

Charlotte Greenfield Report

Report One

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Like every newcomer to New York, when I arrived in July I was looking forward to getting caught up in the fast pace of this huge and brimming metropolis. What I didn't realize was the extent to which reporting on a city forces you to engage with it in a whole new way. I've been out on the streets (sometimes literally on the streets when it comes to getting photos from difficult angles for my photojournalism class) and up in the Bronx Criminal Court and outside NGOs in Harlem, talking to people, trying to get their views on the world and piece together fact and opinion into an story I can stand behind.

Attending Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism is an intellectual and mental whirlwind. Stories are filed constantly. You have to learn how to interview people and get strangers to talk to you fast, how to shoot videos and take photos and deal with the odd looks you receive while doing so as well as how to navigate the city's subway system to unknown locations with little time to spare. But, as important as these practical skills are, what this school values in just as high a measure is being smart, critically minded and having a strong grasp of the economics, policy and history behind what you are reporting on.

I was lucky enough to have three professors for my first fulltime 17-person class. The class is considered a reporting class, which all students must take, but mine was made up on of those of us in the Center for Investigative Journalism. Because of this our professor was Sheila Coronel, a tenacious investigative journalist whose reporting contributed to the downfall of two corrupt presidents in her home country of the Philippines. To back her up we were taught by Bill Grueskin, the dean of academic affairs at the journalism school and a former editor at the Wall Street Journal, and Mark Hansen, a statistician from UCLA who is an expert on data visualization.

Under these teachers' guidance, my class' reporting focused on poverty in New York - its underlying causes, current developments and the effect these forces have on everyday people's lives. As well as requiring accurate and intelligent explanations on this subject, the beauty of journalism is that it always comes back to telling a good story. Finding stories, even in a city as fascinating as New York City, is always hard because our professors have a high threshold. Is it new? Is it interesting and important, and does it answer a question you always wanted answered?

My beat was covering criminal justice in the Bronx. I wrote one article on a divisive judge bought in to speed up the Bronx courts, which are mired in delay, but who some lawyers felt was creating a culture of plea bargains that threatened the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. I also looked at a loophole in state law that allows police to disproportionately charge young men of color with possession of marijuana, an offence, which is decriminalized in New York. And then there was my story on copwatching, a movement among members of highly policed poor communities to record police activity on camera to combat what they believe is a culture of racism and aggression by the NYPD.

I am now moving into the next stage of my course. My yearlong investigative class, taught by Sheila, focuses on research techniques required for deep reporting on systematic wrongdoing. We are currently looking into offshore lenders and others creditors who seek to get around US regulations on predatory lending. I also take a writing class in which I write articles on the changing demographics in America suburbia, such as the massive increase of immigrants directly to New York's suburbs and a video journalism class. On top of this we must take courses in the business, history, ethics and the law of journalism to give us a strong grounding in the field we are about to enter.

Overall, even after only four months, I feel that this opportunity has improved me greatly as a reporter and found an outlet for my natural curiosity about the world. I hope I can use this experience to tell important stories throughout my career and to try to give back to New Zealand some of the influence I've received from the phenomenally talented people who teach me and study with me here. I'd like to thank Yvonne and the Yvonne A M Smith Charitable Trust for making this opportunity possible.