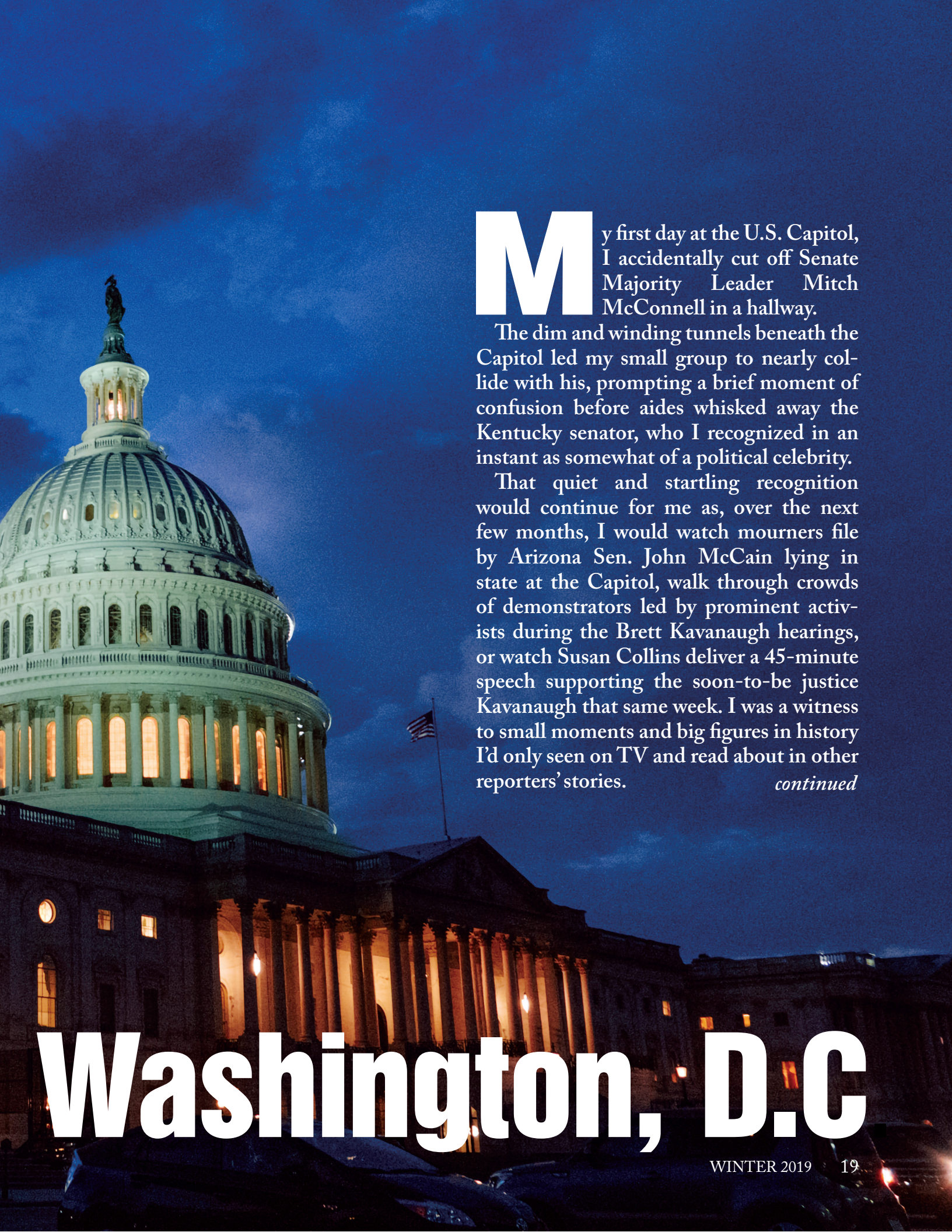


Dateline:

Gaylord College students spend a semester reporting from the nation's capital and get the education of a lifetime.

BY EMMA KEITH

Megan Ross/Gaylord News



My first day at the U.S. Capitol, I accidentally cut off Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in a hallway.

The dim and winding tunnels beneath the Capitol led my small group to nearly collide with his, prompting a brief moment of confusion before aides whisked away the Kentucky senator, who I recognized in an instant as somewhat of a political celebrity.

That quiet and startling recognition would continue for me as, over the next few months, I would watch mourners file by Arizona Sen. John McCain lying in state at the Capitol, walk through crowds of demonstrators led by prominent activists during the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, or watch Susan Collins deliver a 45-minute speech supporting the soon-to-be justice Kavanaugh that same week. I was a witness to small moments and big figures in history I'd only seen on TV and read about in other reporters' stories. *continued*

Washington, D.C

All of these opportunities are likely mundane for veteran D.C. journalists who have navigated the hill for months or years, but for a University of Oklahoma student journalist whose biggest interview so far had been with the president of the university, watching these moments in history unfold strikes me with awe each time.

These experiences have been part of an experiment with Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication and funded by the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, which sent me and two other students — Megan Ross and Storme Jones — to Washington, D.C., during the fall semester to report on Oklahoma issues. The idea is simple in theory — I write, Storme produces broadcast TV and radio segments, and Megan takes photos and does the occasional courtroom sketch.

We've spent the last three months figuring out how it should work as we go, asking "What do other Oklahomans

want to hear about?" and "What's the Oklahoma angle here?" when we approach news events. The issue from the beginning wasn't a lack of news; it was that there was so much of it. We could have gone to every public hearing and vote on the hill, but we wanted to be intentional about our resources and storytelling. We knew that the direction we took our reporting this semester could influence what future students would cover, and we wanted to produce work that was helpful to the news outlets that publish our work in Oklahoma. Some weeks we'd cover the issue of the day — a confirmation hearing for a former OU vice president, for example — while some weeks I would focus on how current issues in agriculture or trade would affect Oklahomans.

We have been guinea pigs for these few months, a test to see if this program could work with just three of us in D.C., while our partner publications and most of our professors were back in

Oklahoma. There were tough days and frustrations, existential moments when we'd step back and wonder if what we did mattered, if anyone even read or heard it.

The first few weeks were largely overwhelming as we struggled to get a foothold with Oklahoma congressional staffs, wondering if what we were or weren't covering was relevant. But there were moments of small personal victories, like the day we happened to catch Sen. James M. Inhofe in a hallway for a comment right after he'd been appointed to chair the Senate Armed Services Committee. On those days, we'd celebrate together on a job well done, a lesson well learned, a team mission seen through. When *The Oklahoman* or *Tulsa World* put a story or photo on the front page, or when News 9 or 6 liked Storme's broadcast work, we were overjoyed to learn that what we were doing could actually be useful to others.

There was also excitement about what

Protesters march from the Capitol Building to the National Mall while Christine Blasey Ford and then-Judge Brett Kavanaugh delivered testimonies before the Senate Judiciary Committee.



Megan Ross/Gaylord News

Eliot Dupree of Cub Scout Pack 116 in Arlington, Va., salutes at the casket of former President George H.W. Bush.



Megan Ross/Gaylord News

was ahead of us, spurred on by what and who surrounded us.

The newfound access to political figures was startling. During the Kavanaugh hearings, I'd watch as swarms of reporters from publications I've read and respected for years would have the same few seconds to catch politicians that I had. It was interesting and often frustrating to chase down Oklahoma senators or representatives — one day we spent hours waiting around the House of Representatives' offices and chamber to catch one comment from an Oklahoma congressman.

I've also never been around so many seasoned reporters who I look up to so much. One Monday, Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* reporter David Farenthold sat down with the three of us for an hour, answering our student-journalist questions about investigative reporting and how he covers President Donald Trump. We talked

to executives at CNN and NBC and asked questions of reporters and editors at Slate and NPR, each week exposed to new ideas and people willing to tell us what they learned as novice D.C. reporters. People's kindness and empathy with what it was to be young, confused, and starry-eyed in D.C. was pleasantly startling sometimes. One *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter not only spoke with the three of us in a class, but also met Megan and me for breakfast the next week, helping two frazzled and overwhelmed young reporters work through all our questions.

This past Tuesday, the three of us sat in the Supreme Court chambers, watching a piece of history — *Carpenter v. Murphy*, which could change the literal landscape of Oklahoma — argued before us. We walked out into the startling cold under a bright blue sky, invigorated by what we'd watched and ready to tell others about it. Later that night, after Storme had produced a broadcast

piece, I'd delivered a story for print, and Megan had taken photographs, we had some sentimental moments about the successes of the day. I remembered that days like that one, the ones where we get to witness history, then learn how to tell others about it, are the ones that make this worthwhile.

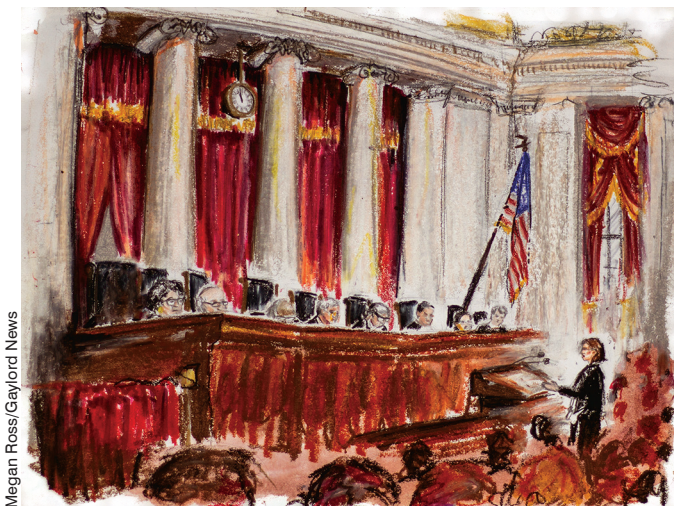
History does not end when we leave D.C. We will continue to witness and process it in Norman when we return in January; we will do that work when we graduate and disperse to places currently unknown in May. We may return to D.C. in 2019 or in a few years; we may never live in this city again. We will, however, carry the knowledge of the people and events we have seen here and all they have taught us into whatever places we take on next.

Emma Keith is a student in the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication and managing editor of the OU Daily.

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ABOVE - Storme Jones, Megan Ross and Emma Keith stop for a photo outside Union Station.



Megan Ross/Gaylord News

LEFT - In addition to her work as a photographer, Megan Ross used her artistic talents and sketch pad within the Supreme Court chambers where cameras are not allowed.