

## Out of the classroom, into the fire

BY STEPHEN DESROCHES '96

When I began the master's program at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism last August, I thought my Wheaton education was well behind me. Wheaton had certainly provided me an exceptional undergraduate experience, giving me a solid foundation to be a good student. But I studied history, not writing or journalism, and I felt that many of my courses were no longer relevant to my chosen profession.

The excitement I felt in the beginning soon gave way to frustration. I was more anxious to actually *be* a journalist than a student. At that point, all I was writing were mock news stories about train wrecks that never happened and faux press conferences.

My frustration peaked in a class called "Critical Issues in Journalism." Designed to engage budding journalists in topics of morality and ethics in the media, the class made my head spin with all the hypothetical "what if" situations we were asked to ponder. The classroom felt restricting. We were being asked to answer questions that veteran journalists still struggle to answer without any experience of our own to draw on.

It soon came time to actually leave the classroom.

My first assignment was to cover the Sept. 11 primary election for city council in Lower Manhattan's District One. It seemed to me a boring assignment: stiff candidates, no real debate of issues, and voter turnout was predicted to be at an all-time low.

However, the closer I got to downtown that morning, the greater my realization that the day would be anything but "boring." Something big was happening at the World Trade Center.

As I arrived the second tower collapsed, stunning those around me into a nightmarish silence. I positioned myself outside of St. Vincent's Hospital, the closest trauma center to the World Trade Center. My student journalist press pass dangled awkwardly around my neck. At that early stage in the day, few journalists had made their way downtown, and I was one of the first admitted to the press pool outside the Greenwich Village hospital.

It was surreal. Rather than sitting at an empty polling station interviewing lackluster candidates, I was running through the dust-

covered streets of New York covering the worst act of terrorism in U.S. history.

I watched shocked, ash-covered survivors make their way out of the ghostly haze. Their stories needed to be told, the journalist inside me said. I approached one survivor, an elderly man emptying his suit jacket pockets of debris. My hands, holding a pen and a reporter's notepad, dropped to my side as our eyes met. "How am I going to do this?" I thought. "How can I do my job as a reporter and preserve the dignity of these people?"

Throughout the day I interviewed survivors. Some narrowly escaped death or saw people fall from the top of the towers. Others were frantically searching for missing co-workers. In each case, my responsibility to tell their stories became shockingly apparent. It was my responsibility to provide them a voice so that their experiences would not go forgotten.

I returned home to a voice mailbox full of concerned family and friends, many from my days at Wheaton. At that moment I would have rather been on the bucolic New England campus than in the city, where the acrid burning smell wafted uptown as a heartbreaking reminder of the morning's tragedy.

The next day my advisor, stuck across the river at her New Jersey home, e-mailed my class with the message, "You just covered the biggest story of your lives. What a classroom you had yesterday." And then it occurred to me. My Wheaton education had given me the most important skill I would need as a journalist—the ability to learn while doing. The knowledge from the classroom applied in the real world, albeit in its most aching real form. Suddenly, on that September morning, the improbable questions of the classroom were present and demanding an answer in a split second.

I would say that the out-of-the-classroom curriculum at Wheaton is the strongest asset of my alma mater. Wheaton recognized that the classroom could go only so far and only for four years. And though I may have forgotten discussions from classes or papers I wrote, I didn't forget the value of learning through experience. Indeed, it came to me when I needed it the most.

