

Need for Speed:

A teen overcomes stress and pressure to take away knowledge, skill and friendship from Phoenix

By Katlin Stinespring

Eight high school students came together in Phoenix with one goal: figure out what newspapers across the country can do to attract young people to newspapers.

This wouldn't be the ideal vacation for most teenagers, but these seven strangers and I were up to the challenge.

The task: In less than three days, create a presentation and give it to the NIE and youth content professionals attending the Young Reader Seminar.

We all met for the first time at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa. Four of us, however, got a head start in our bonding. Eliot Butay, Lily Reed, Conor Wigert and I arrived the day before with our editors and attended an Arizona Diamondbacks game that evening.

This was one of the highlights of the conference for me. A huge baseball fan, I had the opportunity to go to Chase Field, a stadium I had never visited. The game also allowed the four of us to get to know one another outside the conference setting.



Conor Wigert (left), Katlin Stinespring, Elliot Butay

The eight of us met and became acquainted – with minimal awkwardness – over breakfast the first morning. Because I was by far the most talkative member of the group, I helped break the ice. We eventually crowded around one table instead of splitting into smaller groups as originally suggested by the table settings.

“[The first morning] was definitely really intimidating, but it was reassuring that everyone cared so much about something that all of my friends at home think is dorky,” Wigert said. “I loved that I wasn't a complete social pariah and that other teens share the same interest [journalism] as me.”

Our first day consisted of a writing seminar with Richard Weiss, a writing coach who previously worked with teen fellows at the 2006 conference in St. Louis. The narratives we produced improved our writing skills and allowed us to open up and shed inhibitions that could potentially block us from bonding.

We were instructed to choose between two topics: when we first knew we wanted to become writers and the hardest decisions we have ever had to make. Covering topics such as suicide, epiphanies, disabilities and our childhoods, our narratives were surprisingly personal, considering the setting and the fact that we were in unfamiliar company. Reading them aloud gave us the opportunity to understand each other's backgrounds and glimpse into our personalities and pasts.

Late that evening, we began brainstorming for our presentation. This encouraged us to consider how teens use and perceive the newspaper, and helped us to understand the newspaper's role among people of all ages throughout the United States.

In addition to brainstorming and having discussions, we critiqued various teen publications. We came to the realization that the newspaper as a whole must adapt to the changing times of modern society, from content and appearance to the manner in which it is distributed and the media in which it is presented.

Thus, we chose a "past, present and future" theme for our presentation that allowed us to cover the entire spectrum of the newspaper, while still addressing ways it could be improved to attract young readers and be better used in the classroom.

Working on a strict deadline was intense, and even the minutes leading up to the presentation were tense. About 15 minutes before the presentation, after each of us had presented our parts in a dress rehearsal, the content of my speech was almost completely rewritten to give it a more personal feel.

This was very exciting and somewhat stressful because of the quick turnaround. However, the newness of the speech allowed me to be on top of my game. Because of the substantial changes, I didn't feel overly rehearsed when it came time for me to speak.

With each of us contributing different expertise to the presentation, including writing, researching, editing, photography, layout, design and other skills developed in various areas (high school newspapers, teen sections, state and local newspapers), the presentation contained a multidimensional view of journalism. As cultures differ from state to state, we also put forth a diverse geographical perspective that allowed us to examine the abilities of teens across the country. Our group hailed from seven states: Florida, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia.



“The best part was meeting all of the teen fellows and seeing how they all were just regular teens, even though we were all from different parts of the country,” Butay said. “I actually liked doing the presentation because it was interesting having all of the pressure put on us in that it was being judged by people who are better at journalism than we are.”

Despite the hard work and the intensity leading up to the presentation, the eight of us still found time to hang out. We went swimming in the hotel pool several times and visited Rawhide, an 1880s Western town. Among the activities we sampled at Rawhide were riding a mechanical bull, playing blackjack and dressing up to pose for an “antique” group photo.

Our down time allowed for immense group bonding without fear or judgment, which helped us pull through the stressful deadline period and create close friendships. By the time we departed, we all felt like family.

“Arizona was one of the most memorable experiences of my high school career, and I feel that it really brought out my inner confidence,” Jackie Slack said. “It really taught me how to work with others and how to make my writing better so that I can reach more people.”

Even though less than half the group plans to pursue journalism in the future, this conference provided us with a genuine concept of a journalism career – particularly the intensity and stress of newsroom deadlines.

Through this opportunity, we gained prime career knowledge and networking skills, improved our writing techniques and even developed friendships that will last a lifetime, all while having fun in Phoenix.

Katlin Stinespring, a freshman at West Virginia University, represented FlipSide of The Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette at the Foundation's 2008 Young Reader Conference.