

## NEWS

# A San Francisco lawyer-turned-journalist captures the coronavirus era in 'social cartoons'

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Joe Dworetzky will wrap up a one-year master's program in journalism at Stanford University this spring, and like college students across the country, he'll finish it at home.

Unlike many of them bound for the start of their careers, Dworetzky — who's in his sixties — will look for work in his second.

Dworetzky moved to San Francisco in 2011 from Philadelphia, where he worked as a city solicitor under then-Mayor Ed Rendell. He also served from 2009-13 on the School Reform Commission, set up in the early 2000s to oversee Philadelphia's troubled public school system.

After relocating to California, Dworetzky began exploring his new city through drawings that later became editorial cartoons. They've appeared in SF Weekly, The Huffington Post and The Peninsula Press.

Amid the coronavirus outbreak and stay-at-home orders, Dworetzky has turned his attention to how we are living and coping through these strange days. I talked to Dworetzky about his second career and pivot toward COVID-19 cartooning. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

### **Q: What prompted you to go back in to cartooning and when did that start?**

A: I had been a lawyer for many years and then I started to write fiction. I did a young adult book and I worked with an illustrator who was terrific, but I found it was hard to tell somebody what you wanted your illustrations to look like. So I got this idea that I would just try to see if I could learn how to do it. This was maybe five years ago.

And I started just drawing figures of people, and portraits, but in a cartoon-like way. And to kind of encourage myself to go forward, I decided I'd put one up on my website every day. But they were so bad. I mean literally, I was just starting from ground zero. They were just horrific. And so I started writing a little text, you know, sort of like a T-shirt slogan like in the corner, as a way to distract from the art. And I was probably doing it for six months, I was posting every day... And started to see it as its own thing, separate from writing fiction.

### **Q: Are you a lifelong drawer, was this something that you came in to later? How did that come about?**

A: No, I was just a doodler. You know as a lawyer you go into endless meetings and I often just filled my scrap pad or my legal notes with doodles but that's the only thing I had done before. it's not something you can pick up overnight. I'll never be what I would like to be but I've had a lot of fun with it.

### **Q: What were some of the subjects of your first cartoons?**

A: I started doing social cartoons. I had moved to San Francisco from the East Coast and you know it was 2011, sort of the height of the tech boom and I felt sometimes I had moved to another country. You know, ways that people interacted were different. The tech (sector) was rising in such a powerful way that there just seemed so many things to

lampoon. And so I would walk around the city, learning where I was living and ideas for cartoons would come up all the time. So I would do little social cartoons of what people were doing day-to-day.

**Q: What was it like when President Trump came in? I know that's just given so many artists so much material to work with. Did you notice a shift in your work? Or energy?**

A: I don't want to be too political but I found that the biggest problem with it was that you weren't even cartooning. You were just writing down what people were saying because it was so cartoonish.

I remember a cartoon I did about a father talking to his son and telling him to go out and have a good time but don't go to, and then I had a laundry list of all the places where there had been mass shootings. It was a dark cartoon but also it just felt to me like it was just organic from what was going on then and it was on my mind all the time.

You know you may remember in that period there was a proposal that the way to counteract shootings in schools was to arm teachers. Which, I don't know, having been on a school board and around schools for a lot of my life it just seemed to me insane.

You write down and just put those words in a cartoon and that's all it is.

**Q: So now coronavirus is taking the majority of your time?**

A: When I got isolated here in San Francisco I had a really really, really blue day, I was so bummed I wasn't going to be able to finish my year in person and just like every one of us trying to process what this meant — the kids coming back, and our empty nest is no longer an empty nest. I mean, it's just a lot of stuff and I was really blue. The next day I woke up and said, 'I am not going to waste this time. I'm going to do something.' ...

Once I decided to get into it and free from a lot of distractions, I did a lot of cartoons, I've probably done close to 50 and I seem to have a lot of energy to keep at it. My thesis at Stanford is going to use some of those cartoons together with interviews of people about their shelter experience and put it together in a monograph and see how that comes out.

**Q: A lot of your cartoons seem to focus on dating, relationships, intimate encounters. Is that just what's on your mind, is that personally what's happening?**

A: It's not happening to me personally but I think it's always on everybody's mind. You know, connections between people are what drives us as humans. I also think we've come at a funny time. I mean, we used to think online dating was kind of a joke. Now you realize all relationships are online, we've transformed the whole interaction to that so it seems like talking about dating, relationships is a good way to maybe raise some ideas that are broader than just the two people in the cartoon.

**Q: Do you have a favorite cartoon or one that you really felt when you finished, this really resonated with me.**

A: There's one I did, really early on in this experience, it's called the inner life. It's about some indeterminate person just reflecting of all the different things that are going on and at the end of it concluding, 'Wow, this like, sheltering is really good for your inner life. It's just like meditation.'

It kind of reflected the idea that I was, and I think maybe people are, in somewhat new terrain. It's a time to reflect and to take account of what your emotions are and what you're feeling and what concerns you. That cartoon felt pretty true to that.

**Q: You mentioned you'll be finishing your graduate program off campus. What's that's been like?**

A: If you think about, is it as good as it would have been, it's a bad answer. But if you think about, is going to school online better than just sitting around and worrying it looks pretty good viewed that way. You have to look at it that way.

For me, the biggest loss is I am three times older than the youngest person in my cohort of 20 grad students that are in the journalism program and twice as old as the oldest person. I didn't really know (going in) how it would all work. It's just been so extraordinary.

I've made great friends and have felt so good about being able to relate to people who I really am impressed with, who are so smart and focused and just fit in as another person, not as a person whose their father's age and it's nice. We try to do stuff on Zoom, we have cocktails and we have a study group that gets together so we do the best we can for it, but that's the big loss for me.

**Q: So what do you hope to do with this degree and where do you go next.**

A: I was an intern last summer at the LA Times and I was on the metro desk and worked for a terrific editor, Hector Becerra, who's a city editor. He's taciturn and he's very busy so being your first real job in journalism for him was a great experience.

I think what I learned from it was probably what works best for me is either feature writing or long-form. I've taken a number of courses now at Stanford on data journalism and investigative journalism and I kind of want to do that in long-form context. I don't know there's a lot of jobs for someone my age coming straight out of school but I do think if I can make relationships with people I can freelance and hopefully have a place for my work.

My long term goal is to find a way to integrate the drawing and cartooning with the stuff that I'm writing and I've found that there's receptivity to that among editors that I've talked to.

*Arlene Martínez writes the In California newsletter. Sign up now for free weekday delivery to your inbox.*