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“Telling the Truth”

Thank you Sandy. I want to thank Fabi, Laura, Melisa, and Asmaa, and the rest of my SJP family.

During the blistering-hot summer after my junior year of high school, I spent ten amazing days at the Princeton Summer Journalism Program. It was all the fun of sleepaway camp combined with carefully crafted articles, late night intellectual discussions, and more coffee and red bull than should ever be consumed within a ten-day period. More than editing my high school paper or reading magazines and blogs, it was this program and the people who make it up that made me think and feel like a journalist. And, to a certain extent, SJP founders Greg and Richard are why I'm here today – they pushed me to apply to Harvard despite my resistance.

I could talk – and have talked – about SJP for hours. But this story is about my romance with journalism, about politics, about fears, and about trying to change the world.

On our first day at Princeton, we learned that journalism is telling the truth about the world. Journalists are journalists, Director Richard told us, because writing about issues and exposing them is how they make their mark. I've come to realize that not all of them view their work this way – when Rachel Maddow, my all-time celebrity crush, spoke at Harvard earlier this year, I asked her the same question. She stopped trying to change the world, she said, the day she started working for Air America.

But I'm not that cynical.

Wanting to change the world, I plunged head-first into the College Democrats. I started to comp the Crimson, too, but that fell by the wayside.

You see, there's a certain comfort to being involved in a partisan organization that isn't there when it's just your words on paper, black and white, with your name attached. In partisan politics, your actions aren't just your own – they have the backing of millions of Americans who identify with the same label as you, who check off the little D or R, who are red or blue. When the Dems campaign in election years, we try to change the world, but not by putting our individual thoughts and deeply held beliefs out there, but rather by rallying behind someone who already has thousands of supports.

Journalism is an entirely different ball game, and to be honest, I think that's why it took me so long to start writing in college. My high school paper wasn't easily searchable on the internet, and my behind-the-scenes position as editor allowed me to shape the content without having all of it come up every time someone googled "Katie Zavadski."

What if I wrote something I later regretted? Take David Lat of abovethelaw.com - his Crimson column from the 90s features him calling on gay people to stay in the closet. Now openly gay, I'm sure he can laugh about his college days. Or look at Ross Douthat [Dow-that], now a columnist for the NYTimes. I sure hope he regrets the scathing article he wrote about our own housemasters in the Salient. A mentor from Princeton was Editor of the Daily Princetonian when they published a parody letter to the editor written by a rejected "super smart Asian," and a NYTimes article questioning whether that was racist is at the top of his google search. And we all know what happened earlier this year with Marty Peretz's offensive piece in The New Republic.

Journalism is soul-baring and exposing. That's why I love it and why I fear it. Unlike my politically-engaged and ambitious peers at Harvard who spend nights thinking about which religion they'll pretend to believe in when they run for office, student journalists around the country put their often-still-forming ideas on paper and on-line for the whole world to judge.

And so, it took me a year and a half to publish my first signed opinion piece at college. I was petrified. I considered e-mailing the night before it was to come out and asking them to pull it from the paper. Writing about a bill to restrict abortion access, my op-ed was a no-holds-barred attack on the anti-choice extremists.

And sure enough, the next day the commenters were out to get me. A fellow Lowellian remarked, "This is crazy." Another implied that I supported genocide. A couple of days later, a fellow religion concentrator published a letter to the editor that crossed the line from an ideological disagreement with me to a personal attack.

But there were also words of support, from strangers and friends. And most importantly, I had my SJP family. When the comments started pouring in, I e-mailed a group of them on how to best respond, and they came through with words of advice. And now that the band-aid has been ripped off, I don't want to hide behind party lines and make careful, calculated political moves. Like the journalist SJP made me, I want to write my truth about the world. And I hope you are willing to speak your truth, too.