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Students gain real-world experience, professional development opportunities through College of Arts and Sciences storytelling positions

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By Shannon Miller

Ashley Junkunc '21 arrived at UD with a powerful story of survival and a desire to help others facing significant health challenges after overcoming the cancer diagnosis that threatened her life just a few years earlier.

She thought nursing might be the best outlet for her mission until she discovered an on-campus job that gave students the opportunity to share compelling stories from the College of Arts and Sciences while developing their communication skills in the process.

Junkunc had found her calling.

“UD showed me how to take a passion and turn it into a career,” said Junkunc, a junior communication major. “Being in this position has taught me that your passion can be turned into a way to pay it forward.”

Since 2016, the College has offered experiential learning opportunities for students through its writing and multimedia storytelling positions, giving them real-world communications experience and a portfolio of professionally edited and published articles, videos and social media content to present as part of their future internship, graduate school or job applications.

Dave Larsen, a veteran journalist with more than 25 years of experience at the *Dayton Daily News* and *Hartford Courant*, oversees a group of six students who work as writers, photographers and multimedia specialists for the College’s communication outlets. Their contributions reach thousands of readers and viewers through the College’s website and social media channels, UD websites and the *University of Dayton Magazine*.

“The students are immensely helpful because there are so many great stories to be told in the College, and many more than I can get to myself,” said Larsen, who was hired in 2016 as the College’s communication coordinator.

While Larsen doesn’t teach, his efforts make a significant contribution to the College’s academic mission. He devotes a good portion of his workday to instructing his student staff on the nuances of gathering information, finding the right sources, conducting interviews and creating engaging content. When students complete their work, he walks them through a multi-level editing process, helping them improve their skills as they continue through the year.

“It’s been hugely rewarding for me to share my nearly three decades of experience in journalism with students in a mentorship role,” he said.

Dawnn Fann ’19 was one of the College’s first student writers and started the position during her sophomore year in 2017 despite being unsure about her future career goals at the time.

“It made me realize how much I love the idea and art of storytelling,” Fann said. “I loved writing stories on other people doing things worth talking about.”

The Cleveland native is now pursuing her master’s degree in communications and strategic public relations at UD and works in marketing and public relations for the Dayton Foundation.

While most student staffers are communication majors, the positions are open to all UD students. Lauren Reid ’18 was a political science/criminal justice studies major participating in Dayton2DC, a 4-day program for students interested in careers in the nation’s capital. Larsen was there in spring 2017 to chronicle the trip for a College Newsroom blog story and

to shoot alumni video testimonials for the the Dayton2DC website. He met Reid during a communication career panel discussion that included *Washington Post* political writer Rachael Bade '10.

Intrigued by Larsen's mention of the College's student writing positions, Reid decided to apply.

"I wasn't sure what field I wanted to pursue but communications was always of interest to me," said Reid, who also completed an internship in summer 2017 with the communications office for Ohio Gov. John Kasich as part of UD's Statehouse Civic Scholars program, which places students in state government internships in Columbus.

Reid said the student writing position helped hone her interviewing techniques and her ability to write with authority on a variety of topics. Those skills helped her land a job after graduation as a legislative aide for state Rep. Jim Butler, who represents the 41st House District in Montgomery County, Ohio (Centerville, Kettering, Oakwood and portions of Riverside and Dayton). In May 2019, she was promoted to majority policy advisor for the Ohio House of Representatives, where she provides guidance on legislation, writes talking points and speeches for members, and briefs the House speaker on selected topics.

"The student writer job prepared me for what I'm doing today," Reid said.

Junkunc said the position provided her first exposure to a narrative style of storytelling based on interviewing, and she felt a step ahead of her peers when she took her first public relations class as a junior. By that time, she'd already spent a year crafting stories on everything from ROTC, music and theater to chemistry, biology and graphic design.

"I had never really interviewed anyone before and it can be a little intimidating," she said. "You think it's about asking the right questions but the best content comes from letting people talk and tell their story."

Junkunc is thankful for the opportunity to tell those stories. Her family's life was forever changed in early 2014 when her youngest brother, Kyle, was diagnosed with Stage II Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma. After months of treatment, he went into remission, but the family's cancer journey was far from over.

Two years later, Junkunc herself noticed a lump in her neck. Still reeling from Kyle's experience, Junkunc's parents rushed her to the doctor after the lump began to grow in size. She too had developed Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma, and it had spread to her stomach.

Her Stage III diagnosis forced her to undergo four months of inpatient chemotherapy at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, about an hour from her family's home in Libertyville, Illinois. Junkunc was a high school junior, and spent that pivotal year applying for colleges and even taking the ACT while undergoing treatment.

In August 2016, her cancer was in remission, and both she and her brother — now a freshman at the University of Iowa — have remained cancer-free. After finishing their treatment, both siblings became Make-A-Wish recipients and enjoyed vacations Junkunc called a “celebration of life” for their family.

That's why she applied for an internship in the downtown Chicago office of Make-a-Wish Illinois during the summer between her sophomore and junior years at UD. Armed with the writing samples and interview skills from her College of Arts and Sciences job, she impressed the internship coordinators and landed the job. That summer, she used the lessons she learned from Larsen to interview other “Wish Kids,” doctors and their families for the organization’s communication efforts.

Thanks to UD and the College of Arts and Sciences’ experiential learning opportunities in communications, Junkunc plans to pursue a career in healthcare communications and has accepted an internship at Dayton Children’s hospital for summer 2020.

“Everything happens for a reason,” Junkunc said. “My brother and I share a story of survival, and this is part of my mission to give back.”

Above, L-R: College Dean Jason Pierce, Ashley Junkunc, Hayden Doyle, Dave Larsen, Melanie Reindl, Allison Brace, Ian Gouverneur, Carolyn Kroupa and Lucy Rauker. (Not pictured: Katie Timko.)