My turn: How I spent my 43rd summer, as an intern

Josh Dillen in action1.jpg

Joshua Dillen (left) works with student editors at Clackamas Community College to craft a headline for a news story. (Clackamas Community College)

Special to The Oregonian By Special to The Oregonian

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I have been a bouncer, waiter and bartender, along with doing hard physical labor in the great outdoors all over the Northwest. My youthful pursuit was chasing a paycheck while working in the woods and traveling to Montana. I quickly became used to the carefree life of a 20-something making great money as a waiter and a tree planter (reforestation engineer) at Big Mountain Ski and Summer Resort in Whitefish, Mont., and planted the trees amongst the beautiful peaks of the Northern Rockies. In the pursuit of my American dream, I thought employment was a better option than college.

The seasonal and lucrative lifestyle with plenty of time off and frequent five-hour shifts that made over $100 was pretty grand. In my mind, those college kids could stick their noses in textbooks and write papers (Write? I abhorred writing!), while I made the big bucks and had a chance to really experience my 20s.

Fast-forward a couple of decades, and at least some of those college kids have degrees and are professionals making $50,000 to $100,000 or more. Not the case with me.

The losses of the best job I ever had, a house, car and the 2007 version of my American dream became part of a reality that did not include a great paycheck.

After moving to Portland at the peak of a housing bubble-induced recession, I found a solution to my personal recession. They say it's never too late for college, and I embraced "them," enrolling in Clackamas Community College and becoming an editor of the student newspaper, The Clackamas Print.

This summer, a coveted Snowden Journalism Internship is mine at The Baker City Herald. Ten weeks in eastern Oregon as a real reporter -- at age 43 -- could very well be the coolest way to spend it ever.

These days, college life may include one or more internships as a student masters and explores a new craft. A paid one is even better. I never thought I would be psyched to make minimum wage as an intern after being accustomed to over twice that -- at least for most of the 30 years I have worked for a living.

Print journalism is a tough field in today's technological world of reporting. How many people still enjoy the
satisfying read of the latest issue of their favorite daily? Why bother when a smartphone or device delivers whatever news or electronic spew you prefer? Who is crazy enough to pursue a potentially dead field in one of the most rural parts of the country? The answer to the last question is me; the previous two I bid you decide for yourself.

As a student editor, I have come to realize how important the newspaper has been in my life. Those big and unwieldy pages held wondrous stories that my 6-year-old sponge of a mind consumed as my father finished each section. I would try to copy my dad with limited success as he expertly turned the huge pages that had pictures and stories from fascinating and faraway places.

My dad would chuckle as he perused the paper and offer me tidbits to think about. "You know, journalism is a fascinating field; I did it in college, not that I made much money at it or was successful," he would say.

Or he would tell me what that paper could do for me even as I scoffed at having to write for a living. "It'll keep your brain sharp. Teach you more than school, and doing the crosswords will keep that gray matter from turning to mush," he said as I impatiently waited for the Sunday funnies.

Pictures of wars, protests and gas lines fascinated me as much as the people in them. They were my reading and writing lessons in a childhood of little television. It apparently has taken me decades to realize that same passion as an adult.

Last month, I drove five hours through the Columbia Gorge and across a huge expanse of Oregon to familiarize myself with historic Baker City and find summer housing. I met the paper's staff and my editor, Jayson Jacoby, who has been with the paper almost 21 years.

Jacoby likes that the interns he has worked with have an opportunity with the Herald that isn't focused on one aspect of working at a newspaper. He has worked with about 12 interns since 2000.

"Our interns do so many different things. They tend to start reporting and writing literally from the first day they are here," Jacoby said, "rather than being at a larger paper where you are assigned to a copy desk and you are not so much involved in the actual production of the newspaper. I think our internships are pretty valuable that way."

My offer of an internship came a several months after I first applied, so long I had almost forgotten it could happen.

"Hi Joshua, this is Pete Peterson calling from the Snowden Internship Program in Eugene. The judges would like to offer you an internship this summer at The Baker City Herald," Peterson stated in a message he left me a few months ago.

Hearing the booming newscaster voice of Peterson on my smartphone made that realization clear to me. "This is what I was going to do."
Wherever I end up, journalism and writing will be my vehicle and it will be an enjoyable ride.

Joshua Dillen plans to attend Portland State University in the fall "unless Eastern Oregon University in La Grande catches my educational eye" and finish a four-year degree in communications or journalism at the University of Oregon.

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