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The Smoke Signal

The first time I truly began noticing the “Made in so-and-so country” labels on clothing was in 8th grade. I was an introverted 13-year-old who lived in books and articles, and my 11th grade cousin had brought over an issue of her high school’s newspaper and left it on our dining table. I remember picking it up, my curiosity piqued by three words marching across the top of the page in bold block letters: *The Smoke Signal*. I opened up the paper, and as I gazed into a sea of words and pictures, one article in particular caught my attention. It was an opinion piece asserting how we as American consumers should be aware of the unethical social impacts of the clothing we buy that’s produced in other countries. The language was forceful and articulate; reading that article, I was impressed by the power of writing to raise awareness about real-world issues.

After 8th grade, I went on to attend the same high school that my cousin went to. Throughout freshman and sophomore years, I continued avidly reading every new issue of the *Smoke Signal*. But it wasn’t until second semester of 10th grade, when I found out that the *Smoke Signal* was accepting applications for the upcoming school year, that I considered the thought of joining the newspaper. I felt hesitant to try, since I knew next to nothing about journalism. Plus there was another major problem: I was painfully shy of talking to unfamiliar people, but that

exact activity was a necessary aspect of journalism. Yet I thought back to reading that issue of the *Smoke Signal* for the first time in 8th grade. Those articles had made such a strong impression on me, and that gave me a motivating reason to apply instead of letting my shyness shove me back into the corner: I wanted to put my writing out there and perhaps impact another reader in the same way. So after spending hours meticulously perfecting my application and submitting it, I was accepted into the *Smoke Signal* as a staff writer for 11th grade.

Fast-forward to the first day of junior year: as I walked into the journalism classroom, I saw the logo of the *Smoke Signal* emblazoned across one wall, and I wondered if I belonged in that room. Right from the start, I realized that I'd be doing an enormous amount of writing for each newspaper issue—although I decided that I could deal with it, as long as I chose articles that didn't require me to step into the daunting territory of interviewing people. The first issue I contributed to was the October newspaper. I signed up to produce a fun article for the Arts & Entertainment section, in which I rewrote Halloween-themed parodies of pop songs. Easy enough and no need to interview anybody. If I could just do the same types of articles every issue, I'd never have to come out of my shell and talk to anyone.

In the November issue, I signed up to write a satirical piece about Black Friday for the Feature section—no interviews required either. Then in the December issue, even though I was put in a team of reporters writing a news article about new math curriculum standards in our school district, I let the more experienced writers go out to speak with teachers and administrators. However, I came to realize that I had lost sight of my original reason for joining the *Smoke Signal*, because I was too scared to step out of my comfort zone. So far, I hadn't had to deal with too much human interaction, but I didn't feel as if my writing made a significant

impact in the big picture. Song parodies and satirical pieces were fun to make, but they weren't informative, passionate articles like that opinion piece I'd read back in 8th grade. And perhaps the math curriculum news article was useful information for students and parents reading the newspaper, but my own experience of contributing to that article hadn't been meaningful, since I let my teammates do most of the work.

So in January, I decided to turn over a new page and pick a challenging article. I chose to join a team working on a project for the Centerspread section; the article spotlighted my high school's Special Education department. This time, I worked up the courage to take initiative and schedule an interview with a special education teacher rather than push the interview to the other writers. In the time leading up to the interview, my anxiety magnified as I imagined what could go wrong, up until the very moment I stepped into the teacher's classroom. My voice wavered as I introduced myself to the teacher, but she responded with a smile, easing my nerves slightly. I took a deep breath and began to stammer my way through the first few interview questions—fortunately, the teacher was friendly and willing to answer my questions, so eventually I relaxed enough to end the interview without feeling awkward. During the interview, I learned a lot about the Special Education department that I had never known before, and I found myself eager to incorporate all this information into the Centerspread article. I wanted to bring recognition to the special education teachers, who worked hard behind the scenes with special-needs students and often weren't given the acknowledgment they deserved.

When the January newspaper was published, I snagged a copy and flipped right to the Centerspread section, feeling warm satisfaction spread through my chest as I saw the headline “Special Education Department Spotlight.” Looking over the article, I finally felt that I'd

achieved something worthwhile with my writing: spreading awareness to the rest of the student population about the different aspects of the Special Education department and what the department's educators did. It was only when I stepped forward to take on this large project and interview a special education teacher that I had a meaningful experience producing an impactful article. I also realized how my interview with the teacher turned out to be much less terrifying than I had imagined, and I resolved not to let my overactive imagination scare me out of future interviews.

After writing the special education spotlight, I gained confidence in my abilities to go out and interview new people for my articles. As I gradually developed more experience in reaching out to contacts and talking to people, the range of articles that I became brave enough to sign up for increased. I continued writing for the *Smoke Signal* in 12th grade, and I put my hard-won verbal communication skills into practice as I shouldered more significant writing projects with leadership roles. In those projects, I took the opportunities to interview people ranging from students to faculty to local government officials as well as mentor younger staff writers going through the same learning process as I had experienced myself in 11th grade.

Joining the *Smoke Signal* gave me opportunities and experiences I never would have predicted back in 8th grade, when I first picked up that old copy of the school newspaper. Even after graduating from high school, the speaking skills I learned in journalism are applicable to many other situations. I'm still shy, but I've found that with the practice I've gotten while working in the *Smoke Signal*, I have an easier time getting over that bump of anxiety before talking to someone unfamiliar. For example, during college career fairs, I've found that although

talking to recruiters and hiring managers is as terrifying as ever, I approach this fear with a can-overcome attitude.

Besides confronting my shyness and developing verbal communication skills, I've also learned that most of the time, writing is not a one-woman job. In order to produce a compelling journalistic article, it's important to strengthen the article with insights from primary source interviews. I've realized that going out to interview people is a skill applicable to other genres of writing, such as research papers and persuasive essays. By giving a voice to stakeholders like experts in a certain field or local community members, the writing becomes much more credible and relevant to the target audience. Despite all the labor that I had to put into the *Smoke Signal*, the hard work was worth it for the new understanding of journalism that I gained and the communication skills, both verbal and written, that I developed.