

AU Student/NY Times Intern Aspires to Foreign Correspondence

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Story by Peter Holley

WASHINGTON -- It was the orphanage for the blind and handicapped within the heart of Ho Chi Minh City that first piqued Jessica MacDonald's interest in being a newspaper foreign correspondent. An unlikely tourist destination, this aging Buddhist temple is a place of refuge for those Vietnamese children who still suffer from the American military's careless use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. It could have been the baby's enlarged head nestled against a concrete floor, or perhaps it was the agonizing contortions of the children's small, filthy, bodies, that left an enduring impression. But, by the end of her two days working in the Vietnamese orphanage last spring break, it was obvious that the hazardous chemical continues to wage a war that ended 30 years ago.

While most visitors in the bustling metropolis of Ho Chi Minh City might only have seen the place as a somber relic of a forgotten era, MacDonald saw something else. She saw a story.

"It was just a fascinating story with an American appeal," the American University senior and aspiring foreign correspondent explained during a recent interview. "I think it's important to study other countries."

This simple belief has guided the 21-year-old MacDonald to her current position as intern with the New York Times' Washington Bureau. Besides gaining the practical experience of working in one of the world's most prestigious newsrooms, she has had the opportunity to meet and to work with some of the media's most prominent figures.

"Tim Russert was not as sweet as he seems on TV," the Minneapolis native said jokingly. The list of people she's met reads like a who's who of important insiders: George Soros, Judy Woodruff, Alan Greenspan, Maureen Dowd, Thomas Friedman and even the New Yorker's Seymour Hirsch, the celebrated investigative reporter who broke the Abu Ghraib Prison story earlier this year.

For MacDonald, these invaluable networking opportunities are a deserved reward. After undergoing a rigorous set of interviews she was selected for the coveted internship from a pool of 300 candidates in one of the industry's most competitive processes.

In the New York bureau, where the same competitive spirit extends to the newsroom, 130 people compete each day for a byline on the metro desk alone. But, as MacDonald has found, the Washington Bureau consists of more established political writers, allowing her to find her niche with relative ease. Since that time she has transcended the role of intern and in many ways operated as though she were a normal staff writer.

"Sitting in on the conference calls to New York is always interesting," MacDonald explains. "The room is full of editors competing for the next day's front page. New York is yelling or laughing on the other line. There's a lot of discussion, but it is surprisingly relaxed."

Conference calls to New York may appear relaxed, but when you are perched atop the helm of an influential media empire things are bound to become hectic from time to time.

"During the debates it was mayhem, like boiling water," she explains. "But on a day-to-day basis it's much more quiet than most newsrooms, because so many of the experienced reporters are out doing stories around town."

In fact, MacDonald reached her own boiling point during this year's presidential debates when she assumed the role of fact checker. The newsroom's frenzied pace was compounded by the severe time constraints of this high-profile event. MacDonald struggled to complete her online research, which would then be added to a paragraph written by another staff writer, all of which had to be finished in an allotted time. It was for this reason that the exercise is appropriately dubbed "magic fingers."

When asked about which candidate had the most incorrect statements, MacDonald smiles, but declines to divulge any partisan bias. Instead she cleverly positions her neutrality as any savvy journalist would: "George Bush had the most incorrect facts, but Kerry had a few too."

To date, she has produced one contributing byline and is currently working on a story about the Check Clearing Act for the 21st Century. Passed by Congress in June, the act allows banks to save \$2 billion by not including hard copy checks when they return a person's statement in the mail.

MacDonald's lofty ambition is nearly palpable and she continues to construct an impressive resume. Next semester she plans to work as an intern in the Los Angeles Times' Washington Bureau. After graduating in May, she plans to resume her travels, either working at the English Daily Star in Beirut or at the Chicago Tribune, depending upon what's available, as well as the potential danger she might encounter as an American working in the Middle East.

MacDonald credits her journalistic passion to her avid travels abroad.

"I think seeing different areas of the world makes you realize how many stories aren't told and how many stories the American public should know about," she said.

One story that she thinks the American public should know about is that of the Vietnamese orphans whose health is still plagued by Agent Orange.

"I saw children with brain disease, deformities; it was awful," she explained, "As soon as you return home it is easy to forget about an experience like that. This is why it is so important to write about it and share it with people."

From her first travels as a high school student in Jerusalem to her experience in Vietnam last year as a college student, MacDonald has learned, as any good journalist learns, that "everything around you could potentially be a story idea, whether it be for the Times or for the school newspaper."

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