferred those skills over to your blog.

RANDY: Well, that's true. I developed three blogs in the couple years after that, which I still keep active. Those are very creative artistic blogs writing soliloquies and proverbs and interesting life perspectives and comments and essays. I've actually moved more towards trying to express my own voice and

give artistic expression to my passions. I haven't really taken up the technical side of the writing. In fact, I published some other articles on leadership, that were more technical, and I'm not very satisfied with them. I'm way more happy with my blog. I don't really want to write how-to stuff, and I don't really want to write expository things for newspapers and magazines. It just doesn't drive me. But artistic expression of the same ideals like valuing nature or art, yeah. That's way more interesting to me and I'm more passionate about that than doing technical stuff. That is interesting, I haven't thought about that, but yeah. I've moved toward the more personal artistic creative side of myself.

LAUREL: Yeah, the more narrative-centered voice. Well, thank you so much for answering my questions and sharing about your article. I really appreciate it!

RANDY: You're welcome, Laurel. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

Reflection – Laurel Krapivkin

My dad's article about the San Diego South Bay marshlands came out in 2010 in *The San Diego Reader*, a well-distributed local publication. When I moved to Illinois from California last year and was Marie-Kondo-ing my belongings, I came across one of the many copies I had tucked away between some books on my shelf. In a packing frenzy, I was on a mission to only save items that brought me joy in hopes of saving room in our moving van that would take us 2000 miles away from home. The article made the cut.

Home is a powerful anchor, and my family has called San Diego home for the past forty or so years. My parents met in the city, and it was the only place I had ever lived before moving myself, my spouse, a cat, and a houseplant to Illinois for graduate school. I cannot imagine my parents living anywhere but the sun-soaked city of San Diego, the beaches and mountains equidistant from their house in the suburbs of Chula Vista, just seven miles north of the Mexico/U.S. border.

Ever since I was little, my dad has had a fascination with the Sweetwater salt marsh, a splotch of wetlands running along the 805 freeway. He used to tell us fictional bedtime stories he imagined about the flora and fauna that lived there—Musica and Melodia, the two baby mockingbirds that nested in the trees above the marsh, Professors Cabbage White and Swallowtail, leading their classes of young butterflies in field studies, the milkweed plants that decided they wanted to fly—and did. We regularly visited the Nature Center off E Street, an interpretive center committed to the preservation

of marsh animals like the elusive light-footed clapper rails. Each visit, we tickled the stingrays and paid our respects to the mouse-in-the-bread-house. I marveled that my dad could name every butterfly species in the cases. He was our eco-tour guide, and his love of the marsh, and all of nature, was contagious.

It makes sense, then, years after we were grown and out of the house, that my dad decided to write an investigative article on the development of the San Diego Bayfront—a territory battle between conservationists and developers with his beloved marsh caught in the middle. My dad is a "words person"; he has a graduate degree in English and has written and published articles since before I can remember. But this was a project that asked him to put on a journalist hat to interview, research and fact-check, and to juggle statements from both the developers and the marsh-lovers. When the *Reader* accepted it for publication, it was an affirmation of his love of both nature and words, coming together in public print.

This year, nine years after the article was published, I chose to interview my dad about his writing process for the *Reader* article. He talked about the sorts of activities that he engaged while working on the piece—driving to the marsh and walking among the egrets and ducks and crabs, interviewing developers, taking notes on his laptop, and then sorting through the information to try and craft it into something publishable.

But the part that stuck with me most from our conversation was when my dad talked about how this project that started out from something he loved doing—walking the salt marsh—became tedious once he realized that it needed to be factual and correct because it had the potential to actually impact policy around the development of the bayfront. Local business, the government, and local citizens (with voting rights) were going to read this. Once he realized he had an audience with some expertise, it put this pressure on him to "get it right." The stakes were higher. This was now about more than egrets and crabs; this was about people's jobs, taxes, big money, and ethics.

What I love most about the interview—and the article—is that clearly my dad didn't stop writing when it became high stakes, when the *Reader* accepted his proposal and he had to actually write the thing. It became a labor of love, because his initial motivation—his love for and fascination with the mockingbirds, butterflies, and Light-Footed Clapper Rails—was powerful enough to keep him going. And I love this because it affirms something about the writing process that I can never seem to remember when I sit down to writer's block: that writing is complicated and hard. Sometimes you set out to write something you think will be simple (egrets! crabs!) and then it

morphs into something more complex, more high-stakes (developers! billions of dollars!).

But the interview also shows that motivations matter. Writing is already hard, so why write about stuff that doesn't matter to you? That sounds obvious, but it's a good reminder to me—as a writer, and especially as a teacher of composition. I know my students have more momentum in their writing projects when they get to choose what they write about, whether that's transistors, nail art, or their favorite vloggers.

The interview also allowed me to interact with my dad in a new was. We met as two writers talking about writing rather than our usual routine—me calling him up to ask about how to change my car filters, or the everyday language of our family talk ("How's mom? How's the cat?"). I've inherited my dad's love of language— and nature too. It was nice to be reminded, me sitting in my house in Illinois, 2000 miles away from home—of the similarities that still bind us together.

Further Reading

Link to Randy's article: https://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2010/dec/15/cover-chula-vista-power-plant-green/#

Link to updates on the South Bay bayfront: https://www.portofsandiego.org/projects/chula-vista-bayfront

Laurel Krapivkin is a third year PhD student in Children's Literature at ISU. In her free time, she loves to cook with her spouse, cuddle her cat, and hike with her dog.

Randy Hasper is recently retired and spends his days enjoying the San Diego sun, working in his yard, and writing on his blog.