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## WALTER "ROBBY" ROBINSON

### Quill poses 10 questions to people with some of the coolest jobs in journalism

BY PATRICIA GALLAGHER  
NEWBERRY

On Jan. 6, 2002, the Boston Globe led its Sunday paper with a story that began: "Since the mid-1990s, more than 130 people have come forward with horrific childhood tales about how former priest John J. Geoghan allegedly fondled or raped them during a three-decade spree through a half-dozen Greater Boston parishes."

The Globe would go on to report close to 600 more stories about abusive priests and their victims — and about the archdiocese's monumental failure to address the crisis. For its efforts, the paper won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service Journalism in 2003. And from its efforts came the film "Spotlight," which nabbed Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay Academy Awards on Feb. 29.

Walter "Robby" Robinson, 70, has worked for the Boston Globe for 34 years. Now editor-at-large, he covered four presidential elections and two White Houses, he served as Middle East bureau chief, city editor, assistant managing editor and roving correspondent. He ran the Globe's Spotlight investigative unit for seven years, heading the team that revealed one of the darkest times in the Catholic church in America and how it played out in Boston.

Nine days after a whirlwind trip to Hollywood, Robinson spent a day at Miami University in Ohio, to talk about the film and the journalism that made it possible. These 10 questions were among the many Miami University students asked Robinson in class visits, over meals and at his main talk.

#### Why did it take so long for the Globe's 2002 Spotlight project to be made into a movie?

In 2003, I wrote a piece for Nieman Reports about our coverage. A few years later, Columbia did a case study, which attracted a screenwriter. They signed us up for about the price of a latte. And then they went away for a couple of years. They were trying to sell the concept of the story and get the funding. (Then), they spent weeks and weeks in Boston interviewing us. We were kind of skeptical. Then we realized they actually wanted to tell the story pretty accurately.

#### What finally moved the project forward?

(Actors Michael) Keaton and (Mark) Ruffalo had become friends but had never worked on a film together. Ruffalo read the script, and he called Michael and said 'You've got to read this.' He read it, and the two of them called (director Tom) McCarthy and said, 'We want to do this film.' And then Rachel McAdams, a couple of days later, signed on.

#### Do you have any problems with the movie?

I don't have issues with how I came out. Michael Keaton has less hair than me. Am I going to complain about that? No. (But) it takes

five months of our work and compresses it into two hours and eight minutes. The director did an amazingly good job of making the really tedious work we do look exciting. The part about us using the church directories for clues about bad priests? This is done very dramatically on film in about three minutes, with the scenes going from one of us to another, going through the directories. In real life, it took us three-and-a-half weeks to do that.

**In the film, the characters talk about how the Globe knew about the scandal in the church years before it pursued the story. Can you talk about that?**

The scene in real life didn't happen. We had run a piece inside the paper about a lawyer claiming he had 20 victims. But that clipping never showed up in 2001. None of us remembered it. When Josh Singer, the screenwriter, was doing his research in 2012, everything had been digitized and he actually found the story. He and Tom McCarthy had a view that the Globe had been too deferential to the church for too long and that this story had been buried because of that deference. Singer emailed me the clip. I said, 'Geez, I had just become metro editor about two weeks before that story ran.' So all of a sudden they created a scene in the film. It was part of the narrative about the Globe.

**How did readers react to your 2002 stories?**

We were a story or two into this when it went viral. Within a couple of days, we were getting emails from people in Europe, in Australia, in Latin America, who wanted to tell us their stories about what had happened to them. This was the first investigative story of the Internet Age. If we had published this two years earlier, it wouldn't have gotten near the attention it did.

**And did you really get a flood of calls from victims, as shown in the film?**

The film ends with the phones ringing off the hook. In the next several weeks, just in the Boston Archdiocese, we received calls from more than 300 victims. We interviewed all of them. If you want to have a bad day at the office, try listening to victims tell you what a priest did to them when they were 11 or 12 or 13 years old. Most had never told anyone because they felt such shame and such guilt. I got a call from an 87-year-old man in Millinocket, Maine, who called to tell me what had happened at the hands of a priest in 1926, 75 years earlier when he was 12 years old. He had been depressed his entire life and he had never told anyone until he picked up the phone and called us. The damage that was done over generations was just extraordinary.

**Did the church ever explain itself?**

Yeah, they did. Two days (after the first story), the cardinal had a news conference. He said, 'We're sorry this happened. But before we put Fr. Geoghan back into another parish we had two competent physicians that said he was no threat to children.' Two days later we had a story that said the two competent physicians were, one, his family practitioner, and two, a psychiatrist at a Catholic medical center who had been accused of sexually molesting two of his women patients. When we reported that story, the cardinal's support among the most influential, wealthiest Catholics in Boston kind of evaporated.

**What do you make of the fact that Cardinal Law resigned at the end of 2002?**

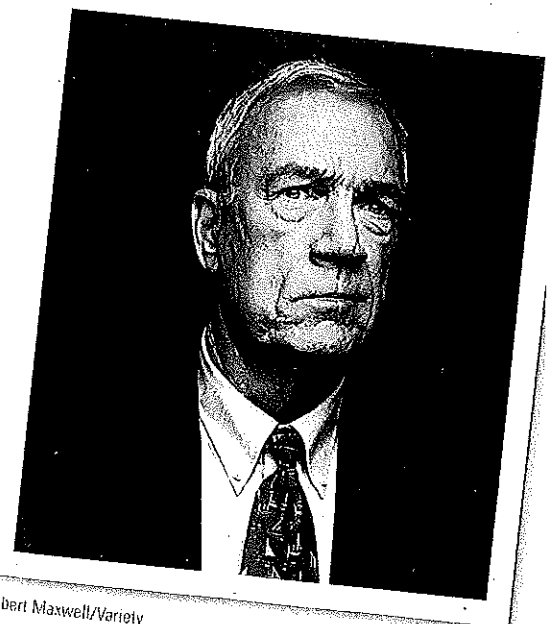
At that point, he had no support in Boston. So it wasn't a huge surprise. The fact that the most senior and prominent American cardinal would be forced out because of what a newspaper did — given that the church doesn't in any way consider itself beholden to or answerable to civil authorities and certainly not the press — was kind of a remarkable moment.

**How have survivors of priest abuse reacted to the film?**

They knew the film was coming. There were advance screenings for some of the leaders. They loved the film. One thing the film does is allow us all to see through the reporters' eyes what happened to people at the hands of priests and to look at it in a way in which we don't have to avert our eyes. If you tried to make a film about what happened to the survivors, no one would finance it.

**What's your secret to getting reluctant sources to talk?**

I try to persuade people that the public has a right to know. I try to appeal to their loftier instincts. I tell them, 'This story is going to come out. You're going to be affected by this story. You need to talk to me. You have to talk to me. You don't want other people who are critical of you to be quoted and for you to say 'No comment.' 'No comment' is never a good answer. ♦



Robert Maxwell/Variety