

## **Intern finds dream experiences from LEAP**

Blind student spent summer with Free Press

Wednesday, August 22, 2018

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Burlington Free Press

I am a big professional wrestling fan, WWE especially.

One night, when I was listening to a match, one of the broadcasters, Jerry Lawler, had a heart attack live on the air. As a listener, I was inspired and moved by how his fellow broadcaster, Michael Cole carried the rest of the broadcast. It was live television, and he conveyed the impact Lawler had on everybody.

I thought about my goal of getting into broadcasting, and I realized I wasn't sure I would ever want to do what Cole had to do that night. Yet this summer, an unexpected challenge in my Burlington Free Press internship allowed me the experience of expressing sensitivity in the course of doing my job and serving the public.

My internship experience came courtesy of the LEAP program. LEAP stands for learn, earn and prosper. It is designed to help blind individuals such as myself get real work and job experience. I have participated in LEAP internships for four years, and it has changed my life. Whether it was learning how to get to and from work by bus or learning job skills, LEAP has been transformative in ways I'll always treasure.

My first and second year, I took apart computers at Resource. What I learned has allowed me to help many people out with their computer problems.

My third year, I interned at a radio station 99.3 WBTV-LP and put together a two-hour radio broadcast called "Stories from the Wolf Den."

This summer, I had an internship at the Burlington Free Press, compiling a list of July 4 fireworks shows and events, along with a separate list of Lake Champlain beaches.

Each of them generated quite an audience online, which demonstrated how what I do as a journalist can benefit people living here in Northwest Vermont.

The biggest part of my summer internship, though, was pursuing a feature story I'd suggested, and my editors accepted. I reported and wrote on the aftermath of the death in April of a BFA-St. Albans student, Ada Sorensen, in a car accident on a snowy road. She lived in the town of Fairfax and was two years behind me at BFA-St. Albans.

My article put the focus on Ada's friend, Chloe Shedd, who started a community garden in her name. Since this was something I had never done before, I had to do a lot of things that, at times I was unsure how to do well. For one, I had to come up with smart questions and conduct background research about Ada's life and the memory garden project. For another, I needed to approach the people who knew Ada best, which meant talking to friends and family who are still mourning.



Alek J. Wolfe, right foreground, a summer 2018 intern with the Burlington Free Press, discusses his experience with from left, Taya Tarr, a counselor with the Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Free Press business writer Dan D'Ambrosio and Free Press photographer Ryan Mercer. FREE PRESS PHOTO

I started by contacting the Fairfax Fire and Rescue Department and posting something on Facebook. A few days later, Chloe reached out to me saying she would love to set up an interview to talk about Ada and the garden. After doing an interview over the phone with Chloe, I went with Taya Tarr, a counselor for the Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired, to meet Chloe and her mom at the garden to get photos and more detail.

As a reporter, it was my job to get the proper information in order to tell Ada's story through Chloe's eyes. When touring the garden, it was helpful and powerful to hear about all the work it took to start this idea. "Ada grew up on a farm." Chloe said to me that day. "That was the motivation, but she also loved flowers."

During the interview, I had to ask personal questions that were very hard for me to ask. This being a sad subject, Chloe and her mom started to tear up. At this point in the interview, I started to make a few jokes because as my first time experiencing this, that's what came natural to me. After visiting the garden, I was moved and inspired by what I had heard. I felt like I could now write the article, but I still wanted to dig deeper into Ada's life. I needed to contact her family next.

I called her parents, David Marchant and Jane Sorensen, to see if they would be willing to speak with me. Again, this being a sad subject, it was difficult for me to consider how best to talk to Ada's family. I got a call back the next day and spoke with Ada's mother. She agreed to an interview via email. I respectfully wrote out questions for her to answer. She responded with answers that were heartfelt. When reading them at home, it was hard not to be

moved. This was her daughter she was writing about, somebody she loved and cared about very much. The thought of that brought me to tears.

Soon, back in the newsroom, it was time to write the article. In the writing process, I got to experience working with other reporters to make sure the article flowed well. I worked closely with the executive editor, Mike Kilian to get an outline for the article then to get a solid draft. He sent me feedback on the draft. I had to go back to Chloe and Jane to get a few more questions answered, but it all worked out.

When the article published online and in print, it was really cool. People sent me messages saying that it was a beautiful tribute and how they loved it. Adlai's mom reached out to me and thanked me for writing it, which felt really good.

I learned a lot from writing this article. Sometimes, to get a great story, you have to go out and ask the tough questions that you might not want to. You also have to be prepared for anything to come up unexpectedly.

Programs like the LEAP program have allowed me and other blind people to have experiences like this. Without this program, I wouldn't have been able to do these things. I head off to Lyndon State soon, where I will study broadcasting. Someday, I hope you will be listening to my words and reading what I've written – about sports, news or anything else that matters to people here in Vermont.

*Alek J. Wolfe was a summer 2018 intern with the Burlington Free Press.*

To learn more about the LEAP program opportunities, email Shelby Glass at [sglass@resourcevt.org](mailto:sglass@resourcevt.org) or visit //resourcevt.org/training-programs/leap/