

**Michael Sallah: a national investigative reporter for USA
TODAY/Gannett newspapers**

UT COMMENCEMENT SPEECH, December 17, 2017

President Gaber, faculty, men and women of the University of Toledo graduating class of 2017. I am honored to be your commencement speaker.

Please allow me to congratulate you on your achievement. I have no doubt there were many long nights when you didn't know when -- and if -- this day would arrive.

I am going to ask you for a few brief moments to put aside whatever fears and anxieties you've been harboring about the great unknown, and to remember these words: Trust in What You've Learned.

The tools that you need to make your mark in this world were forged right here.

Have faith in them.

Decades ago, I came here as a scared, skinny freshman who was raw and awkward and in need of a proverbial kick.

I was fortunate to be taught by a creative writing professor who forced me to dig down deep and never turn in a draft like that last one.

The biology professor who inspired me to reach beyond the newsroom and appreciate the psychology of Jung, the music of Mozart, the words of Goethe.

Larry Dessner and Steve Goldman, I thank you.

But the advice that would stay with me long after my last story was filed came from a political science professor, John Gillespie, who taught me that no matter what was on the news, the world still revolved around personal relationships.

You can learn the intricacies of computer algorithms or spread sheet analysis, but if you don't take the time to know the person sitting to your left and to your right, you'll never understand the forces that shape our lives.

What I found was that behind every story was a real person.

All I needed to do was listen. And in the end, that would make all the difference in my career.

If I was going to design a class today, it would be on the dynamics of personal relationships.

Talking to people. Reading them. Making those critical connections – beyond emails and texts and Snapchat.

As reporters working on investigative teams, we spend months drilling down on projects. Just the amount of data we crunch can be mind-numbing. It's anything but glamorous.

But in the maze of records, we find those points of light -- the people who connect us to our reporting, who keep us writing even under excruciating deadlines.

In Florida, we ran across a troubling story.

By mining the data of the state's inspection reports, we found that every month an elderly person was dying of abuse and neglect in assisted living facilities -- with little or no consequences by the state.

The numbers were alarming enough to convince us to keep digging.

But it wasn't until we connected to the people in those homes that we understood the gravity of the story.

To this day, it's difficult for me to forget Karen Pagano, whose 98-year-old grandmother died after she was found on the floor of one of the homes with two black eyes, a deep gash on her forehead and a fractured neck.

Karen cried for nearly an hour as she told us about the inexplicable circumstances surrounding the death of a woman she clearly loved.

From evidence that we turned up, we found that her injuries weren't caused by a fall -- as alleged by the group home. A witness in the facility had seen a nurse strike the woman's head against a table.

Though the police had closed the case with no one arrested, the information we found was eventually presented to a jury, which rendered a \$2.3 million judgment against the facility.

Karen inspired us to keep drilling down on other assisted living facilities around the state.

After our series was published, the greatest satisfaction wasn't the national awards that we won, but the state shutting down 13 of the worst homes and the governor forming a special task force to investigate the breakdowns.

In Washington DC, a colleague and I launched an investigation into predatory tax lien companies that were taking homes from poor people in the District for small tax debts and flipping the houses for millions in profits.

It was a tough project that relied on data reporting: scraping the court website and searching thousands of electronic documents.

I had reached a point when I had to get away from the computer and get out on the streets.

I drove to a house that had been taken over and padlocked belonging to a man named Bennie Coleman.

At that time, he was just another name on another court document.

But when I found him, my heart was nearly broken.

Bennie was a 76-year-old former Marine sergeant who served in Vietnam and suffered from severe dementia. He had purchased his home from the money he received from his wife's life insurance policy when she died of breast cancer.

He had forgotten to pay a \$134 property tax bill -- and for that mistake -- the marshals showed up on his door one morning.

They hauled all his belongings to the curb: His medals from the Marines. Photos of his wife. Even his TV and living room chair.

The company that foreclosed on his home had paid just a few hundred dollars for the lien, but it tacked on thousands of dollars in fees and other charges, making it impossible for Bennie to save his property.

He said he thought he would stay in his house for many more years, sipping cold drinks on the porch and talking to neighbors over the fence. But now, he was living in a boarding home down the street. "I have nothing," he told me.

Our newspaper, The Washington Post, published our stories that exposed the predatory companies that took the homes, and the DC government that allowed the abuses to clear its tax rolls.

The stories led to sweeping reforms and a vote by the District to set aside \$1 million to pay back Bennie and others who lost their properties through abusive tactics.

At that point in my career, I thought Bennie was the most aggrieved victim I had known -- that is, until I met Frank Zambrana.

If I had not returned the numerous calls on my voicemail, I never would have known the depth of corruption in one South Florida city.

A native of Nicaragua, the 47-year-old immigrant had come to the United States to take part in the American dream.

He worked hard for two decades to open a farm equipment repair business in the city of Opa-locka. With a wife and children, one suffering from cancer, he faced enormous pressures.

But they weren't all from his personal life.

City officials began shaking him down for thousands in cash bribes to get his business license. To make sure he paid, they would send the police and code enforcement to his business.

He could have quietly handed over the money, and just kept working. Instead, he turned to the FBI and The Miami Herald.

Risking his life and the safety of his family, he began to provide information to myself and a fellow reporter.

Frank would pray in the middle of the night, afraid to sleep, while he collected information about the monsters forcing him and other struggling business owners to pay bribes.

Even when his son, Andy, died of cancer, the shake downs continued.

Finally, in April of last year, The Herald published his story: a front-page expose on the man who revealed the worst case of public corruption in South Florida in a generation. Months later, federal agents began arresting the politicians who preyed on Frank and others.

I still remember him calling us when our story was posted online. "When I didn't have a voice, you became my voice," he said, fighting back tears. "Thank you."

My reasons for sharing these stories with you are simple. The world may change, but we don't. We've embraced the new technologies, but without the handshakes and the face-to-face encounters, we'll never understand this world.

What was important to your parents and your grandparents generations is just as important to you -- and your future. The individuals who drive our work -- those who inspire us -- aren't just in journalism.

The teacher whose methods in the classroom were irrevocably changed by listening to that one student who dared to tell that teacher the lessons weren't sinking in.

The government auditor whose most difficult challenge was resolved by one brave worker who stepped forward to tell the truth about the missing money.

The politician whose career was altered by a single voter who dared to tell her that she was ignoring a critical block of voters.

What did they do? They found that the world is intricately connected to the person right next to them. They took out the earplugs -- and listened.

I love the young generation of journalists that I work with today. They can do magic with data and shorten the amount of time it takes to find critical trends. But too often I remind them that they need to do the "old school."

They need to get away from their desks and carry out the shoe-leather reporting or they will miss the heartbeat of the story. The Bennie Colemans and the Frank Zambranas will just be statistics.

For you -- the graduation class of 2017 -- your entire careers are ahead of you. You can accomplish whatever you set your mind to. That it's not about where you are -- it's who you are.

We won a Pulitzer Prize, with the support of our editors and publisher, at The Toledo Blade.

It's about knowing your strengths, your passions, and building on your goals -- day by day.

But you can't do it without people. The world doesn't revolve around abstract ideas. It revolves around personal relationships.

It's about connecting to that person to your right and to your left. God bless you.