

Kathleen Ortiz Writer of the Year Reflection

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been able to interview, photograph and write stories about a variety of people this year. Throughout the process I learned a tremendous amount.

I started my year off by writing a story about a local business that my school buys t-shirts from often. They had to undergo a lot of changes due to the pandemic, and it was extremely important to interview with empathy and make sure I didn't get anything wrong because they were trusting me to write a story about their business, which was their life. I also learned about the importance of taking a lot of notes and photos for reference when I am at a subject's house/ business. Since I took lots of photos and in depth notes I was able to write detailed imagery throughout my story.

My next story was about three generations of rodeo cowboys. It helped me learn the importance of really finding a focus in a story. I interviewed one of the most interesting teachers at my school for nearly an hour, but I knew that I had to find the right focus to tell his story. I looked for the best quote I had gotten and I realized the focus would be his son. Then, I did my first interview with someone in elementary school and even drove over an hour to shoot photos for the story at their ranch. It was an incredible experience and I was also very proud of how the story turned out.

The next piece I chose was actually an editorial. I was able to turn my own frustration of the lack of mask wearing into a well thought out piece that had a specific focus, data and gave solutions for teachers, administrators and students. We also were able to create a visual to show how masks should be worn. I collaborated with my fellow staff members to talk about what frustrated them and what solutions would be best to offer and then I verbalized it in an honest editorial. This piece really allowed me to step out of my comfort zone and into editorial writing.

The story that I was most proud of this year was my Kirsch story. It taught me a lot about empathy and taking care of my own mental health as a writer. I interviewed three girls who had lost both their mom and one of their grandmothers very young. I also interviewed their dad. I knew the importance of making sure my questions were good and so I worked very hard to make sure I was conscientious of their situation, their time and allowing space for follow up questions throughout the interviews. I worked hard during my interviews to give them time to respond, time to process and also time to recover from each question because I knew it wasn't easy for them to talk about. I was proud of how I did during my interviews because when I went back and looked at my notes and did my transcription I truly realized how much information they had trusted in me. This story taught me the power of an empathetic and strong interview. I also made sure to take breaks for myself, even when I wanted to keep writing sometimes in order to make sure I was taking care of myself because the story was so sad, and I wanted to tell it correctly.

The last story I submitted was a profile on one of the stars of my school's boys soccer team. He had scored goal after goal all season, but that seemed to be the only thing anyone knew about him. Three days before the state final soccer game I interviewed his mom for nearly an hour and a half and I realized just how much more there was to this quiet soccer player. Interviewing his mom first gave me the ability to mold my questions for him to be very specific because I already knew the focus of my story based on what his mom told me. Along with that, I realized the importance of showing up to shoot events whenever possible. Before I had even come up with the idea to do this story I had been traveling around the state with the boys soccer team shooting photos and writing game stories which allowed me to have an easier conversation with him and his mom. It also allowed me to write the lede using what his mom told me and what I saw. I also turned the piece around in three days, which I was very proud of for a three source story.

Overall, this year I have written stories that have helped me grow a lot as a writer and as a person.