

## Meet the Producer: Karla Murthy

*This interview with producer Karla Murthy offers a behind-the-scenes look at the NEED TO KNOW story "Choosing words: The controversy over Texas textbooks."*

***Where did the idea for this story come from? Did you know how this debate impacted schools across the country, or was that something you discovered as your research progressed?***

I grew up in Houston, Texas, and I try to stay informed about what's happening there. Even though I live in New York, I still read the local papers in Houston. I read about this textbook story and I thought it would make a great segment on *Need to Know*, so I pitched it in a meeting. I also pitched it knowing that our then co-host Jon Meacham would be interested in the topic.

When I pitched the story, I didn't know about the impact the Texas State Board of Education had on textbooks nationally—that was something we discovered during our research.

***What was difficult about this piece?***

The most difficult aspect of this piece was going through all the archived hearings of the Texas State Board of Education. There was a lot of footage. Once I selected footage that illustrated the point of the piece, it was really challenging because I had to further narrow down the clips to the most understandable examples (e.g. the controversial amendments to the social studies standards).

***What kind of feedback did you receive about this segment after it aired? Does most of the feedback come in via the website? Do you ever respond to the feedback?***

The viewers were overwhelmingly outraged by this controversy. They could not believe this could happen in the United States.

Don McLeroy contacted us after the piece aired. He was really happy about the piece. I feel like that's the sign of a successful piece—when you present two sides and they both feel like they've been heard. It made me feel like I had done my job.

***Briefly describe the path that led you to a career in journalism and to the Need to Know team.***

I did not major in journalism as an undergraduate. When I graduated from college, I thought I would go into academia, but then I realized that a lot of what I was interested in (in terms of graduate-level research) would make for great documentaries. I was living in New York and I started taking classes all over the city, and then I got a job in 2000 working for Bill Moyers. I learned on the job and I learned so much from working with Bill Moyers. I would often write an alternate script for a piece someone else produced as a way to practice and gain experience. It really helped me grow in my field—I did a lot of things like that.

***Is there anything about this story that you think would be helpful for high school students to know?***

I think it's important to understand that there is a lot that goes into education and into what students learn in the classroom. I think students need to understand that there might be an agenda behind what they learn. It's important to recognize that there are other forces at play in the classroom that students





might not be aware of. It's essential that students keep their minds open and question everything. Question what you read, what you see and always look for more information—even outside of your classroom. Don't just rely on your textbook.

In terms of the process of doing the piece, it's always important that people go back to the source. In our case, it was the hearings. You have to put in the hard work and the time to really go and listen to what everyone was really saying in those hearings. I really wanted the piece to be different from other pieces that had already been done on the textbooks. I felt it was really important to capture what was going on in those hearings and highlight what was really being said in those meetings—which is what I thought was lacking in the other pieces I'd seen on this topic.

***Is there anything you would change about the piece?***

The work is never done. Weeks after the piece, I'm still re-editing it in my head. For example, I recently watched the piece again and, structurally, I would move the piece around. The last character I introduced, Thomas Ratliff—I think it would have been better to introduce him earlier in the piece so that the viewer would know right away that there was a race going on. I think it would have been helpful to know that there was a counterpoint to Don McLeroy's point of view earlier on, outside of the school board, and then leave the results of the race hanging until the end of the piece. I think it would have been nicer to have the two candidates back-to-back towards the beginning when they were talking about their religious beliefs. They both consider themselves very religious but they come at it in very different ways (in terms of how it influences their political work.) I do think I would have put him (Thomas Ratliff) higher in the piece, so that he's not this little self-contained third act.

***Do you have advice for young people interested in journalism?***

Find pieces and documentaries that you like, find the producers and ask them lots of questions about how they did what they did. For me, because I didn't go to journalism school, that's how I learned. I had to really watch and observe how other people did it. Also, if I was working with a producer, I would often write my own script to gain writing experience and try to figure out how I would do the piece. There's a million ways to produce a piece. I would try to figure it out and I would do it too, just to get practice.

**Karla Murthy** is an emmy-nominated producer for the weekly television news program *Need to Know*. Prior to that, she worked at *NOW on PBS* and for Bill Moyers' production company Public Affairs Television beginning in 2000. She has produced pieces on topics including unemployment, homelessness, education, and the military.