



Hats Off!

For 125 years, 'The Exonian' has been Phillips Exeter's newspaper of record, serving as a forum for student opinion and spawning several generations of talented writers and editors.

By Katherine Towler



N A WEDNESDAY night, the crowded office of *The Exonian* reeks of pizza, and every one of the 10 computers is in use. Senior editors scoot back and forth in their wheeled desk chairs, just missing each other. They bark instructions and move on to the next problem. One writer is completing an editorial about an assembly speaker's talk on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict while an editor hovers over her shoulder making suggestions. Copy writers insert captions to go with photos that have just arrived. Others squint at columns of type, comparing corrections as they proofread. The scene of barely controlled chaos is fueled by adrenaline and the knowledge that come morning, the newspaper goes to print.

"We're in good shape tonight," says co-editor-in-chief Spencer Sherman, a senior from Ridgefield, CT, as he surveys the mayhem. "It's 7:30 and we're almost ready to send it to the printer. Sometimes we don't get to this point until 5 a.m."

Director of content Elisa Chen, a senior from Dublin, OH, agrees. "Sometimes it's a lot crazier than this. But no matter what, the paper comes out."

The Exonian—"the oldest preparatory school newspaper in America," as its masthead proclaims—has been celebrating its 125th anniversary for the past year. From the first issue, the paper has served as a forum for student views while playing a vital role in conveying information about everything from next week's dance to changes in curriculum. For the legions of students who have worked as *Exonian* editors and writers, putting in long hours to crank out issues that have appeared with surprising regu-



larity and frequency, the newspaper has offered a taste of the journalist's life. Many *Exonian* alums have gone on to pursue writing and editing careers. Former contributors to *The Exonian* include the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. '33; playwright and screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart '12; a raft of *New Yorker* staff writers, including essayist Dwight Macdonald '24, jazz critic Whitney Balliett '45 and social critic George Trow '61; editors at *Time*, *Forbes* and *Foreign Affairs*; reporters at *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, and many other newspapers large and small; and authors, among them Gore Vidal '43, George Plimpton '44 and Joyce Maynard '71.

Though much about the paper has changed since three students took the initiative to publish the first edition on April 6, 1878, the traditions surrounding the

paper and its production can be traced back to those intrepid early editors. Throughout its history, *The Exonian* has paid for itself through advertising and subscriptions, remaining financially independent under the direction of a student business manager. Editorially independent as well, the paper has been guided by faculty advisers who leave decisions about content—and production—largely in the hands of the students. The paper has gone back and forth between publishing twice a week and once a week (since 1974 it has been published once a week), but at no time have students been given credit for the

they give of themselves with no compensation in terms of course credit or financial remuneration. That's amazing to me. They do it because of their love and zeal for *The Exonian*."

A Forum for Students

Bound volumes of *The Exonian* in the Academy Archives now span three centuries.



Exonian co-editor-in-chief Spencer Sherman '04 (second from left) and director of content Elisa Chen '04 (right) review photos with reporter Tim Fernholz '04 (left) and photo editor Sophia Bachilova '05 (second from right). Front pages from the past 125 years (right, top to bottom): the original April 6, 1878 issue of *The Exonian*; banner headlines for historic votes to drop the Latin requirement (1947) and to move forward with coeducation (1970).

investment of time the undertaking requires, nor has the production of the paper ever been formally taken under the wing of a journalism course.

History department chair Richard D. Schubart '79 (Hon.), who serves as one of the faculty advisers for the newspaper, says, "I have the greatest admiration and respect for these young people who do this week in and week out on top of their other commitments. It almost brings me to tears sometimes to see how much

Perusing them reveals that though the paper has always prided itself on journalistic savvy, its focus has tended to be more inward than outward. The inaugural issue of *The Exonian* sets the tone with two themes that recur with predictable regularity



Today the executive board is made up of the editor-in-chief (formerly known as the chair or president), managing editor, and director of content, who take the helm in January of their upper (or junior) years and serve through December of senior year. Thirteen other editors on the upper board oversee everything from features to photography, while two business managers handle the finances with the support of six students in charge of advertising and circulation. Students interested in serving as editors apply for the positions and are chosen by the current board.

Cristian Núñez, a senior from North Bergen, NJ, shared the role of co-editor-in chief with Spencer Sher-

dorm. “My first meeting I was totally overwhelmed. I didn’t take an article,” he recalls. “The second meeting I took an article on the announcement of the Phillips Church renovation. I had to make calls to architects in Boston and to the treasurer’s office. I thought, ‘Wow, this is cool! You get to meet all these people on campus you never knew and learn who they are and what they do.’”

The article was due on Sunday. The night before, Núñez sat bleary-eyed at the computer in his room. He had written 300 words, but the article needed to be 500 words in length. A couple of seniors in his dormitory read the draft and helped him come up with a better lead and suggested he needed to add quotes. Núñez took their suggestions and made his deadline. “By the end of the term I was writing five to six articles a week. I went from being a total novice to a regular contributor. I went out and bought a tape recorder.”

The Big Leagues

The story of how Núñez became involved in the paper is typical. Most former writers and editors were persuaded to attend an *Exonian* meeting or



man through the fall semester. (At the end of that term, a new editorial board was appointed, consisting of co-editors in chief Lois Beckett, an upper from Rochester, NY, and Jennifer Stebbins, an upper from Bedford, NH, along with Matt Smallcomb, an upper from West Newbury, MA, who serves as director of content.) A late starter at *The Exonian*, Núñez attended one of the weekly meetings where articles are assigned for the first time as a lower (or sophomore), at the urging of some older students in his



came out of idle curiosity. Few volunteered for a first article covering a swim meet because they had their sights set on a career in journalism. Yet that is where a number of *Exonian* alums have ended up.

Randall Smith '68 attended his first *Exonian* meeting as a prep (or freshman) at the urging of his father and volunteered to write “the movie box,” a regular feature giving a 250-word preview of the movie to be shown in Thompson Gym on Saturday night. “It was a very stylized format—give the plot and then some reviews,” Smith recalls. “There was no byline, but I wrote the movie box for three years. My third or fourth job at *The Wall Street Journal* was a column called ‘Heard on the Street.’ I used the same style for this column that I had perfected in writing the movie box at Exeter. I remember being delighted that I could use this formula I had developed in a

The Founding Fathers

The founding editors of *The Exonian*—Ernest Balch, Ernest Marlett and William Needles—opened the first issue with these words: “The lack of a proper medium for the interchange of opinions and the discussion of matters of general interest has long been felt and deplored



The first board of *The Exonian*

by the students of the Academy. Several spasmodic attempts have been made heretofore to establish an Academy paper; but in each trial failure has been the result, due in a measure to the fact that the Faculty of the Academy have been disposed to consider with disfavor anything that

might have a tendency to draw the minds of the students from their work... We purpose to afford every member of the Academy an opportunity to express his views, in a gentlemanly manner, on all questions affecting the welfare of the Academy and its students. The columns of this paper, we repeat, are open to all—it is our purpose to favor no class, no clique, no personal interests to the exclusion of matters touching the welfare of the students as a whole.”

Who's the Oldest of Them All?

Over the years, *The Exonian* has repeatedly returned to a somewhat thorny issue—is the paper really the oldest preparatory school newspaper in America, as its masthead has long proclaimed? An article in a 1963 edition of the paper begins: “In its 86-year history *The Exonian* has had several pitched battles, some with the Exeter Faculty and some with other school publications, but probably none as flamboyant as the 1954–56 argument with Andover’s paper, the *Phillipian*, as to which paper was older.”



The dispute was based on Andover’s unearthing of a publication that was dated 1859 and titled the *Phillipian*. According to *The Exonian*, this printed piece was a stage bill, with ads, for a local theatrical, *Two Gentlemen From Andover*. It was not until the fall of 1878, some six months after the establishment of *The Exonian*, that a newspaper called the *Phillipian* began regular publication at Andover.

In 1956, the *Phillipian* threatened to take legal action to prevent *The Exonian* from claiming to be the older paper. The editorial boards of both papers agreed to a ruling by an impartial jury, made up of a chief justice of the superior court of New Hampshire and two instructors in the Exeter History Department who happened to be Andover alumni. The jury found in favor of Exeter.

The conflict was revisited in the 100th anniversary edition of *The Exonian*, published on May 12, 1978. A year earlier, another claim had surfaced from the Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, whose paper, the *Mirror*, first appeared in 1777. Since the *Mirror* ceased publication at various times in its history, Exeter can still claim to be the oldest continuously published prep school newspaper in America. (However, the current *Exonian* board might want to look into the question further, since the *Phillipian* masthead is once again proclaiming that it is the oldest. Apparently the 1956 ruling has been forgotten.)

Throughout its existence, *The Exonian* has been run by a board of editors, with contributions coming from lower classmen who are writers and copy editors.

Stop the Presses: ‘The Exonian’ and the Kennedy Assassination

“Our office was located in the basement of the Academy Building, in a beat-up old room with beat-up old typewriters.” Dr. Alec Clowes ’64 is recalling his days as the executive editor of *The Exonian*, which was then published twice a week. “It was also incredibly smoky down there.”

Clowes, who is now a professor of surgery and chief of the division of vascular surgery at the University of Washington School of Medicine, says working on the staff of “The Oldest Preparatory School Paper in America” during the early 1960s was a “liberating experience, especially because of the way faculty and students were in cahoots.” For Clowes, the fact that he and his fellow staff members were so often given the chance to participate in real, live journalism was what made the Academy unique.

Case in point: On Friday afternoon, November 22, 1963, Clowes and his friend, *Exonian* president Greg Wolfe ’64, were sitting in their American history class when the announcement came that President Kennedy had been assassinated while riding in a motorcade in Texas. According to Clowes, he and his classmates were “stunned. We walked around like zombies. We couldn’t believe that our president, this man who had nothing but pure magic, who spoke beautiful English and who had captured everyone’s imagination, including ours, was gone.”

Friday was one of the two days during the week when *The Exonian* was published, and Clowes and Wolfe soon realized that the November 22 issue was probably already starting its run on the Linotype (typesetting machine) at Riverside Press. “Like most kids,” remembers Clowes, “we wanted to do something. We needed an outlet for the anxiety, fear and depression we were feeling.

“Although we normally typed and prepared copy in our office in the Academy Building, we realized this was an urgent situation. So,” says Clowes, “we walked down to the printer and stopped the press. We discarded the lead article, and Greg dictated a new lead article about the Kennedy assassination directly to the Linotype operator. We dug up a photo of Kennedy and set to work running the revised edition.” Clowes believes *The Exonian* was among the very first newspapers in the East to carry the story of Kennedy’s death.

John F. Kennedy’s assassination left an indelible stamp on the collective memory of a generation. For Clowes, working on *The Exonian* article that November afternoon 40 years ago was “a unique opportunity to work in the adult world” and one of the fondest memories he has of the Academy.

—Melanie Sage



The November 22, 1963 edition of *The Exonian* was already on press when word came that President Kennedy had been assassinated. Executive editor Alec Clowes ’64 and president Greg Wolfe ’64 literally stopped the presses and dictated a new front page story on the spot.

over the next 125 years—campus renovations and complaints aimed at the school administration. Four pages in length, the issue includes coverage of the painting of Abbot Hall over vacation and the completion of repairs to the boathouse. Editorials deplore the lack of organized athletics on campus and urge the Academy to build a gymnasium for the use of students.

Whether it was a response to the editorializing of the paper or simply the evolution of boarding school life, by the early 1900s athletics was firmly ensconced on campus. From these years to the present time, *The Exonian* has

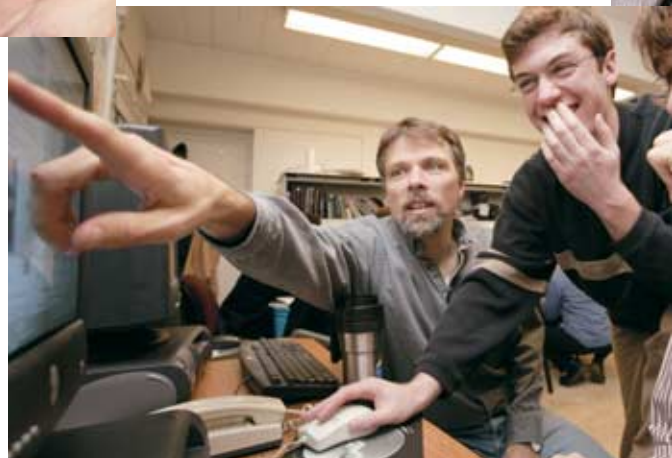
game.” When the would-be pranksters stopped by *The Exonian* office to pick up something, the editors got suspicious and followed them. “We got a great photo of them being led away by security. That’s the only banner headline in the last four years.” The original headline read “Andover Busted,” but at the last minute the editors decided this sounded too much like a tabloid newspaper and went with “Andover Prank Foiled.”

Headlines in different decades of the paper’s history reflect their times. In 1943, a front-page article—“PEA Called on to Pick Apples; Crop in New England Is Large”—details how the football team gave up three days of practice to assist with an urgent situation at the height of the war. A 1948 headline reveals “PEA Votes for Dewey As Truman Sweeps U.S.” In 1963, an extra edition published on November 22, just hours after the assassination, bears the somber headline “President Kennedy Dead.” The back to school issue for 1968 features “Faculty Seminars Held Last Week; Drugs, Sexuality Discussion Topics.” A 1987



reserved its largest headlines for the results of sports matches, in particular an annual football game played against a rival school from the state of Massachusetts. The first photographs to appear in the paper are of athletes in football and hockey gear in the sports supplement for 1906. A decade later, when the United States entered World War I, the front page is taken up with such headlines as “Exeter Honors Quota For National Army” and “Exeter in the Great War.” Yet none of these grim reminders of the world beyond campus warranted a banner headline. In 1917, only the Exeter-Andover football game received this treatment.

Some things, it appears, do not change. Elisa Chen has spent all four of her years at Exeter working for *The Exonian*, culminating in her position as director of content. When asked to name the biggest story she can recall, she responds without hesitation, “The time some Andover kids came up here to commit a prank. They were going to paint a big ‘A’ on the football field the night before the Exeter-Andover



headline makes the claim “Social Life Marred by Student Apathy and Pessimism.” (So much for coeducation.)

The Exonian has also served as a record of notable visitors to campus, from Leadbelly to Margaret Mead to President Eisenhower. An item from the November 20, 1937 issue notes that Count Basie and Billie Holiday will appear with a 15-piece orchestra at a dance to be held in the gym. The article gives background on Basie and Holiday, who were apparently unknowns at Exeter. In more recent decades, *The Exonian* has covered campus visits from presidential candidates every four years as they stump their way across New Hampshire, including an appearance by Bill Clinton in 1992.



Presidential candidates from Richard Nixon (left) to Bill Clinton have graced the Assembly Hall stage and the front page of *The Exonian*. Every issue is a team effort, and some of the team members include (top left) co-editor-in-chief Cristian Núñez '04, Tim Fernholz '04, editorial editor Tiankai Liu '04, Elisa Chen '04, Jin-Kyu Baek '04, photo editor Kathleen DeTeso '04, Spencer Sherman '04, in-depth editor Kalina King '04. Faculty adviser Bill Jordan (center photo, left) makes a point to Spencer Sherman '04 (center) and Sam Sweeney '06 (right). Incoming co-editor-in-chief Lois Beckett '05 (top right) and Sophia Bachilova '05 share a hug.

high school paper for a column in a major circulation newspaper.”

Smith served as editor-in-chief of *The Exonian* in his senior year, and on his own initiative, as a stringer for the local UPI bureau. Anxious to prove himself with the bureau chief at UPI, he filed a report when an Exeter student from a well-known family was suspended, an act that got him a quick summons to the dean’s office. “Dean Kessler said to me, ‘People here say you would sell your own grandmother for a good story.’ At the time I thought this was pretty bad, but when I got into a news career, I realized that you do need to be a little ruthless and maybe what the dean said about me wasn’t all that terrible.”

Smith began his career at *The New York Post* and has worked at

tough, male atmosphere. We wrote editorials asking the administration to get rid of the urinals in the girls’ dorms and asking teachers to treat us better in class.”

Hays came to *The Wall Street Journal* after a stint with the *State’s-Item* in New Orleans (now the *Times-Picayune*). In 1993–94 she spent a year in Moscow, covering the breakup of the Soviet Union. She returned to serve as the Atlanta bureau chief for the *Journal* and in 2000 assumed her current position in the New York office of the paper.

Patrick O’Donnell ’87 signed up as a prep at *The Exonian* and worked for two years as a reporter, a year as the circulation manager and a year as news editor. He remembers putting in 20 hours a week on the paper. “Working at *The Exonian* was the first of several steps on the road to my career. I learned how to take notes on the fly, how to write quickly on deadline, and got used to being edited.”

By the time he was a senior, O’Donnell was clearly headed for a career in journalism and chose the college he attended—the University of Pennsylvania—for its newspaper. He visited Columbia, Princeton, Yale, Penn, Virginia and Duke, among others, and picked up the student newspaper at each school. When he got home, he laid them all out on the living room floor. “The one that came out ahead was Penn and that’s where I went.”

O’Donnell, who is now a reporter for *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, says that at the risk of sounding like

an old fogey, he would like to point out that in his day they still delivered typewritten pages, with edits in red, to *The Exeter News-Letter* office, which printed the paper and was then located by the boat-house. The copy would be typeset and sent back for corrections. Preps and lowers who wanted to work their way up to the board of the paper would serve as runners, literally carrying copy back and forth. “It was a horribly convoluted process,” O’Donnell says. “There were errors in the paper that were not our fault, errors made by the typesetters on round 50 of making corrections. I went to my interview at Penn the morning after we had finished putting together *The Exonian*. I had

line tape and wax all up and down the sleeves of my jacket from pasting up corrections.”

Other graduates now working in the field did not get the love of journalism in their veins until after they left Exeter. Brooke Masters ’85 contributed occasional articles to *The Exonian* but did not pursue journalism seriously until she enrolled at Harvard and began writing for the *Crimson*. She has worked as a reporter at *The Washington Post*

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Lois Beckett '05 (opposite page, left) takes a quick pizza break; (center photo, left to right) Sam Sweeney '06, Yujhan Claros '06, Nathaniel Weiss '05 and Sung Won Kyung '06 fine tune a page layout; (above) Sophia Bachilova '05 and Tiger Rahman '05 review photos. At right, the finished paper.

The Wall Street Journal for 22 years, where he is a staff reporter. In 2003, he won a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting with a group of writers for a ten-part series on the impact of corporate scandals in America.

Laurie Hays ’75 was the first female chair of *The Exonian* and is now the national news editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, where she conceived and edited five of the articles that won the 2003 Pulitzer. She says, “My career in journalism started at the age of 16 at *The Exonian*, and I’ve been doing it ever since. *The Exonian* definitely got journalism in my blood. I loved telling people stories they wouldn’t know otherwise. I saw it as a public service, but it’s also just a great way to gossip.”

Hays remembers the biggest scoop of her tenure—when *The Exonian* made the first public announcement of the appointment of Steven Kurtz as the new principal. “I squeezed the information out of somebody, and we broke the story in *The Exonian*. We published a full-page interview with Kurtz. I interviewed him by phone.” She also recalls crusading for female students, for whom the newly coeducational Academy was not always welcoming. “One of my themes on the editorial pages was to get Exeter to be a more friendly place. Girls had only been on campus for three years, and it was a pretty



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since 1989 and currently covers white collar crime, a beat that has kept her busy this past year writing articles about Martha Stewart and the mutual funds scandals. “I wasn’t a crusading journalist at Exeter,” she comments. “I wrote a lot of goofy play reviews, but I loved it. We spent an awful lot of time together and worked hard. *The Exonian* got me comfortable with journalism. It made me realize it was a fun, social thing to do in school. That experience got me interested in working on my college paper, and the time at the *Crimson* got me really hooked. I built my college career around the *Crimson*. I was absolutely addicted to it.”

Alix Freedman ’75 wrote a few articles for *The Exonian* as a favor to her roommate, Laurie Hays. “I wrote a history of the valentine or something inane,” she says. At Harvard, Hays prevailed on her once again, this time to write for the *Crimson*. Freedman made occasional contributions, but did not see herself continuing in journalism, though her father had served as the London bureau chief for *The New York Times* and as the paper’s assistant managing editor. Summer jobs at the *Times* led to one after college, however, as a researcher for the business section. Freedman went on to work for *Business Week* and in 1984, joined the staff at *The Wall Street Journal*. In 1991 she became an investigative reporter and in 1996 she won the Pulitzer Prize for her coverage of the tobacco industry. She is now a senior editor, responsible for signing off on the paper’s front page.

“*The Exonian* was an excellent paper,” she comments. “There was a general feeling that it was rigorously edited and that people took the mission of the paper seriously. I

especially remember the column written by James Collins, who is now an editor at *Time*. The column was titled ‘Just Jim,’ and it was marvelous. The quality of the writing was impressive and inspiring.”

The Power of the Press

Despite this endorsement from a Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Exonian*, like most newspapers, has been criticized for a litany of faults over the years, from misquoting sources to publishing overly negative editorials. The 1955 PEAN sums up the complaints as follows: “*The Exonian*, as usual, found itself under fire for being inaccurate, tasteless, the therapeutic outlet for a handful of boys, radical and unrepresentative of the school as a whole.” Dissatisfaction with *The Exonian* has even spawned rival papers on campus. *The Plain Dealer* was founded in 1971 to provide an alternative editorial viewpoint to *The Exonian* and featured extensive sports coverage. The paper merged with *The Exonian* in 1976.

If you spend an evening at *The Exonian* office, watching the students put an issue to bed, it’s hard to question their devotion to publishing the best paper possible in the time constraints under which they work. Co-editor-in-chief Spencer Sherman says, “There’s a real responsibility in putting out the paper. We separate the rumors from the facts. That’s important. You have a certain power in putting out a newspaper. It’s important that you use it well and think about how to handle sensitive stories.”

William Jordan, who serves as a faculty adviser to the paper and is an instructor in the history department, cites an article examining political bias at Exeter as an example of both student initiative and responsibility. Inspired by a *USA Today* article on bias on college cam-

pus, the reporters decided to look into the issue in the classroom and assemblies at the Academy. They showed a first draft of the article to Jordan, who called their attention to the fact that 90 percent of the piece focused on assemblies and urged them to go back and get more data about the classroom.

“The writers talked to a few kids who said they felt their more conservative political views were shut down in the classroom. They felt they had a big scoop, but I pointed out that they found what they were looking for and what they wanted to find. So they went back and worked on the article some more,” Jordan says. Later the writers acknowledged that the story was more complex than they had expected. They discovered that some students with liberal views felt equally shut out in the classroom. Instead of running the article as planned on the front page, the editors pulled it at the last minute and found a replacement, giving the writers another week to research the story.

“This was a great process where the students started at point A and went to point Z,” Jordan reflects. “They went back and did more work because they didn’t want to cause more hostility around these issues on campus. I was surprised and impressed by the degree to which they were willing to hold off on running a story in order to handle it responsibly.”

Rick Schubart agrees, adding, “One great value that this business teaches in the hot-house environment of *The Exonian* press room is the proper use of language. The students need to learn the responsibility that comes with using words judiciously. We work hard on that together, yet at the same time we try to give them reasonable liberty to pur-

sue stories that sometimes make us all uncomfortable, like a recent series on use of illegal substances on campus.”

Today’s *Exonian* is more substantial than its predecessors in earlier eras—weekly issues run 14 pages and the graduation supplement is a whopping 100 pages. In 2000, the paper adopted a full format broadsheet format rather than a tabloid format and added color photographs. Results of the Exeter-Andover football game still get front-page coverage, but the in-depth sports stories are found in the back pages of a separate sports section. *The Exonian* now runs a popular Style page, which recently featured a story titled “Blogging Their Lives Away” and regularly presents the “Trendwatch” column.

The Exonian is still printed by *The Exeter News-Letter* (now owned by the Seacoast Newspapers), but the office is no longer located by the boathouse, and runners are no longer needed to carry typed copy back and forth, as everything is transmitted by computer. Students are currently making plans to post an online edition of *The Exonian*.

Speaking for editors past and present, Cristian Núñez says, “When I step back, I realize that what we do is pretty amazing. Yes, we do have some errors, and sometimes the writing isn’t the best, but there are a lot of good things about the paper. Outside of Exeter, when we go to journalism conferences with other schools, *The Exonian* is held up as the poster child of school newspapers. We’re a model others are trying to emulate. It’s wonderful to be part of this 125-year tradition. I’m very proud of that.” ●

A former Bennett Fellow and a regular contributor to the Bulletin, Katherine Towler is the author of Snow Island.