

THE CAMPUS CHRONICLE

Aspiring journalists sharpen skills on spring break in Sicily

by Audie N. Cornish, UMass Campus Chronicle Staff

[Audie was the Teaching Assistant for the course in 2001. She wrote this piece for the Campus Chronicle before she graduated. She is now the host of NPR's All Things Considered.]

Last month, 22 students bypassed the usual sun-and-beach spring break for a trip to Sicily embedded in a course that provides the basics of photography and freelance travel writing. The course, "Introduction to Travel Writing and Photojournalism," is distinctive because of the presence of 10 professional mentors available to students on the trip.

The week-long trip's itinerary included Greek and Roman ruins and mosaics, cathedrals in Palermo, open-air fish markets in Catania, a day at Mount Etna and a jaunt through the towns where "The Godfather" was filmed. Even an unexpected 12-hour layover in Milan turned into a day trip to the Milan Cathedral, the largest of Italy's Gothic churches.

Rick Newton, adjunct lecturer in Journalism and the program's founder and director, taught the course this year with B.J. Roche, a lecturer in Journalism and Boston Globe writer. As the course has increased in popularity, Newton said he has been more selective about the guest travelers who came along.

"I figured the best thing to do was put adults on the bus that had something to do with art or journalism or photography or Sicily," said Newton, who is also GIS lab supervisor at the Environmental Institute.

This year's professional guests included Pippin Ross, a freelance print and broadcast journalist; Christine Pratt, owner of a photography studio, Dark Horse Photographics; Rob Faulkner, a jazz trumpet player and professor of Sociology; and Jeremiah Patterson, assistant professor in the "Foundations of Art" program at the Hartford Art School.

"I tried to find people who could contribute to the knowledge base of the bus," Newton said. "I



Course instructor Rick Newton shares photographic tips with Christina Svolopoulos, a political science and journalism major on exchange from Southwest Missouri State University. (Audie N. Cornish photos)

don't ask anything of them. I just say, 'If the students notice you, mentor them, tell them what you know.'"

Most students had their own doubts about how the mentors would view them. "I didn't know how the adults would feel about us," said Khara Nicholson, a junior Journalism and Psychology major from Dunstable. "But it would have been a completely different experience without them. We got to learn from them. Having Pippin walk around with her microphone the entire time and ask us questions and having Chris tell us little tidbits about how to take night pictures—we wouldn't have gotten that if they weren't there."

Throughout the trip students were challenged to chronicle everything around them, to get out of themselves and discover the place. For example, each student was provided a "stop the bus" pass that was good for one stop during the week to halt travel for a potential photo opportunity. One such pass had nearly 20 students chasing about 30 goats and sheep down a pasture by the highway, with Roche running behind them, shouting for students to describe the sound of the goat bells.

Newton said that sometimes guests have had reservations about traveling with students, but they usually have changed their minds by the end of the trip. "Betsy Wade of the New York Times commented that it was a thrill to travel with people who weren't complaining about their health," Newton said of a past mentor.

In addition to mentoring, Ross was traveling on an assignment for the public radio show, "The Savvy Traveler." She said she appreciated the opportunity to have the students involved in her story. Ross said she collected some 10 hours of audiotape during the trip for a five-minute travel piece.



Toni DeBlaiso, a junior Journalism and Pre-law major captures a bucolic scene in Sicily.

"That was something I thought was good for the students to see: how much I collect to create something," she said. "That's the biggest thing I've learned over the years is to do a ton of reporting, because once you're gone, you're gone."

Some students were able to mine story ideas for the class writing project out of even the most casual bus conversations with mentors.

"I was naively venting about people's lack of appreciation for the opportunity before us," said Laurel Nee, a junior Journalism major from Kingston. "B.J.'s response really made me reexamine my point of view. We talked about how not everyone sees an experience or trip through the same glasses and that I shouldn't let another's negativity influence my experience in Sicily."

After further discussion with Roche and also with Faulkner, Nee, decided to focus her writing project on group dynamics. Another student looked at the desserts of Sicilian cuisine, and yet another chose to write about the gender dynamics between American women and Sicilian men.

As part of the course, all students are required to write their own travel article and to create a photo portfolio. Students are also graded on the materials they gather during the trip, including their journals and notes. The first half of the class was spent preparing them for travel and freelancing and making sure they have basic photography and writing skills. When students returned, the work of producing the article and portfolio began.

Many students didn't know how to use their cameras at the beginning of the semester or aren't journalism majors and may have had some fears about the writing. So Newton emphasized basic camera use in the first half of the semester and is now teaching them how to use Adobe Photoshop to adjust their images. Roche is urging the students to draw deeply from their experience to write their travel articles. Student writing and photographs will be posted on the class Web site (www.umass.edu/journal/sicily2001/).

The program is 10 years old. Founded in the Art Department, it originally focused on photography alone. When the course moved to Journalism in 1996, Newton added the writing element to broaden its content.

In addition to writing and photography skills, Newton wants to provide new experiences for students who haven't traveled extensively.

Due to the popularity of the course, the application process was competitive. Newton said he put a tremendous amount of emphasis on academic standing and tried to take a variety of students from majors outside Journalism, from the Five College system and of various ages.

To Newton the trip is not just about students learning about photography and the nitty-gritty of travel writing.

"What they really get is an international experience in a short period of time," he said. "I consider the program a success if the very next thing they do is get on a plane and go someplace else. That's the seed I want to plant: that the world is a fascinating place and you should go see it."

Audie N. Cornish is a senior Journalism major who served as the teaching assistant for "Introduction to Travel Writing and Photojournalism."

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