Journalism prof known as quirky, dedicated, passionate, inspirational | Journalism

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USU alumna and longtime journalism professor Nancy Williams is an adviser, a cheerleader, a professor, a confidante, a friend, and a mentor to many students in the journalism and communication department, and those roles don’t end after her students graduate.

“She gives good advice, she loves her students and she loves teaching,” says former Williams student Manette Newbold, a 2007 JCOM alum and editor of Cache Magazine.

Ben Wood agrees. “Nancy taught me that the most important news is what’s happening just outside your door,” said Wood. The 2011 JCOM graduate and former Statesman editor is now a reporter for The Deseret News. “She instills in her students a love for the community and a passion for storytelling.”

Current JCOM major Rhett Wilkinson says he was struck by the Williams magic in his very first class. “When Nancy introduced herself in my public affairs reporting class in January 2011, I first noticed how quirky she was,” Wilkinson said. “Within a few minutes, she had told us about ham sandwiches, chicken buzzers and her relationship with broken heaters.

“I don’t know if I heard another word for the next 45 minutes since I was trying to make sense of everything she initially said,” he added. “I fell in love and knew I was in for a fun class.”

Williams has been part of USU journalism since 1984. Although she has taught a wide variety of classes during her 28 years at USU—copy editing and newspaper design, media ethics, community journalism, media smarts, opinion writing and others—Williams is best known for her public affairs reporting class. Despite her retirement in 2009, she’s still teaching it.

“I will not let go of teaching Public Affairs until they find someone else to teach it,” she said. “This course is too valuable to discontinue. We are the only university that teaches a course this way. It is extremely important that students learn reporting this way, and it is important to the JCOM department.”

Covering the Valley

Williams’ reporting students are each assigned a Cache Valley city or town from Paradise to Preston and Nibley to Wellsville to cover for the semester. They get to know mayors and local officials and personalities, attend city council and other meetings, cover city events, and are responsible for all the news that happens in “their” towns.

Colleague Matthew LaPlante, a former Salt Lake Tribune reporter who now teaches JCOM’s beginning news writing class, calls Williams’ dedication “a tremendous public service.”

“Without the effort of Professor Williams and her students, there are a lot of communities in northern Utah that would be woefully underserved by traditional news organizations,” LaPlante said.

In becoming beat reporters, JCOM students cover cops and courts, business and government, sports and cultural events, stories that are edited by Williams and published on the Hard News Café.

“I love teaching Public Affairs and helping students gain confidence and realizing their potential and learning what they can do,” Williams said.

Throughout the semester Williams takes her cub reporters on tours of government and city buildings, including the Cache County jail, the County Courthouse, and the County Assessor’s office, giving students an inside look at how the local government operates. This is rare training in today’s journalism environment, Williams says, and these are essential tools for her students’ future reporting jobs.

“It gives USU students an edge when they are looking for internships and jobs,” she said. “They have real reporting experience and an excellent portfolio to showcase their work.”

Williams’ students say that training stays with them in the real world.
"Nancy’s class gave all the basics for reporting," said Newbold. "The class really helped me understand how local city government works."

Rachel Christensen, another JCOM alumna who is an award-winning reporter for CacheValleyDaily.com, a local online news outfit, credits Williams with forming her career.

"Mentor is a better word to describe Nancy than teacher," Christensen said. "She’s one of the few professors that kept in touch after I graduated, and she continues to push me to be a better writer."

"Nancy’s reporting public affairs class was one of the most important classes I took at Utah State," Christensen said. "Ask any journalist who graduated from USU, and I bet they’ll tell you Nancy’s class prepared them for the real world more than any other. She really loves what she’s teaching, and she passes that enthusiasm to her students."

Emilie Wheeler, city editor of the Herald-Journal, says she is among those infected by Williams’ enthusiasm. "Nancy is always excited to see her students succeed and will do nearly anything to help them in that process," said Wheeler, a 2005 graduate who returned to campus this semester to teach copy editing. "Even though she technically retired a few years ago, her dedication to journalism and teaching young reporters has not diminished. She really is just extremely selfless; she works for the betterment of her students and journalism in general."

During the last 28 years, Williams has seen journalism evolve, change and transform in many big ways. When she began her journalism career as a reporter for the Herald Journal in the 1970s, she wrote stories on a typewriter, printed pictures from film, called news stories in over the telephone, and spent hours late at night designing newspaper pages and pasting them up using hot wax and rubber rollers.

Technology has improved journalists’ capabilities and speeded up reporting—today, journalism happens simultaneously with events themselves. No longer do readers have to wait for a paper-and-ink newspaper to reach your front porch the next morning to know what’s happening in the world.

No dinosaur herself, Williams is constantly online for news and to connect with the world. But she reminds those enamored with the latest blogs and social media that there is still a need for actual reporters and journalism degrees.

"Blogs are great. I love them, but they will never replace real journalism by real reporters and writers," she says.

Love at First Sight

Born in New Mexico, Williams was a high school junior when she took a road trip with her family to visit the Grand Tetons. It was a thousand-mile journey to the mountains, and on the way home they drove down Logan Canyon to Cache Valley. Williams still remembers.

"We came out of this gorgeous canyon into this beautiful valley," she said. "It was August, everything was lush and green. We came up the hill and could see the classic view of Old Main. The ‘A’ perched on the hill was stunning."

"That was it. It was so beautiful. I had totally fallen in love during that half-hour drive," she said.

Williams had never heard of Utah State University or Logan, Utah, but USU was the perfect school for her. She loved the beauty and peacefulness of the valley. Rather than follow all her high school friends to their college, Williams says she liked the idea of a university 700 miles away from home.

After two years as an Aggie, Williams stopped out to get married. She had her first child two years later. After a divorce and remarriage, she got a job at the Herald Journal as a magazine editor on the copy desk.

Williams says she was thrilled to get a phone call from the JCOM department suggesting she return to USU for a graduate degree, with the potential for teaching. She left the Herald Journal and as a master’s student helped take over the local weekly Cache Citizen. With faculty member Nelson Wadsworth, she helped incorporate the Citizen as part of the USU journalism program.

"It was a great experience," she says. "I loved being a part of it."

The Cache Citizen was run by students and published by the USU journalism program for 10 years until it was transformed into an online news website, the Hard News Café, in 1997, the first online news site in Utah.

‘Passion for Journalism, Passion for Life’

"Nancy was much more than a teacher to me," remembers RonNell Andersen Jones, a 1995 alumna who was one of the last student editors of the Cache Citizen. "She was
a model, a mentor, a cheerleader, and a friend. She has a passion for journalism, but mostly, I think, because she has a passion for life."

Jones, now a First Amendment law professor at BYU, says Williams and journalism taught her how to think.

“She taught me that life is worth living fully, and that virtually every idea is worth fair consideration, even if it ultimately gets rejected,” Jones said. “That careful, level even-handedness made me trust her as a person and taught me how, as a journalist, I could earn the trust of my readers.”

Storee Powell, a 2011 JCOM alumnus, says she stays in touch with Williams, and credits her continuing counsel for her success as a professional journalist. “Nancy still takes the time to give me advice on pursuing leads and stories,” said Powell, who won Society of Professional Journalists awards both as a student and this year as a new professional. “And her wisdom never fails. I attribute several of my SPJ awards to Nancy for her tips and feedback. Nancy is not a talker but a doer.”

“Nancy knows how to inspire people to make change because she leads by example,” Powell said.

Over her years as a professional journalist and professor, Williams has never lost her passion or belief in the role of journalism.

“I am teaching because I believe in pay-it-forward,” Williams said. “I have had some excellent mentors and some great experiences, and I want to share them with others who are also passionate about writing and reporting.”

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