

Nathan Yuan Writer of the Year Personal Statement

Central Times
Naperville Central High School

This year, I have focused my efforts to tell the stories that have been concealed, either on purpose by those in power, or unintentionally, because it's out of our comfort zone or obscured by a mess of facts and rumors.

1. When detentions don't work: For some chronically truant students, detention never ends

We often interview sports team captains and debate state champions, club presidents and student council board members. We rarely speak to those chronically in detention or the "troubled" student. This story takes a look into the detention room, listens to chronically truant students and asks how the school system supports them. This story took me out of my comfort zone and sent me, for the first time, to the detention room to do some old-fashioned, shoe-leather reporting. Furthermore, while reporting, I realized that it very well might be the first time some students in detention get to share their experiences and as a journalist, I hold a responsibility to tell stories of people who might otherwise not have the chance.

2. Naperville North teacher fired for fostering 'inappropriate' relationship with two students

In March, on one line of a six-page, closed-doors school board meeting agenda, our District "informed" the community that a tenured teacher at our sister high school had been fired. It did not include the reason why.

As I reported on this story, it quickly became clear our district did not want anyone poking around. When administrators refused to answer questions, I relied on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to gather information. This story ended up needing multiple requests, and we even had to dispute a denial by bringing it to the Illinois Attorney General, which eventually led to the district complying with our request. This experience was a lesson in staying persistent to tell an important story even when authority figures don't think it's a school publication's place to write about "bad news." To date, our publication is still the only source of information on this teacher's firing, highlighting the important role we serve in our community. As one commenter put it: "This is what happens when you cut community journalism: a high school paper is breaking a major news story."

But as much as I am proud of the months of reporting that went into tracing down rumors and filing FOIA requests, this story also contains my greatest mistake. While I was not directly involved, staff members I directed accidentally posted a photo of another staff member with the same last name. The photo was up for only 15 minutes but caused harm. And while I'm certainly not proud of it, this experience has taught me three lessons: First, it reminded me that the devil is in the details. Even a mistake unrelated to the writing undermined the credibility of two months of reporting. Next, as a staff, we recognized that while mistakes happen, we must do better to minimize them. Together, our editorial board immediately proposed multiple potential changes to our editorial policy and reporting procedure to prevent future mistakes. Lastly, this story also tested my adherence to journalistic ethics. More than 80,000 people read it in our city with a population of 150,000. It literally became the talk of our town. To post a public notice on the top of the story and admit you made a mistake is embarrassing, and more so because this was one of my most viewed stories. But as journalists, I believe we have a duty to acknowledge and take responsibility for our mistakes, even when it's embarrassing. I could have attached a pdf version of the story with the correction omitted and asked judges to only evaluate my writing, but journalism is more than just reporting; it includes the rare mistake and how we deal with them.

3&4. Blindness no obstacle to Central senior's music career, school experience & Reporting on special needs has its challenges, but it's necessary

Communicating with someone who's blind can be challenging, and I realized that firsthand when I tried to tell Christopher's story. By the time I took a crack at it, the profile on Christopher had been assigned and reassigned six times over a period of a year, and it took me another six months to complete five interviews and finish the story. Still, despite the difficulties, it is clear to me that the effort was worth it.

5. The hidden homeless: Thousands of schools are failing to identify students experiencing homelessness

Speak to anyone who works with youth experiencing homelessness, from directors of national non-profits to state officials and individual homeless liaisons, and they will readily tell you students experiencing homelessness are an under-reported population. But how big is the problem? Why is it happening? And how can we do better? Our analysis explores, for the first time in Illinois, the issue of the under-identification of students experiencing homelessness. It breaks down the issue, quantifies its impact and identifies contributing factors that perpetuate the failure of our school system to support the students in greatest need of help.

I also learned a lot while analyzing data. Before this story, I had maybe opened Microsoft Excel five times. By the end, my team and I had probably spent close to 30 hours poring over data. To help me understand how to analyze the data, various data reporters from the Chicago Tribune and Center for Public Integrity provided me their data toolkits. I spoke to state auditors, interviewed researchers and asked policy experts to break down issues. And I was only able to report this story after gaining a genuine understanding of the issue. I believe my reporting on this story is also evidence journalism is an incredibly democratic industry; even high schoolers can bat at the same level as professionals, given the right guidance.