



3.5 years, 59 stories, 22 spreads and who-knows-how-many photos. When I look at my years in our journalism program quantitatively, they seem so insignificant. Numbers can never describe the friends I have made, the things I have learned and the ways I have changed.

FINDING MY OWN VOICE

The first time I stepped onto our campus, I was an awkward, shy eighth grader with only two goals: get good grades and make my parents proud (some things never change). Sometimes it's hard to remember that I used to be that girl. That girl would never believe that in just a few years she'd be one of the loudest – and sassiest – voices in the room. She'd scoff if you told her that asking strangers to tell you about their life could be fun. And applying for editor-in-chief? She'd question her capability every step of the way.

As it turns out, journalism was the key to transforming a loner into a leader, an introvert into an editor-in-chief.

For the first time in my life, I was doing something for myself, not for my parents. I found a passion, and I was willing to do whatever it took to become a great journalist. I forced myself to talk to strangers (that was the first step to becoming a better journalist) and I grew accustomed to it. After a while, I began to enjoy it. I got a rush from writing stories and “giving voice to the voiceless.”

Fittingly, journalism gave me my own voice as well. It encouraged me to speak up when I know something is wrong, like sexual harassment in the hallways or stigmatization of mental illnesses. It taught me how to express my thoughts and share my passion.

THE RED & BLACK FAMILY

I did not apply for the position of editor-in-chief because I wanted to be the next Ellie Rodriguez (last year's Florida SJOY and our previous chief). I applied because I wanted to give the younger members of our staff the same experience I had. I wanted them to fall utterly in love with journalism. I wanted to encourage them to grow as writers, photographers and designers. I wanted to teach, and I wanted to continue to learn alongside my staff.

Through all of the ups and downs of the International Baccalaureate program, the best part of my week will always be stepping into Mr. Humphrey's classroom – yes, even during deadline. I've never felt as comfortable in a group of people as I am with our crazy Red & Black family. Nothing has ever been as exciting as jumping up and down and cheering at the top of my lungs as our staff members walk up to collect awards at FSPA. One of my proudest moments is relishing the joy of learning that our newspaper is one of the best in the nation and knowing that I helped accomplish that.

CHALLENGES AND TRANSITIONS

That being said, this year has been anything but effortless for our staff. After two years under the leadership of Ellie Rodriguez, Kathy Xie (my co-editor-in-chief) and I were faced with the intimidating task of filling her shoes. Additionally, approximately a third of our staff had graduated in June 2015.

Though the transition was difficult, Kathy and I were able to take advantage of it by using our fresh start to get rid of old mistakes while maintaining the quality of work for which the Red & Black established a precedent. Kathy and I designed a completely new style guide to streamline our design and promote design consistency. We also eliminated the photo editor position on our staff, forcing every staff member to be responsible for his/her own photos; the goal of this was to cultivate a staff of dynamic, well-rounded student journalists with a wide repertoire of skills.

A challenge we've faced every year is the fact that most of our staff members have class every other day because the IB program operated on a rotating two-day schedule. That means many staffers have as few as three class periods to conduct interviews and write stories, and some writers will never physically see their editor in class. To mitigate this issue, we emphasize effective communication through – whether it's via text messages or face-to-face conversation – as well as usage of tools like Google Drive and Dropbox.

A FOOT IN THE DOOR

I cannot begin to describe what an honor it is to lead this newspaper to which I've willingly devoted hours (and hours and hours) and continue the Red & Black legacy. It will be bittersweet when I pass my job to another capable journalist, but I will take everything that I've gained from journalism when I go to college, where I intend to major in communication.

Journalism has taught me how to write with both passion and finesse and how to design with clarity and creativity. My responsibilities in newspaper have taught me how to lead a large group, cooperate (even when opinions clash), manage time and stay organized. These skills have been indispensable in almost everything I do, whether I'm running tennis practice, helping my dad advertise his dental office or balancing my IB course load with extremely time-consuming extracurricular activities.

The greatest advantage journalism has offered me is the chance to go to my dream university. In December, I finished my application for University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. A few months prior, I had the opportunity to visit USC, where I had scheduled an appointment with Senior Assistant Director of Admissions Danielle Fischhoff. She called my experience "impressive" and encouraged me to apply.

Being on the staff of the Red & Black is a once in a lifetime opportunity that has allowed me to travel, learn and earn a foot in the door into my future. I still don't know where I'll be in five years, or even in one (college admissions don't end until April), but I know I'll be able to thank Mr. Humphrey and the staff of the Red & Black for it.