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A Reporter's Sabbatical



Walk by the Wallace House, the Tudor home on Oxford Road in Ann Arbor, and you wouldn't guess that it is the meeting place of Knight-Wallace Journalism Fellows from across the nation and globe.

When Philadelphia Inquirer reporter Michael Vitez took part in the Knight-Wallace Fellows at Michigan program, he spent his year at the University doing everything his heart desired. He took a course in astrophysics. He took screenwriting and fiction writing and won third place in a Canadian fiction contest. He went to all kinds of sporting events and concerts, and “got really good” at ice skating when he took lessons at Yost Ice Arena. He even learned to play the Michigan fight song on his trombone.

Wow, sounds really fun. But what does it have to do with a prestigious journalism fellowship? And how did he justify taking off eight months from the Philadelphia Inquirer, where he is a general feature writer?

As far as the Inquirer goes, he didn't have to explain. There are basically three big fellowships for midcareer journalists—the Knight-Wallace Fellows at Michigan, the Nieman Fellowship at Harvard and the John S. Knight Fellowships for Professional Journalists at Stanford—and because Vitez was sharp enough to win one, it was newspaper policy to let him go.

As far as the program is concerned, Vitez did exactly what he was supposed to do, in his own way: he grew. The program brings together about 20 midcareer journalists a year and gives them a sabbatical, providing them the chance to take stock of their careers and learn in a way that is impossible in a high-pressure newsroom.

When they apply to the program, fellows submit a study plan for how they want to spend their time, whether it's studying stem cell research or carbon trading. They have great leeway to change their plan—or even abandon it—once they arrive. Many follow their plan to a T, finally realizing that old dream to write a book, become an entrepreneur, deepen their area of expertise or switch beats altogether. Set loose with all of the resources of the U-M campus at their fingertips, they are free to explore their next step as journalists.

Vitez was 38 when he took the fellowship in 1994-95, and he'd been working as a reporter for his entire career. “Newspapering is a wonderful life, but it's not a pampered life,” he says. His study plan was based on storytelling. In addition to the fellowship providing him a much-needed break, he thinks it made him a better writer, especially by teaching him narrative techniques. He returned to Philadelphia to write a five-part series on end-of-life issues that won a Pulitzer Prize.

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FOCUS

The Knight-Wallace Fellows at Michigan seeks to raise the level of journalism in the world by giving outstanding, midcareer journalists the chance to spend eight months of self-directed study at Michigan.



A New Journalism

The K-W program is built on a lofty ideal: that its fellowships can strengthen journalism in the world. If this ideal was not broadly viewed as true, the fellowship would not be such a success. The program has earned the wide support of the U-M community, which in the process establishes relationships with the media. It has also won remarkable backing from individual donors and foundations. K-W was grant-funded at the beginning, but today it runs off the interest of a multimillion dollar endowment. This includes the support of the K-W namesakes, "60 Minutes" journalist Mike Wallace, '39, HLLD'87, and the Knight Foundation.

Of course, K-W's biggest fans are the journalists selected for the program. Regarding his K-W fellowship in the mid-1970s, ABC news anchor Charles Gibson states on the K-W home page that "it may be the best year I ever spent." Today's fellows not only enjoy access to an excellent university, but are also whisked away on group trips to Argentina, Turkey and New York City. In addition, expenses are paid: the fellows receive a \$70,000 stipend to find housing and pay for living expenses for themselves and their families in an accessible and relatively affordable city. It's no wonder fellows say they have to keep pinching themselves.

So who gets picked? The reputation of K-W depends on the caliber of its fellows, so only the best are selected. The size of a fellow's news organization is not important, as the program seeks diversity that includes a mix of large and small. (This year's fellows include a Jerusalem correspondent for the Associated Press as well as a columnist for the Ann Arbor News.) What does matter is the size of the person. "We're looking for big people, people who would grow," says Charles Eisendrath, MA'65, K-W director.

Eisendrath, who has headed the program since 1985, is a somewhat large person himself, with a carefully manicured persona. He is a former correspondent with Time magazine in Washington, DC, London, Paris and Buenos Aires. He favors bowties and suits, some of them pin-striped, and wears his fedora at a jaunty angle. Among the photos in his office, many of him fly-fishing, is one of him giving a ride to Mike Wallace in his 1964 Morgan, a roadster that is handmade in England. During discussions at Wallace House, he is vocal and brusque. Fellows refer to him as a force of nature, a swashbuckler and a whirl of ideas.

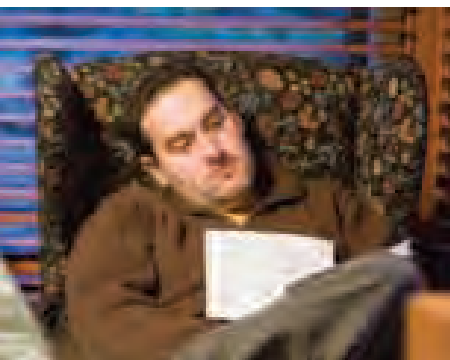


Fellows gather for a lively discussion on terrorism and torture with Karima Bennouna (top photo, far right), associate professor at Rutgers School of Law—Newark and a visiting professor at U-M Law School, for one of the program's regular seminars. Past Knight-Wallace guest speakers include Gloria Steinem, Steve Forbes, Michael Moore and Jill Abramson. Below, Charles Eisendrath, Knight-Wallace director, goes over details about the fellows' upcoming trip to Argentina.

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The walls of Wallace House bear testament to its history and its ties to journalism. This bell (top), a gift from the fellows in 2000-01, rings to signal the start of meetings. Behind it are two of the house's many caricatures by widely syndicated cartoonist and Wallace House visitor Patrick Oliphant.



So often, journalists only have time to react, says Richard Deitsch, who covers media as a special projects editor for Sports Illustrated. With the fellowship, “There is freedom to think.”

“I have to give Eisendrath credit, he’s created a pretty marvelous world,” says Richard Deitsch, special projects editor at Sports Illustrated and a current fellow.

Part of that world is an awareness that Eisendrath expects a hell of a lot from the fellows. When journalist Chris Carey describes his 2005-06 fellowship, he says, “It probably starts with Charles and his mission to think big, which is what you’re told the minute you walk in the door. You really do walk around for most of that year with the idea that anything is possible.”

When Carey was a beat reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, he wrote a series about stock fraud that he believes was his ticket for the fellowship. He’d been with the paper since 1988. On assignment for profiles of the area’s top 50 businesses, he followed his instincts and began to uncover “boiler rooms,” offshore brokers selling investors stocks in fraudulent companies. He spent nearly three years compiling the series.

The day before he applied for the fellowship, he covered the sale of his newspaper to a company with a much more local approach to covering news. Carey figured his chance to write national and international stock fraud stories for the paper were over.

Then in Ann Arbor, surrounded by new journalist friends with time to talk, an idea began to take form for an investigative news service dedicated to uncovering stock fraud. In February 2006, Carey emailed billionaire entrepreneur Mark Cuban about the idea. He wrote back within an hour. The fellows left the next day for their trip to Turkey, but Carey kept in email contact with Cuban from his hotel room in Istanbul. And just like that, Sharesleuth.com was born. The online-only service, which is based in Ann Arbor, is a for-profit company.

Carey is one of several fellows striking out on a new frontier. “The fellowship used to be more about recharging,” one current fellow says. “Now it’s more about reinventing yourself.” Eisendrath notes that a significant percentage of each year’s class now tries something entrepreneurial. He sees it as a radical and exciting time for the program.

“New journalism is being invented as we watch, and that’s so much fun I can’t stand it,” he says.



Jonathan Martin (left) of the *Seattle Times* talks with Peggy Lowe of the *Orange County Register* and Darrell Bowling of *MSNBC.com* before the seminar starts. The relationships that fellows form with one another are central to the experience.


A Band of Fellows

Yes, there are a lot of things to love about a K-W fellowship: the University, Ann Arbor, the trips, the time off. The best part, though, might be the other fellows. Go to the Wallace House on a Tuesday or Thursday evening and you begin to get a sense that it is at the heart of the program. The 1909 home, which is a gift from Mike Wallace and his wife, Mary, is located on a residential street around the corner from an elementary school. The house's quiet exterior shows few signs of the life within.

The official reason they meet there twice a week is the seminar speakers. Guests give a talk and participate in discussion. They include faculty members and well-known figures such as Madeleine Albright, Steve Forbes, Patrick Oliphant and Bill Cosby. This is certainly a highlight, including the occasional chance to give a speaker a ride to the airport. (The time this backfired on one fellow is part of K-W lore. Car trouble hit and Mike Wallace had to get out and push.)

But even better is the collegiality between the fellows. Twenty fellows sip sherry by the fireplace in the living room. They take turns making fancy dinners in the big kitchen, they laugh and hug, they learn about each other's homes in Seoul, Sacramento, Detroit, Prague. They raise an unholy din.

Some of what they gain from each other is personal. They share the Michigan experience as if they're college students. The friendships are what they talk about year later; it's why they come back to Ann Arbor for reunions, why they email each other about wedding anniversaries or their children's college graduations.

Another gain is professional. They commiserate about an industry in upheaval, and they brainstorm how to turn this into new opportunities. It is with each other that they sharpen their ideas, to consider what might be won or lost by risking something new. They are the ones, after all, who are reinventing journalism. 

—Brad Whitehouse is a staff writer for *Michigan Alumnus*.

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