

Will Shortz Interview Presentation Notes

By Alex Vratsanos

November 12, 2013

Hello, my friends. I am Alex Vratsanos, *New York Times* crossword constructor, and I have interviewed the *New York Times* Crossword Editor, Will Shortz. I conducted this interview over the phone and recorded it, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I had never actually spoken to him before, so this was an opportunity for me to make an impression with him, and I feel that I capitalized on it.

Who is he? Well, he is a lifelong puzzler. He submitted a crossword for the first time at age 14, and created the Enigmatology major at the University of Indiana, designing a whole curriculum for himself and receiving his unique degree in 1974. After joining the staff of *Games Magazine*, he founded the ACPT, which has become the grandfather of all crossword tournaments. 35 Years later, he still runs it, and 26 years later, he is still NPR's Puzzlemaster. As Puzzlemaster, he gives a challenge for listeners to solve every Sunday morning, and one randomly chosen correct solver will get to play along with him live on National Public Radio the next Sunday. (If you'd like, I can share a challenge or two of his when we're done.) One year after founding the World Puzzle Championship, the third *New York Times* Crossword Editor, Eugene T. Maleska, died, and Will applied for and got the job, sending him to the top of the puzzle world, if he was not already there. So who is he, then? I'll sum it up this way -- he is the absolute best at what he does.

Rising to the top has not been easy, and thus his job is not easy. 75 to 100 puzzles are submitted to him every week, and he examines and takes notes on every one of them. That being the case, it is Paula Gamache who actually notifies the constructors of acceptances or rejections. And as early as 2000, Will decided to have a summer intern to help him with the mail and such. His current intern is Joel Fagliano, who is now a senior at Pomona College and has agreed to work for Will full-time once he graduates. He also has a year-round intern, who currently is Anna Shechtman. The two people in the middle column are two of his four test-solvers, Frank Longo and Ellen Ripstein. Longo and the two other test-solvers weigh in on each puzzle once it has been accepted, edited, and typeset. Longo himself rechecks every word and fact, and Ripstein, who won the 2001 ACPT, converts the puzzle into Across Lite, the premier electronic solving software. Having the puzzle in Across Lite facilitates Deb Amlen's job as production manager of the puzzle. Besides blogging almost every puzzle on Wordplay, the *Times*' official crossword blog, she gets the puzzle everywhere it needs to go -- not just the *Times* itself, but the numerous other papers to which the puzzle is syndicated, to a company called Puzzazz, to the Large Print Weekly, to the *International New York Times*, and more. So what do you think Will does in the evenings and on the weekends? Anyone want to guess? ... Well, he plays table tennis... and he is probably one of the best players in America!

In just nine days, Will will celebrate 20 years of editing the Times crossword; 20 years ago, the digital age was just beginning. Will's "huge advantage" is actually something he still has, but now shares with literally everyone -- he has a huge reference library, not just dictionaries and thesauri but reference books on any subject you can think of. But now, all that information is online... as are crossword blogs, where solvers from all over the world come together and have their say on what they liked and didn't like in a puzzle. It can be said that together, they wield almost enough power to overrule Will -- though they cannot decide which puzzles are published and which are not, they influence and have influenced the choice of themes, entries, and even clues. Nevertheless, the impact of PCs and the Internet has been positive, even in Will's eyes; with Crossword Compiler and other solving software as well as online databases and email (which enables constructors to work together), the quality of the words and clues in puzzles has risen dramatically, and online subscriptions to the *Times* puzzles represent a lot of money for the *New York Times* company. Still, most people solve on paper, and those solvers got the best part of the two puzzles shown on the bottom of this slide. See why?

If you thought Will's career path was unusual, you were right, but it was perhaps the most unusual path in a field of unusual paths, as being a puzzlemaker or editor is an unusual endeavor. Some of the six or so people in America who do make a living as a puzzlemaker are Patrick Berry, the author of the book pictured on this slide (which Will very highly recommends), Emily Cox and Henry Rathvon, who create acrostics every other Sunday for the *Times*, and Merl Reagle, one of the few constructors with a Wikipedia page. There are a few more than six puzzle editors in America, but again, there are not many. But all those people learned their craft and learned it very well, and they have made connections to businesses, which have allowed them to, in effect, create their own job. Will's advice to you continues -- it all starts with the word "try." Try creating a corner of a crossword, say a 4x4 square -- it doesn't have to be a whole crossword. Also try doing print puzzles, and see, regardless of whether or not you finish the puzzle, if you enjoy it. Besides Patrick Berry's book, go to Cruciverb.com (this is a screenshot of it), and check out the advice experts have for potential puzzlers like you. Finally, puzzle events include not only the ACPT but also the conventions of the National Puzzlers' League as well as local events. There's a lot of help out there... utilize it!

So what did I gain from this interview? A lot, especially of how far the *New York Times* puzzle (and by extension, my own puzzles, which I have copies of if you'd like one) reaches across the world and how rewarding it can be to work in the Crossworld. It felt absolutely wonderful to talk to Will, the Puzzle Master, for the first time, and I feel he learned something about me too. I definitely will continue my journey in the Crossworld, and perhaps I will use this interview as a stepping stone in that journey. I now cordially invite all of you, including you, Professor, to join me in this journey.