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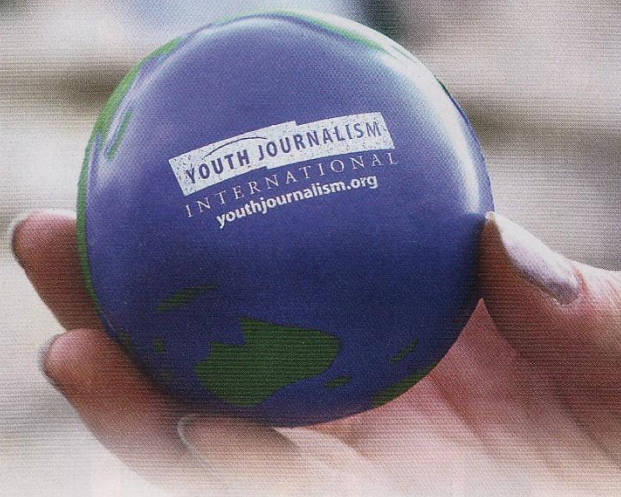


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Raising voices

A Bristol-born **youth journalism organization** helps teens from **around the world** connect and be heard

by Jennifer Sager



FEBRUARY 11, 2011

ALEXANDRIA, Egypt — The streets are going wild. There are cars honking, people chanting in joy, and men and women in balconies and windows yelling, "Victory!"

Egypt is in an ecstatic state. There are no words to describe how happy people feel right now. Personally, I am overcome. Victory is here. The heroes of the youth revolution have done it.

The men, the women, the children and the elderly who have day after day demanded change have finally removed the head of the regime after 18 days on the streets. No one believed they would live to see this day.

Egypt got its soul back today. Welcome freedom. Welcome liberty. Welcome justice. As I write this, there are still tears of happiness in my eyes. From now on, "walk like an Egyptian" will mean walk tall and walk proud. The revolution is victorious.

— By Jessica Elsayed

■ As Egypt's revolutionaries celebrated in the streets this past February, Jessica Elsayed, a senior reporter with Youth Journalism International, shared the news with the world.

Not yet 18 at the time, she had long been a member of YJI, an organization founded in Bristol, Connecticut, by local journalists Steve Collins and Jackie Majerus.

Like other teenage YJI members around world, Elsayed reports local and national events as they happen, and posts her stories online for her colleagues and the rest of the globe to read. Beyond its newsgathering function, YJI serves as a training ground for aspiring young journalists, and has created a close-knit global community of young writers who are intent on making a difference in the world.

When the husband-and-wife team of Collins and Majerus began interacting with teens on a local volunteer project, they had no idea it would one day grow into an international youth organization. What began 17 years ago as a way to engage a small group of Bristol High School students in



Erez Bittan
Hall High School

Mary Majerus-Collins
Bristow Middle School

Francis Byrne
King Phillip
Middle School

Jason Soltys
John F. Kennedy
Middle School

Yelena Samofalova
Bristow Middle School



YJI founders
Steve Collins and
Jackie Majerus



YJI reporter
Francis Byrne
interviewed
Captain Ken
Ham, a NASA
astronaut and
space shuttle
commander,
at the Imagine
Nation children's
museum in
Bristol.

writing and journalism has blossomed into a global network of more than 200 teen writers in 40 countries, reporting on everything from how they celebrate New Year's Eve to the recent revolution in Egypt.

"When we started this journey in 1994, we couldn't have imagined we would one day be where we are," said Collins. "We started by working with Bristol teens interested in pursuing careers in journalism, teaching them the basics. Right away, we loved working with the students, more than we ever thought we would."

A year into their work at Bristol High School, the students did a project on teen suicide. It was emotionally challenging for the teens writing it, as well as for Collins and Majerus.

"The kids did a beautiful job on the project and it had such a powerful message that we decided we needed to share it with others on a much broader scale," Collins recalled.

"We published it online for a larger audience and that is when everything changed," added Majerus.

Once the story was posted, people from across the country and the globe began contacting them, wanting to get involved, and wanting to write. "All of a sudden, we had messages from teens in Texas and Louisiana, and then they started reaching out

from Pakistan, India and Singapore," said Collins. It was then that they realized they were onto something – something big.

"Things clicked, and we suddenly understood that we didn't need to be bound by our geography. All we needed was a computer and access to the Internet. The students taught us that," said Majerus.

"It really is amazing, but the kids always find us," said Collins. "We've got 225 teens on our current list of participants and dozens more on our waiting list. Some write regularly, some more sporadically, but they are all connected to us and to one another."

General story topics or writing prompts are blasted out via e-mail to the whole list of active participants. However, many students will contact Collins and Majerus with story ideas of their own.

"We had a teen attend a public talk with the Dalai Lama in his town near Mumbai and actually ask a question. He [the teenager] decided he really wanted to cover this story, let us know he was doing it, arranged transportation to and from the talk, brought his notebook, heard the Dalai Lama speak, took notes and raised his hand to ask a question. When they chose him, he introduced himself as a reporter from Youth Journalism International.

YJI SAVED MY LIFE

ALEXANDRIA, Egypt — Where I am from, when someone is really grateful, they put their hand on their heart, then move it to their head, in a gesture that looks like a salute. The reason behind this is because just saying thank you alone will sometimes not express the extent with which something or someone has touched another's heart and mind.

Youth Journalism International gets this beautiful gesture from my home in Egypt, and tens of other traditional ways of saying thank you from all over the world with every new blog entry it posts.

Personally, I cannot remember my life before YJI, although it was not far back. It isn't very exciting remembering when my opinions were only thoughts no one else can hear in my head. My views were overlooked and rarely respected. My words reached no one past my friends, who still thought I was crazy for wanting the world to hear me.

But YJI heard me and let my voice echo out into the rest of the world through the miracle of blogs and websites.

Most people my age have something to say but... they seem to have nothing, walking empty-headed in the streets.

The truth is, YJI saved my life. It showed me that I, like all youth, have respectable thoughts that, when put into writing, are priceless.

Even before the revolution [that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak], YJI gave me freedom and allowed me to criticize, condemn and praise what I saw around me.

Although my ideas were oppressed in school, I came home to a website and community of people just like me, despite our different nations and traditions.

The people behind YJI are the most pure forms of human kindness. They are such motivating and full-of-life individuals that stood by me when my nation was experiencing the most difficult of times, calling on a daily basis during the revolution to get my voice over to the other end of the world and just comforting me that they stand by our struggle and that freedom was soon to come. And it did.

Now with a more fearless nation, more youth are going to be searching for a place to be heard. One by one, Egyptians look to YJI.



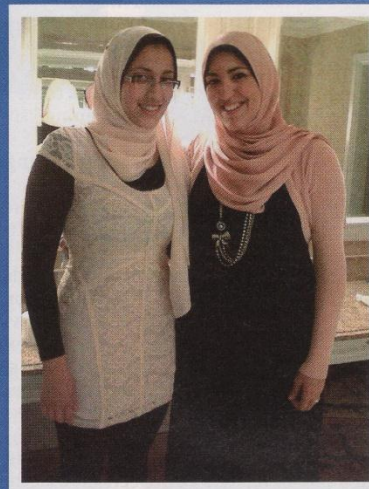
So, thank you with my hand on my heart to the organization that made me feel like something because I am.

Thank you, YJI, for being the microphone I use to be heard in such a noisy world.

Thank you, for connecting me to such an amazing group of people that made me realize that the world is much smaller and more related to each other than we think.

I am a braver, stronger person because I am part of YJI and I will forever make sure that no matter where or what life throws at me, I will stay loyal to the organization that taught me to be loyal to myself.

— By Jessica Elsayed
Senior Reporter
Youth Journalism International



 Youth Journalism
International (YJI)
Youthjournalism.org
Yjiblog.org



YJI Editor Katie Jordan, reporters Becca Lazarus, Kiernan Majerus-Collins, Laquandria Fenn, and co-founders Steve Collins and Jackie Majerus visited ESPN as part of their World Cup coverage.

I mean, that is just amazing," said Majerus proudly.

With members in dozens of countries, YJI has had teens report from the front lines of nearly every major news story of the last decade.

"It has been great to have these stories come in about current events as they are happening," she said.

The organization does more than train young people as journalists, however.

"YJI connects kids who live completely different lives, in opposite corners of the world. Wonderful friendships and a real understanding develop between these students, and suddenly the world gets a little smaller. All of sudden, the revolution in Egypt is important to a teen from Connecticut who has never even visited this faraway place half way around the world. It's important because he or she has a friend from YJI who lives there and is directly impacted. It's a really beautiful thing to see happen," Majerus explained.

Today, YJI's mission is to connect teen writers, artists and photographers with peers around the globe, teach journalism, foster cross-cultural understanding, and promote and defend a free youth press. Still based in Bristol and still run by Collins and Majerus, YJI is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization offering teen writers on five continents a free education in journalism. Over the years, YJI has worked with countless young writers, helping them to hone their journalism skills, providing an outlet for

their creative expression, and exposing both the teens and their work to a global audience. All of these outcomes have resulted in a large, enthusiastic and engaged network of parents and alumni.

Katie Jordan, a YJI alum from Ellington, became involved with YJI in the seventh grade through her older sister, who was attending Bristol Eastern High School.

"I was hearing and seeing the great things going on with the program from my sister and wanted to be a part of it too. I started attending meetings at the high school, writing articles and drawing cartoons. Steve [Collins] and Jackie [Majerus] were so supportive through my years in the program. They taught me how to express myself clearly and effectively. That's a skill more people could use today," said Jordan, who – after earning her B.A. in English and Journalism at the University of Connecticut in 2009 – returned to YJI as a volunteer editor.

"YJI gave me an outlet to express myself and connected me to other teens all over the world, plus I was able to really develop strong writing skills that have been a great tool for me. I was excited to help other students find these incredible gifts as well," explained Jordan.

Of Collins and Majerus, she says, "They really are amazing and the fact that they make this experience possible for so many students, on top of having their own lives and a family, is just inspiring."

Like Jordan, Joe Bun Keo, a YJI alum and up-and-coming Hartford artist, credits Collins and Majerus and his experience with YJI with opening the doors to the world for him – literally.

"When I first got involved, I was an aspiring cartoonist who lacked some direction and needed to improve my social skills. Steve and Jackie gave me guidance and helped me develop my skills socially, but also as an editorial cartoonist and writer. Without them and my experience with YJI, I honestly don't know if would have pursued the arts," the Bristol-based artist said.

"Being in the program taught me how to ask questions and talk to people, and exposed me to new ideas and world issues I might never have come into contact with." Keo recently exhibited his work at ArtSpace in Hartford and has several other art-related projects in the works.

Thirteen-year-old Jason Soltys has only recently become involved, a decision he made in part because he watched his older brother Sean enjoy the program but also because he, too, likes to write. So far, he's enjoying learning about the importance of looking for and writing down details to tell a story or describe an experience. "I liked writing about and sharing my trip to a space shuttle launch with other people," he said. "Also, visiting the state capitol with YJI and getting to go in the governor's office was fun."

The Soltys brothers are not the only members of their family involved in YJI. Their dad, Mike, an

executive at ESPN, has a longstanding relationship with the organization.

"I've worked with YJI for 15 years and seen what a solid opportunity it is for young people to learn about journalism and writing. At ESPN, several times we have included YJI reporters at press events we ran in Bristol. The students were able to see ESPN in a setting with national journalists. The media that attend often comment on the professionalism of the young writers."

Soltys thought so highly of YJI that he didn't hesitate to get his boys involved when they expressed an interest in writing. "Both of my sons have written stories about places they have visited and then were able to share their stories with family and friends. Steve and Jackie give all of their writers valuable individual attention on the correct ways to write stories and improve their skills."

During the past 17 years, YJI – but more specifically, Collins and Majerus and the students involved in the program – have built connections across international borders and promoted a free press, all while doing their best to ensure the future of journalism as the profession continues to change in the digital age.

Majerus believes the future remains bright for journalists, despite a decline in printed media.

"Every week, several new teens seek to join our ranks. Today alone, we had seven inquiries," she said.

"Unfortunately, our ability to handle the soaring interest is severely constrained by a lack of funds and manpower. Steve and I only have so many hours in the day, plus we have our own jobs and a family to raise. We would love to expand the number of students in the program, but we just can't support that right now."

Currently, YJI is funded by loyal readers, grateful parents and alumni – those committed to the profession of journalism, and to Collins and Majerus personally.

"We want YJI to be sustainable long after us," said Collins.

"But if we have to choose between helping a teen with a story or fundraising, we always choose the teen," added Majerus. "That's why we've been doing this for so long." **HM**

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ON THE COVER:

Local teens visiting Avery's Beverages in New Britain created the company's newest "Gross Soda." Story on page 40.
Photo by Brian Ambrose.

Youth Journalism International reporters
take a break at the State Capitol in Hartford.
Page 45. Photo by Corley Fleming.

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Christopher White

■ What could be more fun than seeing things through the eyes of a child? For those of us lucky enough to be a parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, friend or mentor to children, the answer is: "Not much." Their actions, worldview and incredible ideas often bring a smile, and keep us young at heart. In our annual kids' issue, we bring you several stories about the fun and amazing things that the children in our community – and around the world – are up to.

Avery Beverages in New Britain recently held a contest asking kids to come up with new flavors, and then created actual sodas with those names. The result? "Totally Gross Sodas" that sound horrible, taste great and are flying off the shelves. Bottle of Bug Barf, anyone?

Then there are the teens from your neighborhood and across the globe who have begun reporting at a young age and whose stories are seen around the world, thanks to a local volunteer group launched in 1994 by journalists Steve Collins and Jackie Majerus. Today, **200 teens from 40 countries report online** for Youth Journalism International (YJI), sharing everything from native traditions to how it feels to be on the streets in the middle of a political uprising.

In news from the younger set, we tell you about elementary students who read a book about a woman who made an enormous difference in her native East Africa, and followed suit – in their own schoolyard. These second graders are also on track to **change the world**.

When it comes to creating positive change, many adults in our region are likewise stepping up and letting their voices be heard. WRCH on-air personality **Allison Demers** recently "walked the talk" by traveling to Kenya. Read her inspiring story of the impact that her small, faith-based group had on people afflicted by poverty, drought and a sometimes-brutal environment.

We also sat down for a chat with **Kamora Herrington of True Colors**, a local organization that helps teens deal with the often harsh realities of being gay or lesbian. The group provides much-needed support and validation for young people who may have nowhere else to turn, and has been credited with saving young lives.

Saving lives is second nature to the dedicated medical personnel at **UConn Health Center's Emergency Department**. We spent a night there, watching medical dramas unfold. For the caregivers at UConn's ER, it's all in a day's – or night's – work.

We also bring you our annual report on **Greater Hartford high schools**. Using the latest statistics from the state Department of Education, we assess which schools are making the grade – or getting a failing grade. Want to see how your child's high school stacks up? You won't want to miss this feature.

Thanks for your ongoing support of *Hartford Magazine*, our region's premier lifestyle publication. We welcome your feedback.

Christopher V. White

Christopher White
Publisher

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