

FREE PRESS *under* PRESSURE

As the *Daily Free Press* turns forty, former staffers look back with affection, ahead with anxiety | BY JESSICA ULLIAN

EVEN TODAY, Karen Eschbacher Spataro can recite word for word the front-page “teaser” in the January 17, 1997, *Daily Free Press*:

“BU administration fails to take care of students at this university.”

The problem? There was no story. The knock on BU was the default placeholder for every issue, replaced by a real teaser every night, until the day it showed up in print. Spataro, then a freshman assistant news editor, remembers the dread she felt when she got to the office that day.

“I was the first person in the office, and I was waiting for someone to call and yell at us,” says Spataro (COM’00), who went on to work for the Quincy, Massachusetts, *Patriot Ledger* and

the *Indianapolis Star-Tribune* before joining the development office at Indiana University. “And I was thinking, I won’t ever do this again.”

Many a former editor at the *Daily Free Press* has experienced a similar moment — like the morning in 2000 when the paper came back from the printer with the headline “BU _ins Beanpot” — and most of them remember it as one of the formative experiences of their career. But there were plenty of others, too. After all, *Free Press* writers and editors often spent more time at the paper’s offices — first in the basement of the College of Communication, then on Commonwealth Avenue, now on Beacon Street — than in their dorm rooms.

Hundreds of journalists made it their home away from home for their four years at Boston University, learning how to meet deadlines, craft stories, and handle the responsibility of a 25,000-circulation newspaper.

These days, the roster of alumni of this journalistic boot camp spans the globe, and those alums have racked up an impressive list of credentials and awards, including journalism’s highest honor, the Pulitzer Prize.

“The fundamentals of journalism were learned there, and I apply those tools on a daily basis,” says Jessica Van Sack (COM’03), now the general enterprise reporter at the *Boston Herald*. “The definition of anonymous sources and



ion strike begins today

mediate student union to strike
The Executive Board of the Boston University Chapter AAUP has voted to recommend an indefinite strike... The strike will begin at 9 a.m. today.

ion-University leaders express different perspectives on strike

Report of strike disrupts Sil... The strike has disrupted the normal operations of the university... University leaders and student union officials have expressed different perspectives on the situation.

Report of strike disrupts Sil... The strike has disrupted the normal operations of the university... University leaders and student union officials have expressed different perspectives on the situation.

Silber stuns state in primary win

Will face Weld in November... The election results were surprising... Silber's victory in the primary election has stunned the state.

Give blood today at Shelton

The Daily Free Press
Safety cited, judge halts police layoffs... The court has ruled in favor of the police union... The judge's decision has halted the planned layoffs.

More violent crimes at BU than any other college in the... The statistics show a concerning trend... More violent crimes have been reported at BU compared to other colleges.

Faculty contract talks nearing crucial stage... The negotiations are reaching a critical point... Faculty contract talks are nearing a crucial stage.

BU SACKS FOOTBALL TEAM



BU SACKS FOOTBALL TEAM... The team's performance was disappointing... The university has announced the sack of the football team.

THE DAILY FREE PRESS

Robert Brown named 9th president of BU

Current MIT provost has long history in academe... The appointment of Robert Brown as the 9th president of BU is a significant event... He has a long history in the academic world.

Today at 700

Free Press

arrest student journalists... The incident has raised concerns about press freedom... Student journalists were arrested during a recent event.

es draw 1,000 to Marsh rally, GSU, confront SAO officials



Ramoner decries BU policies, officials... The rally was a success... The speaker decried university policies and officials.

nts proclaim Marsh rally a 'success,' made effort 'sent a message' to SAO... The participants felt their actions were impactful... They proclaimed the rally a success.

Trespassers To Be Prosecuted

Students Occupy 147 Bay State



Students, Officials Talk; Avoid Confrontation... The occupation has led to negotiations... Students and officials are talking to avoid a confrontation.

Students... The situation remains tense... Students are still occupying the building.

MONUMENTAL



Terriers win fifth national championship after last-minute comeback... The victory is a historic achievement... The Terriers won their fifth national championship.

Postgame celebration shaken by assault, pepper spray... The celebration was marred by an incident... The postgame celebration was shaken by an assault and pepper spray.

CLA faculty votes for Silber's removal, 167-23



SPC and SO call for Silber... The faculty's decision is a significant move... SPC and SO are calling for Silber's removal.

New policy to ban over limit visitors in BU res



Marsh rally draws 1,000 protesting dorm students call upon BU to rescind insulting... The rally was a show of solidarity... Marsh rally draws 1,000 protesting dorm students.

IN GRIEF, FEAR, CAMPUS CARRIES ON



Westing says BU campus not in danger... The campus atmosphere is somber... Westing says BU campus is not in danger.

when to use them, when to ask tough questions and how to reach people at all hours, and how to gain sources and keep them — all learned at the *Daily Free Press*.”

But like most newspapers across the country, the *Free Press* is struggling to keep up in an increasingly digital world. It’s been beset by financial woes: the paper’s tax filings show that in the last decade, revenues have dropped 37 percent. The page count, once reliably twenty-four, dropped to twelve, and sometimes eight. Mounting costs led the paper to move out of its longtime office at 842 Commonwealth Avenue in January 2008. Then, last February, for the first time in nearly four decades, the *Daily Free Press* failed to publish on a school day when the paper’s financial

crisis forced the editorial board to eliminate the Friday paper.

Current editor Vivian Ho (COM’11), a journalism major from Westborough, Massachusetts, says she cried when the staff cut back to four days. But she entered this semester confident that the *Free Press* will stay alive. “People are looking at print and saying, print is dead,” she says. “No, print’s not dead yet. And journalism will never die.”

But news of the reduced schedule and the paper’s relocation has alumni worried. Some took action: in 2007, a group of recent editors formed the *Daily Free Press Alumni Association* and incorporated as a nonprofit organization. The group held a fundraiser in the spring, and members are

mobilizing alumni for the paper’s fortieth birthday in 2010. As newspapers around the country — both city and collegiate — cut staff and printing schedules, other *Free Press* veterans wonder if the paper is prepared to weather a larger industry crisis. Virtually all former staffers agree on one thing: the end of the *Daily Free Press* would mark a serious loss to BU’s aspiring journalists, and to the University.

“Everything has to be done to keep it around,” says Katie Zezima (CAS’02), a full-time Boston freelancer for the *New York Times*. “It’s made us the professionals we are today.”

BECOMING PART OF THE TEAM

In the first days of her freshman year, Van Sack browsed a list of student organizations trying to decide where to get involved at BU. She had no journalism experience and planned to major in psychology, but she left a message at the *Daily Free Press* office anyway. “They called me an hour later, saying desperately, please come in!” she says. “I think it was the very next day I got my first assignment.”

Van Sack’s experience is common among the paper’s success stories, people who were hooked by a sense of belonging that is cultivated through shared responsibility and passed down from juniors and seniors to freshman. Most former staffers remember not only their first story, they remember sitting side-by-side with an editor after filing, learning how to craft a good opening sentence and where to place the quotes. Lifelong friendships, and often romances, were formed. Former *Free Press* colleagues celebrated with Spataro at her wedding; Van Sack’s bridal party is largely made up of what she calls “ex-Freepers.” Zezima’s first story was edited by Dave Shaw (COM’00), now a producer at WBUR, the University’s National Public Radio station; they were married in 2006.

The collegial atmosphere also owes something to the grueling process of running a daily newspaper without flunking out of school. “We were in class all day, and then we’d show up at the paper to start work at two, three in



Don Van Natta, Jr., got a job at the *Miami Herald* after graduating, thanks to his *Free Press* experience and clips.

JOSHUA PAUL

the afternoon,” says Gene Johnson (COM’99), who edited the paper in fall 1998. “Before you know it, it’s eleven o’clock and you’re getting final copies, doing all the editing, production, and page design, and then you proofread everything, and it would be three in the morning. We were working seventy, sometimes eighty hours a week at the paper. I’d show up in class so overtired — not hungover, overtired — that I’d literally get sick.”

The long hours and learning-on-the-job philosophy that make the *Free Press* valuable for students have engendered tension at times. Johnson’s first story, about higher

prices at on-campus convenience stores, blindsided his BU source. “I didn’t tell him we were doing this comparison and didn’t give the guy a chance to react or explain,” he says. “It was just completely unfair.” Editors lost sleep over such errors at the time. But in retrospect, they’re glad they happened when they did.

“There’s no safety net, no moderator, no adult supervision. If you make a mistake, there’s thousands of pieces of evidence of that mistake the next morning,” says Don Van Natta, Jr. (COM’86), a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative correspondent for the



Jessica Van Sack, a general enterprise reporter at the *Boston Herald*, learned how to use anonymous sources at the *Daily Free Press*.

VERNON DOUCETTE

WEB EXTRA
See a timeline of four decades of *Daily Free Press* highlights at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

New York Times. “It toughens you up, and those mistakes are the best education you can have. The great thing about the *Free Press* is it teaches you what not to do as a journalist.”

Plus, for every pitfall, there was also a triumph. Zezima remembers the thrill of going neck-and-neck with Boston’s major papers with the news that Terrier hockey player Rick DiPietro was leaving BU for the NHL; Bill Yelenak (COM’04) recalls a similar race against the *Globe* and the *Herald* to cover the hiring and quick dismissal of former NASA administrator Daniel Goldin as president of BU in 2003. Spataro’s coverage of an MIT student’s death from alcohol poisoning was her first experience covering a tragedy. “It was the first time I had the sense

that what you write can really impact people,” she says. “There was this sense of accountability, because this was someone I might see in the hallway.”

Former editors, who have gone on to some of the nation’s biggest news organizations, say there’s no doubt the *Free Press* opened doors for them. Van Natta, who edited the paper for a record three semesters, says his clips helped him get an internship at the *Miami Herald* after graduation, which then led to a job. Other former staffers include David Barboza (CAS’90), the Shanghai bureau chief of the *New York Times*, Andrew Cohen (COM’88, LAW’91), chief legal analyst and legal editor at CBS News, and Renée Loth (COM’74), the former editorial page editor of the *Boston Globe*.

Glory Days

The paper’s 1985 staff (left) included Ian Fisher (COM’87) and Don Van Natta, Jr. (COM’86), both now reporting for the *New York Times*, and Andrew Cohen (COM’88, LAW’91), chief legal analyst and legal editor at CBS News. The *Free Press* (right, in 1981) was once Boston’s third-largest daily newspaper, with a circulation of 25,000.





Current editor Vivian Ho says the *Free Press* will get back to five issues a week someday. "Print's not dead yet," she says.

ROBIN BERGHAUS

A TURNING POINT

The *Free Press* first stared into a fiscal abyss in 1998, when Suffolk County Superior Court ordered the paper to pay nearly \$163,000 to Karen Miranda, a former full-time advertising manager who sued for a wrongful termination in 1994; financial records on file with the IRS indicate that in its final form, the payment rose to \$295,503.

The *Free Press* finished paying the settlement (\$40,000 up front, then \$4,000 per month) by 2004, but it ate into the paper's small reserves, and other fiscal woes continued to mount as ad revenues declined. The paper's last tax filing, for the year ending August 31, 2008, shows \$314,814 in revenue, but with a deficit of more than \$68,000 and \$97,000 in accounts payable and accrued expenses. A September 2, 2009, *Free Press* article tallied the deficit at \$77,000, with \$30,000 in accounts payable.

Debt is nothing new for the *Free Press* — Van Natta says the paper was in bad financial shape after his term as editor ended in 1985, and Matt Negrin (COM'09), who was editor for all of 2007, estimates that the paper owed between \$60,000 and \$100,000 in printing and rent costs during his tenure. But the Miranda lawsuit made at least one former editor think

differently about the paper's avowed policy of independence from the administration.

Johnson, the editor who faced the lawsuit's initial judgment, says he believes accepting some business advice could have helped the students attain a better outcome in the case.

"We were extremely proud of the fact that we didn't have a faculty advisor, but having a faculty advisor could have avoided all that," he says. "We spent all of our time trying to come up with stories. An advisor could have overseen all these other issues. We just did not understand what we were involved with. It didn't occur to us that something this serious could happen."

Others, like Negrin, say that the paper's total independence remains paramount. In 2007, when he announced in an editor's note that the page count would be reduced because of a decline in advertising, he said the move was "the price we pay for being one of the few truly independent college newspapers that publish every day."

But independence is a relative term, and both the *Free Press's* printer and Boston University, which has been the

paper's landlord since its founding, have been flexible. The printer, Negrin says, has allowed the paper to get behind on payments during tough times. The University, too, has let the *Free Press* lag on rent, according to Joseph Mercurio, BU's executive vice president.

"They have wanted complete and total independence from us, and appropriately so," says Mercurio. "But that's never been the real model. In truth, they could not have survived had we not propped them up periodically."

The University has also made other efforts to help. Kenneth Elmore (SED'87), the University's dean of students, says he has offered around \$50,000 in support with "no strings attached" — a deal, he says, turned down

by previous editors. Ho says her understanding was the deal was for paid advertising, and fell through because of communication problems, not ideological differences.

In recent years, however, efforts have been made to draw on the paper's broader resources: the *Daily Free Press* Alumni Association held a meeting in October 2008 and a fundraiser last May. Organizers set a goal of \$2,000

WEB EXTRA
Read President Emeritus John Silber's reflections on his tumultuous relationship with the *Daily Free Press* at www.bu.edu/bostonia.

— “because we’re in a recession, and reporters and editors make no money,” says current president Dan Atkinson (COM’04) — and raised \$2,800, used to pay down the debt and offset operating expenses. Longer-term goals include a substantial celebration, with editors from decades long past, for the paper’s fortieth anniversary in 2010.

Pulitzer winner Tom Fiedler (COM’71), dean of the College of Communication and former executive editor at the *Miami Herald*, has another idea, one that doesn’t involve taking handouts. Fiedler spent 2007 as a fellow at Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy, where he served on a visiting advisory board to the *Harvard Crimson* — one of the most fiscally sound student papers in the country. Advisory board members provided a written critique of the paper each day and met with its staff once a semester to talk about the paper and about journalism.

“It became thoughtful outside input without compromising the mission,” says Fiedler. “I recognize there’s a line the *Daily Free Press* doesn’t want to cross, and I don’t want them to cross it — their value is their independence.

However, they should be open to advice, wherever it comes from.”

SAVING THE SHIP

Just two years removed from his spot at the top of the *Free Press* masthead, Negrin already knows what he could have done to make a better paper.

“I think I was too cautious about a lot of things,” he says. “It’s a college paper, and it’s free — you can run creative photos, fool around with headlines. The Beanpot special edition is something people hung up on their walls. If you had one of those every Thursday, people would say, ‘I can’t wait until the *Free Press* comes out!’”

The need for risk-taking is echoed by some alumni with a few more years of experience in journalism. Mark Jurkowitz (COM’75), a former *Free Press* sportswriter and *Boston Globe* media critic, who is now the associate director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism at the Pew Research Center, believes the paper’s survival depends on both a change in objective and a change in attitude. That the *Free Press* should be independent isn’t a question, he says, but the means of maintaining independence has changed.

“The highest and loftiest goal is not taking money and support from the University,” Jurkowitz says. “But if these guys want to survive, it seems like it’s time to say, look, the media world is in transition and so are you guys. Refocus, don’t just be caretakers. And look at the business side — infuse them with the idea that you’re in the make-or-break moment. It’s happening in the professional world, and it’s happening with you.”

Charles Radin (COM’71), the paper’s founder, says that student newspapers may be especially well-positioned to survive the industry downturn:

they have a select audience that should appeal to advertisers and fewer overhead costs than major mainstream publications. But thinking in terms of print, he cautions, is a problem. He believes the *Daily Free Press* should be trying to transition its audience and advertisers to the Web instead of trying to get back to a five-day print publishing schedule.

“It’s obvious that if you’re focusing exclusively on print, you’re in trouble. I don’t know anybody who is looking to a happy future in print,” says Radin, who spent three decades at the *Boston Globe* before accepting a buyout in 2007. He is now director of global operations and communications at Brandeis.

“What they have to do, in my view, is put themselves into a format that’s useful to students — which may be different from the old format,” he says.

This semester, Ho seems to be thinking along the same lines as some of her predecessors and would-be advisors. “My number-one goal is to bring the *Freep* into the twenty-first century,” she says.

Multimedia is a priority — she wants to make the Web site richer. She’s open to receiving advice from COM faculty and says the paper is happy to conduct business transactions with any Boston University department. She remains confident that the *Free Press* is here to stay — and in print form, at least for this semester. “I have generations of editors making sure we’re going to make it through,” she says.

Equally confident of the paper’s ability to thrive — although likely in a new medium — is Radin, who says that students inevitably find a way to make their voices heard, even when challenges abound. When he founded the *Daily Free Press* in 1970, the staff were rent-free squatters in the COM basement, where an old closet housed the typesetting machine. On the nights it broke down, they would crawl into the machine and poke it with paper clips until it started working again.

“As long as the kids want to do it, that’s the only essential ingredient,” he says. “I have a lot of confidence that students who want to have a paper will keep, phoenix-like, rising from the ashes.” ■



COURTESY OF KAREN SPATARO