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Healing With Words



(R-L): Molly Gessford, Normando Hernández González and Adam Braver

April 24, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. -- Acts of violence invoke widespread fear and anger, and can paralyze the community upon which it is perpetrated. As recent world events have shown, even the most unassuming people prove themselves all too adept at wielding this darkness against others. But ask any proponent of the written and spoken word, and they are likely to agree that words are a much more powerful tool. Through language, we are able to shed light on injustices, to connect each other through a sense of shared humanity, to affect meaningful and courageous change and to redeem ourselves – reconciling the hurt inflicted by others, and create healing.

Adam Braver and Molly Gessford '11 reveal the power of words in a story that began, for them, with a Roger Williams University class advocating for imprisoned political dissidents. Through the 2010 PEN Collaborative class, Braver – a creative writing professor, guided students on a letter-writing campaign to free Cuban journalist Normando Hernández González from one of the worst prisons in Cuba.

González was one of 75 journalists arrested by the Cuban government during the “Black Spring” in 2003. For seven years, González languished in jail, his health failing him while suffering constant beatings and psychological torture. Though PEN officials and the RWU case-minders had few

illusions about González's situation – his health had declined so much that many thought he would perish in prison – González was freed in 2011 and exiled with his family to Spain.

A few months later, Braver and Gessford traveled to Madrid to meet González for the first time and record his story for their book, "[The Madrid Conversations: Normando Hernández González: Persecuted, Imprisoned, Exiled.](#)" Released earlier this year, a copy of the book is available in the University Library.

The authors shared their experiences telling González's story and the process of writing something so powerful with PDQ@RWU during a recent interview.

What motivated you to tell Normando's story?

Gessford: His mission all along was to tell his story. We were his voice when he couldn't have one.

Braver: We were invested in this not just because it's bad to put people in jail, but it's bad to limit, as a basic human right, freedom of expression. Part of what we could do is help give the forum for freedom of expression.

What was it like to transition from advocating for justice for Gonzalez to hearing his story?

Braver: I think, partly, we were the audience, and we wanted to know certain things – tell us more about this, we don't understand this, what was this like? There were other parts to understanding this that from his perspective were not the central concern. He's very focused on the politics side of it and we were equally concerned with the human side.

And we also became partners with him to some degree. We didn't see ourselves as propagandists, but we sort of became part of the story in this, too. It went from this role of being a very distant thing to being a collective experience.

How did telling the story in Normando's voice influence your narrative choices?

Braver: When you're in the room watching him tell the story it was clear he was very deliberate but he was also very passionate in the way he told the story. He was very dramatic the way he talks, so that you knew just by his facial expressions, the way he leaned forward, the tone of his voice, that we were in a bad place.

Our big challenge was to essentially have it brought back (from a Spanish-language translation) as words. I guess it's no different from when you translate a poem from another language – you have to try to find a way to recreate that experience. So it's very much a translation.

Another challenge was making a narrative from two-and-a-half days of conversation that when transcribed had seemingly no rhyme or reason. So we did a lot of moving and giving it a little more of a linear quality.

Gessford: More than anything we wanted it to be a story of humanity. While the political details of what is happening in Cuba is important, of course, we wanted the reader to feel a connection to the person that was experiencing this, a person not just experiencing this, but while experiencing it was still fighting hard.

His story is told in vignettes, a Q & A transcript, and as streams of consciousness. Why this format?

Braver: Because the story is so intense and so dense, we tried to create some breathing room. Even as he was telling the story, somehow you felt the space and you felt movement. But when it was transcribed it felt like there was a lot of information coming at you. So part of this was to just back out some of that and really make it more of the essence – capturing the lyricism of his voice, the sense that this was a man of words. We stripped it down so you can hear his turns of phrase.

The interviewing was sometimes to emphasize certain points, sometimes to give a sense of the hesitation where we had to kind of get a little more from him, or our surprise at his answer. Again, not that we were part of the story but that there is a dialogue going on with this.

What impact did you hope to have on readers with these really short passages?

Braver: The idea that the most simple line is more powerful sometimes than all the description. Let them sit and reverberate. The same way they say that with writing, the hotter the subject is the cooler you should write and let it speak for itself.

Gessford: They almost feel desperate at times – in the way it expressed how desperate Normando's situation was.

What struck you as one of the more poignant moments he described?

Gessford: When we asked Normando what got him through it all. He pointed to his wife and his daughter and said, 'Them, they got me through it all.'

Braver: There wasn't a dry eye in the house at that moment.

Gessford: Everyone in the house was just so taken aback by that. It was just such a raw and emotional moment. And it was the type of emotion we hadn't experienced yet. Everything else he had described was so sad and hopeless. To hear him say that and be so steadfast in his devotion to his family was pretty awe-inspiring.

Molly, this was your first book. What was unexpected about the process?

Gessford: I was very taken aback by how much I felt for and with his family. It was the way he was with his family that I think really drew me in and made me want to help to tell his story. I was surprised by how emotionally invested I was in this story.

Adam, all of your work to date has been novels; what were the challenges of writing this book?

Braver: Some of them are the same old challenges – of being consistent in telling the story, keeping a narrative going, finding the right way to tell the narrative, making sure things are accurate. Sometimes you had this sense of 'it would actually be a little better if you said it like this' or 'if you said this,' so those urges had to be resisted. But I didn't feel like I was in a new world. Because I'm influenced by a lot of creative nonfiction, I saw it as a hybrid of that genre. It probably looks like it was written by a novelist more than a journalist.

From the Cuban government crushing free speech to writing advocacy letters on González's behalf in the PEN Collaborative class to penning the story of his ordeal, this is a story about the power of words. What lessons have you learned?

Braver: It confirms the power of words. It makes you understand why people don't want other people to use their words. I was on a recent trip to the PEN office and they were telling us about a poet in Qatar who has a lifetime jail sentence for just one line he said about supporting the Arab Spring. He was charged with inciting revolution and insulting the Emir. Just the idea that words *are* that powerful. While we say we can't understand why people won't let others express themselves, you can understand – because they are that powerful, both in expressing ideas but also in conveying experiences, like in this book.

Gessford: What's refreshing about Normando's story is there's so much of it that talks about that words can get you in trouble, but if you say enough of them they can get you through as well. Normando's persistence in spreading his words and getting others to do so, too, was his saving grace. That part of the story is important and nice to hear.

What do you hope happens as a result of publishing his story?

Braver: That the somewhat uninterested reader who may come to this – who may not be a Cubaphile – would also realize how lucky we are to have free expression, even when sometimes we feel we don't have free expression. But also to advocate. Certainly for people interested in the written word, this is a sort of literary citizenship – that you have to look beyond yourself and fight for others.

And even beyond just helping Normando get his story out, but also hopefully a few people will work to make sure the next Normando doesn't go to jail. That's the idealistic version.

I hope it's an inspiring story, too – the idea of having conviction and believing in something. Normando keeps saying, 'If I believe, my principles will always get me to the right place at the end.' That belief in principles certainly inspired me.

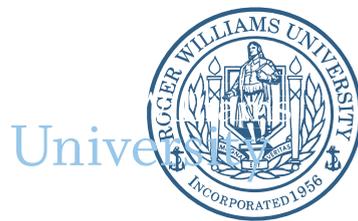
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