

# Adviser Update

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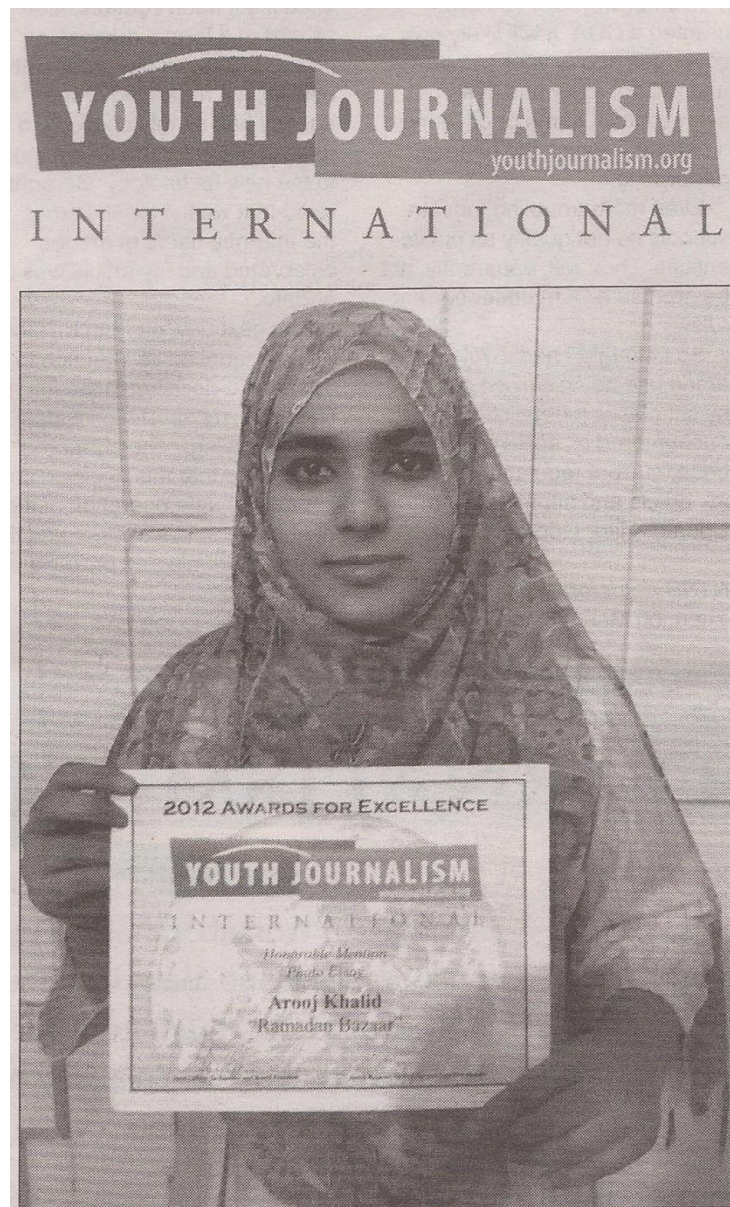
## Spring 2014 Story about Youth Journalism International

**'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*



## BY JULIA SWAN

**A**fter 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 teenage 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.

### **Getting started**

When Jackie Majerus and Steve Collins, a couple from West Hartford, started working with teens in 1994 on a youth page in the Bristol (Conn.) Press, they had no idea what would develop in a dozen years from this modest beginning.

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



### **Julia Swan**

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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.

### **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

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# BRIDGE

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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 teaches 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 all her 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](http://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.