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# PRECIOUS LIVES

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TELLING MILWAUKEE'S STORIES OF  
YOUTH GUN VIOLENCE FOR REAL SOCIAL IMPACT

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*Local That Works: Public Radio Case Study No. 3*

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## LOCAL THAT WORKS

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The premise of these four case studies, prepared for the Eastern Region Public Media [PUBLIC RADIO SUPER-REGIONAL CONFERENCE](#) (Oct. 25–27, 2016): stations need and want to be “more local.” The evidence we have collected suggests they will succeed in doing so by filling gaps in local news coverage and playing a larger role in the daily life of their communities.

It is safe to assume that all stations would do more of this—except for the fact that “being local” takes a good deal of money and staff. In an era of declining tax support, rural and small-market stations are getting squeezed. Through no fault of their own, their long-term prospects are being eroded by a combination of forces, including the inherent financial limits of a small local audience and small local economies; increasing ease of access to national program material; and increasing costs associated with multiplatform service.

This is not a new problem. The “large/small” divide has permeated system politics. Meanwhile, the growing “capacity gap” between smaller and larger stations—in membership, staffing and digital tools—has been well documented by the [PUBLIC MEDIA FUTURES FORUM](#).

If public broadcasting is to retain its [NEAR-UNIVERSAL REACH](#), the system will have to develop ways to sustain the service of small-market, especially rural, stations, and find ways to empower them to be both sustainable and more local.

The [LOCAL THAT WORKS](#) project involved three elements. We were looking for locally managed activities with

- (1) wide applicability across a range of small and large stations,
- (2) repeatability—meaning a program, feature or engagement effort could be reapplied over and over with continuing value—and
- (3) content or service output that could be delivered across several media platforms.

The case studies in this series look at local stations that meet these criteria. All have found ways to [THRIVE AND CONNECT](#) with their audiences in new and innovative ways despite trying market conditions.

## INTRODUCTION

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**PRECIOUS LIVES** is a multiplatform civic engagement project that examines the crisis of gun violence among young people in the Milwaukee area. The first **PRECIOUS LIVES** radio broadcast segment aired in January 2015, and the last will air in December 2016.

Over its two-year life, **PRECIOUS LIVES** aspires to create real social impact by “opening conversations” between individuals, organizations and community constituencies. Partners include WUWM-FM, the public radio station at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; WNOV-AM, a black community-oriented commercial station featuring talk shows and music; the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*; and the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism.

As its website describes, the **PRECIOUS LIVES** project seeks to tell stories that are “engaging, intimate and illuminating—giving voice to many people not represented in mainstream media, creating sustained attention to this persistent problem and showcasing solutions many in our community don’t know about.”

## THE BACKSTORY

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Brad Lichtenstein is the founder and president of 371 Productions and executive producer of **PRECIOUS LIVES**. He was moved by the Newtown, Conn., mass school shooting in December 2012—in which, as he describes it, a lot of kids were killed all at once—to want to tell the story of youth gun-violence killings in Milwaukee—in which a lot of kids are killed, overwhelmingly African-American, but “in slow motion,” one or two at a time. After hearing the WNYC audio program “In Harm’s Way: Remembering the Life of Xavier Granville,” on the death of a 17-year old boy in Queens, NY, who was accidentally shot and killed in December 2013, he was inspired to go at realizing that storytelling goal via production and distribution of an extended series of “character-driven” audio shows. This radio series would be coupled with an in-depth community engagement effort.

In January 2013, Lichtenstein began calling potential funders and collaboration partners. In particular, he called the Helen Bader Foundation (who had already funded a number of his projects, and in fact had lured him to Milwaukee from New York City) to pitch the project and got a preliminary vote of support. He then approached Eric Von—an African-American radio show host and a friend, who was enthusiastic about the idea. WAMU-FM GM Dave Edwards gave him a strong vote of support for the concept and a commitment for WUWM to broadcast the shows. Key people at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* also voiced their support.

With this base established, in spring 2013 Lichtenstein began the formal funding application process and early stages of project development. Well ahead of receiving grant dollars, he hired a community engagement director to identify Milwaukee's ongoing programs around the issue of gun violence and youth.

On the audio series distribution side, he enlisted WUWM-FM early on. He then was able to enlist WNOV, which—though it asked that [PRECIOUS LIVES](#) pay for the airtime for the show—was an opening Lichtenstein saw as essential for reaching the African-American community. Lichtenstein also approached Wisconsin Public Radio, but given his near-exclusive Milwaukee focus, discussion of statewide distribution ended quickly. They found multiple organizations and websites willing to make podcasts of the episodes available for download or streaming. In print, he enlisted the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and, for in-depth digging, the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism (WCIJ).

From the start, Lichtenstein envisioned [PRECIOUS LIVES](#) as both a media project and an effort to drive strategic change on a critical community issue. He explains: "I like to use media to push people to action." As a result, he sought both media-based and community-service collaborators.

On a sad note, Eric Von passed from a heart attack on September 8, 2016. He was replaced as host of the [PRECIOUS LIVES](#) episodes by James Causey (a *Journal Sentinel* writer), and on WVON by Michelle Bryant.

## IMPACT AND REACH

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[PRECIOUS LIVES](#) "outputs" address multiple diverse audiences and span a wide multimedia and multiplatform spectrum, including:

- ▶ one hundred 5–20 minute radio episodes, aired weekly on WUWM's *Lake Effect* and on WNOV-AM's weekday *Eric Von Show*, which includes listener call-in. All episodes are available after the broadcast as podcasts at multiple websites.
- ▶ an active social media presence managed by 371 Productions.
- ▶ *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* news reports and related features on gun violence, written principally by the paper's crime reporter and distributed in print and online.
- ▶ in-depth investigative reports produced by WCIJ (six reports scheduled for publication in 2016). In addition to standing on their own as studies of gun violence, some of the WCIJ reports serve as a basis for audio episodes, and WCIJ staff regularly appear on WUWM as interview guests on *Lake Effect*.

- ▶ interviews on WUWM's *Lake Effect* weekday call in show, along with interviews, news stories and discussions on WNOV-AM.
- ▶ a searchable "Get-Help, Give-Help" online map (<http://preciouslivesproject.org/get-help-give-help/>) based on Google map technology and featuring 142 organizations and offices offering social service help or places where someone can volunteer to help with the epidemic of local gun violence.
- ▶ outreach work, including special engagements with noted outside individuals (including the former mayor of Minneapolis) to explore key issues and potential solutions, and an ongoing series of in-person community forums and press conferences. A focus of the project has been capacity, collaboration and relationship building between the community organizations engaged in the project.
- ▶ an extensive community engagement and outreach effort was associated with this project from its conception and early days. Led by Paul Kjelland of 371 Productions, the project team organized and facilitated scores of meetings and gatherings involving well over a thousand people from across all segments of the community. These conversations ranged from small round-table discussions to a theater performance, "Precious Lives: The Live Show," which attracted an audience of 800 to the Milwaukee Pabst Theater in June 2016. The show, developed and hosted by 371 Productions and WUWM, included presentations and performances by many of the individuals featured in the radio series and an extensive Q&A. Shorter and smaller-scale "pop-up" versions are planned for 2016.

## COLLABORATION STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONAL MODEL

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**371 PRODUCTIONS**, a Milwaukee-based public-service media production-company, leads the project, provides oversight of the collaboration, and produces a weekly series of radio reports and **PRECIOUS LIVES** episodes. They also lead the **PRECIOUS LIVES** community engagement campaign and support most of the social-media presence for the project.

They provide 3.5 FTE staff for audio episode production, project oversight, community engagement management and social media presence operations. In addition, they contract out for editing support and special community engagement work (particularly to support "**PRECIOUS LIVES: The Live Show.**")

**WUWM-FM**, the Milwaukee NPR affiliate owned and operated by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, broadcasts the **PRECIOUS LIVES** audio stories; airs related interviews, primarily on its *Lake Effect* weekday talk show; and helps organize community engagement pieces, including "**PRECIOUS LIVES: The Live Show.**"

WUWM provides about 0.5 FTE staff for WUWM coordination, episode hosting and interviews on *Lake Effect*, as well as support for live show. Some WUWM work is funded partially from the Localore grant; most staff work is funded from WUWM's budget.

[WNOV-AM](#), a black-oriented commercial radio station, broadcasts the [PRECIOUS LIVES](#) series, hosts listener call-ins focused around the features and airs other [PRECIOUS LIVES](#)-related interviews while providing staff for Eric Von's radio show.

The [MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL](#), the city's daily newspaper, provides extensive reporting on the [PRECIOUS LIVES](#) episode contents and related gun violence topics and distributes [PRECIOUS LIVES](#) podcasts on its website. It provides 0.3–0.5 FTE staff reporting on episode topics and related youth gun violence topics. These reporters are funded out of the *Journal Sentinel's* ongoing operations budget.

The [WISCONSIN CENTER FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM](#) (WCIJ), an independent investigative center at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, produced investigative reports on a range of Milwaukee and Wisconsin gun violence issues. The center uses college student interns from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communications, where three interns were assigned to develop four [PRECIOUS LIVES](#) reports. WCIJ senior staff wrote two additional stories. WCIJ work has been funded via its existing support and grant funds.

There are no formal agreements between the partners to structure or guide the collaboration, made possible by the fact that only limited funds are exchanged between partners. However, there are informal guiding principles that define the roles each partner was expected to play, and there are shared working standards that guide the productions (e.g., WUWM maintains the right to edit any content that will be aired on their broadcasts, and the *Journal Sentinel* made it clear they are doing "journalism only," not advocacy.)

Ongoing collaboration, oversight and guidance are provided via informal but regular story meetings where the partners review and agree on upcoming shows, program tie-ins and other issues. These standing meetings (typically one hour per session) were initially held every week and later became biweekly when the project was well into production. As the project nears its end, the meetings now occur monthly or every three weeks. The closest ongoing operational collaborations have been those between the show's producers, the *Journal Sentinel* crime reporter, and the show's host, Eric Von.

Project-specific funding was initially developed from two Milwaukee-based foundations. The Helen Bader Foundation awarded 371 Productions \$100,000 (\$50,000 a year for two years) in early 2014, and the Greater Milwaukee Foundation awarded \$140,000 (\$70,000 a year for two years) in mid-2014. A Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and Wyncote Foundation Localore grant of \$75,000 was awarded to Eric Von, as an individual producer, and to WUWM in November 2015. Each partner is responsible for managing and funding resources it applies to the project.

## UNIQUE FEATURES

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- ▶ **PRECIOUS LIVES** has had contact with or directly involved more than **50 COMMUNITY PARTNERS**, including the Milwaukee Health Department's Office of Violence Prevention and community groups such as Urban Underground, which use the **PRECIOUS LIVES** stories as part of a community-wide effort to reduce gun violence among young people. Community partner organizations and the city's Office of Violence Prevention assigned staff as needed to support their part in this initiative.
- ▶ Milwaukee is shown by one quantitative measure to be "the most segregated city" in the United States, and has been described by many as being "hyper-segregated."
- ▶ A key challenge for the project is the differing perspectives among the multiple constituencies and audiences, particularly the difference between the black inner-city audience of WNOV (whose community is the most directly and immediately impacted by gun violence) and the predominantly white suburban audience of WUWM (which is typical of NPR affiliate news stations.)
- ▶ There was early skepticism from the black community about the ability of the 371 Productions team to communicate their story. As senior producer Emily Forman (a young, white reporter from the East Coast who had just finished a public radio internship in Alaska) told us: "I am aware that I am an outsider, and still an outsider two years later. ... People would say, 'Wait, you were in Alaska before this, and now you're in Wisconsin to tell the gun violence story ... this is our story to tell!'"
- ▶ The producers had to make a major "pivot" early in the series. As Lichtenstein described it, **PRECIOUS LIVES** had to shift from an exclusive focus on the devastation of gun violence (i.e., "loss and tragedy and the grieving process"), as reported by WNYC's "In Harm's Way" series, to more "solution journalism." Lichtenstein told us: "Our original approach was unsustainable ... all that tragedy was burning out our reporters and our audience. ... By week nine, I had people saying, I can't listen anymore—it is too sad!"
- ▶ The episodes were originally envisioned to be short—just 3-4 minutes each. But the production team quickly learned that to tell the in-depth, rich, nuanced stories they

wanted to share, the features would have to be much longer. The first 10 pieces were in the 6–8 minute range, but following the “pivot” they moved to more typically 7.5–10 minutes each, with later episodes averaging almost 12 minutes each.

## KEY LESSONS

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- ▶ The **PRECIOUS LIVES** project is an unusual example of the power, value and impact of collaborations and partnering. WUWM played an important element in the collaboration, but the project’s impact was magnified by a culture of collaboration in place across the partners, reaching widely across the various segments of the Milwaukee community, especially through the reach of WNOV into the African American community, the prominence of the *Journal Sentinel*, and the social media efforts from 371. The important lesson for public broadcasters is: you don’t have to do it all yourself—and, in some cases, you can’t have the impact you want to have by working alone. To diversify your audience, you may need partners with greater reach into parts of your community unserved or underserved by public media.
- ▶ While the staff of the collaborating partners working on the project were stressed and not all envisioned pieces were put in place, the effort was fundamentally “resourced to win”—i.e. it was supported well beyond being just “resourced to survive.”
- ▶ **PRECIOUS LIVES** was, in large part, a response to a “crisis of opportunity”—that is, the impulse to begin this project did not reflect a need for sustainability or an adjustment required by negative economics. Instead, Lichtenstein and others saw it as an exciting and powerful opportunity to create civic value. An ongoing commitment to the health and well-being of the local Milwaukee community was a powerful motivator.
- ▶ The project as a whole was about “opening conversations” across and between multiple community constituencies and organizations on the issue of youth gun violence using multiple reinforcing media platforms, each of which had its own audience. In this, it was massively successful.