

Dominique Hessert

Your occupation and employer now and how long you've been there:

I am currently a cinematographer on the video team at *The New Yorker*. I started working there in November 2018, as an associate producer, and then was promoted to video producer in February 2019, and most recently to cinematographer.

Hometown:

Lamoine, Maine

College(s) you attended on your Gannett scholarship and degree earned:

I attended Rochester Institute of Technology in the BFA photojournalism program, graduating in 2017.

Why did you want to be a journalist?

Growing up, I was painfully shy. Hiding behind a camera was my way to experience and observe my life, my friends, but mostly my big family. That blossomed into an intense passion for observational photography, which I identified as photojournalism.

When I got to college, I began to second-guess my photojournalism major and dabbled in advertising and fine art photography. To clear up my decision, I went on a photojournalism internship to Kenya and followed high school students working on an invention to eliminate deforestation and pollution that had harmed their villages. I spent the summer learning about the cultural habits of their native villages, capturing the hours of work these kids were putting in just so their homes could survive.

Immersing myself in their stories pulled me out of mine and threw a definitively clear perspective check at me. It became so natural to ask questions and engage with strangers, a skill that was once my biggest obstacle.

When I returned to the states, I kept in contact with the Nairobi students as I began an internship at the L.L. Bean shooting studio. As I learned the techniques of lighting and created artificial visual stories for the magazine, I yearned to be back in Africa, documenting a reality that was hidden from the majority of our American world.

I realized the impact of my Nairobi experience was something I wanted to share with others. That's when the power of journalism became clear to me, and I never questioned my degree choice again.

Why is journalism important today?

Journalism has the power to eliminate the mistruths that can so easily float through the internet, an issue that has only seemed to become more problematic as social media becomes an outlet for people to consume news. I think that it's also becoming easier to identify bias in journalism, as journalists become angrier and more passionate about the issues and social injustices flooding the U.S.

Journalism has the power to make a viewer not only see, but feel for both sides of a story, regardless of their views. That power is the power that can urge the public to feel passionate about fixing an issue, even if it doesn't affect them directly.

Tell us about your most memorable assignment – and why it has stayed with you.

I've valued so many assignments in both my college and professional career, but the one that stuck out to me the most was one that I worked on this past year. In October 2019, I travelled to Alabama alongside *The New Yorker* writer Liz Flock to spend time filming and getting to know Brittany Smith, a woman who was facing a murder charge for killing her rapist after he tried to kill her and her brother. In Alabama, the Stand Your Ground law should protect women from going to prison for situations exactly like this one. However, only a handful of women have benefitted from it since the law was founded.

In the past, the stories I worked on focused on a lot of profiles that highlighted niche communities. This was the first assignment where I broke out of that shell in a big way and felt so angry by what I was filming that I felt fueled by that passion to continue. Brittany ended up losing her Stand Your Ground hearing and is now facing a potential life sentence in prison.

When people around me read Liz's article, or watched the accompanying short documentary I made, they couldn't believe the situation. To me, this felt like an example of how journalism can enlighten those on the issues that they've fortunately never encountered and can make them care. For this piece, I hope that it's a story that angers enough people to enforce actual change to protect women from having to go through the trauma that Brittany did.

How has Maine shaped your view of the world or perspective as you do your work? What is your advice to future Gannett scholars?

It wasn't until I left Maine that I truly appreciated how unique and special a state it is. Maine as a state has a distinct personality, one that appreciates isolation, kindness, and space. That appreciation is one that became ingrained in me, not necessarily in the way I want to live, but in a way where stories about community and isolation are ones I typically gravitate towards.

I got a piece of advice from my professor when searching for a subject for my college capstone that stuck with me. He told me that the greatest stories are often in your backyard. It made me realize I was so hungry for new stories that I was skimming over the ones I know best. I ended up switching gears and focused on stories of isolation and community on the remote outer islands on Maine.

That would be my advice to future Gannett scholars: Sometimes the greatest stories are right in your backyard. Tell them, dig deeper, and find the subject that you're the most passionate about to explore.