



## Alumni Voices

### From PowerPoint to Publishing: How I Quit My Consulting Job to Become a Magazine Editor

by Jason Stevenson, '00

On a June day four years after I left Harvard with an undergraduate degree in social studies, I sat at a small desk on the ninth floor of a Washington, D.C. office building. I didn't have a window, file drawers, or even a proper office chair. I didn't even have my own desk - sitting across from me was a 19-year-old Yale sophomore whose Mac laptop and empty coffee cups hogged much of the available space. Just a few years after setting out to conquer the world with my Harvard education, I was working as an unpaid summer intern at a D.C. political magazine.

The Yale student and I also shared a phone, which I needed urgently that afternoon for an interview, while he used it to arrange his dinner plans. As I waited for him to hang up, I consoled myself by glancing at a spreadsheet of magazine internships I kept on my computer. High on the list was *Outside*, an adventure magazine located in faraway Santa Fe, NM. I had applied twice for a job at *Outside*, and had been rejected both times for lack of writing experience. But now, with several more reporting clips to my name, I thought I might have a better chance. As I typed an email to *Outside*'s research editor, I wondered what the hiking was like in New Mexico, and if the magazine's interns got their own desks, phones, and windows.

Six months earlier I had quit my consulting job in Boston, filled a U-haul truck with my mismatched post-college possessions, and drove south to D.C. I'd joined the consulting firm, which specialized in inner-city economic development, right after college because its work mirrored my thesis research on urban renewal. But after three years of client presentations and Excel spreadsheets, I felt the need for a more creative career. Up until that time, writing had been an extracurricular pursuit for me. At Harvard I wrote for the weekly *Independent* newspaper, and later experimented with essays and poetry during a year-long fellowship in Scotland. But as my interest in economic development waned, my writing hobby grew into a passion. My manager at the firm urged me to pursue journalism. "You make nice PowerPoint slides," she told me, "but don't you like writing more?" Her blunt advice, a downturn in the consulting business, and the fact that my girlfriend had moved overseas, helped me make my leap. I applied for a dozen magazine internships, and when a small monthly publication in D.C. agreed to take me on, I quit my job, packed my belongings, and jumped into a new career.

My six months in Washington, D.C., which encompassed unpaid internships at two political publications, taught me to love magazines, but dislike political journalism. To me, the constant game of "gotcha" that Beltway reporters played with their elected prey seemed petty and unproductive. Still, my time on the magazine ladder's lowest rung proved a valuable boot camp. I observed how editors become instant experts on dozens

of topics, and how smart questions can generate a story. I learned the importance of fact-checking, and confirming sources and quotes. I figured out that freelancing requires constant follow-up with editors and an email style best described as “gentle harassment.” I learned that I could live cheaply by eating generic foods and giving up movies and expensive entertainment. And perhaps most importantly, I realized that persistence and luck are the keys to landing a magazine job. The last point I learned first-hand when *Outside*’s research editor called me a few days after I sent her an email and offered me an internship. Two weeks later I flew to New Mexico with two suitcases and a one-way ticket. After months of living off savings and meager freelance earnings, I finally would be earning a paycheck again, even if it was for only \$8 an hour.

The “work hard/play hard” environment at *Outside* immediately captured me. Not only did the magazine cover outdoor sports, adventure travel, technology, and the environment - topics that appealed to my core interests - but editors lived the lifestyle they wrote about. Plus, interns like me were expected to pitch ideas, write short articles, and play key roles in producing each issue.

My *Outside* internship lasted six months, and just before it ended, the research editor who hired me left the magazine. To fill her spot they hired me as an assistant editor - an incredibly lucky break. Rising from intern to paid staff is the crux move of career advancement. Almost no magazine will fill a staff position with someone with only intern experience. For most aspiring editors, the only route higher on the masthead is what happened to me - to be promoted internally by colleagues who know you well. To make this move, you need to impress the staff, pitch appealing articles, tackle difficult projects, and most importantly, be available at the right time.

As an assistant editor at *Outside*, I fact-checked feature stories and wrote small sidebars and profiles. But after a year and a half in Santa Fe, I needed fresh challenges. I applied for and accepted an associate editor position at *Backpacker*, a smaller magazine based in Pennsylvania. This new job gives me more responsibility in assigning and editing stories, managing a budget, and creating online content - a promotion that would have taken much longer to achieve at *Outside*. At *Backpacker* I’m also learning skills like editing long-form features and managing writers that I’ll need to master before advancing higher on the masthead. And whether I decide to stick with magazines, become a full-time freelance writer, or strike out into an entirely new field, I am learning how to make writing a key part of my career.

My decision to leave Santa Fe for Pennsylvania wasn't easy. But neither was driving away from my consulting career in Boston two years earlier. Both decisions demonstrated the incredible upside of the unknown. Risking what you have, I now realize, is often required to create something better.

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