

HL: "Like A Snowflake"

SH: Shawnee Mission high school journalism programs receive national awards at fall convention, adding to historical success

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I was introduced to journalism through the yearbook class at Trailridge Middle School.

I didn't understand how to properly attribute quotes, what investigative reporting was, or how cameras worked. I only knew about cheesy headlines, awkward interviews, and colorful graphics.

It wasn't until I took a newspaper class (on a whim) freshman year that I started understanding the sheer impact that my school, *my district*, made in student journalism.

When you walk into the journalism room at Shawnee Mission Northwest, you will see dozens of wooden plaques precariously hanging off white brick walls. There's boxes of old newspapers — some framed — yearbook spreads pinned to corkboards and marked up, and printed out packets of New York Times pieces strewn across desks.

It's not just these mementos, but the culture of this program that has been growing and thriving for over 50 years. High schools in Shawnee Mission have won hundreds of the most prestigious awards in scholastic journalism for carefully capturing moments, exposing controversial issues, and crafting visuals that tell one story in multitudes.

The latest national conference that I, and other high school journalism students throughout SMSD attended was in Nashville, hosted by the Journalism Education Association (JEA). At these conventions, students can take sessions taught by advisors, professional reporters, and others who give their industry secrets, talk through work their students have produced, and answer questions.

The convention centers are huge and swarming with people wearing business casual, pajamas, and lanyards. It feels like making your way through the airport on Christmas Eve. Not only was this the first year I taught one of those sessions, but sitting through awards was like listening to attendance in a new class, and my ears perk up with every familiar name.

Shawnee Mission East's (SME) *The Harbinger* was named a National Pacemaker winner, one of only 19 in the country.

Shawnee Mission South's (SMS) *The Patriot* was recognized as a National Pacemaker Finalist, the first in school history according to NSPA and old school records.

My school's paper that I'm Coeditor in Chief of, was also a National Pacemaker Finalist.

For the first time in Shawnee Mission Northwest (SMNW) history, three out of three student media publications placed top 10 in best of show contests, where judges examine one issue, book, or broadcast segment against a specific criteria, which determines awards.

SMNW senior Annabel Hall was named 2nd place National Writer of the Year.

SMNW junior Finn Bedell was named Photojournalist of the Year (also the first time a student has received this award in SMNW history).

SME sophomore Claire Rosen was named 4th place National Writer of the Year.

Molly McCracken, a 25' graduate, was awarded first place for informational graphic design.

And the list continues, yet it's only a brief glimpse at the routine success these publications have had.

“It’s been a slow process, right?” Shawnee Mission North (SMN) journalism advisor Becky Tate said. “It’s not like we jumped in and it happened one day. The journalism programs have had excellence probably since the 40s and 50s. We’re just trying to keep it moving and growing.”

The journalism advisors in Shawnee Mission are all too familiar with each other. They practically compare themselves to siblings. Their office walls have framed pictures of them together. Their phones ding with group chat notifications asking questions about font types, press passes, and breaking district coverage.

To understand how they’ve become so close you’ll need this context:

Shawnee Mission West advisor Amy Morgan and SMS advisor Tucker Love both graduated from SMN and were advised by Tate on newspaper and yearbook publications.

SME Advisor Dow Tate is married to Becky.

SMNW advisor Christopher Heady graduated from Shawnee Mission East and was advised by Dow as head editor of the Harbinger.

Tate and former SMNW advisor Susan Massy, who taught and advised at SMNW for 45 years, were also very close.

“She was like an older sister to me,” Becky said.

The entanglement of these advisors’ paths is extensive. They say without it, they wouldn’t be nearly as successful, or invested in each other’s programs.

Every Thursday morning, they meet over Zoom to discuss the problems and celebrations of their publications, new systems, and class plans.

Every couple months the editors on different staffs will come together at one of the high schools and discuss what’s been going well and any shared issues.

Each of the advisors noted how rare it is to have this system of collaboration in place. That’s also why they’ve worked so hard to maintain it.

“At some points, especially during conventions, it almost feels like we’re one big school,” Bedell said. “When I see East or West win an award, it almost feels like we’re one connected family in terms of publications. We do a pretty good job of working together.”

Morgan said the district’s success in high school journalism also stems from innovation, consistency, and simply how much each advisor enjoys what they do.

“All five of us actually wanted to teach journalism,” Morgan said. “That’s really unusual. A lot of schools call an English or Art or Social Studies teacher into doing it. Some of them fall in love with it. Some of them just do their time until they can pass it onto the next person.”

As someone who grew up with this program, managed a staff, and won awards that add to our collection of plaques, it’s hard to wrap my head around *all* the students who have come before me, doing the exact same things.

It’s hard to understand how other schools around the nation don’t also have this system of support. That they don’t necessarily talk to the schools in their district, follow them on social media, get inspiration from their covers, and then ask that staff *how* they did it. Or, that their advisors don’t do things together outside of school, or aren’t constantly talking on the phone, or talking at all.

“It’s a little bit wild how connected everyone is,” Love said. “That’s probably never going to happen again in this way.”

“I would say it’s like a snowflake,” Tate said.