

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 I tend to work seven days a week. It's a lot of work, but 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 last Sunday, so I was back in my home state for a few days.

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

WILL: Here's the process, which started gradually. I had a summer intern in 2000, just to help me get through the summer and catch up on mail. I did that for a number of years. Then, around 2006 or 2007, I had a part-time assistant through the whole year, and for the last two years or so, the assistant has been full-time. My assistant right now is Anna Shechtman, who is a *Times* crossword constructor. I'm sure you've seen her work. She's had three crosswords in the *Times* so far, and her September puzzle in the AVX Crossword was declared by Ben Tausig to be the best puzzle of the month. So to summarize, I have an assistant during the full year, and I still have a summer intern. For the last three summers, this has been Joel Fagliano, now a student at Pomona College in California. We've agreed that after Joel graduates this spring, he will work for me full-time. There are other people who help out. Paula Gamache helps me with correspondence. I still look at all the submissions myself, but rather than writing to everybody myself, which is quite time-consuming, I jot my notes about the submissions on the envelopes, and every few weeks Paula comes to my house and takes those envelopes and responds to everybody. There are three test-solvers for the crossword, Frank Longo, Nancy Schuster and Evie Eysenburg, who work at home. After I edit and typeset them puzzles, I send PDFs to the testers and they call me with their comments and suggestions. Frank is very important, because he rechecks every word and fact after me, and if there's an error in the clues, he's the one 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. 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 Ellen is the one most likely to catch that. So that's basically the team – they're all freelance people.

ALEX: Where does Deb Amlen come in?

WILL: Deb Amlen started out simply as Wordplay blogger, but about a year or so ago, she became the production manager of the crossword. She makes sure the puzzle gets distributed to all the outlets that need to have it. Of course, there's print, which I think is automatic, but I don't know for sure. There's also online for solving in Across Lite. Crosswords can also be solved using an app that Peter Ritmeester in

Holland has created, so he gets the puzzle. The puzzles also go to the *New York Times* Syndicate, the Large Print Weekly, and the *International Herald Tribune*, recently renamed the *International New York Times*. The puzzle gets distributed to a lot of places, and Deb is in charge of making sure that gets done. I'm sure there are other duties 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: First of all, the impact of personal computers and the Internet has been huge, in a positive way. Personal computers have aided constructors in creating higher quality grids, with more interesting vocabulary and less crosswordese and obscurity. Personal computers and the Internet have also helped puzzlemakers with the clues. In the old days, before the Internet, I had a huge advantage over other editors, 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 is at your fingertips. Anybody has access to all the information I have, and that 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 used to be that 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. 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?

WILL: Well, the crossword is a profit center for the *New York Times*. I've mentioned that more than 50,000 people have subscribed to the puzzle, and that alone represents a lot of money. The *New York Times* crossword books are the best-selling crossword books in the country, I think, and that represents money for the company. There's the 900-number clue line. The *Times* puzzle also appears in syndication. Someone at the syndicate once told me that the *Times* crossword appears in more than twice as many newspapers than 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: I recognize that more and more people are solving the puzzles electronically, but the vast majority of solvers are still doing them in print, so I am geared for print. If a constructor creates a crossword that Across Lite can't handle, then I just accept that, and we offer a PDF of the puzzle for that day. 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, and 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, there are 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 for newspapers and magazines, but also for online in various ways. There are people who make their living from editing puzzles. Then there's a whole new field of puzzle apps – people can make money from creating a new kind of puzzle that takes off electronically, that consumers 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.

What would be my advice? What I did was very unusual. You know that I have the world's only college degree in Enigmatology, which I got from Indiana University in 1974. 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 and credentials that no one else has. For someone who wants a career in puzzles, the things to do are: #1. Learn your craft, whatever it is – crosswords, electronic puzzles, etc. Learn to do it well. #2. Make connections in the business. Get to know editors. Get to know people in the business. That way, you can sort of create your own position, create your own job.

ALEX: Continuing, if someone became interested in crosswords, the way 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, then that's something you should pursue. There are various aids available. I'd advise you go to Cruciverb.com, which is a crossword destination and forum that hooks you up with lots of other constructors. There's lots of advice there.

I recommend Patrick Berry's book "Crossword Puzzle Challenges for Dummies," which, besides having a lot of good crosswords to solve, has a lot of advice from Patrick on how and where to sell crossword puzzles. That's the best book ever 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: Thanks a lot. I want crosswords to appeal to everybody. I think in the old days crosswords appealed mainly to older folks. My goal has been to have crosswords appeal to everybody. 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.

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, stop by my table tennis club. I'm there almost any day. I'd be happy to play with you, and we could talk about puzzles besides.

ALEX: I am prepared to lose.

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

ALEX: I didn't realize at that point that you were a table tennis fan, too. So, yes, 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: 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.