

Alex Vratsanos Interviews Will Shortz

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ALEX: From what I've read and heard, editing the Times crossword is a huge job. Not only are you responsible for a quality puzzle every day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, but you also have to correspond with constructors, keep them up to date on puzzle publication, and render decisions on about a hundred puzzles a week.

WILL: I'd say 75 to 100 puzzles a week.

ALEX: How do you manage that and still find time for table tennis?

WILL: Ha ha! Well, I play table tennis in the evenings, but when I'm traveling or something I tend to work seven days a week. And it's a lot of work, but you know, you find time for what's important to you and what you enjoy. Usually I'm working at home, but, I had a speaking engagement in Indiana on Sunday, so I was back in my home state of Indiana for a few days.

ALEX: I believe you have a team that helps you out, right?

WILL: Here's the process. It started gradually, I got a summer intern in 2000, just to help me get through the summer and catch up on mail, and I did that for a number of years. And then, around 2006 [or] 2007, I got an assistant for part of the time during the year. And then for the last 2 years or so, I've had an assistant through the whole year. My assistant right now is Anna Shechtman, who is a Times crossword constructor, I'm sure you've seen her work, she's had I think three crosswords in the Times so far, and she had a puzzle in the AVX crossword in September, which Ben Tausig declared was the best puzzle of the month. So anyway, I have an assistant, [and] during the summer, I still have a summer intern. For the last three summers, it's been Joel Fagliano, while he goes to school at Pomona College in California, and, we've agreed he's going to work for me full-time next summer after he graduates. So there's the assistant, and then there are other people who help out. Paula Gamache, you know, helps me with correspondence. I still look at all the submissions myself, but I will, rather than writing everybody myself, which is quite time-consuming, I'll jot my notes on the submissions, on the envelopes, and every few weeks she comes to my house and takes those envelopes and responds to everybody. There are three test-solvers, who work at home, for the crosswords. After I edit and typeset them, I send PDFs to the test-solvers. They call me back with their comments and suggestions, and those people are Frank Longo, Nancy Schuster and Evie Eysenburg. Frank rechecks every word and fact after me, so he's the most important solver, because if there's an error in the clues, he's the one who's most likely to catch it. Once the puzzles are finished and I have polished them to the best of my ability, I email them to the Times. Ellen Ripstein goes into the Times building and converts the puzzles into Across Lite so they can be solved online, [and] as long as she's doing that, she tests the puzzles again. Once in a while, something will slip through everybody, or maybe, in polishing the puzzles at the last minute I've introduced a new

error, so she's the one most likely to catch that. So that's basically the team- they're all freelance people.

ALEX: Yeah, where does Deb Amlen come in?

WILL: Okay, Deb Amlen started out simply as Wordplay blogger... but about a year or so ago, she became the production manager of the crossword. So, she makes sure the puzzle gets distributed to all the outlets that need to have it. So, of course there's print, I think that's automatic, I don't know. There's also online, of course, so it can be solved in Across Lite... crosswords can also be solved using a app that Peter Ritmeester in Holland has created, so he gets the puzzle. They also go to the syndicate, to the Large Print Weekly, and [to] the International Herald Tribune, or what's now the International New York Times. The puzzle gets distributed to a lot of places, and she's in charge of making sure that gets done. I'm sure there's other duties she has besides that. She's production, though, not editorial.

ALEX: You became Editor in 1993 and Across Lite files started accompanying Times puzzles in 1996. What exactly has been the impact of technology on the quality of Times crosswords since then? Do you still think, as you stated in your interview with Jim Horne in December 2010, that the popularity of crosswords will decline a little when print dies?

WILL: Okay, first of all, the impact of personal computers and the Internet has been huge, in a positive way, on the Times crossword... personal computers have aided constructors in creating higher quality grids, with more interesting vocabulary and less crosswordese and obscurity, [and] the personal computers and the Internet have helped puzzlemakers in the clues. In the old days, before the Internet, I had a huge advantage over anybody else, because I have a massive reference library. Dictionaries and reference books on any subject you can think of, and I could write interesting clues with all these aids. Nowadays, with the Internet, everything at your fingertips, anybody has access to all the information I have. And it helps crosswords get better. I think the various crossword blogs have aided crossword constructors by allowing everybody to see what solvers love and what they don't like, and puzzlemakers have changed their styles accordingly. It seems to be the only feedback constructors got was from me, pretty much, unless they had a friend or family member who was doing the Times crossword. Now, if you have a crossword published, you can go online and see hundreds or more comments from solvers, which is helpful. As far as the future of crosswords, I think it's good. I do think crosswords are better suited for print media than electronic media, because first of all it's easier to jump around a grid when you're solving on paper than it is when you're solving online, and second I think there's an aesthetic pleasure in filling a grid with a pen or pencil that isn't quite as good when you're filling it on a computer screen. But all that said, I think crosswords are going to survive, you know, more than 50,000 people have subscribed to the New York Times crossword online, and solvers are doing other puzzles online. So, crosswords are going to do just fine, even if print media eventually die.

ALEX: So how can you help now to keep crosswords going strong then?

WILL: Well, the crossword is a profit center for the New York Times. I've mentioned before, more than 50,000 people have subscribed to the Times crossword, and that alone represents a lot of money. The New York Times crossword books are the best-selling crossword books in the country, and that represents money for the company. There's the 900 number clue line, the puzzle appears in syndication... someone at the syndicate once told me that the Times crossword appears in more than twice as many newspapers as any other feature that they syndicate. And of course, it's a draw for the print newspaper itself. No one knows the exact figure, but we all know a lot of people continue to subscribe to the print edition of the newspaper in order to get the puzzles. I'm proud and happy that crosswords can be successful like that and be beneficial to the whole New York Times Company.

ALEX: Also on the topic of print versus electronic, how do you handle crosswords that "push the envelope" and thus may be difficult to handle electronically, like Corey Rubin's "LARGE PRINT" puzzle earlier this year and Milo Beckman's "Mind the Gap" puzzle?

WILL: Yeah, I recognize that more and more people are solving the puzzles electronically, but still the vast majority of solvers are still doing them in print, so I am still geared for print. And if a constructor creates a crossword that Across Lite can't handle, then I just accept that, and we print a PDF of the puzzle for that day. Or, you probably know Puzzazz is able to handle almost any New York Times crossword trick, so I think eventually even the crosswords that "push the envelope" will be solvable online, that the electronic media will be able to adapt.

ALEX: Very cool. Becoming Times Crossword Editor is arguably the pinnacle of your career in puzzles, but you have also become NPR's Puzzlemaster, founded the ACPT and World Puzzle Championship, and endorsed numerous books of sudoku and KenKen as well as crosswords. How many people in America could there be that could make a living off of these sorts of things, and what preparational advice would you have for them?

WILL: Being a puzzle editor, or a puzzlemaker, is an unusual endeavor. Not many people are able to make their living from this. Let's take puzzlemakers... as far as people who make puzzles for print, probably half a dozen. I think Patrick Berry does it, [as do] Emily Cox and Henry Rathvon, and a few other people. And there are puzzle editors, of course for newspapers but also for online in various ways... there [are] people who make their living from editing puzzles. And there's a whole new genre of puzzle apps- people can make money from creating a new kind of puzzle that takes off electronically, that people are willing to pay to get. So that's a new way to make your living from puzzles... some people are able to do it, but it's a very small field, as you suggest. And what would be my advice? Well, what I did was very unusual, you know I have the world's only college degree in Enigmatology, which I got from Indiana University in 1974. And I devised my entire curriculum in puzzles- there were no classes on puzzles. But because of that, I think I know the history of puzzles better than anyone else in the world. That gives me a

grounding that no one else has, and also gives me credentials no one else has. But really, for someone who wants a career in puzzles, the things to do are #1, learn your craft, whatever it is, crosswords, electronic puzzles, or whatever it is, learn to do it well, and #2, make connections in the business, get to know editors, get to know people in the business, and you can sort of create your own position, create your own job.

ALEX: Continuing from there, if someone I presented this to became interested in crosswords like I am, what advice and/or information would you give to him or her specifically?

WILL: Start creating crosswords! There's a lot of help available... if you're doing it for the first time, I'd say take a grid out of the newspaper, whether it's a New York Times grid or from another newspaper, and see if you can fill it by hand. See if you enjoy doing that, and if you do and it excites you, you know, then that's something you should pursue. There are various aids that you can get- one, I advise you go to Cruciverb.com, which is a crossword destination and forum, and that hooks you up with lots of people and there's lots of advice there; I recommend Patrick Berry's book "Crossword [Puzzle] Challenges for Dummies," that, besides having a lot of good crosswords to solve, it has a lot of advice from Patrick on how and where to sell crossword puzzles. That's the best book that's been published on the subject. And then I'd recommend going to puzzle events, such as the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, the National Puzzlers' League conventions, and if there's anything local going on in your area, try to go to that too.

ALEX: I do hope to inspire some people to keep the puzzle profession going, like you've done a lot of work to reach out to young people like me.

WILL: Yeah, thanks a lot. I want crosswords to appeal to everybody... I think in the old days, crosswords appealed mainly to older folks. My job, my goal has been to have crosswords appeal to everybody, and I still want them to appeal to older folks, but I want everybody's culture and life to be represented in the crossword. So, I want smart teenagers to be able to do and enjoy the puzzles I edit as well.

ALEX: I admire that. This has been great, but I will ask one more question. You've had some special weeks of puzzles, like the Teen Puzzlemaker Week in 2008, the Half-Century Puzzlemaker Week in 2009, Brown Crossword Week in 2010, and Patrick Berry's "Cross" Word Contest week in 2011. Those were all special, but I can't think of anything more special to crosswords than the hundredth anniversary of the crossword itself this December 21. Do you have anything special planned for it?

WILL: I do have a special crossword planned.

ALEX: I'm just curious... I'm hoping to make my classmates and friends curious. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we stop?

WILL: Ha! I don't know, seems like you've covered things pretty well. If you ever make it to the New York area, you know, stop by my table tennis club. I'm there almost any day, be happy to play with you. And we could take about puzzles besides.

ALEX: I am prepared to lose.

WILL: Ha ha, okay! I remember your ping pong puzzle in high school, so that's pretty cool.

ALEX: I didn't realize at that point that you were a table tennis fan too. So yeah, I got pretty lucky then, and I feel lucky now that I've been given this opportunity to interview you, The Master, The Puzzle Master.

WILL: Oh that's super, thanks a lot, Alex.

ALEX: So, having said all this, it really truly has been an honor, Will. Thank you so much for the time.

WILL: You're very welcome.