

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 38
Mara Silvers

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today, I speak with Mara Silvers of Montana Free Press. Mara and her colleagues have teamed up with Montana Public Radio and Yellowstone Public Radio to produce a second season of the amazing Shared State, a podcast about the strange political moment we're living through.

Mara Silvers There are stories in Montana's history and in Montana's present that transcend this level of partisanship and being shut off from one another. There are stories that just challenge that. And let's go find them.

Justin Angle Season one went deep on the meaning of Montana values in the lead up to the 2020 election. Season two, which just released, explores some of Montana's messiest political quagmires and the people trying to find their way through. Mara, thanks for coming on the show.

Mara Silvers Thank you so much for having me.

Justin Angle So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Mara Silvers I grew up in Helena, Montana, and I think I'm used to saying Helena, Montana is like a full location and since I lived out of state for so long.

Justin Angle You've got to put the state there as well?

Mara Silvers Yeah, but yeah, I grew up in Helena, and my parents are mental health professionals, so my mom's a licensed clinical social worker. My dad was a licensed clinical therapist for a long time. Now he's a school counselor, so maybe a different kind of stress, I guess, from from the work he used to do. But yeah, and my sister's actually a school counselor as well. So everybody is kind of a social worker or a mental health professional.

Justin Angle Yes. So you escaped that, you know, family trend in employment. Tell us about your path into journalism.

Mara Silvers I wanted to go into journalism, went from a pretty young age, like, when I was in high school, I remember telling people that I wanted to be a journalist. And that was at a time when the newspaper industry especially was going through such a low point that people kind of gave me this, you know, weirded out look of like, why would you want to go into such an unstable industry? But. But I always just kind of wanted to be able to be curious for a living.

Justin Angle Right.

Mara Silvers And and get to talk to people about whatever they're interested in and the lives that they're leading. But then I, you know, I kind of went a different path when I got into college, I was like looking more into nonprofit work and eventually circled back around to storytelling. It just felt like the right calling for me, and I think a great opportunity to be creative and and communicate through written and spoken words. But still be really tied into real urgent, you know, real life issues as they were coming up for different people. So, yeah, so I did some campus publications when I was in college and then eventually got really hooked on podcasts as as I'm sure so many people have. And I came back to work for Montana Public Radio as an intern in the summer of 2016, and that was my first real experience doing radio.

And I was obsessed. It just felt like the coolest medium to work with words like that. So after that, I just kind of stuck with radio for a while.

Justin Angle Mm-Hmm. You went to New York City and then with WNYC and a brief stint at Slate. Tell us about those experiences.

Mara Silvers Oh my gosh. Yeah, it feels like it was the longest and shortest chunk of my life, both at the same time. It happened so fast, but they were really rich, transformative years for me. So, yeah, I went out to New York to work as an intern on The Takeaway, a national news show. And pretty soon after that, you know, WNYC is this amazing organization because there's so many shops that are under one roof, right? So there's always like different shows that are looking for producers or looking for part time, you know, workers for different projects that are coming up. So it's just an amazing, creative environment to be in and definitely was around 2017. So The Takeaway is right next door to the WNYC newsroom, which is like the local NPR station for the New York City metro area. I didn't know anything about New York City politics or New York state politics, but I was really curious about becoming a better producer at the time. And so they were looking for somebody who could be a stand in producer on their All Things Considered program. So I did that on a freelance basis for a couple of months and then eventually just kept kind of like warming my way into the door. I think like first, first a toe and then a foot and then an elbow. And after a while, they they hired me full time and I got to be a producer on the evening news for about two years. And then rotate through being a general assignment reporter every once in a while. So sometimes I'd be on my way into work and my editor would call me and say, I need you to go down to, you know, the Southern District of New York's headquarters because the attorney general is giving a press conference on something. And I'd suddenly be in a world of, you know, a white collar criminal investigation that prosecutors were getting ready to unveil. So it's just a huge, a hugely diverse learning experience, both from a political angle and from a technical skills angle of just learning radio and learning how to do that and be a local news contributor among some of the most experienced reporters I've ever an editors I've ever worked with.

Justin Angle And now you're back at Montana Free Press in Helena and tell us about the issues that you're particularly interested in. What's your what's your beat?

Mara Silvers So I've always been interested in Health and Human Services reporting, maybe not surprisingly given that's my my parents background and kind of what I the shop talk that I grew up around, so to speak. But I think in Montana, that can look like so many different things because those are issues that overlap with all of these different systems. So I've been doing a lot of COVID reporting. But then also doing different, different looks at Montana's mental health care systems or the lack thereof in some in some situations. The gaps in systems that people are trying to plug and different ideas that they have for fixing them. So it really spans spans quite a few different topics. And then, of course, as you know, a lot of people might expect, it's difficult to be a reporter in Helena and not get pulled into political news, especially with new administrations and the recent 2020 election and the legislative session. So I definitely have my fair share of political reporting. That's just part of my my daily life, too.

Justin Angle Yeah. So that's maybe a great moment to pivot the conversation to Shared State, this amazing collaboration. Let's start there. Like how did this kind of collaboration among the many amazing public media outlets, nonprofit media outlets in the state of Montana come together?

Mara Silvers So I came on to Montana, a free press in May of 2020. And pretty soon we had the primary that just landed, you know, in the middle of the news cycle. And after the primary in June, we were looking at all these candidates and listening to all of the the talking points that they were giving about why they were going to be the best candidate for their office for the state of Montana. And for so many of them, they kind of came back around to this, this refrain about Montana values and how they would be the best candidate to support Montana values. And it just kind of felt like we were in this moment of needing to step back and question that premise a little bit. Like, what our what our Montana values? But also, why is that

such a relied upon phrase for politicians who are trying to communicate to Montanans, right? Trying to communicate to their constituents.

So I kind of got this this idea in my brain that we could have an opportunity if we worked with our, you know, independent nonprofit media partners who also got to make creative work like us. We could step back and question that premise a little bit and not not take the bait of just assuming sure, like you have an idea of Montana values, that's true for you. So we started having these conversations about broadening our election coverage to be a little bit more narrative focused, to be an audio project that got to tell stories about the political moment that we were in in Montana in 2020 and through a lot of conversations with Montana Public Radio and in Yellowstone Public Radio, we started thinking about how we could dig into the idea of Montana values and what people what issues Montanans care about outside of such a polarized black and white kind of lens. And that's really the whole idea behind Shared State is just not starting from the presumption that everything is automatically polarized. Looking at the issue first and looking at the history of the issue first to try to see if we can just get into the nuance and get into the gray area first instead of a this side or that side, this party or that party focus. So it was actually Corin Cates-Carney who came up with the idea for the first season to look at the Montana Constitution as a framework for what what our Montana values. So we base the whole season kind of around the themes and the values that are laid out in the preamble to the Constitution as a way to to try to understand what Montanans care about. And that brought us all the way up to election season. And then after that, we were all sucked into the legislative session pretty quickly. So we kind of had to step back from the project and just focus on the fire hose and the news that was coming out.

Justin Angle Yeah, yeah. And so here you are. You know, season two just released and folks can binge it because I saw all seven episodes, right, dropped just today that we're recording?

Mara Silvers Eight episodes.

Justin Angle Eight episodes. OK, so miscounted. I mean, season two is fantastic. I encourage folks to well, I'm not going to say, listen, right now, maybe finish this the show and then and then head over to Shared State. But but anyway, the second season as amazing a conceit as Montana values were for season one, this notion of thorny political quagmires for season two is really powerful, and I think it kind of like does a symbol, it does the similar work of framing issues as not necessarily automatically black or white or polarizing. So I mean, they're they're certainly polarizing, but it's not automatically black or white. Tell us about season two and how you arrived at that idea.

Mara Silvers Yeah. So I remember this. This meeting that we had in the spring of 2021 after the legislative session was was wrapping up. And it was a bunch of, you know, team members from our three organizations who are on that call hashing out just what we were observing in the political moment. And everyone sounded. So I think I think this is OK for me to say everyone sounded so tired. I don't I don't think that that was just because we had just come off the legislative session. It seemed like so many people who are covering news for a living were looking at the politics of the political moment that we were in and just feeling exhausted. Because there was so much this feeling of stuckness of so many issues that people were just their heels were dug in, they were looking at each other from across some kind of barrier and just either yelling at each other or feeling so tired that they were throwing up their hands and everybody was walking away, instead of being able to have some other kind of interaction around a political issue. We started trying to explore that a little bit and see how we could create a series that was listenable, like it wasn't just negative and sad and depressing.

Justin Angle Yeah, I mean, the number of the number of story and headlines I see in the media that sort of sort of are some variation of everything is terrible.

Mara Silvers Right.

Justin Angle I mean, I don't recall living through a period of a couple of years where it's just like that, and I understand all the incentives in for profit media to kind of drive that kind of storytelling. But yeah, this is, uh, thankfully a departure from that. It's very accessible.

Mara Silvers That's I'm glad to hear you say that. That was part of our motivation. We were thinking about the the tone and the tenor of the political moment that we were all observing squared with just what we know to be true about our state and about the people that we've met in this state. Our neighbors, you know, legislators, we've watched for decades. And I think that there was just kind of this feeling of like like there are stories in Montana's history and in Montana's present that transcend this level of partizanship and being shut off from one another. There are stories that just challenge that and let's go find them and weave them together to be our second season. So that was the idea.

Justin Angle Yeah. So maybe let's dig into a couple of those stories. And when you talk about water, pandemic, Badger-Two Medicine, conservation. Yeah, where should we start? What are some of the issues that just captivated you in this whole series?

Mara Silvers So originally, I think I was expecting that the stories that we're going to come back to us, we're going to be a little bit more nitty gritty, local disputes about, you know, neighbors who I had never heard of before. You know, like the school superintendent and circle having, you know, a debate with his school board back in the 90s. Like, I was imagining these really super local nitty gritty stories. And really what we got more of was people coming with these these big sweeping problems and and debates that were just had had a type of longevity, I guess, that had that have lasted for decades. And it makes sense that reporters were bringing back those stories and they ended up being so rich and and exciting to dig into. But some of them, of course, are about environmental themes. Some of them two of the episodes are about affordability and about figuring out where you can live in Montana these days, when the cost of living is changing so much. We definitely knew that we had to hit on the pandemic and some of the culture wars that have come out of COVID policies. And so those

are just a brief sampling, but they definitely are these big picture themes that are rooted in local communities and with real people who have been dealing with them for a long time.

Justin Angle We'll be back to our conversation with Mara Silvers after this short break.

Welcome back to New Angle. I'm speaking with Mara Silvers of Montana Free Press about the current season of Shared State.

Yeah, maybe without giving too much away for listeners, can we dig in to the Badger-Two Medicine story?

Mara Silvers Yeah, great episode.

Justin Angle I mean, that episode does such a good job of kind of illustrating these complex issues where I learned some so many layers to this that I hadn't considered before maybe set the stage for listeners on what to expect. Why is that issue particularly compelling and complicated?

Mara Silvers Yeah. So that comes to us from reporter Aaron Bolton from Montana Public Radio, and it was edited by Nikki Willette, who used to be the news director at Yellowstone Public Radio and freelanced with us on this project. So Aaron had had this story and this idea of saying, you know, the Badger-Two Medicine has gone through so much political turmoil in the last couple of decades. And of course, because it's this incredibly beautiful, sacred area of wilderness. Sacred to Blackfeet Nation, but also to so many conservationists and people who care about that ecosystem, which is right next to Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall wilderness. So Aaron knew that this was a really a hot-button issue, I guess kind of place, and he wanted to go back to understand where there had been agreement and and coalescence around how to protect the Badger from oil leases, oil and gas leases. And then what happened since since that victory, so to speak, like the fight that so many people were involved in to get

rid of the oil and gas leases on in the Badger and then what those stakeholders are trying to do to figure out the future of the place. And that's where the disagreement really starts to become clear. So one of the things that I loved about this episode is that Aaron was able to show he was able to show that there was both both things happening. There was a period of a lot of agreement and a lot of shared values for how to protect this land. And then there has been and as episode, we'll get into a big shift both politically and I think just in the opportunity of the moment that many members of Blackfeet Nation see right now before then, as as what they can do to advance their ownership of this track of land that used to be part of their boundaries.

Justin Angle And so the reclaiming of that sovereignty really is a big issue, and it gets sort of gets catapulted through the social upheavals that we've experienced in summer 2020. And talk about some of the conflict between conservation interest. I mean, there's there's differences in how we approach conservation in general and in that area in particular. That and then conservation again is a concept that's sort of antithetical to some indigenous belief systems. So yeah, it's a really messy, in a good way, issue?

Mara Silvers Yeah. One of the I think moments in that episode that just struck me so much was when we, Aaron and I, went up to Browning to interview several people for this episode. And I was his, you know, kind of field producer, so to speak. And we interviewed a lawyer and a tribal traditionalist and Browning named Joe McKay, who comes in and about the middle of the episode. And I remember sitting in that interview just really having the sense that Joe was very firmly taking the perspective that he saw us bringing to the interview and just turning it like almost like you would a globe, right? You know, you you turn the globe and you see a completely different part that you hadn't seen before. I will just say, like for me personally, there were some times in interviews where you just sit back on your heels and you're like, I'm having my mind blown right now. And it was it was a very humbling experience for me. And you can hear Joe, I won't give too much away, but you can hear Joe when he greets us. And when he brought us into his house, he said, let's sit down and figure out what we're talking

about. And it was it was a reframing of of the issue before we even really got into the subject matter. And I think that I guess I'll just leave it there to say that he really represents a different way of looking at an issue that I think a lot of people might think that they already know the story about. And I really appreciate that he was able to do that.

Justin Angle That is powerful. I often find that in these, you know, these interviews that I do for this show is like when somebody kind of rejects the premise of your question, it just sort of it is kind of unsettling in the moment, but it is. It is the stuff of opening your mind to new ideas and new ways of thinking,

Mara Silvers yeah, it makes me think actually, when you say it that way, it makes me think of the way that we start the season with political scientist and professor Jessie Bennion, who is such a refreshing political analyst for me to listen to because she is, she is, I think, also used to looking at partizanship and then trying to figure out how to go a different way, or at least how to approach an issue with like fresh eyes and and and fresh ears. She talks about welcoming her students into class into a new semester when she's teaching. I think public administration and how she just asks her students to consider being curious and humble and entering the conversation with humility first, and how that could help us get out of the preset black or white way of thinking about something. And I think that whether or not we intentionally crafted it this way, we have a lot of people featured in these episodes who return us to that offer, I guess, again and again throughout their episodes and throughout the exploration of the issues that they they care about.

Justin Angle Yeah, I mean, that was such an interesting choice. I'd love to hear kind of your thoughts about how it came to be for episode one, kind of focusing on this interaction between some locals and Livingston and Tucker Carlson and his daughter, I believe, who were, you know, traveling through town to go on a fly fishing trip and they had a confrontation. And then in classic Montana's style that the two folks sort of went off the grid for a while after that.

Mara Silvers Into the literal river of no return wilderness, which I just thought was such a good detail.

Justin Angle And they did return. So the thing they're that's interesting is you have this series that is premised on the notion of these complicated issues with no clear sides. And then you introduce this character, Tucker Carlson, is instantly polarizing to everybody, kind of has an opinion about this guy like him or hate him or love him. Talk about that choice and how it was a great vehicle for actually demonstrating some of the complexity here.

Mara Silvers This is Nick Mott's episode who's my co-host in the season and and our editor and editor of so many amazing Montana-based projects, really. In case you don't know, anybody who likes Montana-based podcast usually has Nick Mott to think in some capacity. But so Nick brought this story about, you know, this flashpoint moment that people might have seen across their social media feeds of like, 'Oh my gosh, Montana's man is trending on Twitter'. He somebody got in a fight with Tucker Carlson and a fly shop in Livingston. What is happening, like, is this part of a fever dream? Like, what's going on? So people might have seen that and they might remember that. But Nick's story, it was really about what happened afterwards and what happened to that couple after they realized that they had become a political flashpoint, like, they were now at the center, they were in the eye of the storm. So I think a lot of people, probably, like you mentioned, have really strong feelings about Tucker Carlson. They have strong feelings about Dan Bailey, the guy who who went up to him and started this confrontation in the fly shop. But I think that the episode, if you can bear with it, is really not about Tucker or Dan.

Justin Angle No.

Mara Silvers It's about everybody else who got sucked into this moment. And I think in the reactions to that video just reaffirmed the incredible political divide and aggressive feeling of confrontation that's gripping so much of our politics these days. And it was the reaction to the

thing that I think is really worth digging into. And there's a part of, again, kind of just going back to the wonders of audio and why audio is such an amazing medium. But there's a section of that episode that's a montage of news clips and political commentary that came out in response to that video created by our amazing producer and editor, Nicky Ouellet. And it just, I think, is a cacophony of feedback and political, you know, vitriol that really came spewing out over the course of that becoming, you know, becoming a thing that people were talking about. So I think that it's it's a story that helps us observe who we are right now in this moment. And it's about so many more people than Tucker or Dan. It's actually about us and psychologically what is going on with us in this moment.

Justin Angle It is a look in the mirror and kind of a scary one at that. In our in our remaining time, Mara, I'd love to kind of hear some of the broader themes of, this might be too optimistic a term, but resolution. How do you think we find common ground on some of these issues? And maybe to tone down the tension that is so vividly displayed in the first episode?

Justin Angle You know, sometimes I feel more optimistic than other times as a reporter and as somebody who's you know in this in this political ecosystem alongside everybody else. But I think that the offer that we're putting on the table here is a pretty simple one, and it's not something that is going to be any kind of a silver bullet or we're not going to wake up tomorrow and just be in a fundamentally different situation. But I think that what we're putting on the table is just this the possibility of believing that the issue is more complicated. It always is. And there is history there, there is personal history there, there's communal history, there are wrinkles to this that you can't see from a 30,000 foot view. You have to get closer to it. And that's, I think one of the beautiful parts of my job is just getting to do that with stories and with people. But I think that there's there's opportunity for all of us to do that and it's hard. It's not to say that it's easy. It's it's a lot easier, I think, to look at something from a 30,000 foot view and just go with your gut reaction and go with that, that whatever strong emotion that it sparks in you and then ride that wave, you know, as long as it can take you. I think the harder thing to do is to slow down, turn down, you know, the temperature on your own reactions to

things and try to lead with a little bit more curiosity. And just speaking personally, I guess the moments when I feel most optimistic is when I do that and the moments when I feel most pessimistic is when I let my emotions take me, you know, far, far away.

Justin Angle Tell us as we as we start to close here, where would you point people online to learn more about shared stay? Where would you want them to find it?

Justin Angle This is a true in every sense of the word partnership between Yellowstone Public Radio, Montana Public Radio, and Montana Free Press. So you can find Shared State on any of our websites. You can also look on whatever your preferred podcast platform is. Spotify, Apple Podcasts. And you know, a lot of the people who are making the show are online. We're on Twitter. People are talking about it there, so you can you can look us up on your social media platforms and have a have a public engagement with us around this. I'd love to hear feedback. I'd love to answer questions about why we went about things certain ways, and I think the reporters would as well.

Justin Angle Mara, congratulations to you and your colleagues on the second season of Shared State. It is an achievement and I encourage all of our listeners to tune in right away.

Justin Angle Thank you so much.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio.

Aj Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. See you next time.

