



PROJECT REPORT

Community-Guided Rural Journalism Education Project, 2018-19

Journalism & Media Production Department
The Edward R. Murrow College of Communication
Washington State University

THE EDWARD R.
Murrow
COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION

Project Summary

GUIDING QUESTION

Can Community-Guided “Parachute” Journalism Lead to Meaningful Coverage in Rural Areas?

KEYWORDS

Journalism education, rural journalism, community engagement, parachute journalism, library collaboration, news deserts, local news, experiential learning

ABSTRACT

In the context of postsecondary journalism education, we investigated whether community guidance and involvement can improve “parachute” journalism to create meaningful coverage in rural areas. We worked with local libraries in rural communities surrounding our university to build story ideas, then sent teams of students to conduct interviews and produce multimedia content during a 48-hour event in October and subsequent small-group trips throughout the academic year. The project involved more than 60 students traveling to 26 communities they likely would not have otherwise visited. We specifically wanted to test whether this process 1) is effective for student learning, 2) leads to story ideas that would otherwise be missed, 3) creates meaningful coverage that represents communities with more depth than typical “parachute” journalism. We found strong evidence of benefits for student learning. We had more difficulty measuring the impact on community media coverage and recommend ongoing assessment of information needs and program efficacy, but found enough positive effects that we plan to continue this project with the support of our university and media partners.

OUR PROCESS

In October 2018, teams of four student journalists made overnight reporting trips to rural towns in the region to meet with community members and identify potential story ideas. To avoid preconceived ideas, the students did not know their assigned towns until right before leaving campus. Instead, faculty worked with local libraries in each community ahead of time to gather story suggestions and provide guidance. This event, called the Rural Reporting Plunge, was voluntary and open to all communication students.

Throughout the rest of the academic year, student journalists visited the same locations and other communities to produce multimedia stories on specific topics. This work was published by professional news organizations, student media, and on the university project website.

In April 2019, rural news stakeholders including local journalists, library employees, community leaders, faculty and students gathered for the Rural Journalism Education Roundtable to discuss outcomes from the project, concerns about local news in the region, and possibilities for future collaborations.

WHAT WE FOUND

- Strong initial evidence of student learning outcomes, particularly in increasing student enthusiasm and respect for rural journalism
- Interest from regional news organizations in greater collaboration with student journalists, limited primarily by resources and capacity for mentorship
- Need for a complete and ongoing assessment of information needs of rural communities in the region during a time of rapidly changing technology and loss of local news resources



PROJECT TEAM

Co-Principal Investigators: Ben Shors, Lisa Waananen Jones

Supporting Faculty and Staff: Alison Boggs, Trent Boulter, Denise Crossler, Roberta Kelly, Scott Leadingham, Marvin Marcelo, Wendy Raney, Kanale Rhoden, Julia Royals, Sara Stout

Media Partner: Northwest Public Broadcasting

This project was funded by a grant administered by the Online News Association with support from Excellence and Ethics in Journalism Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund, Rita Allen Foundation and the Scripps Howard Foundation.



Faculty give student teams their information packets at the start of the Rural Reporting Plunge. PHOTO BY LUKE HOLLISTER

Students gathered in the atrium with backpacks and cameras, ready to find out where they'd be traveling. The reveal was anticlimactic: Most of the students had never heard of the small towns their teams were assigned, though all are less than 100 miles from campus by road. After a flurry of paperwork and instructions, they piled into cars and left, many of them reporting off-campus for the very first time.

The inaugural "Rural Reporting Plunge" event in October 2018 involved 48 students traveling to 12 different rural towns in Eastern Washington and North Idaho for overnight reporting trips. To avoid preconceived notions, students did not know their assigned destination ahead of time. Instead, they received a packet that included news tips or guidance from people within the community.

Prior to this event, we established criteria for "rural small towns" (see Page 5) and selected 12 locations. Faculty contacted 14 public libraries in the selected communities. Of these contacts by phone and email, 11 resulted in interactions related to compiling news ideas for student journalists. Several library directors volunteered to personally meet with students; others collected story ideas through established digital

channels, such as library Facebook pages, or methods such as a news tip jar at the library's front desk. In places where libraries did not respond immediately, faculty also made contact with chambers of commerce and city halls (which, as we found, often involved the same civic leaders). During the trip, students completed a list of reporting tasks that included gathering multimedia, interviewing people for short profiles, and compiling story ideas with contact information for potential sources.

Student Learning Outcomes

We found strong evidence for effective student learning. Participating students filled out surveys before the trip (98% response rate), which indicated:

- 23% responded "yes" to the question, "Are you from a rural area?"
- 32% indicated they are first-generation college students
- Rating their journalism experience on a scale from 1 (no experience) to 5 (significant experience), the average score was 3.3
- 47% said they had not ever interviewed someone outside our town and neighboring college town for a journalism story

A follow-up survey distributed a week after the event (44% response rate) indicated that students who responded were overwhelmingly supportive of the event.

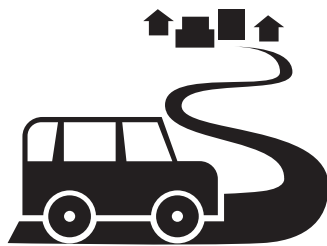
- 100% indicated they were glad they participated
- 95% indicated they would "definitely" or "probably" participate if the event were offered again
- 100% indicated they would "definitely" or "probably" recommend that other students participate

Community-Guided Reporting Process Model

Reach out to libraries as starting point for identifying news ideas within small communities



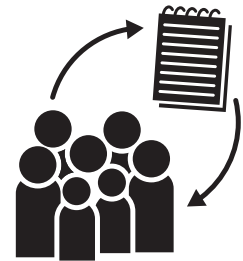
Student journalists visit to interview and report based on community's ideas



Students continue reporting to develop and publish stories with media partners



Students and faculty follow up with communities for feedback on stories and reporting process



- 38% indicated they would “definitely” or “probably” not be able to participate if students had to pay for the costs of lodging and transportation; another 29% said they “might or might not” be able to participate; 33% said they “probably” or “definitely” could pay
- 100% strongly or somewhat agreed that the experience was “fun,” “eye-opening,” and “a valuable learning experience”
- 67% strongly or somewhat agreed that the experience was “difficult”

In open-ended comments, the majority of negative feedback was about group dynamics within student teams and disagreements about how to approach the tasks. Most students also acknowledged that this was part of the learning process. Later in the fall semester, two students conducted in-depth interviews with eight participating students to record details about their experiences.

Including the Rural Reporting Plunge and later small-group trips, 62 individual students participated in this project by spending time in 26 towns they would likely not have visited on their own. Other students also did rural reporting at their own cost. Students completed work for five different classes in our program: Multiplatform Reporting (ComJour 333), Public Affairs Reporting (ComJour 425), Video for the Web (ComJour 390), Murrow News Service (ComJour 486), and Visual Communication (Com 320). We had more difficulty measuring the effects on community media coverage. The project succeeded in generating many story ideas



Director Lillian Heytvelt greets students at the Denny Ashby Library in Pomeroy during the Rural Reporting Plunge. PHOTO BY JACOB BERTRAM

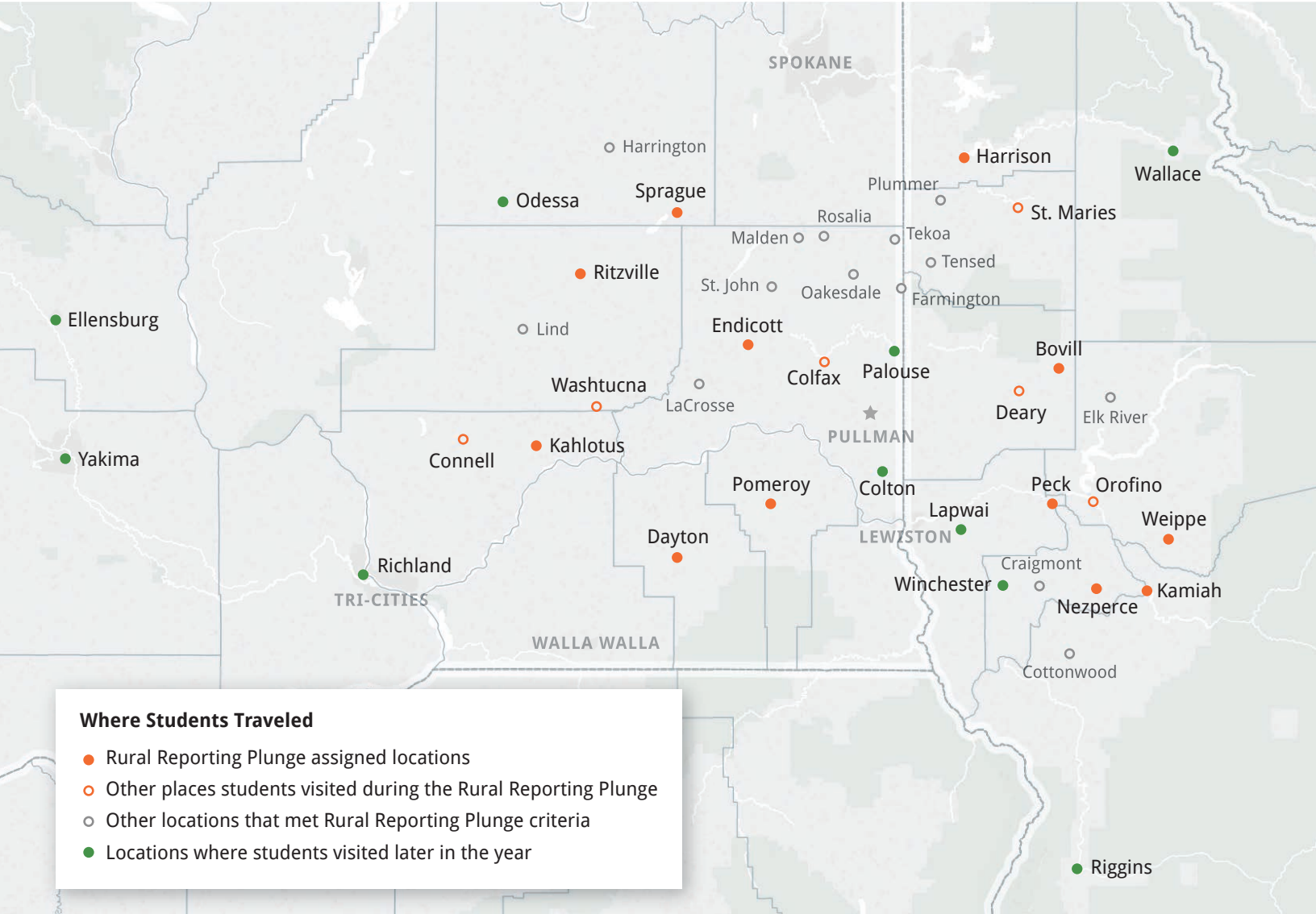
through connections with library directors, an online form for news tips and feedback, and students’ interactions with people. Many of the story ideas were broad or unoriginal, but this process did succeed in generating story ideas that would be impossible for our students to know about without visiting places and talking to people.

One example is a profile story about Joe Meiners, a World War II veteran in Nezperce, Idaho, who still has flashbacks about D-Day (see Page 9). This was a location where the process initially did not work because the library did not respond ahead of students’ visit; however, when community members learned that students would be visiting, the mayor made a point to show them around and make introductions. He introduced them to Meiners, and the students returned in November when the town held an event

Themes from story ideas

- Health care and emergency services
- Schools, sports and the need for youth activities
- Environmental benefits, conflicts and economic impact
- The impact of individual volunteers and civic leaders
- Community identity and tradition amid demographic changes, particularly aging populations
- Historic preservation of cultural sites and buildings

honoring him for Veterans Day. Other story ideas, while not immediately actionable, collectively identified themes and common concerns in our region: health care and emergency services, education and sports, environmental conflicts, community identity and tradition amid demographic changes.

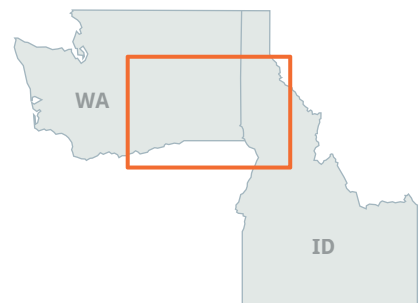


Rural Reporting Plunge Location Selection Process

To choose locations, we started with a list of all U.S. Census designated “Places” located in counties within a 150-mile radius of Pullman, Washington. This list was filtered to include only locations that:

- Are 30-100 driving miles from Pullman (source: Google Maps API)
- Have a population of 100-3,000 (ACS 5-Year Population Estimates)
- Are at least 25 miles from the nearest city of 10,000+ population (ACS, Google API)
- Have a public library

This resulted in a list of 28 locations in 12 counties in Washington and Idaho. For geographic diversity, one location from each county was randomly selected, for a list of 12 locations. Two locations were later shifted to nearby communities for lodging reasons.



Harrison (photo by Kyra Antone)



Ritzville (photo by Ariana Andrade)



Kamiah (photo by Zana Crites)



Top row: Bob Kalamasz in Dayton (photo by Rachel Sun); Evelyn Kramer in Sprague (Dylan Greene); Aimee Guiles in Ritzville (Ariana Andrade); Second row: Mark Hand in Nezperce (Claire Martin-Tellis); Manley Walbron in Bovill (L. Hollister); Georgia Wells in Endicott (Jasmine Brown)

Feedback & Discussion Events

We hosted several events to share the project and receive feedback. On April 3, 2019, we held a panel about student reporting in the field at the annual Murrow Symposium hosted by our college, which attracts alumni, news professionals and university leaders as well as students. We also presented this project and other experiential learning programs at a May 7 university-wide symposium about Washington State University's role as a land-grant institution, connecting rural journalism education to the broader mission to serve the public good.

On April 26, 2019, we hosted the Rural Journalism Education Roundtable with 28 participants representing the perspectives of community members, news media, educators and students. As noted at the event, these are not discrete roles and many people in the room represented multiple perspectives. Half the participants were from outside our academic program, and would otherwise not be involved with our curriculum. Although we were pleased to have some guests from the communities where students traveled at each of these events, we did not get enough external attendance to collect measurable feedback about the project. This discussion did provide evidence of broad support for our university's role in rural journalism, especially among media professionals and educators.

Some key ideas from this roundtable:

- Resources are a major barrier to rural coverage, particularly financial resources. Small newspapers have to make do with fewer employees, and have trouble retaining reporters because of low pay.
- Resources are also a barrier to professional collaboration with student journalists, both for universities and editors, because it requires time to coach students through the learning process in a way that is not currently built into curriculum. Editors desperately want students' coverage — but with the caveat that they don't have the capacity for intensive editing. The hiring of one university employee to serve as an editor-adviser for student journalists could have a substantial impact on how much student work is published in local media, and result in positive learning outcomes for students.
- Rural journalism is implicitly a low priority in the news industry. Aside from quantifiable cutbacks such as closed bureaus or the rise of "ghost newspapers" at the professional level, educators and academic institutions often show disregard for rural and local news by praising alumni who work at large news organizations, urging talented students toward "prestigious" internships in metropolitan areas, and choosing projects with national awards in mind rather than local information needs.



On the road in Lewis County. PHOTO BY CLAIRE MARTIN-TELLIS



On the road in Latah County. PHOTO BY LUKE HOLLISTER

Impact & Lessons

At the beginning of this project, we imagined measuring impact with the currency of traditional journalism: interviews conducted, stories published, news tips received. We expected sources to have opinions about the stories students produced. Instead, we've found that the transactional practices of traditional journalism do not align with goals of relationship-building. We've been influenced by community engagement practices at other news organizations. There is value in asking for ideas and sending students to talk with people, even if those ideas and conversations do not immediately turn into publishable stories. This changed our approach toward measuring impact and assessing information needs.

The most important impact of this experiment was advancing rural journalism as an emphasis area in our program and building momentum for collaboration. This project created space and opportunities for faculty and students to collaborate with each other outside of classes, which allowed for new connections between students, between faculty, and between students and faculty. For instance, sophomores met seniors they wouldn't otherwise know, let alone work with. Over time, we'll be able to track whether participation has any correlation with retention in the academic program, as well as upper-division student learning outcomes such

Previous Research: The Murrow Rural Information Initiative

A 2012 Murrow College research project on rural information needs in Washington state, funded through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, found that "the lack of availability of local news and affordable access, especially mobile Internet access, is limiting availability of local news to rural populations, as well as rural adoption of online participatory news and discussion options." Research findings included:

- In Washington, rural residents find it significantly more difficult to keep up with local news than their non-rural counterparts.
- Rural residents are less frequent consumers of news media, both traditional and new, for local news than non-rural residents, even though they seek out broadcast and online news sources as often as urbanites for state and national news.

Hindman, D. & Beam, M. (2014.) A Rural Drought in a National Flood: Washington State Residents' Assessments of Local News. Community Journalism, 3:1, 23-45.

The Murrow Rural Information Initiative: Access, Digital Citizenship and the Obligations of the Washington State Information Sector. <http://socialcapitalreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/MURROW-RURAL-INFO-INITIATIVE.pdf>

as producing publishable text and multimedia news stories.

We learned that student interest and enthusiasm for rural reporting is higher than we anticipated, if financial barriers like transportation costs are removed. We initially worried about whether enough students would sign up to participate, since it was open to all students and not for class credit, and we were overwhelmed by the positive response. More than half the WSU student population comes from the counties around Seattle, so we were surprised to find out how many students have rural ties and were eager to share their perspectives when asked.

We learned that student travel is not as expensive as we feared — but it's also prohibitively expen-

sive for the majority of individual students. By making use of lodging like Airbnbs and carefully planning groups for efficient shared lodging, we were able to have students spend more time out of town for less money than we anticipated. But students reported that even small reimbursements, like mileage for driving a personal vehicle to a town 30 miles away, made it possible to follow up on stories that otherwise seemed too difficult.

We learned there is a wealth of potential stories in our region, with experts all around us. This project strengthened our belief that our region is uniquely positioned for reaching a variety of rural communities because of the geography and variety of industries, populations and contrasting government

policies. As faculty with personal ties and reporting experience in this region, we were perhaps surprised to find out there's a lot we don't know about the surrounding communities. Even in our own buildings, we discovered many of the staff employees at WSU are from small towns in the region and have an abundance of ideas if we only think to ask. Additionally, the project led to conversations and potential collaborations both within the Murrow College and across Washington State University.

We learned that this program needs to become established beyond any one person, with roles rather than individuals. Turnover among students and professionals was an unexpected challenge, with several media partner employees moving to other positions or locations. We had an unusually large group of students graduating in December or leaving campus for internships, including some of the students with leadership roles in the project. Although we did not anticipate so much turnover in one year, this is inevitable long-term, and it forced us to start thinking about how to create sustainable roles rather than relying on individual skills and interests.

We learned that logistical challenges, as well as cultural ones, make it difficult to reach underserved communities. For example, one location on our Rural Reporting Plunge list with a predominantly

Anonymous student feedback comment after the Rural Reporting Plunge:

“I really enjoyed getting to know the people of this small town and all it had to offer. I had never been in a town with one stoplight and I was able to achieve that. It was much different and better than my expectations. I'm honestly even more proud to be a Murrow student because of opportunities like this.”

Native American population had to be shifted because there was no suitable lodging nearby for the required dates. Other locations did not even get on our list because of the driving distance from campus, and several trips were postponed or canceled during the spring semester due to unusually heavy snow in February and March. Students also found that in many cases rural residents work and live in different places; for example, teachers in one of the smallest towns all carpool together two hours roundtrip from a larger city, while many people who live in small towns work away from home for extended stretches of time.

We learned that the academic calendar is a barrier for collaboration with professionals. Students are inconsistently available, and often busy or absent all at the same time. Media partners must work

around the arbitrary deadlines of the academic year along with news deadlines, which can lead to delays.

We learned that it's important to define the audience for a particular story at the outset. We expected this to be a challenge: Is this story created *for* the community or *about* the community? As a regional media outlet, our media partner found it difficult to justify stories written for the interests of a small population unless the story had extraordinary newsworthiness or issue-based reporting. Often, media partners wanted additional context (e.g. nut graphs) added to hyperlocal stories so that the content could have broader readership; however, this context can also lead to the perception of uniformity across rural communities when in fact these communities often demonstrate remarkable diversity.



The road into Harrison, Idaho. PHOTO BY BRANDON BJELKE

Up Next

The Rural Reporting Plunge will continue in 2019 with a similar overnight reporting event for student journalists in October. The project was awarded the internal Smith Teaching and Learning Grant grant to fund this event and small student travel expenses for rural reporting that would otherwise not be possible. The competitive grant is awarded to “recognize and reward innovative ideas to enhance learning and teaching at WSU.” This is indicative of the Journalism & Media Production Department’s ongoing commitment to rural journalism education and will provide an opportunity to collect further data about education and engagement outcomes.

Student Work Examples



PHOTO BY RACHEL SUN

Sharing Nez Perce culture

A team of student journalists visited towns near the Nez Perce reservation in Idaho and attended the Annual Nez Perce Culture Day. They published four feature stories and a photo essay in a summer issue of *The Daily Evergreen*, the university's independent student newspaper.

In a story about teaching the tribal language, Daisy Zavala quoted Mary Jane Oatman:

"We lost so much with the language loss," she said. "In English, they'll never find the words to be able to explain why they love the land they're standing on, and in English, they're never going to be able to explain the level of hurt that they still feel."



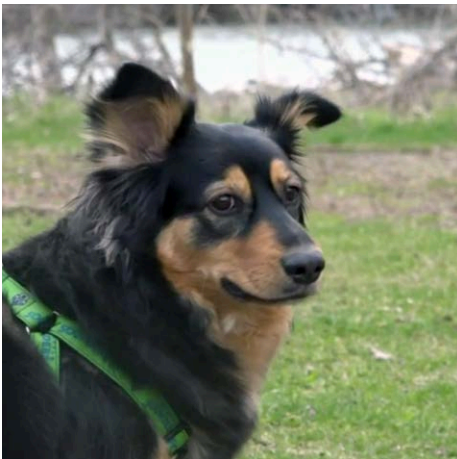
PHOTO BY LUKE HOLLISTER

Nezperce veteran recalls D-Day

During the Rural Reporting Plunge, the mayor of Nezperce introduced students to World War II veteran Joe Meiners. Students visited again, and a story by Ryan Blake was published in *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane for the 75th anniversary of D-Day:

Meiners, who was 21, had orders to drive his Dodge Power Wagon across the beach to the front line. He and his partner drove through a "thick" layer of bodies covering the beach to the seawall.

"I had to run right over many bodies because you couldn't dodge around them, and not knowing whether they were alive or dead," said Meiners, now 95. "It was a feeling that I hope I never have again."



FROM VIDEO BY JASMINE DARAKJY

From Puerto Rico to Ellensburg

Four students traveled to Puerto Rico in March for the annual international Backpack Journalism trip. They reported on an animal rescue that sent about 200 dogs to the mainland U.S. following Hurricane Maria. Jasmine Darakjy later visited one dog, Sage, at her new home in central Washington, and the story was broadcast on KHQ.

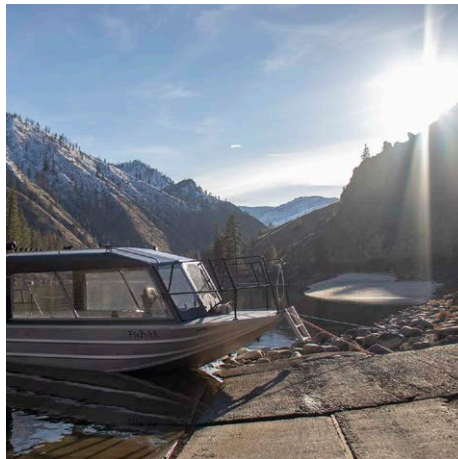


PHOTO BY ANGELICA RELENTE

Steelhead fishing season saved

A team of students spent spring break in Riggins, Idaho, where tourism related to steelhead fishing is important for the local economy. A conflict between state officials and environmental groups threatened the season in the fall, which attracted temporary regional news coverage. Students were able to follow up with residents.



FROM VIDEO BY CARISSA SLATER

Boxing in Wallace

A pair of students traveled to Wallace in the Silver Valley in north Idaho to cover a boxing tournament. Carissa Slater created a short documentary about competitor Coral Devereaux: "I'm one of those kind of people where I harbor my emotions, and I release them all at once when I get to punch."



This project would not have happened without the help and enthusiasm of many people. We especially appreciate the time and efforts of the following participants and contributors:

Rural Journalism Roundtable Participants

EXTERNAL

- Josh Babcock The Moscow-Pullman Daily News
 - Kenton Bird University of Idaho
 - Jonathan Brunt The Spokesman-Review
 - Jacob Fries The Inlander
 - Jacob Jones Whitman County Watch
 - Jana Mathia Whitman County Gazette
 - Sheri Miller Whitman County Library
- UNIVERSITY**
- Dean Hare WSU Photo Services
 - Adriana Janovich Washington State Magazine
 - Tracy Milano WSU Student Media, Palouse community leader
 - Faith Price WSU Native American Programs
 - Ray Sun Department of History
 - Kayla Wakulich Center for Civic Engagement

MURROW COLLEGE

- Scott Leadingham Northwest Public Broadcasting
 - Marvin Marcelo Northwest Public Broadcasting
 - Sara Stout Murrow Student Services
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- AV:** Greg Mills, Kanale Rhoden

Project Advisors and Collaborators

- Peggy Ball Weippe Hilltop Museum
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- Dorothy Blackmore Harrison Manager, Community Library Network
- April Blankenship Branch Manager, Kamiah Community Library
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- Brittany Griffin Branch Manager, Bovill Community Library
- Lisa Hendrickson City of Sprague
- Lillian Heytvelt Director, Denny Ashby Library
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- Tia Langston Whitman County Library
- Doreen Schmidt Branch Manager, Peck Community Library
- Leah Sottile Visiting journalist, Charlotte Friel Memorial Communication Lecture
- Terri Summerfield Director, Clearwater Co. Free Library @ Weippe
- Shane Thompson Mid-Columbia Libraries, Kahlotus Branch

Assisting Students

- Ryan Blake, Emma Epperly, Luke Hollister, Brooke Kerley, Angelica Relente, Malu Santos, Ian Smay, Sydney Taylor, Yasmeen Wafai, Daisy Zavala

Additional photo credits COVER TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Brandon Bjelke, Ariana Andrade, Yasmeen Wafai MIDDLE ROW: Oliver McKenna, Rachel Sun, Claire Martin-Tellis BOTTOM ROW: Cheryl Aarnio, Zana Crites, Carmen Jaramillo THIS PAGE TOP ROW: Lauren Ellenbecker, Claire Martin-Tellis, Oliver McKenna, Jacob Bertram BOTTOM ROW: Cheryl Aarnio, Kyra Antone, Yasmeen Wafai, Cheryl Aarnio

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