



YAVAPAI COLLEGE ALUMNA, REBECCA SPIESS, EARNS PULITZER NOMINATION FOR COMPELLING SERIES ABOUT HOMELESS IN PITTSBURGH

Posted on September 15, 2024 by J.J. McCormack, Yavapai College Marketing &

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Photo: Yavapai College alumna Rebecca Spiess

Rebecca Spiess knows something about the homelessness crisis. The former Yavapai College Honors student also knows something about the art of writing. The two combined to earn her a Pulitzer Prize nomination earlier this year for a series of editorials she co-wrote with a colleague at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.

Rebecca and Brandon McGinley were named Pulitzer finalists for their “ambitious, investigative editorials that examine a collapse in services for the homeless in Pittsburgh, and the city’s failure to account for millions of dollars meant to offer relief.” So reads the Pulitzer website description of the seven-part series credited with effecting change and saving lives in Pittsburgh.

“The work had tangible effects for people who were suffering,” Rebecca said, interviewed by phone after Yavapai College was alerted that an alumna had earned the pinnacle of journalism honors. Noting that Pittsburgh officials are already preparing to protect the city’s homeless population ahead of the next frigid winter, Rebecca said she is as proud of being a catalyst for change as she is being a Pulitzer finalist at age 25. News of the award did give her a weeklong “high,” she admitted. “It absolutely blew my socks off.”

Rebecca’s path to a journalism career can be traced to her exploration of a variety of academic fields at Yavapai College -- an exploration that started when she was 15 -- four years after moving to Prescott with her family from Washington state. “I had the most amazing freedom to take whatever classes I wanted to, from chemistry to calculus.” Among other memories of YC, Rebecca cited being in the honors program and inspirational interactions with Humphries Fellows, a cohort of international journalists at Arizona State University’s Cronkite School of Journalism.

Told about Rebecca’s Pulitzer nomination, YC English and Humanities Professor and former Honors Program Director Jason Whitesitt said

he wasn't surprised to hear Rebecca is excelling in her career. "From the first class, she stood out to me as someone with the mindset and ability to make the world a better place. I've rarely been so happy to have been proven right," he said.

After graduating from YC in 2016, Rebecca transferred to the Cronkite School as an ASU Honors student. "I've always enjoyed writing so when it came time to transfer and think about the next steps, I felt like I was making an informed choice," she said.

At ASU, Rebecca earned her first bylines working for the Downtown Devil, the Cronkite School's digital news offering for the community it operates in. She also interned at the Arizona Republic and covered the border for Arizona PBS. After graduating from ASU in 2019, she earned a Fulbright Fellowship, an award that enabled her to cover political extremism in Berlin. Not long into her fellowship, the pandemic hit, her job was gone and Rebecca found herself backpacking around Europe and waiting out the pandemic with family and friends.

Upon returning to the United States - to Denver, Colo., -- Rebecca labored in odd jobs, including working as a cook in a homeless shelter for six months before landing a reporter position at Colorado Public Radio and its digital branch, the Denverite. She described working for the media outlets as "great experiences," but when the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette offered her a job, "I up and moved to Pittsburgh."

At the Post-Gazette, Rebecca leaned into her experience at the homeless shelter in Colorado to closely examine the plight of some her new city's most vulnerable residents. Promoted to associate opinion editor she had the freedom to "sound the alarm" with editorials about \$10 million in missing government homelessness funds and the city's lack of urgency after the closure of a 100-bed shelter. "I was able to say you're going to kill people unless you change your policies. Unfortunately, that did happen," she said, referring to the subject of one of the editorials in her award-winning series - a 30-year-old woman found dead in her tent outside a full shelter.

Rebecca has plenty of fodder for the Post-Gazette's editorial pages beyond what has already earned her journalistic renown. "I have 15 projects I'd like to pursue right now. There's always something new and interesting happening," she said. "Getting paid to do this job feels like a privilege every year I get to do it."

When she's not keeping tabs on local, state and national news, or writing editorials, Rebecca enjoys portrait drawing, hanging out with a group of German-speaking friends and spending time in the outdoors.

Rebecca said she would recommend anyone launch into higher education at a community college. Starting at YC enabled her to transfer debt-free and well prepared to handle a university course load, she said.

"The benefits of Yavapai College were incredible. I had the flexibility to dabble in so many different subjects," Rebecca said, adding that she has an affinity for the community and technical colleges in the Pittsburgh area. "Community colleges are an incredibly valuable asset. They are creating a lot of really, really valuable workers."

Read Rebecca's Pulitzer-nominated series

here: <https://www.pulitzer.org/finalists/brandon-mcginley-and-rebecca-spiess-pittsburgh-post-gazette>