Observations on reporting from The Wall Street Journal's Angelo Henderson

by Mark Russell, Metro Editor, The Cleveland Plain-Dealer

He is a reporter who once fancied himself a chameleon. In the late '80s he sat atop an LTD eating fried chicken in one of the worst neighborhoods of St. Petersburg, Fla., to get a bird's-eye view of how the crack-cocaine epidemic was ravaging a community.

And he routinely checks in with the folks who populate his source network: funeral home directors, beauticians, detectives and, his latest find, bail bondsmen.

Of course this doesn't sound like a Wall Street Journal reporter, but that's what Angelo Henderson is. And he's a very good one, having won a Pulitzer Prize in the features category in 1999.

One creative mind, one off-center idea, one Pulitzer Prize

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Henderson, 38, a senior special writer for Page One based in Detroit, brought his journalistic gospel to the Plain Dealer's brown-bag speaker series July 13, More than 60 reporters and editors crowded the Joseph William Gray Dining Room to hear him talk with passion about how he covers urban communities and trend stories anchored in the black community.

Henderson, a six-year WSJ veteran, offered a behind-the-scenes tour of his Pulitzer story, about how a Detroit pharmacist coped with having killed an armed robber. Henderson said the genesis of that story was a basic, dark thought: "I had this idea, 'What is it like to kill someone/' And it is something that I have always wanted to know."

Back in 1994, while writing about a Detroit shopping center, he befriended the owner of the barbershop and workers at the pharmacy there. Three years later, he read a brief story in the Detroit papers about a robber who was killed in a holdup at the same drugstore.

Henderson immediately began working the phones, calling his sources to find out who shot the robber. He instinctively knew this could be his chance t explore his idea of what it felt like to kill someone. He also thought the story could illuminate the dangers that workers face behind bulletproof glass in tough areas.

But, first, he needed to talk to the shooter.

The incident happened on a Saturday, and Henderson cold-called the pharmacy Monday morning. He got his first surprise. The pharmacist picked up the phone.

"He was at work, which I could not believe," Henderson said. "If I kill somebody, I know I am not going to go to work for at least c couple of weeks."

Henderson introduced himself to the pharmacist, Dennis Grehl, who remembered him from the earlier story. Henderson explained that he had read what happened and wanted to tell Grehl's story.

Not surprisingly Grehl was reluctant to talk. Henderson gave him a business card and told him that he wanted him to tell his story in The Wall Street Journal. The reporter also was quick to tell the pharmacist that he wasn't doing a story for immediate publication.

Henderson then developed a strategy to keep pursuing his long-held story idea. He stayed in touch with Grehl, visiting him at the pharmacy at least once a month from January to August.

This was no easy feat. At the time, Henderson, who was covering the global auto industry, was also the deputy chief of the WSJ's Detroit bureau. Yet he carved out time to visit Grehl at lunch, before or after work or when he had a slow afternoon and two hours to spare. Henderson viewed such visits as respite from the daily grind of earnings stories and company profiles. This was something he wanted to do. He also kept most of the details to himself.

He said he wanted to see Grehl in his own environment so he would begin to see the world as the druggist sees it. "Plus, I wanted to be there in case he just begged out one day."

And he needed to make sure he had a great relationship with Grehl. "If at any point in the process he had pulled out, my story would have been shot." After several months, Grehl started to open up, revealing his feelings about the shooting and his fears of possible retribution by the suspect's family or friends.

While working on the pharmacy shooting story, Henderson had the most difficulty getting personal information about the robber, Tony Williams.

When Henderson finally located the family of Williams (with the help of a newly minted police information specialist he met at a Detroit police media day), he traveled to a rough part of Chicago and interviewed the mother, who did not know her son was selling crack in Detroit. The woman's other son, present for the interview, told her the sordid details with Henderson sitting there, stunned at his turn of luck

He regarded it as a gift from God after the suffering he'd endured early in his career when a St. Petersburg Times editor told him he was not cut out for the field. That editor said the same thing

to another St. Pete alum, Ronald Suskind. Henderson and Suskind both joined the Journal and both won Pulitzer Prizes. “I guess it’s a good thing to be fired by this women,” Henderson joked.

He stressed the value of building relationships. “I never think that people are just one-time sources,” Henderson said, adding that he tells his best sources that he works for them.

He also stressed that reporters should withhold key details of a big story from their editors. “We reporters cannot keep our mouths shut. We get a good quote and we are running to the editor,” he said. “Keep some mystery about the story before the editors sees it. You want the editor to be surprised when they get the story.

While working on the pharmacist story, Henderson arranged for a shepherd to guide him into the neighborhood of the slain robber. It’s a common technique of WSJ reporters and other national and foreign correspondents. As Henderson explained it, he finds someone not connected to journalism who knows the geography, history and people in an area. He sometimes buys the person meals or other tokens, and it usually is a friend of a friend who is excited by the prospect of going on assignment with a national reporter.

But Henderson didn’t use such tactics when he was a young reporter in Florida sitting on the LTD eating fried chicken 15 years ago. In that instance, Henderson and his girlfriend were quickly sized up as city slickers by some hardened neighborhood types. They had to quickly leave the area.

And Henderson said he learned a valuable lesson:

“You can’t just drop into a place and pretend you know it. You don’t.”