



# **A Narrative about the Past, Present and Possible Future of Youth Journalism International**

*I was always interested to be part of international organizations and get involved with people from all around the world.* – Edrees Kakar, who works for a bank in Kabul, Afghanistan and began writing for Youth Journalism International in 2005.

## **What YJI Is**

Youth Journalism International, Inc. is an educational public charity that connects teen writers, artists and photographers with peers around the globe, teaches journalism, fosters cross-cultural understanding with its hyperglobal coverage, promotes and defends a free youth press and helps young people gain the skills and confidence they need to succeed in any endeavor.

## **Why YJI is Seeking 501(c)(3) status**

The organization seeks formal designation from the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit to secure recognition of its mission and to support future fundraising that would allow the expansion and enhancement of its programs.

## Who YJI Helps

*When Youth Journalism International was a part of my daily life, the people there kept me sane and grounded in a way that no one else in my life did, and I will always be grateful for that.* – Shaina Zura, 2009, a social worker in Oakland, Calif. who participated from 1997 to 1999.

Suffused with the youthful idealism constantly flooding in from newcomers who want their chance to be heard, Youth Journalism International makes it possible for teens to have their voices added to the global conversation and to be taken seriously. Every year, scores of them jump at the opportunity after finding us online. We don't search them out. They come to us.

*When I was younger, I had these huge dreams of writing along with people from all over the world, becoming famous and what not. The fame-part of those little-kid-dreams is as yet to be fulfilled, but writing with YJI has somehow reminded me that we write with the purpose of enlightenment and enrichment of yourself and of others, and not to gain fame.* – Mariechen Puchert, South Africa, 2009

What students get out of it is, to a large degree, what they put in. Those who jump at the opportunity wind up as part of a family of sorts that has members in more than two dozen countries and most U.S. states. Many stay on with the organization in an alumni status, continuing to play an active role as advisors and friends. They often credit their success – as lawyers, reporters, medical students and more – to their time in Youth Journalism International.

*Youth Journalism International strengthened my writing and communication skills, which I use to this day. But also, it really boosted my self-esteem and confidence in what I could accomplish, laying the groundwork for my career ambitions. I have carried those things with me well beyond YJI into college, grad school, and now running social service programs.* – Shaina Zura

Youth Journalism International started off in 1994 as a small, informal group in Bristol, Connecticut whose work was printed in the local daily newspaper. By 1996, when students finished an award-winning series on teen suicide, its reporting was available online as well. Starting in 2001 with a young woman from Singapore, Kaishi Lee, it began to attract participants from far-flung locales. Lee leaped at the chance to discover what makes America tick, and to talk, on the phone and through instant messaging, with students closer to our Connecticut base. Little did any of us know that largely because of her participation she would snag a full scholarship that allowed her to attend, and graduate from, Wesleyan University, just half an hour away. It was just another indication of how this small organization was making the world smaller, too.

*I wasn't being published anywhere else, and neither was anyone I knew who wasn't involved with Youth Journalism International. It felt like I'd been vindicated. It felt like my voice was worth something. It felt like I could be taken seriously. I think in a lot of cases high schoolers feel as though they're not taken seriously by adults, even when they try really hard. In print, you're in a position where you have to be taken seriously.*

– Brian LaRue, a rock and roll singer in New Haven, Connecticut who wrote for Youth Journalism International in the 1990s

What Youth Journalism International teaches goes beyond journalism, of course. In dealing with young people, much of what they learn is inherently broader than just how to write a news story, why reporters attribute every fact or how come newspapers only have one space after a period. It turns out that what students learn is deeper and more meaningful, and often has nothing to do with journalism directly.

*The thing is, I think it's important to mention that I use skills I learned from being involved in teen journalism basically every day in what I do - may not seem likely that investigating a scoop is all that related to choosing event decor or theme concepts or soliciting donations and sponsors, but it is.*

*I sincerely believe I do what I do better because I learned how to write. How to ask questions. How to think creatively. How to sort through information and make connections. How to rally around a dying profession. How to talk people into things. How to be persistent. If I hadn't learned those skills... Well, I couldn't really say where I'd be, but probably not doing the amazing things I'm lucky enough to do now! – Jennifer Rajotte, who wrote for Youth Journalism International a decade ago and is now special events manager for the Brooklyn Academy of Music*

## **How YJI Works**

*I got to meet people from all over the world and I've made fast friends with some of them. The friendships I forged with them will ALWAYS stay with me and they've changed my life (for the better). It's also really amazing to see your article printed in a newspaper – especially one published half a world away! – Geraldine Soon, Singapore, 2009*

What Youth Journalism International does, in a nutshell, is provide a free education for young people in any country who are interested in journalism, current events and getting to know their peers across the globe.

Perhaps the easiest way to explain how it works is to focus on just one of the several hundred young people we have come to know since the organization began operating informally in 1994.

Four years ago, an ambitious Edrees Kakar sat at a computer in a struggling section of Peshawar, Pakistan, looking for something that would help him be part of the greater world. What he

found, thanks to the magic of Google, was a link to a website searching for “talented teens with an interest in journalism.” He clicked on the link and, as he put it recently, “everything was revealed for me.”

In Youth Journalism International, Kakar discovered a group that embraced him, allowing him to make friends with peers in many countries and to get a lot of freely offered help from the organization’s founders, Jackie and Steve Majerus-Collins, to turn his elementary English into publishable prose. It took hours of editing, back and forth on the computer, but the results were worth it.

Kakar’s first substantial piece of journalism described a major earthquake that shook the foundations of his high school in Peshawar. “Without waiting for instructions from our teachers, we all ran from the building, terrified for our lives,” Kakar wrote, in a story that brought home the reality of a faraway disaster to teens who might otherwise have known nothing about the tragedy.

The organization deals with two groups of students – one is the young people nearby in Connecticut, who can get together in person with some regularity, including twice-yearly gatherings that also include many alumni. The other group consists of students who know each other only online, though that is increasingly the common ground of youth everywhere, even in the same town. We are able, of course, to focus more keenly and completely on those who are close. They can sit with us at meetings and at the computer to hash out stories, to hear directly what they need to do and how they might do it. They learn an awful lot.

*I learned how to talk to a woman who is 100 years old (loudly) and how to talk to kids from Afghanistan who don’t speak English (through an excellent interpreter). I learned that every question leads to more questions. I learned that an interview is a conversation – and it’s the interviewer’s job to make sure it’s an interesting conversation. – Katie Jordan, a 2009 graduate of the University of Connecticut who wrote for Youth Journalism International between 2000 and 2005*

Youth Journalism takes in “classes” of students, provides reams of material about how to write news (mostly done through emails that try to make it all make sense to teens) and encourages students to start writing. Typically, it asks them to join in group projects such as a yearly guide to high school life that over time has come to offer a comprehensive view of surviving high school. But other projects have focused on everything from teen pregnancy to the Olympic Games. Last year, teens in nine countries weighed in with a wide-ranging array of pieces during the Beijing Olympics, including one from a girl in China, Zhu Qin Zhe, who had held the torch on its way to the Summer Games. Last winter, student reporters in eight countries talked to more than 30 of their peers on five continents to find out what the election of Barack Obama might mean for them, their nation, the world and the future. The amount of work that went into editing that diverse package was staggering. Teens in Connecticut, Germany and Australia shaped material gathered from all around the globe, guided by Majerus and Collins, two adult volunteers working from their home office in West Hartford, Connecticut. Our work routinely reaches across borders.

*The biggest thing I learned in Youth Journalism International was that anyone has potential, and there really are adults who believe in teenagers. Jackie and Steve gave us all the confidence, guidance, and encouragement we needed while still letting us figure everything out for ourselves. Their support was priceless to us all, and is a constant reminder to me to take the teenagers I know seriously and offer the same support I received.* -- Kathleen Haynes Makoski, who wrote for Youth Journalism International in the 1990s

The work of Majerus and Collins, who have been the mainstays of the organization, has not gone unnoticed. Several years ago, they won the Scholastic Press Forum's Dean Milton Birnbaum Award for their work with teen reporters. The head of American International College's journalism department, Will Hughes, said they earned the top prize for educators in 2006 because he knew of no two people who had done more to help young journalists.

The students' journalism is shared with the rest of the group, of course. It is also published in a variety of places, including *The Bristol Press*, the *West Hartford News*, *The Tattoo* teen newspaper and more. It has been printed in textbooks by National Geographic and by publishing firms in Denmark and the Netherlands. It has been read by hundreds of thousands of people.

What Youth Journalism International has done is largely what it hopes to do in the future on a somewhat larger scale.

## **Future Plans and YJI Social Benefits**

Youth Journalism International formally incorporated in Connecticut in July 2007, with the intention of quickly filing the necessary paperwork with the government to become a recognized public charity. But when it came to a choice between doing the paperwork and helping students, we kept choosing the latter. However, we realize that we need to get the filing done so that we can help students more in the months and years ahead. So we've plunged ahead with turning a nascent organization into one that can secure the public support for our mission that we know exists among our alumni, news professionals and generous souls who have indicated they will assist our growth.

Youth Journalism International needs computers, a website, telephone calls and time to do the work. What it could also use is more opportunity to speak at conferences and schools, more ability to travel in pursuit of training young people to cover the news and more time to organize potential volunteers from among the alumni and others who are eager to help. There are people who have said they will assist financially – but only after Youth Journalism International earns the Internal Revenue Service designation required for recognized charities. That is the reason for this application.

We see in the near future a great opportunity to expand the organization. We see chances to speak to more schools, to reach out to more young people in more places, to bring more issues to the forefront and to take more issues off the back burner and complete them. We have a core group in South Africa that may be able to bulk up to cover next year's World Cup, especially if we can go there and train them. It all takes more money than we can afford personally to throw into the coffers any longer.

## Conclusion

In the world of journalism these days, there is much talk of hyperlocal coverage, of online newspapers that can focus attention on a particular community with a range of tools, melding traditional reporting with blogs, video, message boards and more to provide a complete picture of what's going on in a neighborhood. It's a worthy idea, though awfully close to what daily newspapers have done in print for centuries. Perhaps the new venues will meet with success. What makes Youth Journalism International different, maybe unique, is its commitment to hyperglobal coverage, based on the idea that young people not only can, but must, reach across national borders to address each other, learn from each other and ultimately find ways with each other's help to solve issues that threaten us all.

*Youth Journalism International gave me a great opportunity to work with people from all the countries. I think it is great that we can communicate in such a fast way and I think that debating with people who are not your friends and who may have different opinions is important.* – Eugenia Durante, a 2009 Youth Journalism International student in Genoa, Italy.

Edrees Kakar, who is now 22 and working for a bank in Kabul, Afghanistan, knows more than most of us how crucial it is that we pull together. The other day, a suicide bomber targeted the Indian embassy a few blocks away, killing at least 17 and shattering the windows in Kakar's bank. He is, of course, only too aware that the next blast, or the one after that, or the one after that, could do more than shatter windows nearby. He lives in a dangerous place. But he also lives in the hearts and minds of scores of young people in many lands who know his face, his words, his ideas and, ultimately, him. He means something to them in a way that the 17 people who died outside the Indian embassy did not. Kakar is one of us. And in the long run, Youth Journalism International aims to make everyone understand that all of us are one of us.

We've always been a public, educational charity. It's just time – past time, really – to make it formal.

Steve Majerus-Collins  
President of the Board  
Youth Journalism International

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