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NSPA Writer of the Year Submission 2021

Personal Statement

Stories shape human civilization, and every momentous change starts with a story. As storytellers of the world, journalists wield the tools that impact history. In the tumultuous times in which we live, the stakes are high: the very integrity of journalism, a pillar of democracy, is under assault. Misinformation is rampant even from mainstream news providers, and fabricated news feeds are reinforced within fringe groups. My compelling desire to fulfill the onus that lies upon journalists to report the truth has been galvanized by current events.

Two years as a student journalist have taught me about the responsibility of journalists to tell the stories that matter—holding those in power accountable, demanding change, reminding us that our voices matter, and cataloguing the moments that spark social movements. In a year of isolation, as my community struggled to stay connected via Zoom screens, journalism kept progress alive, pushing us forward towards an equitable future.

This year, I wrote an article about the #MeToo movement in my community that garnered thousands of views and was shared in Sex Education curriculums and served as a starting point for discussions about the movement at my school. As a journalist, I search for new angles at every turn — when I felt the frustration of the student body at the delay in reopening school, I interviewed six teachers and administrators to learn their take. And when I saw my social media feed flooded with posts featuring Cardi B’s new song, “WAP,” I juxtaposed its lyricism to Aretha Franklin’s feminism anthem, “Respect”.

I learned unique lessons from each story I wrote, buttressing my abilities as a writer, reporter and leader — skills that I will use next year to fortify my publication as Co-Editor-in-Chief.

Dreams Come True: <https://spark.adobe.com/page/F1Ok0kmUkuhJ5/>

This feature story delved into the immigration journey of a Mexican family in my community. Cupertino is a primarily Asian, affluent area, and the stories of Latino families struggling with Student Visas and stacks of immigration papers often go unheard. At one point during my interview with the Hernandez family, the mom broke down into tears. She recounted how decades of hard work and hope had borne fruit in her American dream coming true, at the expense of not knowing when she could see her Mexican parents again. The Hernandez family taught me the importance of searching for and drawing inspiration from the underrepresented stories in my community — a duty that I believe lies within all journalists.

The Experience of Too Many Women:

<https://elestoque.org/2021/03/22/special/the-experience-of-too-many-women/>

My community faced a reckoning after the publication of this #MeToo story, which brought the rampant misogyny, sexual harassment and sexual assault to the forefront of our attention. A revision of Title IX policies by student advocacy groups and our district administration followed suit.

The anonymous source I interviewed had received death threats online after posting about his issues with the #MeToo movement on Instagram. I struggled over whether to publish his opinions. While I hesitated to give him a platform to voice views that degraded thousands of individuals, I ultimately decided that because his opinions were widely held in my community, it was important to report them. This story pushed me to cover an issue from every perspective and ensure that my publication represented all opinions on a subject, a lesson that I will carry with me in the future. Most importantly, the story resulted in vigorous community debate and positive change.

“Respect” to “WAP”: Examining the progress of women’s empowerment

<https://elestoque.org/2020/10/12/entertainment/respect-to-wap-examining-the-progress-of-womens-empowerment/>

This song review coalesced my advocacy of women’s rights and love for music and history. I drew inspiration from my social media feeds as well as the lessons about women’s suffrage and Civil Rights movements I learned about in my history class. The result was the creation of a story that embodies what it means to be a student journalist — finding meaning in the topics and trends that are most important to my peers by approaching them from a unique angle.

“Parent bullies” and “teachers who cried wolf”:

<https://elestoque.org/2021/03/19/news/parent-bullies-and-teachers-who-cried-wolf/>

One year into the pandemic, my school had not yet announced plans to return to even a hybrid model. Frustration about the uncertainty of the future was palpable among parents and students. In conversations exchanged over Zoom calls and in chat rooms, teachers were often erroneously blamed for this delay in the reopening of schools. I wanted to learn what teachers were feeling during this crisis. I was able to provide an intimate picture of the struggles that teachers encountered by trying to balance giving students the best education possible with maintaining their own physical and mental health.

Off the market: How Robinhood’s mission to democratize trading highlights a bigger problem of financial illiteracy:

<https://elestoque.org/2021/03/07/news/off-the-market-how-robinhoods-mission-to-democratize-trading-highlights-a-bigger-problem-of-financial-illiteracy/>

Investing is thickly woven into the fabric of my community. The surge and subsequent crash in Gamestop stock directly impacted many of the student investors that hedged their bets through Robinhood. I spent hours researching this incident and learning about the systems of economic inequality that contribute to the inaccessibility of the stock market. A local financial consultant, AP Economics teacher and student investor provided their perspectives about the implications of the incident. I took inspiration from articles by professional publications and learned how to synthesize interviews into an engaging piece.