Unleashed: Heralding 5 years of the teen journalism program’s unique link with area schools

One of the popular features from the largest media outlet in south central Washington turns 15 years old this fall. The past one-third of that — the entirety of the teenage years so far of the Yakima Herald-Republic’s Unleashed feature — has unfolded because of the direct involvement of the schools whose students are in that program.

In early 1999, the newspaper assembled its first group of 37 area high school youths — from about 130 who applied — to serve on a weekly Tuesday section that would feature teen-generated stories, photography, and illustrations. The first three pages of Unleashed saw print that September.

Flash forward to early 2009: Just as staff members were gearing up for plans to celebrate the feature’s 10th birthday, the newspaper made the very reluctant decision to cancel the program, due to budgetary considerations. Aware of the value that Unleashed provided for community readers and the educational experiences it created for the students themselves, leaders from ESD 105 and area school districts pursued talks to partner up with the newspaper on an idea to revive the student feature under a co-op directly funded by the schools themselves. The scaled-down but still-resurrected Unleashed returned to the newspaper the following October, now bi-weekly in Sunday editions and comprised of a staff of just over 20 kids.

Under the co-op, member school districts and private schools provide funding for a part-time coordinator who oversees and guides the student staff. The schools’ contribution also allows students to have the real-world work experience of being paid for their published assignments — one of Unleashed’s components from the very beginning.

During the five years that Unleashed has operated under the school-supported co-op, almost 90 students from 13 high schools in ESD 105 have participated in the program. About 75 of those students would never have had

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First-year members Ben Gerhardstein (West Valley) and Samantha Valdez (Yakima’s Davis High School) participated in the official media pool covering the second We Day event at Seattle’s KeyArena on March 21.

CBS “Face The Nation” host Bob Schieffer visited with members of the Unleashed staff from La Salle, Selah, East Valley, and West Valley during his appearance at the Yakima Capitol Theatre’s Town Hall Series on April 30. Five members of the Unleashed team were able to take part in the press conference with local media that was held prior to the veteran newsmen’s presentation.

“Unleashed has been both a great educational and career experience. I’ve been able to collaborate with other students as well as become a better writer. Being in Unleashed has had a profound impact on my life, and has assisted in my future as a potential journalism major.”

– Ryan Miller, 2 years in Unleashed Selah High School, Class of 2014

“Unleashed has not only improved my writing, but has given me a new perspective on what writing is really like. It has helped me discover the capacity of my skills as a writer, and whether or not I want to go into the journalism field. It has enabled me to connect with my community in a new way.”

– Samantha Valdez, 1 year in Unleashed Davis High School, Class of 2015
ESD 105 CLASS

Unleashed

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“The Unleashed program has helped me so much with school. It has made me more confident in my writing, and has taught me great ways to collect information and relay it, both of which helps in writing essays. When people stop me in school or on the street and say that they saw my article, it gives me great pride and makes me feel like I have accomplished something great. Nothing is better than seeing your name and picture in the paper on a Sunday morning.”

– Colton Redtfeldt, 1 year in Unleashed
Selah High School, Class of 2017

“As a lover of romance and mystery novels, reporting for Unleashed has taught me the fundamentals of journalism. This style of writing was new for me, and I knew I had much to learn. This program has emphasized the importance of trying new things and using those lessons to polish my skill. Journalism has also given me insight into what a community really is. Without Unleashed, I wouldn’t have received such amazing opportunities.”

– Ciara Hansen, 3 years in Unleashed
Naches Valley High School, Class of 2015

The Unleashed program has been a true blessing in my life. It not only has helped me understand about being a journalist but provided the ability to actually experience it for myself. I’ve always loved writing and I know being in Unleashed will help me go farther, not only in journalism but in my other future writing styles. It’s helped me help others, and to let people know of stories that so often get ignored. This program really opens your eyes to multiple possibilities.”

– Tamson Reed, 1 year in Unleashed
Highland High School, Class of 2015

Unleashed has not only made me a better student. It’s made me a more social person. I learn more with each project I take on and feel more confident with each meeting I go to. Unleashed has made me realize how important it is to work hard in school and how a deadline can make such a huge difference. The Unleashed coordinators know how to challenge the students in the group and make them grow in skills even outside of journalism. I can’t stress enough how much Unleashed means to me and how much of an improvement it has made to my life.”

– Jasmine Randhawa, 3 years in Unleashed
East Valley High School, Class of 2014

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The Yakima Herald-Republic is NOW taking applications from incoming 9th-12th graders to join Unleashed for the 2014-2015 year. The application form is available online at: http://special.yakimaherald.com/unleashed_application.pdf

Further academic enhancements occurred in the more recent years of the co-op. Since the start of the 2011-2012 school year, students now also receive one graded high school credit for their participation during the school year. The frequency of the regular group meetings at the newspaper’s offices has been doubled to twice a month during the school year, boosting the opportunities for students to be exposed to information about communication practices and to learn about career insights from journalism professionals. Those meetings may occasionally include Q&A sessions for the kids with local elected officials and area newsmakers. Plus, for the past two springs, an Unleashed delegation has been able to take part in press conferences with well-known figures during the We Day events at Seattle’s KeyArena. Membership opportunities have also grown with the introduction of the newspaper’s merit scholarships, which allow for a few other deserving applicants to join the program beyond those being funded by their school.

While there are still newspapers throughout the country that offer some type of teen journalism section, Unleashed may be the only one involving its type of direct support with surrounding schools. For 15 years, Unleashed has been helping teenagers take their accumulated education in writing and photography beyond classroom assignments by applying that learning into the next level of the professional setting for a public audience. Thanks to the support of the co-op for the past 5 years, local students are able to share their voice with area readers and are gaining experiences that influence many on their college and career choices.

Photographer Gordon King offers some instruction at one of the twice-a-month meetings that are held at the Herald-Republic’s offices.

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