

Faculty Profile: AggieTV prof shines from fiery crash to Christmas lights

12/11/2012



Garff and senior Meredith Kinney work in the ATV News control room. Dan Smith photo

December 11, 2012

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Story & Photos by D. Whitney Smith

LOGAN—A little more than a year ago, a horrific traffic accident and heroic rescue to prevent a fiery death played out just yards away from the Quad at Utah State University. Chris Garff remembers it well.

Many will remember the September 2011 motorcycle accident on Hwy. 89 that left USU student Brandon Wright pinned under a flaming BMW. More and a dozen bystanders—students, faculty and construction workers—raced to lift the burning vehicle and pull Wright from underneath from the wreckage.



From atop the USU Business Building, grad student Chris Garff shot video that went worldwide.

As the nation celebrated Wright and the “heroes” who saved him, as talk show host Ellen DeGeneres called them, the media chased Chris Garff’s video of the rescue.

“I just happened to be in the right place at the right time,” said Garff, now a faculty member in the Journalism & Communication Department (JCOM), whose offices overlook the site of the accident. “And I knew what I was doing when it happened. I knew the rules of shooting video, so it worked out really well. I was able to get that video to different news outlets. The other nice thing about it was obviously no one was hurt.”

Garff graduated from JCOM with a major in broadcast journalism in 2008, he went to work for the university’s Faculty Assistance Center for Teaching (FACT) as a media production specialist while enrolled as a graduate student in multimedia and instructional technology.

Last spring, as Garff prepared to complete his master’s degree, he was recruited to apply to teach in the journalism department as a full-time video instructor. The opening came as Garff’s former broadcast TV professors Penny and Dean Byrne retired.

Applying for the position in his old department “was a no-brainer,” said Garff.

Garff said he had several video clips and projects in his portfolio that helped get him the job, including the motorcycle accident footage.



Garff, right, confers with Brian Champagne on the AggieTV News set. Dan Smith photo

Professor Brian Champagne, who leads JCOM's video and multimedia program, has years of professional experience working at big-city TV news stations. Hired in 2010, Champagne also chaired the hiring committee that chose Garff to fill the position.

"I can say it was a pretty clear choice," Champagne said. "Chris has made my job easier. That's the big thing. It's kind of neat—the more he can do, the more I can do."

He and Garff complement each other in building JCOM's AggieTV news program, Champagne said: Champagne worked for some 20 years for TV news stations in California and Utah, and Garff has extensive knowledge of video and multimedia editing hardware and software.

Garff's knowledge of all-things-movie extends beyond the classroom, Champagne says.

"A good nickname for him would be 'IMDb,'" Champagne said, referring to the Internet Movie Database, which catalogs countless archival facts on film and TV. "Just say any random line from a movie, and he'll tell you the stars and all that stuff."

Champagne and Garff also co-teach JCOM's new required core course in multimedia, as well as the weekly AggieTV newscast, which offer journalism majors the opportunity to acquire hands-on experience with shooting and editing video. AggieTV News, which covers USU and northern Utah and feeds Salt Lake's TV stations, puts students to work in a professional TV news environment, both on and off camera.

Kelsey Keller is a USU senior who often anchors the ATV News program.



Garff and JCOM senior ATV News anchors Romina Nedakovic (left) and Kelsey Keller set up for the Christmas 2012 Cache Rendezvous show. Dan Smith photo

"It's been really cool to see how much the journalism department has changed just since I've been here," Keller said. "Starting out, we didn't really have a whole lot of development, but now we have some top-notch equipment. And with Chris coming, too, it's just nice, because he has a lot of new, fresh ideas."

When the JCOM department migrated from its aging home in the Animal Science Building to the new \$43 million Agricultural Sciences Building last spring, the department also invested in a brand-new studio equipped with the state-of-the-art technology that permits students to produce a professional news show. On the first day of classes last fall, Keller said, the new ATV News studio didn't have a set, so Champagne and Garff built one.

"That's how Chris works," Keller says. "I was actually in newscast before Chris was here, and it was kind of a lot messier in the past. Our set was a little bit more unorganized, we didn't clean up as much after the show. That's one thing that Chris has really enforced."

As Keller speaks, Garff sweeps through the studio and control room next door, like a human tornado, straightening up as he goes—hanging lights, adjusting video monitors and coiling cords.

"He gets really in the zone when he's doing stuff in [the studio]," Keller says. "Actually, one time when we were on air, we were in commercial, but we were almost out of commercial, and he came in front of the screen to fix something. So, we came back [on air], and he walked in front of the camera. So he got on the ATV News that week."

Garff also teaches the introduction to video class for students just starting out in TV news. Beginning student Jenna Colton says Garff has been helpful in pointing out what exactly broadcast majors need to know going into TV news.

"When we first came in here, he told us a little bit about what he does," Colton said. "I learned that he was the guy who shot the motorcycle accident, and that was kind of cool because I recognized that. I felt like I was in a class with a mini-celebrity. He said he was a celebrity for 24 hours."

"Because he just graduated recently and he's so immersed in the field right now, I feel like he really knows what's

going on at the moment,” she said. “Sometimes, I feel like teachers have been teaching for a long time, and they really know a lot, but they’re not immersed in the field. It’s cool that Chris is. I think that gives him a lot of credibility.”

As Garff teaches, he often relates concepts about video to real-world examples and anecdotal pop-culture tidbits—such as “hypnotoad” from the animated TV show *Futurama*.

His demeanor is relaxed, yet on point; he keeps students laughing, but they say he is serious when it comes to learning.

Brandon Fonda, another broadcast major in Garff’s introduction to video class, says Garff is easygoing and approachable, but he doesn’t mince words when it comes to deadlines.

“I think that because he is a little younger, he relates to the students a lot,” Fonda says. “To be honest, he makes learning all this—I mean, it could be tedious going through every single technique—but he makes it a lot of fun. He’s just a funny guy. There are little things that he does that he always does. He’s got a good sense of humor. I think I’ve laughed every class.”

Garff tells his students, “It’s very important to communicate well, but communicate well before, during, and after.” They will make mistakes live on video, he tells them, but it’s important to work through those experiences and realize they are just another way to connect with the viewer—it’s all part of storytelling.

Students and fellow JCOM faculty agree that whether he is tidying up the ATV News studio, hanging Christmas lights to create ambiance for the *Cache Rendezvous* magazine show, or being in the right place at the right time to shoot career-defining video of a near-fatal motorcycle crash, Chris Garff’s passion for the medium and for storytelling comes through in all that he does.

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