

DANIEL CONNOLLY, INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER

I knew I wanted to be a reporter when I joined the college newspaper. I stuck with it because I want to make a difference. Plus, it's fun.

In the past seven days, I gave other reporters directions over the phone to help them navigate through the night to the site of the tornado touchdown in Jonesboro. I worked with colleagues to cover the news of the new coronavirus emergency hospital, reported on a huge ramp-up in COVID-19 testing, contributed to an article about the death of a pastor from coronavirus and asked about contingency plans to deal with a possible overflow of corpses.

If I'd been furloughed, I couldn't have done that.

Every day, we reporters hear news tips about wrongdoing and injustice related to this pandemic, from coverups of COVID-19 outbreaks to mistreatment of employees who simply want protective gear. Our time is limited, and we can't pursue every tip. **Having fewer journalists at work means many stories of wrongdoing and injustice go unreported, and ordinary people suffer.**

It also means less time to compile basic information that helps people survive -- like pulling together lists of places you can go to get tested for coronavirus. I updated that list of testing locations on Tuesday.

I grew up in Memphis in the Hickory Hill neighborhood and went to Campus School, White Station Middle and White Station High before going to college out of state. My father and stepmother are both in their 70s and live in Memphis. They want to know things.

I write for them, for all the people I grew up with and went to school with, all the people from my church, my chess club, my judo club and my jiu-jitsu club, and everyone else. Memphis is home.

The company's actions don't take account of how dramatically our lives have changed. My wife has been asking me to wear a mask and gloves whenever I leave home to report the news. For days, I didn't do it because I thought the mask looked strange and that it would appear that I'm overly frightened of the disease.

As the epidemic became more and more dire, I began to wear a mask at the grocery store. Today I went out on assignment in protective gear for the first time: I put on a mask and purple gloves, went to a news conference and asked questions to the head of the Health Department about how the government plans to handle all the bodies from the outbreak -- a very sad thing to contemplate, but necessary to know.

Ordinary life now carries with it a high risk. **We need the company to recognize the circumstances we're living through, the work we're doing on behalf of the community, and meet us halfway.**

We have a good team. We work well together. **What we want more than anything is to keep doing our work safely and for a fair wage, for the good of the community.**

ARIEL COBBERT, PHOTOJOURNALIST

My first year of college is when I decided I wanted to be a storyteller. Honestly, I love it. In the past year or so I've seen why what my coworkers and I do is vital. **If there are no journalists who holds people accountable? How do people get their information? Who puts pressure on officials?**

I know my coworkers and journalists across the company deserve better than being furloughed when our work on the frontlines is needed more than ever. It doesn't feel right. It's not fair to the reporters.

And it's not fair to Memphis. Memphis matters to me because it accepted me with open arms and blessed me with many opportunities. Memphis is beautiful and unique in many ways. Moving through Frayser, Orange Mound and Binghampton and other communities has taught me how special the people are here.

JOE RONDONE, PHOTOJOURNALIST

Journalism, for most of us, is the singular option for combining our passions with (what should be) a sustainable living: How does this world work? How can we improve it? Who's being left behind?

Answering these questions isn't just a day job, it's an insatiable pursuit.

But if I'd been furloughed last week, I wouldn't have been able to photograph that; to be a window to the city that allows people a look, even when their own quarantine stymies that view.

Memphis is a quirky, beautiful city that deserves attention. Sure, it is a bit of a fixer-upper, but man is it incredible when it shows its best. It is home.

When there are unending questions about a brand new world, one we are all hoping to better understand -- what's most crucial is a place to find answers. Ones we can trust to help guide us to a safer route through a difficult journey.

When the goals of serving a community good, especially in a time of crisis, are outweighed by a shareholder's profit, it becomes impossible to stand idly by. This is how we treat corporations at large as journalists, including our own.

Look around corporate America. Look at your own business. We're living in a society that has been built to serve the top while utilizing the strength of true labor and burying those of us at the bottom. We can all do better than this. We know it.

MAX GARLAND, BUSINESS REPORTER

The hard-working people in this community power logistics and transportation networks that ripple throughout the world. I came to Memphis to tell their stories.

I've known I wanted to be a journalist ever since my first deadline. It was an entry-level, in class assignment, but that jolt of adrenaline was something I had never felt before. Journalists did that every day?!

It's cliché, but our job is to write the first draft of history. Now we're covering a historic news story on an unprecedented scale.

In the past week, I've written about the experiences and financial hardships of those who have been laid off in the Memphis area.

But soon, reporters across the country are going to be furloughed -- shut off from providing vital information for three weeks as this pandemic rages on.

Transparency has been a frequent issue during the coronavirus crisis. **Without journalists questioning and challenging officials every day, how much would we really know about COVID-19's spread? I don't know anyone who would feel safer with less information.**

Reporters are essential, as the stellar journalism produced during this pandemic shows, even though ever-shrinking newsrooms would suggest otherwise.

SARAH MACARAEG, INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER

I put my first investigation together six years ago and was hooked. There's nothing like reporting a story that has a shot at making a difference in peoples' lives -- running all over the city, diving into a range of topics, listening and listening and chasing down answers and data and documents, to try to craft a story that counts.

When you do accountability reporting, you know you won't always win. But every now and then you do. And so you always fight like you just might. I changed careers into this industry, with all of its problems, eyes-wide-open, because just being in the ring was enough for me. I'd always figured that if the ship's going down, I'll go down fighting with it. But I didn't foresee being yanked from the frontlines right when demand for the work is exploding and the stakes -- of life and death and public health -- couldn't be higher.

I've always felt so privileged to be reporting in Memphis because there's so much meaningful work here to do. And it's not always about accountability. Memphis is the place where I've been able to report on solutions and not just problems, where I've pounded the pavement in so many neighborhoods, sat for hours with community elders and marveled at the spaces and bonds people who love this city have made.

Last week, I wrote a profile on the Memphis warehouse workers who are keeping groceries moving through the Mid-South. And then, a couple days later, the workers contacted me when they learned someone had tested positive at the Kroger warehouse. Distribution slowed to a trickle as they grappled with their safety concerns and demanded hazard pay. The story I wrote that night featured dispatches from the warehouse floor and became national news. But it was local to the core. I looked back at my notes and realized the story had been a long time in the making. I'd taken the first meeting, which led to another, which led to the relationships I've built with those workers -- in September 2018. That's **the thing about local reporting: it's a relationship between a journalist and the community they serve. When the relationship is gone, there's a vacuum of information.** There could be many Krogers we just don't know about. Because there's already a shortage of local reporters. And now, there'll be weeks at a time when those of us who remain can't be on the job.

It's a hard time right now for so many companies. And ours isn't exactly in tip top financial shape, we recognize. We do need everyone who can support our reporting, all being provided free during the coronavirus crisis, to please subscribe. That's the thing that makes our furloughs unusual: They're happening when demand for our reporting is sky high. And who does reporting: Not executives. So **it seems unfair to us and not in the best interest of the community to have reporters take the brunt of the downturn equally with executives. We should be on the frontlines.** And there is a lot more room to save money at the top, among six-figure salaries, than there is by squeezing reporters who don't own homes, have student loans and are already scrimping to get by.