It was July 16, 2010 and Joyce Nelson-Crockett’s face lit up with a brief but glimmering smile on recognizing his name. Kaylie Simon had just told her of the recent contact she had with Ronald Dugger, the journalist who in October 1955, had investigated and written about the racially motivated shootings that occurred in Rusk County, Texas. When Simon suggested the two could connect by phone, Nelson-Crockett’s response made clear the lasting impact Dugger had on her. Although 55 years

* Information for this article was gathered over the course of two interviews with Mr. Dugger on June 25, 2010 and July 29, 2010, as well as a firsthand account of a trip to East Texas from July 15 – 17.
had passed, Nelson-Crockett could still vividly recall answering the man’s questions at her house in the days following the shootings, and until Simon clarified his identity as a journalist, Nelson-Crockett had thought Dugger was an agent of the FBI. Perhaps it was the probing nature of his questions and his obvious desire to uncover the truth that led her to believe he was a public official. While the actual public officials and institutions of Texas sat idly by and did nothing to further the case, Ronnie Dugger, the founding editor of a weekly newspaper called the *Texas Observer*, was one of the few white people in East Texas who actively sought out the truth.

In the days and months following the shootings, Dugger’s investigative work and articles in the *Texas Observer* exposed the deeply embedded racism, corruption, and hypocrisy of the Texas criminal justice system. His work was the primary impetus for the involvement of the Texas Rangers, which led to the criminal prosecution of one of the shooters, Perry Dean Ross. Dugger could not have known, however, that his pursuit of truth in 1955 would guide and motivate the work of a Northeastern law student’s work in 2009 and 2010, and that at 82, he would once again become actively involved in the pursuit of justice for Joyce Nelson-Crockett and the community they once shared.

In June 2009, Simon began looking into the death of John Earl Reese as a third-year law student working for the Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project (CRRJ). Initially, the only information she found was a few brief sentences in an anthology of violence in America. With the help of an archivist, Simon uncovered the court documents and investigative files, and after Dugger read about Simon’s activities, he gave her the articles he had written for the *Texas Observer*. The articles told the
complete story of the shootings, and provided a detailed account of a social and political environment shaped by a deep fear of desegregation.

With such information in hand, Simon was able to begin her investigation in earnest. She contacted Nelson-Crockett and others from the community, and eventually arranged a trip to the Longview area to continue her investigation. While in Texas, Simon spoke with them about possible legal and non-legal remedial measures that could be pursued for Nelson-Crockett. It soon became apparent that neither civil nor criminal remedies were available, but the possibility of exploring community-based restorative responses seemed to be taking root.

Shortly after Simon returned to Boston, Professor Margaret Burnham, the founder of CRRJ relayed to her a remarkable piece of information. Ronnie Dugger happened to be living and working in Cambridge, MA and was interested in meeting to talk about the case. Whether divine intervention, random chance, or something in between, Dugger’s geographic proximity and desire to participate was a most-encouraging development.

Several weeks prior to leaving for East Texas again, Simon and a fellow law student, Nataniel Johnson-Gottlieb, met Dugger for dinner. They talked for several hours, paying scant attention to the meals in front of them. Dugger’s steadfast commitment to truth and justice that was so readily apparent in his 1955 coverage seemed to have only become more resolute and focused over time. “[T]hey’re all perpetrators. Everybody on the jury is a perpetrator, the defense attorney. Every one of them, ethically,” he exclaimed while reflecting on the continuing need for accountability in the case.
Dugger relayed many other personal anecdotes about his coverage of the shootings that didn’t make it into the articles. He told Simon and her colleague that he was accused of “suppressing evidence in a murder trial” and had to appear before a grand jury. Apparently, he had lost some bullet shells he collected from the scene of the shooting. When District Attorney Ralph Prince subpoenaed Dugger and asked what he had done with them, Dugger said, “I lost them, but on the way over here I picked up some more and there’s plenty more out there if you want to get some.” He had noted early on in his investigation that Perry Dean Ross and Joe Reagan Simpson were the likely culprits. This was many weeks before they had been indicted. At the grand jury he told Prince that “If anyone is obstructing justice, its not me!” Finally, Dugger offered Simon and Johnson-Gottlieb advice on how to approach potentially difficult interviewees in their upcoming trip, suggesting they make it “an objective discussion about progress,” in which you “save the toughest questions for last.”

The students left the dinner amazed to have received such invaluable strategic advice from a man with intimate knowledge of the case and of the community from so many years ago, and were captivated by the depth and breadth of wisdom amassed over the course of his lifetime. Yet, they were left wondering what motivated him to pursue such a career. Why did this young white man choose to leverage his privilege to fight against injustice in 1950s East Texas, and how did those experiences inform the rest of his life’s work? Simon and Johnson-Gottlieb quickly arranged to meet with Dugger for a second time. Over the course of the meal, Dugger relayed a number of telling facts and anecdotes that began to shed some light on their questions.
He was born in Chicago on April 16, 1930 and was raised by a Scottish mother and Texan father in San Antonio. Dugger both condemns and credits the impact that his Catholic education and upbringing had on who he became. While bitter about the “intellectual abuse” he says he experienced, his Catholic upbringing gave him the framework and sensibilities to identify injustice and work to change it at an early age. Dugger told the two law students that he remains grateful to the Church because he was “poured in an ethics-seeking mold.”

He was also a naturally intelligent child and a gifted student. At age 8, his teacher would let him spend much of his school days writing poetry in the corner of the classroom, and when the teacher left the room, students would line up to hit him over the head with their books, but he would continued to write. In high school, he won two national debate championships and a national student journalism award, and was editor of the school paper. He went on to edit The Daily Texan at the University of Texas and was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, where he studied politics and economics.

Eventually, he decided against an academic career, citing to Simon and Johnson-Gottlieb that his reasons for making the decision were the unpleasant internal politics, the lack of personal freedom, and his “contempt for pretension and authority.” Dugger then tried his hand at law school, lasting only three days. When a teacher told him and his classmates that as lawyers, they would be “officers of the law,” he recalls feeling “straight-jacketed” by that prospect, thinking “I don’t want to enforce the law. I want to change it.” It became clear to Simon and Johnson-Gottlieb that Mr. Dugger has always been unwilling to make ethical compromises and valued his ability to work independently. “I would rather disappear than not do my own work,” he declared.
The law students heard example after example of a prolific and uncompromising career as a journalist and author that spans over six decades. He spent more than 40 years as the publishing editor of the *Texas Observer* and has authored many books and hundreds of widely published articles. Dugger readily acknowledged to Simon and Johnson-Gottlieb that while his accomplishments are no doubt admirable, they have been enabled to a certain extent by the privilege that comes with being a highly educated white man in America. Yet the courage and significance of his work should not be doubted.

Dugger has dedicated the majority of his life to the pursuit of justice. He and a handful of others like him who reported on the massive anti-civil rights violence in the South played an essential role in establishing an accurate historical account of our nation’s violent past. Like Mr. Dugger, their work was often a significant motivating factor in the pursuit of criminal accountability. They risked and sometimes lost their lives in order to reveal the truth.

Yet all too often, despite the work of investigative journalists like Dugger, crimes went unpunished. Nelson-Crockett’s story is a striking example of this. Perry Dean Ross and Joe Reagan Simpson’s conduct left John Earl Reese dead at age 16, injured Johnnie Nelson at age 15, and left Ms. Nelson-Crockett at age 13 with a life-long debilitating physical injury. Yet Ross, convicted of murder, received only a 5-year suspended sentence and spent no time in jail while Simpson’s indictment was dismissed. Nelson-Crockett has endured a lifetime of guilt, deep sadness, and bitterness, and for decades, those responsible for her trauma, both individuals and institutions, have remained silent. While Ms. Nelson-Crockett’s courageous spirit and charming wit are a testament to the
capacity for human perseverance, it is intolerable that she and countless others will go their entire lives without justice and reconciliation.

That is what makes the story of Ronnie Dugger, Kaylie Simon, and Joyce Nelson-Crockett so compelling. A journalist’s work in 1955, continued by a law student in 2009, has finally yielded results. In October 2010, on the 55th anniversary of the shooting, a plaque will be unveiled at the Henderson Public Library in Rusk County memorializing John Earl Reese and honoring Joyce Nelson-Crockett. The mayor of Rusk County will issue a formal proclamation condemning the murder and assaults, and other public officials will address the community. Additionally, the county road where some of the shooting occurred will be renamed after Reese, and his gravestone will be replaced by one properly honoring his life.

Joyce Nelson-Crockett and Ronnie Dugger did end up speaking on the phone that July day. They spoke of their children and grandchildren, their experiences with the Northeastern law students, and last but not least, they made plans for Dugger to attend the October event. Over half-a-century later, Ronnie Dugger and Joyce Nelson-Crockett will be brought together once again.