Giving Voice to the Voiceless

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Lee Pitts sits at his desk, preparing for class. His office walls are lined with newspaper clippings, and the headlines jump off the page: “No Soft-Shell Vehicles,” “No More ‘Hillbilly Armor,” “It’s Real Now, Boys.” On a bookshelf stands war memorabilia and a framed photo: two heavily-armed soldiers walking through a desert town. Between them is a man with a camera and a stalwart smile.

Pitts, that man with the camera, now directs the journalism program at Dordt. After earning his master’s degree from Northwestern University, he worked for the Chattanooga Times Free Press in Tennessee, covering everything from the state lottery system to Hummer conventions.

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Lee Pitts is pictured with American soldiers on a foot patrol through a village in northeastern Iraq. Next to the framed photo are trinkets and toys he picked up “during that season of life,” he says.

GIVING VOICE TO THE VOICELESS

Dordt journalism majors learn to see the world as their workplace.

A JOURNALIST IS BORN

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In 2004, Pitts was on a six-month
deployment to eastern Iraq with the 278th Regimental Combat Team. Their missions ranged from peacekeeping, to humanitarian missions, to night combat raids capturing insurgents. Pitts went with them, from platoon to platoon, and recorded their stories.

The soldiers were skeptical at first; they thought the media was out to get them. But Pitts told them he was simply there to tell their stories.

“The more I put my life at risk, the more they respected me,” says Pitts. “They saw that my stories were fair and accurate, and they opened up. By the middle of my deployment they were begging me to tell their stories.”

For Pitts, the best part of journalism is being in the thick of it. Instead of carrying a rifle, he carried a notepad and pencils. He sat in the back of a Humvee, wearing night-vision goggles, going 50 miles an hour down a desert road. He was there as soldiers handed out water bottles and flip-flops in dusty villages that consisted of little more than huts made of mud. His stories mattered—not just to the soldiers and the public, but to the soldiers’ families.

“I was writing about real people swept up in global events, making sure their voices weren’t forgotten in this year away from their families,” says Pitts.

Pitts describes how his stories were a lifeline to absent fathers, brothers, sons, spouses. Families would log on to the website to see what had happened the previous day in Iraq. After being sick for a couple of days, he found his inbox filled with emails asking when the next story was coming. He kept those back home informed about the dangerous missions of their loved ones.

From this experience, Pitts says he began to realize the gravity of his work: He was writing a rough draft of history.

“Maybe one day, historians will use it as a source to write about the war in Iraq,” says Pitts. “I was telling future generations what it was like to be a soldier or a citizen at that moment in American history.”

After Iraq, Pitts worked as a reporter in Washington, D.C. In Iraq, he had reported on the bottom rung of the military ladder—soldiers with mud and blood on their uniforms; in Washington, he wrote about politicians and government officials in fancy suits and ties. He covered congressional hearings, press conferences, and State-of-the-Union addresses. Pitts describes much of what goes on in the capital as being orchestrated by politicians and their “gatekeepers.” Much of his job was to try to get around these gatekeepers—to hold the powerful accountable and tell true stories of what was happening behind the scenes.

JOURNALISM AT DORDT

Toward the end of his time in Washington, Pitts began to feel pulled back to teaching. He had been a middle school English teacher before he became a journalist. A job offer from Dordt gave him an opportunity to marry his loves of teaching and journalism. In 2016, he launched a new journalism program at Dordt.

Pitts had specific goals for Dordt’s program.

“When I was hiring young journalism interns in Washington, I found that they knew a lot about the theory of journalism, but not about the world around them,” he explains. “A journalist has to have a working knowledge of the world they are going to cover—a world
that is rapidly changing.”

So Dordt’s journalism program was designed to have classes about journalism set within classes about the world they plan to cover: politics or art or economics or criminal justice. A bumper sticker for Dordt’s journalism program might read: “Our graduates know how a bill becomes a law.”

Pitts also wanted Dordt journalism classes to be practical, adopting the “hospital” model of teaching. Medical students spend a lot of time in clinicals to become good doctors. In the same way that patients don’t want a doctor’s first time operating to be on them, readers don’t want a reporter’s first story to be when they are paid to do it. They need to learn by doing journalism.

“I want them to write and report while facing real deadlines,” says Pitts. “I would be remiss as a professor if I had students who were curious about the world, and I trapped them in a classroom. The community—the world, really—is our classroom.”

In Dordt journalism classes, students write stories on a variety of topics. They learn to use technology to keep up with the rapidly-changing media world: podcasts, editing software, video stories, and more. Students write for local newspapers such as the Sioux Center News and the Northwest Iowa Review, and they write for and edit The Diamond, the student newspaper.

Dordt junior Jenna Stephens wrote a piece on the day-to-day life of Darrell Kooima, a local mall custodian. She followed him around for a couple of days, observing his work and listening to his stories. Her piece ran in the Sioux Center News. “This is someone you might not ordinarily notice—you’d probably walk by him without talking to him,” says Stephens. But he is an important part of keeping a community service running well. In spending time with him, she gained his trust and formed a meaningful connection.

Joshua Meribole, another journalism major, wrote a story on immigration. In preparation, he interviewed a Sioux County attorney and an undocumented immigrant. The language barrier was initially difficult, and he had to rely on the immigrant’s daughter to translate his questions. Writing the piece opened up a variety of ethical questions. “How much protection do I give my source?” he asks. “Do I include names? How much detail do I put in? Will it affect their livelihood?”

For Meribole, wrestling through such issues helped him grow as a journalist and as a person.

Dordt’s journalism program also provides internship opportunities. For Danny Mooers, a senior at Dordt, this was one of the most exciting parts of his time in the program. He spent a semester at...
King’s College in New York City, writing for Newsweek and International Business Times. Mooers worked 25 hours a week as a technology reporter. In his spare time, he saw Broadway shows and “Saturday Night Live,” ate at food trucks, and explored all five boroughs.

Last summer, Pitts also brought the World Journalism Institute (WJI) to Dordt. Twenty-six journalism students from 17 states came to campus for two weeks of coaching and mentoring by professional Christian journalists. The students networked with other aspiring journalists; together, they learned and were encouraged about the future of their profession.

“WJI was awesome,” says Mooers. “It was two weeks of pure journalism. The entire experience is hands-on, and the teachers are solid. WJI made me more valuable as a journalist because I can shoot video, write features and news stories, and create radio spots. Journalists these days have to be able to do a little of everything, and WJI is a perfect place to learn these skills.”

**WHY JOURNALISM? WHY NOW?**

With the decline of print publications in today’s digital age, many thought that journalism too was a dying industry. But according to Pitts, while traditional newspapers and newscasts may be having a difficult time, the field of journalism is not, in fact, dying out. It is morphing into something exciting and new.

“As long as people care about stories, journalism will have a critical role in our world,” says Pitts. “Our new technology is not threatening the profession, but changing it.”

As technology has become more affordable and available, it has also become easier for anyone to write stories using different media—sometimes lowering the bar for journalism. There is a danger, argues Pitts, when anyone who writes online is considered a journalist—particularly with the use of social media. Now, more than ever, he believes, we need journalists who have been trained to value the roles and responsibilities of journalism and see it as a profession with a discrete set of standards, practices, values, and ethics.

“The challenges that journalism faces in the era of fake news makes it a significant time for journalism, but also for America,” says Pitts. “Journalism, as an institution, is tasked with being the conscience of America. If journalists are not trusted to report accurately, that can give free reign to people of power, and it doesn’t give the voiceless a chance to have their stories told. That hurts our democracy.”

And that, Pitts believes, is why it is so critical to train journalists at a college level—not only about how to use technological tools, but also how to understand journalism as a mission or calling: telling stories in order to affect change, increase awareness, and educate the voting populace.

To Dr. Leah Zuidema, Dordt’s associate provost, journalism is a perfect fit for Dordt’s mission: equipping students to work for Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of contemporary life.

“Journalists have such a powerful influence on culture today,” she says. “We are awash in news coverage, with stories coming at us through our social media and screens as well as via podcasts, radio, and newspapers. For better or for worse, journalists deeply shape the public imagination.”

As long as people care about stories, journalism will have a critical role in our world. Our new technology is not threatening the profession, but changing it.”

— Lee Pitts, journalism professor

At Dordt, the mission of the journalism program is to give voice to the voiceless and to hold the powerful accountable. Christians can impact the profession in huge ways, argues Pitts, by modeling their reporting and writing after the way...
Jesus lived his ministry. Christ used the medium of stories to instruct and inspire people. He listened to the broken and the outcasts, giving them a voice, while calling out the Pharisees and others in power when they displayed hypocrisy.

Pitts points to prominent examples of how journalism has exposed abusive power. A Boston Globe reporter first uncovered decades of sexual abuse and helped bring about real change in the Catholic church. In-depth reporting exposing sexual abuse in the workplace helped give rise to the #metoo movement. The perpetrators of such injustices are being held accountable, due in large part to the journalists who tracked those stories down. And the impact that journalists are having on the political life of our nation today is undeniable.

“You can effect real change as a journalist,” Pitts says. “You can change society and culture for the better. Hopefully there are fewer priests abusing children, fewer professional leaders abusing their employees, and more politicians being held accountable because of the work of journalists.”

Mark Vogelzang ('79) is a Dordt English graduate who is now CEO of Maine Public Radio and Television.

“Journalism brings the free flow of ideas and debate,” he says. “It helps people make decisions. By speaking the truth, we hold public officials accountable. As citizens in a democracy, we should all want that. Our mission is to connect the dots in an incredibly complex and fast-moving world.”

For Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra ('01), a Dordt communication graduate and writer for Christianity Today and The Gospel Coalition, the key to good journalism is humility.

“You need to start with the mindset that everyone is created in the image of God,” she says. “Part of that is holding your sources in high esteem—doing the important work of listening to them, digging into things you may not understand, and keeping as broad a mind as you possibly can. Most people are trying to do good, even if in a broken way.”

By viewing sources as humans made in the image of God, Christian journalists can witness to God’s goodness and love. Not only does this create better stories, it leaves a lasting impact on others. People realize they are being seen as human beings first, and sources second.

“We need journalists who care about the world and are compassionate,” says Vogelzang. “Those are Christ-like traits. You can change any one person, maybe even a whole community. Whether you’re talking to someone in the street or someone with a lot of power, you can make a difference, one person at a time.”

Lee Pitts’ journey has been an amazing one. From giving voice to the voiceless soldiers of a never-ending war, to training the next generation to seek out those whose voices aren’t being heard, he is committed to promoting true and good storytelling.

“Pitts understands journalism, and what a good story is,” says Mooers. “And he wants the best for his students. As soon as he finds someone with an inkling of passion for journalism, he latches onto them and brings them into his world. He’s willing to bend over backwards for those who love journalism and want to pursue it.”

“A good reporter looks for what makes an ordinary person extraordinary,” says Pitts, “and what makes an extraordinary person ordinary. If you love telling stories, and believe in the necessity of open information in a free society, you should go into journalism. It’s a high calling, and brings a lot of joy.”

Pitts has a newspaper vending machine in his office; he uses it to store Diamond copies that date back to when he first arrived at Dordt.

**BACKPACK JOURNALISM**

Pitts describes how, thanks to new technology, the concept of “backpack journalism”—the idea that you can put all of the tools a journalist needs in a backpack—has emerged. With simply a laptop, a digital audio recorder, and a handheld HD camcorder, a journalist can tell stories in all mediums.

The 24-hour news cycle was initially created by the cable networks, but the Internet has thrown it into hyper-drive. Now, print, television, and online journalists can update stories online immediately; they can tweet out updates or share video footage as a crisis unfolds. Interactive websites have brought storytelling to a new level. Amazing photos, interactive graphics, and panoramic sweeping videos can all be embedded in an article: digital tools enable vivid and effective storytelling.

Journalism helps us understand our neighbors and fellow citizens better: our shared plight, our shared brokenness. Doing journalism well—providing insight into someone’s stories, joys, goals—all of that enhances our shared humanity.”