

The Washington Post

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To the Judges:

One of Eli Saslow's greatest skills as a journalist is his ability to transform the most complicated subjects into stories that are understandable and deeply affecting. In 2013, Eli wanted to write about the U.S.'s \$78-billion food stamp program, which has tripled in size over the last decade and now reaches a record 47 million Americans. From that abstract beginning, Eli ended up reporting and writing six extraordinary stories:

The first, located in Woonsocket, R.I., where one-third of the residents receive food stamps, details the astonishing transformation of a despairing town on the day each month when those food stamps arrive. "The economy of Woonsocket was about to stir to life," is how Eli's story begins. "Delivery trucks were moving down river roads, and stores were extending their hours. The bus company was warning riders to anticipate 'heavy traffic.' A community bank, soon to experience a surge in deposits, was rolling a message across its electronic marquee on the night of February 28: 'Happy shopping! Enjoy the 1st.'"

The second story, in Florida, details the efforts underway to bring food stamps to "some of Florida's most desperate senior citizens," including a man who for all of his life has divided the world into "makers and takers" and now must decide which one he is.

The third story, in rural Tennessee, is the story of what happens to hungry children in summertime when the schools where they get breakfast, lunch, snacks and cans of food for weekends are shut down. Tennessee's solution to a growing, nationwide problem: "It was the first day of summer in a place where summers had become hazardous to a child's health, so the school bus rolled out of the parking lot on its newest emergency route," Eli's story begins. "The highway became two lanes. The two lanes turned to dirt and gravel. On the dashboard of the bus, the driver had posted an aphorism. 'Hunger is hidden,' it read, and his bus had been dispatched to find it."

The fourth story, about U.S. Rep. Steve Southerland, R-FL, follows Southerland in Congress as he pushes for an historic overhaul of the food stamp program, and on what his schedule calls a "Poverty Tour," where he exhorts the needy, "I believe in a God-given purpose. I believe that being dependent makes you more vulnerable. I believe work is the greatest gift you will ever receive."

The fifth story, set in Hidalgo County, TX, tells of a place of cascading extremes: "one of the highest poverty rates in the nation ... which has led almost 40 percent of the residents to enroll in the food-stamp program ... which means a widespread reliance on cheap, processed foods ... which results in rates of diabetes and obesity that double the national average ... which fuels the country's highest per capita spending on health care." The question in Hidalgo: "Has the massive growth of a government feeding program solved a problem or created one?"

The sixth, set in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., tells the surprising story of a 41-year-old mother of six who has been on food stamps her entire life and suddenly has to contend with the biggest cuts in the food stamp program in fifty years. "What are we going to do?" she says as she is running out of food, and then, as Eli writes of the unexpected answer she comes up with: "Congress could come up with its solutions, but so could she."

Six stories, six masterpieces. Each on its own is a model of exemplary journalism. Together, they are journalism at the highest levels of ambition and execution, and we are proud to nominate them for a 2014 Pulitzer Prize in Explanatory Reporting.

Sincerely,

