2015 CLASS OF SNOWDEN JOURNALISM INTERNS

Impressions, Lessons and Reflections
Charles Snowden Program for Excellence in Journalism

The University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication works closely with media organizations throughout Oregon. Each media partner invests in its own Snowden intern by creating a supportive learning environment in its newsroom and paying half of the intern’s stipend. The endowment covers all remaining costs.

During the ten-week program, Snowden interns learn what it takes to work in a professional setting. Whether they're covering beats ranging from sports to City Hall, taking photos, shooting video, recording audio or designing page layouts, students produce exceptional work that is often featured on front pages, websites, radio broadcasts and picked up by the Associated Press. The program is open to student journalists at all Oregon colleges and universities. For summer 2015, 64 students applied from 11 Oregon schools for the 16 internships.

In 1998, the family of Charles and Julie Snowden initiated the program in Charles’ memory. He had served as an editor at The Oregonian and the Oregon Journal. Since its inception, 219 students from 15 Oregon colleges have been awarded internships. Nearly 80 percent of Snowden interns gain full-time employment in news media after completing their university degrees.
2015 Snowden Interns

Jonathan Bach, University of Oregon (East Oregonian, Pendleton)
Sean Bassinger, Oregon State University (Herald and News, Klamath Falls)
Christina Belasco, University of Oregon (OPB, Portland)
Francesca Fontana, University of Oregon (The Register-Guard, Eugene)
Gordon Friedman, University of Oregon (Statesman Journal, Salem)
Scott Greenstone, University of Oregon (News-Review, Roseburg)
Emily Hoard, Willamette University (News-Register, McMinnville)
La’akea Kaufman, University of Oregon (Baker City Herald, Baker City)
Travis Loose, University of Oregon (News-Times, Forest Grove)
Julia Reihs, University of Oregon (The Register-Guard, Eugene)
Will Rubin, University of Oregon (The Bulletin, Bend)
Mary Jane Schulte, University of Oregon (The Register-Guard, Eugene)
McKinley Smith, Oregon State University (The Daily Astorian, Astoria)
Zane Sparling, Willamette University (Capital Press, Salem)
Kaylee Tornay, University of Oregon (Mail Tribune, Medford)
Alexandra Wallachy, University of Oregon (The Outlook, Gresham)
Jim Harrison’s story was going to take a while to wrap my head around.

I approached Jim about his being a cook for an annual event called Round-Up, an annual, large-scale rodeo in Pendleton. From afar, the construction company owner’s story seemed fairly straightforward: He would set up camp near the rodeo grounds and volunteer to cook Round-Up patrons tasty breakfasts, lunches and dinners each year. We wanted to approach him for a profile for the East Oregonian’s yearly Round-Up magazine.

Then things got interesting.

During the initial interview, Jim mentioned he was from Korea. As we talked further, his story came clearly into focus. When Jim was a boy, an Oregon couple adopted him from South Korea. He was the son of an American soldier and a Korean national, a self-proclaimed “war baby.” His mother, he said, died of tuberculosis, but not before sending him to America, “where money grows on trees,” as he recalled her saying.

In 1985, as an adult, Jim crossed the Pacific to seek out his extended birth family, some of whom thought him to be dead. After just a few days, he found them.

He teared up often while he talked about the reunion. He had regained a part of his identity, and he was a true world citizen.

Not all stories are going to be like Jim’s. But his sheds light on some key lessons I learned while a Charles Snowden intern at the East Oregonian.

First, you should always conduct more than one interview when possible. Talking to Jim upwards of ten times—be it by phone, in the newsroom or when randomly running into him at the store—lent clarity to the story that would have been missing without pestering him.

Second, don’t feel bad about pestering people if you’ve missed a detail. Smile, be cordial and even fall over yourself in apology, if necessary, but never feel bad for asking to rehash a conversation. People generally won’t be harsh on you about it. Plus, a second (or third) interview allows you to pry further into a source’s relationship to the story you’re trying to tell.

Third, when you feel it necessary, ask for proof. Anyone can say they’ve been to Korea, but Jim provided copies of his original adoption papers, as well as photos from his time with extended family there, one of which we used as a contributed photo in the magazine.

If anything, all of these assets bring you closer to forming a clear picture in your own mind of the manner wherein the story played out, allowing you to write it with confidence.

The article on Jim required several interviews for around 1,000 words of copy. It took a while to figure the whole thing out, but the payoff was more than worth it.

“Jonathan has all the traits of a great journalist — thoughtful curiosity, intellectual honesty and genuine empathy. The tenacity with which he is pursues stories sets him apart.”

Daniel Wattenburger, Managing Editor, East Oregonian
I wanted to step out of my comfort zone. Cops reporting came to mind since I had very little experience with it outside of a single story about a campus bomb threat.

The current beat reporter, who was preparing for the rare instance of time off, showed me the ropes of the daily police and fire report columns. Seemed simple enough.

On the first Monday, I received the phone number of a Chiloquin resident who had a tip on a large-scale “vandalism.” The small former logging town had a history of tensions between residents since industry declines in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Still, this was apparently the most damage they had seen in ages. The woman on the phone was quite distraught. I went to my editor and said, “I’m heading out.”

Thirty minutes later, I arrived at a destroyed art gallery, saw wrecked equipment in a library, a small cafe stuck cleaning up a few gallons—yes, gallons—of maple syrup, and a considerable amount of distressed locals.

Blocks away, I discovered a torched truck outside of a market. I talked to the owner of the truck who said two others pushed it away before the flames spread to the store. The authorities had three young suspects in mind related to the events, but only caught two the next day. One remained at large.

I broke a small version of the story, wrote the front-page centerpiece, and followed up during a sheriff’s advisory meeting just days later. This was my first four days on the beat.

Reporting on these events was bittersweet. I saw the damage, destruction, and distress in the eyes of residents, yet I experienced another side to the story. One resident visited the newsroom the next day to tell me of a “good story” in the community that nobody from the paper had touched on before.

I told her I would return to check it out after my second week on public safety, and I did.

I went from documenting one of the more devastating crime sprees seen in the community to reporting on a group of youths from an organization known as the Sierra Service Project. They come from all over the Pacific Northwest, raise money to visit small communities, and help build or repair structures in the area. For better or worse, I learned a lot about a small community.

This was just a fraction of my experience at the Herald and News. I wrote briefs for small events, tagged along on a hike with a 94-year-old woman at Crater Lake National Park, wrote features on local figures, sought out new details on firsts at this year’s Klamath County Fair, and more.

In just 10 weeks, I wore more hats than I could count. I felt less like an intern and more like a reporter who had been around for a while. And the only person I ever got coffee for was myself.
Community journalism does not solely pertain to newspapers in small towns.

From the very first day I went out into the field on assignment, the thing that struck me the most was the amount of profound respect I received from sources when I told them I was a reporter with OPB, a very different response from when you explain you’re a student journalist.

OPB is a huge organization that serves an equally huge audience, the entire state of Oregon and the Northwest. It’s the in-depth, quality coverage of important topics that has earned the public’s respect.

Keeping this in mind, it’s been an honor to intern at an organization with such prestige. I know I’ve grown as a journalist just by the sheer number of events I had the chance to cover—practice makes improvement. I covered everything from a naked bike ride in my first week to a protest of kayakers (aka kayaktavists) who tried to stop Shell’s icebreaker ship from drilling in the Arctic. I was out there in the middle of their crowd of hundreds in the Willamette River, in a kayak of my own, with my camera.

Hands-on experience like this is invaluable. It’s been an amazing summer in Portland and I’ll always be very grateful for this experience offered by the Snowden program and OPB.

“Christina Belasco quickly became a key member of the OPB digital team. Her willingness to cover any story at any time, including the middle of the night, resulted in terrific work and earning the respect of her colleagues.”

Jan Boyd, Director of Digital Strategy & Community Engagement, Oregon Public Broadcasting
Over the course of my internship at The Register-Guard, I’ve had the opportunity to write a wide variety of stories—features, breaking news, meeting coverage, and business stories. But among the work I’ve produced this summer, I believe I learned the most from an interview with an inspiring boy named Jacob Burris. A 13-year-old with a congenital heart condition, Jacob approached his illness with humor and maturity beyond his years. After undergoing major heart surgery, Jacob was spreading awareness about congenital heart conditions by handing out pins, reminding people to check their blood pressure, because it was what saved his life.

The two hours I spent with Jacob and his mother stuck out to me amid all of my other interviews, and as I began writing my feature story about Jacob and his journey, I understood just how much power we hold as journalists and just how critical it is that we get stories right. I knew that I had a responsibility to handle the ordeal Jacob and his family had gone through over the past year with sensitivity and care, and to show his community just how important his activism was to him. When the story ran, Jacob’s mother told me she was so happy that Jacob would have a way to look back on his story when he is older. She also said that Jacob, a huge fan of the Spiderman comics, had loved reading the article, saying my story might as well have been printed in The Daily Bugle.

I am grateful for the opportunity to receive a Snowden internship for many reasons. I’ve worked with other Snowden interns to produce stories I am proud of, and learned more than I thought possible about community journalism and what resonated with our readers. I also learned how to cover difficult stories, from an emotional vigil of a young woman murdered in her own home to a local woman’s journey to lose weight on a reality TV show for her terminally ill husband. But I might be most grateful for the chance to meet Jacob, and to help him share his incredible story with as many people as possible.
The first week really wasn’t easy. Learning the ins and outs of nine-to-five was one thing. Having a go-bag and being ready to hop into the car at a moment’s notice to head out for literally anything was an exercise in preparedness.

It felt like there was barely time to write, let alone write well. But things got better.

With a bit of time and experience, I began to understand how to recognize what’s important and write the news.

Now, looking back on it all, it’s been quite a journey. There’s been a racketeering scandal, press conferences with the governor, a shooting, a few enterprise investigations, and more than enough fires.

Each story is its own event, but it’s also a person’s life. The news is more than headlines. Through it all, I’ve gotten a better understanding of a newspaper’s role in a community and how that role is evolving. Newspaper reporters inform the public. It’s our civic duty. Innovation doesn’t come easily, but for newspapers to continue to be relevant, they’ll adapt with changing times to inform in newer, better ways. I’m hoping I can be a part of that future.

“Gordon has infused our newsroom with passion, purpose and a pile of story ideas. He’s the real deal, and he has found a home in our newsroom.”

Michael Davis, Executive Editor, Statesman Journal
When I accepted my internship, my publisher asked if I had any experience with digital. I said “some.” He asked if I could help him make his print-first publication a digital-first publication. I said, “Maybe?”

So half my time this summer was spent trying to figure out the answer to this question: “Why have a local newspaper in a digital age?”

It’s a scary question. I didn’t know if I even wanted to tackle it. I grew up with the Los Angeles Times on my table every morning, but now I read all my news digitally, and often from news sites that were never connected to a print product.

But I tried. I expanded social media, posting as much as I could on Facebook, Twitter, and even Reddit (turns out there’s a Subreddit for Roseburg). I figured out Google Analytics and Chartbeat, and tried to use them to think critically about what content strategies were working. I spearheaded a daily email newsletter.

And I found that there are unique rewards to doing local digital media. Fires broke out in late July, so with our coverage we put up maps of the perimeter of the fires, and we left updates as often as possible. People commented on Facebook, saying “Thank you for this!” We got interactive, polling readers on issues and publishing posts with their comments. And when we messed up, they let us know.

That’s an intimate experience. Douglas County is grappling with a lot right now—high unemployment, low economic growth, and lots of drug trafficking—and I saw and felt a lot of Douglas County residents’ fears about the future.

So. Why have a local newspaper in a digital age? I don’t know. But maybe our readers do—and now, more than ever, we’ve got the means to listen to them.

“Scott has been a breath of fresh air for The News-Review. We turned him loose to help drive our digital content strategies and he really moved the dial. Our site traffic percentage is up double-digits this summer and most of that has come through better utilization of social media. We plan to keep Scott on the payroll for a few hours per week when the internship ends (working remotely from U of O). We are launching a daily digital newsletter we’ll blast on e-mail and Scott will serve as its editor.”

Jeff Ackerman, Publisher & Editor, The News-Review
“Emily Hoard was a real bright spot in our newsroom this summer. To a demanding reporting position, she brought composure, solid writing, a strong work ethic and a disarming personality that charmed co-workers, and put sources at ease. She’s exceptionally well grounded. We know she’ll go far.”

Steve Bagwell, Managing Editor, News-Register
If you’re going to make it out in northeast Oregon, there are a few things you need to have: a pair of Wrangler jeans, a free hand to wave out your car window at any given time, a working knowledge of the concept of calving, and a whole lot of moxie.

The people in Baker City are passionate. They’ve carved a life for themselves in one of Oregon’s most rural slices of land, and if you’re willing to listen, they’ll sit you down and help you realize how and why.

The community flung its arms out wide for me during my three months working for the *Baker City Herald*.

I sat with cowboys stretching behind the chutes of a rodeo arena, played pinochle with inmate fire crews on their lunch break, learned how to deep fry a candy bar, and spoke to a woman about how the first 100 years of her life had convinced her the world was getting siller. A Vietnam War pilot turned aerial firefighter gave me a tour of his helicopter, two farmers invited me to drive out and see their orchard, and I spent several Sundays on their porch eating the best peaches I’ve ever had and chatting easily about nature, the future, and the 2016 presidential race. I met a local business owner and we liked each other so much, she invited me to move into her home, and now I have a friend for life.

At the beginning of my internship, I found myself prefacing most of my questions with “Sorry, but—” and then asking what I knew to be an obvious question to anyone who is from Baker: “What’s mopping up a fire?”, “What is tri-tip on the Traeger?”, “What exactly is calving?”

But nobody was harsh and nobody made me feel stupid for not knowing. Instead, they let me sit shotgun in their truck and took me out to the fire line to watch a mop-up crew at work, offered me a piece of steak from off the grill out back, showed me a picture of the new additions to their herd born this past February—at the freezing crack of dawn no less.

If you care enough to ask, the people here will serve you with a trove of knowledge, without expectation.

What this internship has given me, then, is the courage to ask, unapologetically, for the things I want and the information I need. Sometimes it really is that simple.

“Kea not only was an immediate contributor to the Baker City Herald — something I’ve come to expect from Snowden interns over more than a decade participating in the program — but when the largest fires in Baker County history were started by lightning in August, she contributed several stories vital to our coverage of this major event.

Kea gained experience that epitomizes the idea of “real world,” and the Herald was able to give readers a more thorough understanding of what was happening to their county and to their neighbors.

*Our reports, suffice it to say, would not have been as compelling without Kea’s work.*

Jayson Jacoby, Editor, *Baker City Herald*
Travis Loose
University of Oregon
Reporter, News-Times

While sitting at my desk in the News-Times office, I noticed a woman and two girls riding horses down Pacific Avenue, the main thoroughfare in Forest Grove.

“There are horses on Pacific,” I said loudly to the other staff in the room. As everyone moved to the windows to get a look, my editor said, “Grab your camera and go get a picture.” “Ask what they’re doing,” said another reporter. “This is news? Are you serious?” I asked in a tone that I felt clearly articulated my incredulity. “Yes!” they all shouted back.

Within seconds, I was sprinting down the street with my notebook and camera in hand. After all, it’s not every day you see horses trotting through downtown and swinging through the Dutch Bros. Coffee stand for chai.

As a Snowden intern this summer, I’ve had my share of firsts:

• I’ve photographed a dog that spends its free time on the roof of a building.
• I’ve photographed a man who hordes old milk bottles.
• I told the story of the descendants of a famous Norwegian poet.
• I watched a man suffer a fatal heart attack at a quick draw contest.

My internship has been exciting, interesting, fun, and emotional. I’ve learned a lot and I’ve gotten better for it. But I’m still new, and I’ve still got a lot to learn.

As a staff reporter for the News-Times, I’ll keep learning and writing about more of my firsts.

And that’s really what I love most about journalism—every day is something new.

On any given day, I could cover a manslaughter trial, foot golf, or a wine-tasting event. Much like Forrest’s proverbial box of chocolates, as a small-town newspaper city reporter, “you never know what you’re gonna get.”

“In his 10 weeks as a Snowden intern in our newsroom, Travis demonstrated remarkable enthusiasm, initiative, teamwork and skill. We were happy to offer him a position as a reporter at the end of his internship.”

Nancy Townsley, Managing Editor, News-Times and Hillsboro Tribune
When people asked me what I wanted to do when I graduated, I always answered, work at a production company or make documentaries. The word “newspaper” was not in my vocabulary.

But mid-June, I began working at The Register-Guard newspaper. And despite the daily grind of news videos and feature photos, I’ve had the opportunity to dive into the community I thought I already knew—the track-dominated, hippie-stereotyped college town of Eugene—and discovered new people and cultural dynamics I never knew existed here. Stories are everywhere, and the beauty of working for a newspaper is that it gives you many different entry points into a community.

An interesting spin on my internship occurred mid-summer when The Register-Guard announced that it would begin its transition to a digital-first newspaper. Being the designated multimedia producer, my job was to pitch, film, and edit the bulk of video content for the site. In addition to cut-and-dry videos about dead bodies in a freezer, a giant root ball stuck in the Willamette River, and a man who erected a giant doobie on his roof in celebration of the legalization of marijuana, I’ve had the pleasure of following 87-year-old track star Bill McChesney on his 40th Butte-to-Butte race in Eugene, and body builder Aydian Dowling as he represents the transgender community and tries to win Men’s Health magazine’s Ultimate Guy competition.

The digital transition has opened an era of experimentation for newspapers, and being part of this change has been confusing, exciting, and rewarding. It has given me the opportunity to apply the video skills I love in a fast-paced, news-oriented world that has taken upon itself the enormous task of morphing into a digital publication that meets the changing needs of the public. My experience this summer has left me with appreciation for newspapers that I will never forget.

“Julia is one of those rare multimedia journalists who excels in all facets of the profession. Hardly just a “videographer,” Julia is also a talented writer and photographer. This internship allowed her to hone her skills in the crucible of daily journalism in the digital age.”

Rob Romig, Director of Graphics, The Register-Guard
Will Rubin
University of Oregon
Feature Writer, The Bulletin

“I went into the Snowden program with a very clear idea of what I wanted to get out of the experience. After three years covering University of Oregon sports for a number of publications, I wanted to continue improving my non-sports writing skills.

In addition, I wrote 90 percent of my sports stories for online-only publications, so while I knew about things such as inch counts and pitch meetings, I had next to no experience working within the day-to-day operations of a professional newsroom.

My Snowden internship with the Bend Bulletin has proven so beneficial to me in far more ways than I can express in one essay.

One of the first stories I started working on was about why young adults in Bend seemed to have a hard time finding reliable social outlets in which to pursue friendships and romantic interests.

What may have started as a way for the intern to get his feet wet turned into a two-part, nearly 2,000-word look at how the cyclical economic forces that spurred Bend into one of the fastest growing cities in the Pacific Northwest have also priced young adults out of the area.

It was a story that involved a lot of raw data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Oregon’s state Department of Economics. For a career C-math student like myself, it was a story unlike any I’d ever written. It was also a cannonball into the deep end of the pool rather than an effort to ease into the internship.

The piece wound up being a rousing success, carrying The Bulletin’s social media interactions for the entire weekend and finding its way to various newspapers around Oregon via the Associated Press wire. It wouldn’t have been possible without a supportive editor willing to let the intern swing away, and Features Editor Jody Lawrence-Turner deserves a lot of credit for her part in it.

Another way my Snowden internship advanced my journalism education was in the community aspect of reporting—building rapport with city officials and other sources, interacting in the community, and giving proper attention to those whose actions deserve the spotlight.

I wrote a story in July about a group of women who started an all-female classic car club. It started with a single phone number and turned into a decade’s worth of stories and an important look at what is generally a masculine hobby. Building a story from scratch isn’t something that happens very often on a sports beat, so having that experience was very beneficial.

Jody and the entire Bulletin staff have been extremely supportive all summer long. The Snowden staff have been the interns’ most fervent advocates throughout the process, and the Bend community has been a fascinating one to navigate.

I look forward to continuing to do so for the next five months—The Bulletin recently extended my stay through the second week of January.

“Without hesitation, he’s taken on any story assignment thrown his way. Will has covered topics ranging from Bend’s high cost of living for 20-somethings to vulgar puppets to county fair festivities. His willingness and genuine desire for reporting have been much appreciated.”

Jody Lawrence-Turner, Features Editor, The Bulletin
My time at The Register-Guard as a Snowden intern has been invaluable. I feel that it has prepared me for what it’s like to work in this field, and in doing so, it’s made me realize that I am, in fact, pursuing the right career.

Aside from the assignments I shot on a daily basis, which continually pushed me as a photographer, my biggest challenge was finding a story that I could make a strong photo essay out of and work on over a period of time. My editors told me at the beginning of my internship to start brainstorming ideas for this, and it wasn’t until late in my internship that I finally nailed down a story I knew I wanted to follow and pursue. This story is about the relationship between a married couple dealing with life and death. The husband was dying of throat cancer and was in hospice. I feel so lucky to have found such a beautiful story and a couple that allowed me to have as much access as I did. This has, without a doubt, been the highlight of my time as a Snowden intern, because it pushed me in so many ways. Prior to working at The Register-Guard, I had been very comfortable shooting sports, but lacked experience with human-interest stories, so I knew this was something I wanted to work on. During my internship, and especially working on this specific story, I was able to grow as a photojournalist and see things in a whole new light.

Through this internship I have gotten the opportunity to interact with so many wonderful individuals and see many different stories. It has made me feel truly lucky and proud to do the work that I do as a photojournalist. I am so grateful for this experience.

“Mary Jane Schulte follows in a long tradition of excellence as a Snowden Intern at The Register-Guard. From producing photo features, breaking news and late deadline sports assignments, she has regularly produced quality work for the photo department. I particularly appreciate her can do attitude and work ethic. I have no doubt that she will succeed in carving out a career for herself in the world of journalism.”

Chris Pietsch, Chief Photographer, The Register-Guard
Kaylee Tornay
University of Oregon
Reporter, Mail Tribune

“I decided I wanted to be a journalist during my sophomore year of high school. I had just read Half the Sky, a book by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn that paints a dramatic portrait of women’s struggles in developing countries and how their successes bolster that of their countries. What an incredible job, I thought. I wanted to do this!

Part of my fascination was rooted in the intrigue of travel and other cultures, and I wanted to tell stories like that, demonstrating no matter how many miles or cultural differences might separate two people, their common humanity can allow them to empathize with each other.

One of my biggest takeaways from my Snowden internship has been that community journalism offers exactly such opportunities—but because the stories are locally focused, their significance can be stronger, more frequent, and easier to observe.

When I wrote about an upcoming school supply giveaway, the woman who emailed about it asked for us to do more than print the press release because she said they were always able to help so many more people the years the paper writes a full article. Although it didn’t seem very exciting to write, her request was a humbling reminder for me that what we do as journalists at a local level matters. We are curators of a small and intimate public platform, and hearing that affirmation from a source and a reader was enough to shift my perspective, make me sit up straight at my desk and pick up the phone to make the first call.

As I quickly realized, jumping into an unfamiliar town to assume the position of delivering its news is about much more than learning new skills. I picked up many new skills working closely with my editor, but it was something much less tangible that proved to be far more critical to writing pieces that satisfied me. Being able to write a killer lede won’t help you, I discovered, if you can’t empathize with what’s important to the people you’re writing for. Getting your sources to pour out poetic quotes in articulate complete sentences will be meaningless if you can’t frame them in an article that resonates with the readership you’ve pledged to inform. As a Snowden intern, I learned something far more challenging and multifaceted—how to be a Medford resident and how to be engaged in the community I was helping shape.

I discovered that Medford, though there was little about it that I personally might have connected with, could feel like home, because in my first week I had spoken to 20 new people, about community projects they were passionate about. Over the 10 weeks, I listened, fascinated, to a 19-year-old 4-H veteran explaining how to show a pig at the fair. I found myself rooting for a group of parents to meet their fundraising goal so they could open a new charter school. I felt an ache in my chest when a program director asked me if there was a way to get in a story about a Latino student leadership program she ran, a positive story “to counter all the gang stories.”

What the Snowden internship does is give students a chance to see that what they do matters. By putting us in unfamiliar and often small communities, we have to learn to lay ourselves aside. When we leave, and we look back, we get to see a sum total of our impact. In just 10 weeks, we get to make friends in our newsrooms, form contacts in the community, and experience the privilege of caring about the people we’re writing for and about. We get to be contributors in a new place, take away irreplaceable memories and relationships, and have a ton of fun doing it, and that is an incredible gift to offer students.

Kaylee Tornay has done an outstanding job at the Mail Tribune. She’s fearless and tenacious on stories, eager to learn and improve, and an absolute joy to work with. When I assigned her to a structure fire, she sent continuous Tweets with photos and video from her phone while gathering information from the home’s residents, neighbors and officials, allowing me to get a story with visuals on our website within minutes. Her excellent writing and reporting skills are a tribute to the Snowden program and the University of Oregon. We’re grateful for her hard work and positive attitude and know she will go far in whatever career path she chooses.”

Cathy Noah, City Editor, Mail Tribune
As an environmental reporter, the Snowden Internship Program gave me the opportunity to experience a taste of what it’s like reporting on science for the local paper. Before, I’d operated at a university, where science stories are as abundant as test tubes. In Astoria, there was plenty going on, but it didn’t come prepackaged by the research office.

I had to learn how to find the stories that mattered to the community and who held the keys to scientific knowledge in the area. For help, I benefited from the experience of the staff at The Daily Astorian and its sister papers in the area. First, I researched what science articles had been written before and learned what the important issues were. Then, I connected with a science reporter and remained in contact with her throughout my internship for advice. Learning how to network and reach out to people is a great strength of the program as well.

That took care of my story ideas, but when it came to finding out who the authorities were, I relied on my coworkers for their knowledge of the community. That, and Google never hurt. I learned to be unafraid of making a phone call to someone I thought could refer me to the source I needed, or the source who knew the source I needed, etc. Sometimes, you’ve got the right source and then they bring in someone who’s even better. Finding the right source can be a process.

Most of all, being a Snowden taught me that in order to be a reporter, I had to be connected, with the newsroom and the community. It’s the kind of experience you only get by going all in, and I can’t think of a better situation to do it in than with the support of the Snowden program.

“What a treat to have a biologist on staff, who can report and write with such aplomb. McKinley Smith handled myriad assignments over the summer, from pageants to dog drool to a complex business story about environmental cleanup. She pitched good story ideas and took assignments very seriously. While fun to be around, she didn’t hold quarter with sources when she needed an answer. All in all, a wonderful addition to our newsroom.”

Laura Sellers, Managing Editor, The Daily Astorian
Community journalism was a wakeup call for me. During my first week of work, the office got repeated calls about a tree in Damascus that had been cut down. Residents erected a small shrine on the tree stump with candles and flowers. After hearing the news, I rolled my eyes. It seemed silly that a tree falls in Damascus and everyone hears about it, but when I started talking to people, I saw a very different side of community news.

Residents felt betrayed and confused by the removal of a beloved Ponderosa Pine. There was no explanation of why the tree had been removed and some worried that the property owner didn’t have the correct permits; others assumed the city cut it down.

That passion and confusion is exactly the reason community journalism is integral to such close-knit communities. After interviews and trips to City Hall for permits, and conversations with arborists, it was clear that the tree was infected with a root fungus, making it dangerous for the tree to be so close to a major intersection. The candles didn’t go away, but many were relieved to finally be in the loop.

It wasn’t Watergate, but it was still rewarding to answer questions people in your community care about. Helping people engage and understand their community is an important job, and I’m very proud to have done so.

I wrote about inspiring people, legislation and issues affecting East County, and learned what words to avoid for my editor’s sanity. FYI, the list of words includes: currently, sexagenarian, slated and second annual. It isn’t annual until at least the third event, so you could say I learned a lot.

“Alex proved herself as a reliable member of our newsroom, demonstrating an ability to jump into whatever situation presented itself, whether that be covering a city council meeting, a Fourth of July festival, breaking news or a feature story. She played an important role in helping The Outlook achieve its goals involving a greater reach in social media. And her quick wit allowed her to fit in quickly with the reporting staff.”

Steve Brown, Executive Editor, The Outlook, Sandy Post, Estacada News
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