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Story about
Youth Journalism International

‘More than just guidance’ – Youth Journalism International builds bridge while promoting quality journalism

Adviser Update is a quarterly newspaper for journalism educators from Dow Jones News Fund.
‘More than just guidance’
Youth Journalism International builds bridge while promoting quality journalism

WINNER — Arooj Khalid, a 16-year-old YJI student in Lahore, Pakistan, with her award certificate from the 2012 Excellence in Journalism contest.

Update photo courtesy of Youth Journalism International
After the Boston Marathon bombing, Nawall Hassan, a Boston-born Muslim who now lives in Saudi Arabia, writes movingly about his reaction to the tragedy in the place he considers his hometown. After hearing of the bombing, he talks about his experience watching the Marathon while he was growing up and says, "My thoughts first drifted to who could have the heart to pollute something as sacred as a lifetime of memories. My second response was to hope and pray we didn’t share the same faith."

"As a young American Muslim," he continues, "it isn’t hard to get lost within two oceans of culture. It truly is a calamity when a race, nation or religion is persecuted for the actions of misguided members."

Hassan is one of scores of young people from around the world whose writing is showcased online by Youth Journalism International, a Connecticut-based nonprofit organization which mentors and works with aspiring young journalists worldwide.

A young man from India, Pushkal Shivam, manages to get an interview with the Dalai Lama. A teenager student (whose name is withheld for her protection) in Syria writes, "I’m sorry for the delay in responding to your former emails … Three days after your first email my neighbor was shot in the head; some of my relatives were either killed or arrested."

A student from New Orleans writes a moving journal about Hurricane Katrina.

Kai Lawson-McDowell expresses fears of violence following an upcoming election in Kenya.

Emma Bally of Brooklyn, N.Y., writes about the damage sustained by her neighborhood from Hurricane Sandy.

The youth page no longer exists, but Youth Journalism International now highlights the writing of hundreds of young people and has a waiting list of many more who would like their work to be published by the organization.

The students write on topics ranging from serious (suicide, school violence, terrorism, the Arab Spring) to light (movies, music, sports), but always with an emphasis on good writing and journalistic principles.

Youth Journalism International students have written about child labor in Pakistan, the Egyptian revolution, this year’s Academy Awards nominees and attitudes toward rape in India.

In addition to the Dalai Lama, they’ve interviewed author Judy Blume and New York Times editor Jill Abramson.

Through YJI’s connection with ESPN, which is based in Connecticut, they’ve also had the opportunity to meet and interview major sports stars.

Julia Swan
is a freelance writer living in Hellertown, Pa. She was an editor at two weekly newspapers in Pennsylvania for almost 15 years, and prior to that, worked for 10 years as a part-time reporter for a suburban daily near Boston, Mass. She can be reached at bruce.swan@rcn.com.

Building bridges
It all started in 1994, when the students working for Collins and Majerus on the youth page produced what Majerus called "a really terrific project" on teen suicide.

The couple decided they wanted to give the piece broader exposure so they created a primitive website and posted the project on it.

After that, they began getting inquiries from kids all over the world about writing for the website. So they decided to create Youth Journalism International. In the subsequent years, they have become totally immersed in the project, with Majerus giving up her day job in order to devote all her time to YJI.

But while the organization is passionately devoted to teaching young people the highest standards of journalistic writing and ethics, it has become just as much about building bridges among cultures and nations.

Majerus and Collins have forged friendships, both in person and online, with many of the writers, and the writers have
frequently met one another.
“Many of them travel and
connect with each other,” Majerus
said.
And Collins and Majerus
themselves have met a
surprisingly large number of
the writers. Several of those
friendships have continued after
the young people have moved
beyond writing for YJI, to college
or careers.

Ambassadors
YJI now gives trophies every year
for outstanding writing by the
young journalists, a competition
which is enthusiastically
anticipated by the writers.
Majerus and Collins
have recruited a cadre of
“ambassadors,” adult volunteers
who help spread the word
about YJI among their friends
and associates. Many of the
ambassadors also judge contest
entries. The ambassadors include
people ranging from a Nebraska
police chief to Mike Soltys, vice
president of ESPN. They include
YJI writers, such as Pushkal
Shivam, the young man from India
who interviewed the Dalai Lama.
Others are journalism teachers,
such as Michelle Harmon, who
learns English and journalism
and is adviser to the Borah
Senator, the Borah HS newspaper
in Boise, Idaho.
Harmon first got involved with
YJI about four years ago when
she read an email announcing
YJI's annual youth journalism
contest.
"The idea that it was
international intrigued me," she
said.
Harmon has also been
impressed by the scope of topics
covered by YJI writers.
"The thing I like," she said, "is
that YJI topics are less tethered
to the academic world."
Megan Mizuta, one of her
students, won YJI’s Student
Journalist of the Year award in
2010.
In submitting Megan’s entry,
Harmon wrote, “Megan is the
epitome of student journalism:
she is honest, communicates
clearly, constantly experiments
with journalistic forms, assists the
staff with copy editing, vehemently
practices journalism ethics and
provides leadership."
Another of Harmon’s students
received a first place award for a
profile she wrote of a local artist.

YJI accolades
YJI was incorporated in
2007 and was approved as a
recognized nonprofit in 2010.
In addition to having their work
posted on the YJI website,
YJI journalists have seen their
efforts in newspapers and on
radio, on the PBS NewsHour, in
the Huffington Post and even in
textbooks.
Accolades for YJI have come
from GreatNonProfits.org, which
recognized it as a top educational
charity, and from Groupon and
AOL, both of which chose it as a
featured charity. But perhaps the
most affecting and convincing
praise has come from the
students themselves.
Pushkal Shivam said, "YJI gave
me more than just guidance; it
came as a godsend." He even, on
his own initiative, created a video
for the YJI website supporting its
work.
Mike Nguyen, an alumnus
from Connecticut, said, "Year
in and year out, YJI finds and
fully commits to developing a
community of teen journalists."

Funding need
But in order for YJI to continue
showcasing the work of young
writers, it needs funding. It has
never charged the students to
participate and uses nearly every
dollar raised on its educational
programs.
Majerus, who devotes almost
time to the organization, is
unpaid, and they would like to pay
her a modest salary. There are
some 1,200 students on a waiting
list to write for YJI, and with more
funds, more of them could be
accommodated.
Collins and Majerus
acknowledge they are "not so
skilled at raising money." They
have had to approach family,
friends and colleagues seeking
help, but now need to reach out
beyond their circle if YJI is to
continue to grow.
Contributions can be made to
Youth Journalism International,
33 Griswold Drive, West Hartford,

FOUNDERS — Youth Journalism
International founders Steve Collins
and Jackie Majerus are at the
Newsies, an awards ceremony and
journalism conference in New York
for high school journalists. They
judged contests and presented
workshops at the conference.

Update photo courtesy of Youth
Journalism International

CT 06119, or by going to www.
youthjournalism.org and clicking
on the link to Causecast.
Become a YJI Ambassador and
help spread the word about the
valuable work the organization
does.