

What I Wish I Knew Then: Richard Esposito

By Steve Cohen

January 6, 2025

For nearly three years, I've had the remarkable opportunity to interview interesting, successful attorneys about their careers and to learn from them the advice they wish they had received earlier in their career and want to pass on to young lawyers today. I was ready to conduct the next interview—with a well-known attorney—when I was unexpectedly invited to a book party. The author being celebrated was a man I didn't know: Rich Esposito. But the subject of his book was someone I had admired from afar: the newspaper columnist Jimmy Breslin.

It was a relatively small event, maybe 50 people, but the folks in attendance were a "who's who" of journalism and politics. There were Pulitzer Prize recipients rubbing shoulders with Emmy Award winners, with a former U.S. Senator, a CIA spymaster, and a near-billionaire thrown in for color. It didn't take a genius to figure out there was something special about both Rich and his book.

It was the near-billionaire, a recovering attorney and occasional reader of this column, who suggested I interview Rich. His perspectives—as both a consumer and keen observer of the law—might provide a useful perspective. Boy was he right.



Rich Esposito for What I Wish I Knew Then. As you'll see, this one is a bit different: Rich is not a lawyer, but a consumer and keen observer of the law. I focus a bit on his new (terrific) book about Jimmy Breslin.

A Mini-Bio

Rich Esposito likes to say his career was split into two parts: the first half where he spent 17 years working at newspapers and the second half where he spent 18 years as a network television journalist. The bi-fold hinge was a sojourn into the music business and international corporate entrepreneurship. Following his graduation from New York University and briefly pursuing an advanced degree in literature, Rich joined the New York Daily News as a "copyboy," as clerks were called. After a few twists and turns through

other news organizations, his zigzag course took him to New York Newsday where he was part of the team which won a Pulitzer Prize for local reporting: the derailment of a subway train entering the Union Square station. The train driver was drunk and came around a curve too quickly. The train derailed and it resulted in five deaths and 200 people injured.

Rich's segue into television journalism started on September 11, 2001, when he was contacted by ABC News. They needed help on a piece of the unfolding story that no one else seemed able to provide. Rich did, and a few years later, Rich was the network's Senior Investigative Reporter. Later, he moved to NBC News where, where, for nearly four years, he was the senior executive producer for investigations. In that role he built the largest investigative unit of its kind—from the ground up. And after that, just to keep things interesting, Rich served as the deputy commissioner for public affairs and strategic communication for the New York City Police Department. Along the way came a couple of books, and now this one, which is our subject.

What follows are Rich's words, occasionally mangled by my interruptions and transcription.

A Book About Jimmy Breslin

Why a book about anything? Because its important. To me. And I think it is important to you too. This is a book about 50 years of American history, and throughout those years Jimmy was a character at the center of the events that shaped our nation. Nobody is interested in a biography of a person who worked for a thing that no longer exists. It's like writing about the guy who made the hieroglyphics; you want to write about him? No, you want to write about *why* he created the hieroglyphics. In this case, 5,000 newspaper columns.

Jimmy Breslin was the quintessential tabloid columnist. He wrote hard. He drank hard. He

was always on deadline. When he won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary, the committee said it was "for columns which consistently champion ordinary citizens." That didn't come close to what Jimmy did or the impact he had. He championed you. The reader. He wrote for you. And he stood beside you, whether in a polling place or at a bar. One of his very first columns was about the impact this new-fangled device called a television set had when it was first mounted in his local bar. Think about how it changed the way people in that place talked to each other. And think about the writer who asked himself the question, and then did the legwork to answer it. He was 18 years old.

Jimmy probably first achieved national attention when he wrote about JFK's funeral from the perspective of the laborer who dug the grave. The way he wrote it is now a line in a journalism school syllabus: "The Gravedigger." But his real notoriety began when the city was paralyzed with fear by the Son of Sam. Jimmy wrote about it in the Daily News, and unbelievably, the still-at-large serial killer wrote a letter, taunting the police, and announcing that his demons demanded fresh blood, and sent it to Jimmy at the paper. Jimmy was not just a chronicler of history, but a part of it. He was the serial killer's pen pal. His muse.

Learning on the Job

My first job in journalism was at the Daily News. I wasn't a reporter, but a clerk. It was an apprenticeship system. A few people at the newspaper had gone to journalism school, but most of us learned on the job. You didn't just ask questions—you observed. If you were asked to go out to report, you learned to count the stairs in a building and to write down the wattage of the light bulbs. No detail was too small.

That's the way you painted vivid pictures with simple words in short, declarative sentences. This foundation shaped my approach

to reporting: facts matter, details matter, and people matter.

One thing about an apprentice system is that you learn everything—you needed to learn everything if you wanted to succeed—and you needed to things early. It started with little things: don't put your hands in your pockets when you're walking in the newsroom. Always be busy. Roll your sleeves up; nobody, absolutely nobody around here walks around with their cuffs cuffed. Little things like that. Bigger things too: like when you're 22 years old you were expected to work midnight to 8AM, standing on your head. My advice for a young lawyer is simple: understand that every organization has its customs and norms. You might not like them or agree with them; but the people in charge have probably succeeded under them. You might want to change them—you might even be able to change them. The important thing is to be cognizant of them.

It is a different world today. The life of a young journalist today is considerably different than what I experienced. Some of it is change for the better. Some of it is not. Law firms too are changing. But I would hope that first year associates going to law firms realize their experience will be rather different than it is portrayed in Suits.

Thoughts About Journalism

Journalism has changed dramatically over the years. Today, many reporters rarely leave the office, relying too heavily on phones and algorithms. They've lost the essence of being a journalist: observing the world firsthand, building relationships, and understanding the human drama that underpins every story.

You need to live the story. Whether standing in the rain, entering a conflict zone, or spending time with police officers, you build trust and gain access when you are there. I've traveled the world meeting people during quiet times; so that when news broke, they would take my call.

That's the kind of groundwork that's needed. And it is missing today for too many who would try to convince us they are providing us with news.

Many newspapers, starting with The New York Times, have replaced judgment with algorithms. The algorithm is giving you what it has figured out – or what you have told it – you want to hear. You read the paper and go home no smarter than before. When a newspaper makes choices on your behalf—not for you—you should be both surprised and educated. And in addition to being educated by a newspaper, you should be entertained. Unfortunately, as Damon Runyon famously said, most times newspapers have as much humor as an auto accident. Most blog posts have even less. TikTok, God bless, is a place that does educate, does surprise, can make you laugh, and maybe can even give you facts. So there is hope. Fifteen seconds at a time.

Lessons for Lawyers and Journalists

Whether a journalist or a lawyer, the fundamentals are the same: observe and write clearly. Jargon obscures the truth; simplicity communicates it. The best lawyers and journalists I know write in plain English, making their work accessible to anyone. Every piece of jargon avoids the truth. You're not special because you have jargon any more than a priest who speaks Latin is special because he speaks Latin.

I was working at a big record company. A lawyer was writing a contract for Madonna. Well, Madonna needs to read it. The CEO needs to read it, and I need to read it. If you write it in a way that is only meant for lawyers to read, that does me no good; it does the CEO no good; and it does Madonna no good. So, write it in English. That is the single best lesson I could suggest to a lawyer. Write English. It will make you a better lawyer, because the clarity of writing that way will improve your understanding of the law, your client, and the case.

You can't paint the picture in generalities. I once heard a re-write man tell a young reporter covering a fire to go back out and count the number of buildings on the block, the number of stories in the buildings, and note the color of the bricks. Similarly, you want your lawyer—whether criminal or corporate—to know the patterns of the facts that are the bricks of the story. I want that young lawyer to learn how to put together a pattern of facts that tell a compelling story. Obviously, it has to be true; but it also needs to be compelling. That's why Jimmy Breslin sentences seem simple. They are not the story. Those are the courses of bricks that enable you to build the building.

The Lesson of Organizations

A lesson I learned later in life that I wish I had learned earlier is that if you understand how an organization is structured, you will understand how the organization thinks. If you take the NYPD at 54,000 people and put its org chart on top of the org chart for the CIA, you're going to discover they're almost the same. If you take those two and put it on top of the Catholic Church, you will see that the three of them are aligned. Understanding organizational structure is an invaluable tool. If you're going to look at a corporation, you better understand its organizational structure, or you will probably make a mistake—such as making the story too complicated—and that will sink you.

When I did my CIA investigations, first I drew the org chart. Then I put the people in the boxes. And then I tried to figure out who in which box would know what the other guy in the other box knew—and which things they didn't tell each other.

Lawyers and the Media

Should lawyers talk to the media? Absolutely, but only when they understand how the media works: and that is that it is a transactional relationship. Every deal has two sides. You want it to be good for you and your client. But it also has to be good for them. What are you willing to trade? Ethically. Don't make the decision to talk until you can answer that question. Jimmy Breslin once explained to me his relationship with Gov. Mario Cuomo. Jimmy said they had different job descriptions: Mario's was to govern, and Jimmy's was to watch him govern and make sure he was doing a good job. Mario understood this.

On the Importance of Mentors

I've been lucky throughout my career to have been given good advice on both the personal level and on a professional level. This is an important piece of advice I would give a young lawyer: have a mentor, someone who cares about you as a human being and will teach you how to do your job in a way that no school, no book, will ever teach you. I was blessed by having mentors, including former Manhattan District Attorney Bob Morgenthau. The most important lesson he taught me was, there's the law and there's justice, and they're not the same thing. And you should always strive for justice. Not everybody gets that. I just was fortunate.

I learned to be a city editor because I had a mentor who taught me the whole business: how to lay out a paper, how to design it. What makes a good cover story. That's a mentor. If you have a good mentor, you'll grow beyond yourself. You may grow beyond your mentor. Breslin was a mentor. To many. That is one of the important reasons why I wrote this book. To pay it forward.

Steve Cohen is a founding partner at Pollock Cohen.