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How oral storytelling helped a blind man see the Montgomery brawl.

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Andy Slater sometimes misses crucial visual context around major news events because he is blind.

So when the brawl on a Montgomery, Ala., dock last week became social media's dominant topic, Slater took to TikTok with a request: that someone "write and record some kind of image description, narration, some audio description" of the fight.

The response was instantaneous. Thousands of viewers shared his appeal, and hundreds responded, many of them making videos narrating the fight. The outpouring of help moved Slater to both laughter and tears.

"People showed up for me and for the rest of the blind community," the 48-year-old told The Washington Post. "I cried as I watched them."

The fight that sparked Slater's request began when a Black co-captain of the Harriott II Riverboat asked a group of White boaters to move their pontoon boat on a dock at Riverfront Park in Montgomery. The White men attacked him, sparking a massive brawl as onlookers stepped in to help the co-captain. It resulted in assault charges for four of the White boaters and one Black man.

Video of the dock fight recorded from various angles by onlookers quickly went viral, becoming fodder for memes: the Black co-captain tossing his baseball hat into air as the White men began pushing him, a 16-year-old Black boy swimming across the water to the dock to "the rescue of a fellow colleague," and later a Black person using a folding chair to hit more than one White person.

But Slater initially couldn't experience any of this, he said.

He could gather that there was a whole cast of characters involved in the fight, and he wanted to know more, he said, adding that he also wanted this to be a moment to promote access and inclusion for blind people in the conversation.

"Seeing people don't realize that a piece of visual information that seems insignificant to them can really help us picture things," said Slater, a media artist and sound designer who works for an immersive design company. "People don't realize the value of audio descriptive tracks that sound natural."

He said he was moved by how excited people with the ability to see were to make sure that blind people had a seat on the dock.

"These people didn't know me," he said. "But that didn't hold them back from making all kinds of videos, some were very neutral and polite, some were absurd and creative, but all of them were so wonderful."

Slater said one that stood out to him came from Wildlin Pierrevil, a 25-year-old content creator based in New York City.

Pierrevil's interpretation of the Montgomery brawl is from the perspective of the co-captain's hat. With gentle music in the background, Pierrevil uses a soothing tone to describe the events the way a personified hat would have seen them.

The hat, in Pierrevil's narration, doesn't claim to know everything, it appears uncomfortable with the folding chair being used to hit a woman, but it repeats several times that there are a few things "that were absolutely and undeniably true." One was that the "little boat didn't belong in the big boat place."

Pierrevil voices the hat describing the White men attacking the co-captain and about 25 Black people coming to his rescue. It

describes the police arriving and "watching it happen and doing nothing to stop it," until the folding chair was brought into the fight. It notes how crowds on the dock and the "big boat" cheered, clapped and snapped pictures.

The narration is sprinkled with pop culture references and earnest jokes about the hat just wanting to do its job: "blocking the sun out of my guy's eyes."

Pierreil told The Post that Slater's request inspired him to try a kind of oral storytelling that transcended sensory experiences, in the style of a folk tale.

"While writing this, I couldn't stop thinking about American mythology and Black American mythological characters," he said. "Some of whom are real, larger-than-life people who existed, like Harriet Tubman, and others who are mostly made-up, like John Henry."

Pierreil said he tried to imagine a future where the Montgomery brawl's participants as well as objects like the folding chair and the hat, had their stories told as folk heroes.

He said he was thrilled when Slater commented on his video saying he enjoyed it.

Slater said he often feels like he's missing out on context around the news because he is blind. He cited the Jan. 6, 2021, riots as one such moment.

When videos from the Capitol were widely circulating online, Slater said he asked his wife or son for context: "What does Lindsey Graham's face look like right now? Which room have they entered? What kind of hat did you say he is wearing?"

Slater said he wishes that more people whose job involves disseminating the news would create nuanced audio descriptions of events that are of national importance. He said he hoped the response to his request about the Montgomery brawl will help spark more opportunities for all people to gain a deeper understanding of critical events.

"It was a moment where people were happy and TikTok was filled with joy," he said. "I didn't want this moment to get away from my community."

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