Aggie journalists best in region with 20 excellence awards | Journalism

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By Kelton Wells
Photos by Danielle Manley

SANTA FE, N.M.—Students from Utah State University broke school records, and swept areas of competition in the 2012 Mark of Excellence awards sponsored by the Society of Professional Journalists. The awards were presented as part of the annual Region 9 SPJ conference last Saturday in Santa Fe at the offices of the Santa Fe New Mexican newspaper.

Aggie journalists collectively earned 20 MOE awards in 12 different categories, both breaking the school record and earning more awards than any other school in the region. Region 9 comprises colleges and universities in Utah, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico.

The awards recognize the best in student journalism, and Rio Grande SPJ Chapter President Laura Paskus said she was impressed with the quality of work submitted by students this year.

“I often worry about the future of journalism,” Paskus told conference attendees. “But after having read, listened and watched the works of journalism submitted by these students, I know our future is in good hands. The next generation of competent newsroom leaders is sitting with us today.”

Among USU entries, Utah Public Radio students collected six Mark of Excellence wards; The Hard News Café won five; Aggie BluePrint won three, and A-TV News and The Utah Statesman each won one.

AGGIE JOURNALIST Mackenzie Hamilton traveled to Ethiopia for her award-winning story on an American expatriate working with poor kids. DANIELLE MANLEY photo

USU sophomore Mackenzie Hamilton and senior Rhett Wilkinson tied for best performance by a single student, each with three awards.

Hamilton’s first-place entry in the feature writing category, “Hillsboro native builds ‘Vision of Life’ for homeless kids in Ethiopian capital”—about a 25-year-old American expatriate who has spent his early 20s helping kids in Ethiopia rather than attend college—was published by both The Oregonian and The Deseret News.

“I was thrilled when I saw my name on the screen,” said Hamilton, who got the story during a reporting trip to Ethiopia last summer with JCOM assistant professor Matthew LaPlante. “I thought the piece was good, but I didn’t think it would take first.”

She attributes the award to the mentoring she has received as a student in the Journalism and Communication Department at Utah State.

“It’s all because Matt LaPlante was willing—or crazy enough—to take three students to Ethiopia,” she said.

Students attending the conference were also able to network with industry professionals and take part in professional development workshops.

Other first-place winners from USU included Brianna Bodily for Radio News Reporting, and Ryan Cunningham...
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for Radio Feature, as well as Ryan Cunningham and April Ashland for Online Feature Reporting—for stories they aired on Utah Public Radio; *Hard News Café*’s Steve Kent for Online News Reporting, and Kristi Ottley for Online In-Depth Reporting, and Rhett Wilkinson for Online Sports Reporting in *Aggie BluePrint*, USU’s online student magazine.

The *Hard News Café* once again was named the region’s best independent student news website, a category it has dominated since the local news website’s founding in the 1990s.

In addition to the eight first place awards, USU students also won nine second-place and five third-place Mark of Excellence awards.

Aggies swept seven competition categories by winning all awards in Radio News Reporting, Radio Feature Reporting, Online News Reporting, Online Feature Reporting, Online In-Depth Reporting, Online Sports Reporting and won Best Independent Online Student Publication for the *Hard News Café*.

All regional first-place MOE award winners go on to the national SPJ awards competition.

**2013 USU SPJ Region 9 Mark of Excellence Awards**

**Best Independent Online Student Publication**
First Place: *The Hard News Café*, Utah State University

**General News Reporting**
Second Place: “GRAMA request reveals missing faculty conflict-of-interest forms,” by Caitlin Moffitt, *Hard News Café*

**Feature Writing**
First Place: “Hillsboro native builds ‘Vision of Life’ for homeless kids in Ethiopian capital,” by Mackinzie Hamilton, *The Oregonian*

**Sports Column Writing**
Second Place: Tavin Stucki, *The Utah Statesman*

**Radio News Reporting**
First Place: “Bicycle Brent,” by Brianna Bodily, Utah Public Radio
Second Place: “Water Dispute at Oneida Narrows” by Brianna Bodily, Utah Public Radio

**Radio Feature**
First Place: “Coyotes Fascinate, Puzzle Researchers in Utah,” by Ryan Cunningham, Utah Public Radio
Second Place: “Porcupine Music Festival—Hairy, Friendly People in Northern Utah,” by Mackinzie Hamilton, Utah Public Radio
Third Place: “Kids with Williams Syndrome are Pretty Tight, According to Friends and Researchers,” by Mackinzie Hamilton, Utah Public Radio

**Television General News Reporting**

KELTON WELLS participates in the SPJ conference in Santa Fe as fellow Aggie Caitlin Moffitt looks on. DANIELLE MANLEY photo

The winning entries appeared in several media outlets including UPR, A-TV News, the *Hard News Café*, *The Utah Statesman*, *Meridian Magazine*, *Aggie BluePrint*, Yahoo Sports, *The Oregonian*, and the *Deseret News*.

“We are so proud of our student journalists,” said JCOM Department Head Ted Pease. “Beyond the excellence of their journalism, what’s especially gratifying is the diversity of outlets in which our students are working and being recognized for the quality of their work—radio, TV, newspaper, online, magazine, both on-campus and off-campus, these students are doing journalism that makes a difference and reaches people.”

Coming in second to USU’s 20 total awards, students from Brigham Young University won 18 total awards, while students from Metropolitan State University of Denver walked away with 17.
Second Place: “USU Eastern Enrollment,” by Kelton Wells, A-TV News

**Online News Reporting**
First Place: “Converting algae to biofuel with solar power? USU’s almost there,” by Steve Kent, *Hard News Café*

**Online Feature Reporting**
First Place: “Buddhist Monk Urges Awareness, Understanding Amid Political Tension in Tibet,” by Ryan Cunningham & April Ashland, Utah Public Radio
Second Place: “Liz Emery: The polarizing *Statesman* columnist discusses her life’s course,” by Rhett Wilkinson, *Aggie BluePrint*
Third Place: “Up Close at the 2012 Utah Legislature: An Intern’s Perspective,” by Lis Stewart, *Hard News Café*

**Online In-Depth Reporting**
First Place: “Commencement 2012: Aggies have less debt than national average,” by Kristi Ottley, *Hard News Café*
Second Place: “Decision nears on proposed Oneida Narrows dam, but fight not over yet,” by Allie Jeppson, *Hard News Café*

**Online Sports Reporting**
First Place: “Actually, Andersen didn’t know that he was leaving Logan,” by Rhett Wilkinson, *Aggie BluePrint*
Second Place: “Barnes reveals more about USU’s Mountain West Conference status,” by Rhett Wilkinson, *Aggie BluePrint*

**Total Awards**
- Utah State University—1st (8) 2nd (9) 3rd (5) = 20
- Brigham Young University—1st (9) 2nd (4) 3rd (5) = 18
- Metropolitan State University, Denver—1st (8) 2nd (4) 3rd (5) = 17
- University of Utah—1st (4) 2nd (3) 3rd (2) = 9
- Colorado State University—1st (2) 2nd (3) 3rd (1) = 6
- New Mexico State University—2nd (2) 3rd (1) = 3
- Weber State University—1st (1) 2nd (1) = 2
- University of Colorado at Boulder—1st (2) = 2