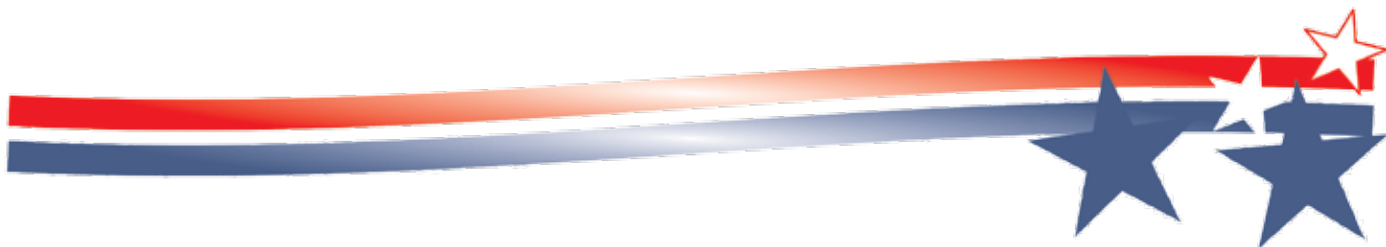




The Road
to **Iowa**

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP
PHOTOS PROVIDED



Lindsey Gomez was running a 102-degree fever and standing on a snow-encrusted sidewalk in Des Moines, Iowa, where the temperature this January evening registered minus 6. The needle-sharp air was difficult to breathe and her hands had turned an angry shade of red. As Gomez faced the camera, the OU junior realized fleetingly that she might pass out.

She was having the time of her life.

Gomez and 13 classmates from OU's Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication had traveled nearly 600 miles to cover the Iowa caucuses, the inaugural event of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The two-week trip tested even seasoned professionals and brought some students to a moment of vocational epiphany.

The road to Iowa started with a television and a couch. Last fall, former *Chicago Tribune* political writer and Pulitzer Prize winner John Schmeltzer watched, agog, as the biggest slate of Republican presidential candidates in a century debated. "You had a wide view of 17 candidates," OU's Engleman/Livermore Professor of Community Journalism recalls with wonder. "I said to myself, 'This is nuts. I have to figure out a way to get the students there.'"

Schmeltzer approached Gaylord Visiting Professional Professor Mike Boettcher, the former CNN and NBC correspondent with whom he co-teaches Advanced Multimedia Journalism. The course is project-based, changing every semester. Two of Boettcher's six national Emmys were earned in 2012 while working with OU students to cover U.S. troops in Afghanistan and their families stateside.

"It became the perfect opportunity to take this course and do something really, really different with it," Schmeltzer says. It also provided the opportunity to introduce an essential, fascinating field to young journalists often focused on entertainment and sports reporting. "All these people who said

they only wanted to cover sports would see that politics is the ultimate sporting game."

"One of the things we both believe is that you can only do so much in the classroom," Boettcher adds. "You need to get students out into the world facing real-life issues and problems. That's where you find a lot of growth."

But neither professor foresaw how their idea would grow. Schmeltzer consulted with OU Department of Political Science Chair Keith Gaddie, a noted expert who co-writes

The Wildcatters political analysis column on *The Huffington Post*. In turn, Gaddie called OU alum Natalie Jackson, who is senior polling editor for the site. He asked if she would consider allowing OU students to run survey questions by their national research consultant.

"Natalie said, 'If these kids are writing on politics, let's set them up as blogger-reporters and they can write for *The Huffington Post*,'" Gaddie relates. With one generous sentence, Jackson made it possible for students to potentially reach mil-

lions and "OU Covers '16" was launched. The project would challenge student reporters to explore political issues that impact their generation.

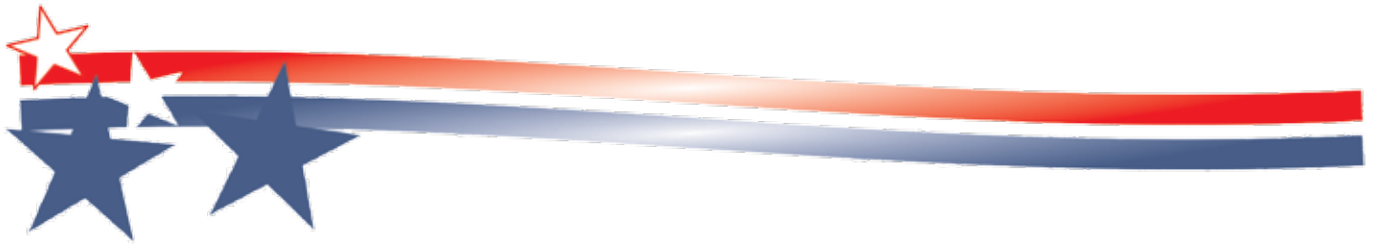
Schmeltzer's goals for the project were straightforward. "I hoped that the students wouldn't fail too badly, to be honest," he says. "I hoped they'd have a lot of fun. I hoped they wouldn't get hurt. I knew any professional at the caucuses would give them the shirt off their back. And I hoped they would be given access."

Access was made easier through the hiring of *Des Moines Register* political and investigative reporter Tom Witosky as OU's advance man. With a grant from Oklahoma's Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation defraying expenses, six broadcast majors and eight print/online journalism majors drove into Iowa on Jan. 17 to be greeted by Arctic temperatures, a conference center news hub, and a two-day crash course on caucuses featuring Iowa political reporters and politicians.

"I went to Iowa with no expectations," admits Woodlands, Texas, senior Gloria Noble. The sports broadcasting major was fresh off the plane from Miami, where she had worked for the OU Athletic Department during the Orange Bowl. "I figured, 'Why not? One more thing to add to my resumé.'

*In the dead of winter,
fourteen OU students
set out to cover their first
presidential primary
and came back journalists
ready for more.*

Opposite - FOX News anchor Bill Hemmer (seated) welcomes OU Covers '16 reporters to the network's temporary set. Pictured are (front row, from left) Ali Stratton, Lindsey Gomez, Aimee Schnebeck, Nola Allinger and Gloria Noble. Back row, from left are Shea Smith, Anna Whitney, Mashiur Rahaman and Matt Trovalli.



Gaylord College junior Lindsey Gomez braves Iowa's January temperatures – which ran as low as negative 6 degrees – to report for OU Covers '16. Students produced more than 60 stories and had life-changing experiences during their two weeks in Iowa.

My expectations changed on Day Two. I fell in love with the fact that we were there with everyone under the sun.”

“The caucuses are, in many ways, a big scrum of media from all over the world,” says Gaylord College Dean Ed Kelley. “For our journalism students to be right in the cauldron of this signature political event – in one of the most tumultuous political years in memory – is amazing.”

OU's hotel was home base for heavy hitters like the Associated Press and National Public Radio. Though other universities had sent students, OU had the largest contingency staying the longest, which allowed reporters to spread across the state. “People recognized us. We were the kids from OU, and they were so enthusiastic to see us prepared and willing to learn on the fly,” Noble says.

That willingness paid off when presidential candidate Rand Paul dropped by a barber shop three blocks from OU's news hub. Student editors were soon uploading the first story to

The Huffington Post under the scrutiny of Schmeltzer, Witosky and Boettcher.

Boettcher took things one step further by establishing a partnership with Oklahoma City's KOCO-TV. Hours after a freezing and feverish Lindsey Gomez taped her story about millennials attending a Hillary Clinton rally, she watched it stream online. “When I saw them introduce me, I thought, ‘Wow. Never in a million years did I expect that I was going to be able to broadcast my story in a top U.S. market at the age of 19. This is real.’”

Learning on the fly also could be hazardous, as Gloria Noble learned after falling down a flight of stairs.

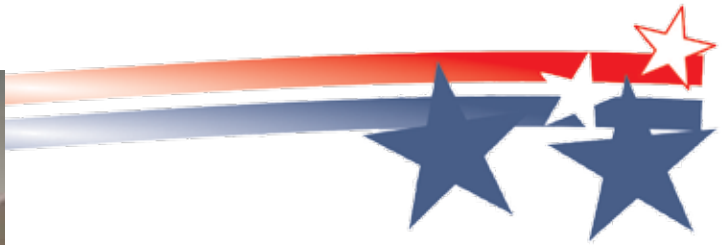
But she didn't let a broken leg – or the unexpected departure of Jeb Bush, the candidate she was assigned to cover – deter her. “I thought, ‘This is either going to make it hard for me, or I can be the journalist who's going to go out there and do everything I can,’ ” Noble says.

She shifted her focus to covering local college students en-

“There were a lot of ‘big journalism names’ asking questions ... and there was me.”



OU junior Lindsey Gomez shows off a coveted prize for any political reporter: a press pass to cover the Republican presidential debate. Gomez and 13 classmates provided extensive coverage of the 2016 Iowa Caucuses for KOCO-TV and *The Huffington Post*.



gaged in the political process. “It was electrifying for me as a student to see so many people who wanted to share what they believed in. That was the moment when I thought, ‘This is what I want to do with my life.’”

Journalism senior Matt Trovalli thought his professional life would revolve around online reporting, until Boettcher noticed he has what journalists call a “broadcast voice.” Trovalli soon was writing for *The Huffington Post* and appearing on camera for KOCO. While covering a Ben Carson prayer breakfast, he was invited to a Q&A session with the candidate. “I was literally four feet away from someone running for president. That was the craziest thing for me. You see this guy on TV and the Internet, and he’s standing right in front of me. There were a lot of ‘big journalism names’ asking questions ... and there was me.”

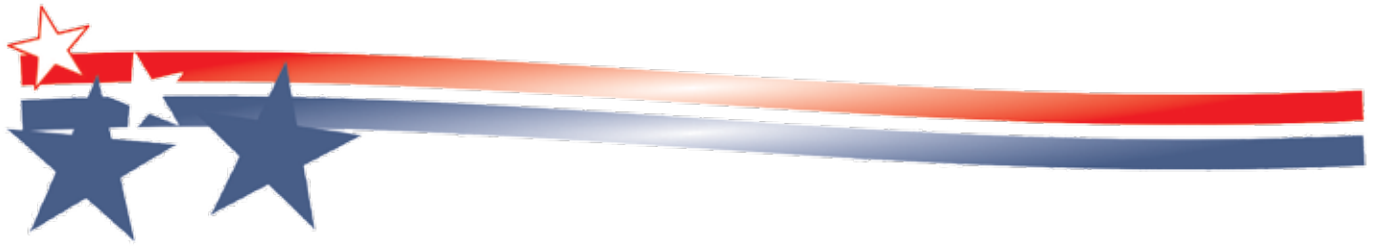
Opportunities were everywhere. While Noble rested her leg in a hotel room late one evening with OU classmates, a rumor broke that candidates Clinton and Donald Trump were conspiring to fix the general election. The team scrambled and had an in-depth article on *The Huffington Post* within two and a half hours. “We were one of the first organizations to have a strict analysis. That was a moment of realizing we were actually in Iowa, covering the big stuff, and keeping up with everyone else,” she says.

OU’s media partners agreed. “I kept asking, ‘What do you think?’ and KOCO said, ‘It’s great, keep it coming,’” Boettcher says. “I knew what the students were capable of, and I knew they’d be just fine. You create a challenge for them, and these students are going to meet it.”

“I wasn’t sure what to expect, but they did a great job of going out and chasing unique angles,” says *The Huffington Post*’s Natalie Jackson. “The response was absolutely positive from



Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and pop singer Demi Lovato greet an enthusiastic crowd of supporters in this photo by OU journalism student Lindsey Gomez.



the company. I've always known that OU has talented students, and it was great to give them an opportunity to showcase their talents."

The students represented OU so well that professional journalists took note. "The political reporters were stunned that the university had sent so many students and said it was an incredible opportunity, then proceeded to help in any way that they could," Schmeltzer says.

Even the Secret Service pitched in. During an appearance by former President Bill Clinton, an agent handpicked three photographers to shoot from behind the stage. Without hesitation, the agent said, "We'll take the AP, one more, and we'll take this student," Schmeltzer says. Any worries about access to candidates were wiped away.

The finest moment for OU's 14-member team came on the night of the Jan. 28 Republican debate. A carefully executed plan sent several students to cover the main event, while others were stationed in key cities. Student editors worked from the news hub to weave together the constant flow of content.

"That was our biggest hustle day. We were everywhere, we were trying to cover everything, and we were trying to turn around as many stories as we could," Noble says. "But there's always something that gets in your way of telling a story. In school, they can't teach you these things; there's no scenario that prepares you. It taught us the best lessons we ever could have learned."

Trovalli was in the news hub when word came that a large "Fight for \$15" protest outside the Republican debate was on the verge of becoming unruly. He and videographer Mashiur Rahaman sped to downtown Des Moines in minutes. "We got into the middle of the protest and started interviewing people," says Trovalli. "It was honestly the biggest adrenaline rush I've ever had."

Gomez can relate. "I learned to use the stress to fuel me, to think quicker, act quicker, edit quicker and make it a positive thing," says the Edmond, Okla., junior, who put 10,000 miles on her car during the 16-day trip. "I learned that I can work when I'm sick, I can work when it's negative 6 degrees outside, I can work in a car. I am



An interactive map links readers to stories "OU Covers '16" students have written for *The Huffington Post* and reveals the location of their coverage. Visit <http://okroutes.com/elections2016.html>.



Senior Matt Trovalli interviews a voter in the days leading up to the Iowa caucuses. The OU senior said covering the caucuses helped him "learn how to be an actual journalist instead of a journalism student."



Junior journalism student Shea Smith (right) snaps a selfie with videographer Mashiur Rahaman, a graduate student in Gaylord College. The OU Covers '16 project sent students across Iowa to report on every aspect of America's election kick-off event.



Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump speaks to the Iowa Renewable Fuels Association in this image captured by Shea Smith. The journalism project brought OU students face to face with more than a dozen candidates and gave them a new interest in politics.

capable of doing this job. There is no, 'I'm going to try.' There's a deadline, and you'd better meet it."

When all the deadlines had been met and their time in Iowa ended, OU Covers '16 students had reported and written 42 stories for *The Huffington Post*, 16 stories for KOCO, two for KWTV-TV, several in Spanish for Telemundo Oklahoma, and made five appearances on KOKC Radio. They also may have changed their lives.

"We came out of Iowa with 14 students interested in politics," Schmeltzer says with pride. "I wouldn't be the least bit surprised to see two or three of them reporting from Iowa during the next election."

"Before I went to Iowa, I put limitations on myself because I didn't think people took me seriously," reflects Noble, who had planned to become a sports journalist. Today she is focusing on a graduate degree with an eye toward political reporting. "I think now that if there is a story to tell, I have every bit of confidence in myself to go out and do it. Iowa really helped me learn I'm the only thing that's holding me back."

(OU Covers '16 students also will report from the national political conventions and throughout the 2016 presidential election. An interactive map with links to their stories on The Huffington Post is available at <http://okroutes.com/elections2016.html>)

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