

'It Was an Eye-Opening Experience'

Former Patriot's Pen participant recalls her time as the national first-place winner and how it led her to a career as a professional journalist

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When Julia Benbrook was in eighth grade at Woodward Middle School in the Oklahoma panhandle, the VFW's Patriot's Pen essay contest sent her down a path toward a career in journalism.

Benbrook's essay on "Why America's Veterans Should be Honored" beat out more than 110,000 essays in 2009 to capture the national first-place honor, which included a \$10,000 U.S. savings bond and a tour of the nation's capital.

Sponsored by VFW Post 1335 in Woodward, Oklahoma, Benbrook wrote about her two grandfathers, both of whom were World War II veterans. Since both had died before she was born, Benbrook interviewed her family to find out about her grandfathers and their military service.

For Benbrook, now a journalist with Spectrum News, it was an introduction to the world of storytelling through journalism.

"Writing this essay was my first look at being a journalist while sitting with my grandma with a pen and paper," she said. "It was an eye-opening experience. It really did change the course of what I wanted to do."

Benbrook was in school the day her parents — Sheryl and Bruce — were notified that their daughter was the national winner.

"It was really exciting, and my parents were blown away," Benbrook said. "I remember them picking me up from school, and both of them were in the car. 'We got the call,' they said."

When Benbrook traveled to Washington, D.C., along with the Department Voice of Democracy high school winners, her parents were there to hear her winning essay. It was

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the first time Benbrook had been to D.C. since she was 4 years old.

“It was a moment that I knew that journalism was something I wanted to do,” Benbrook said. “Before this, I had lots of ideas of what I wanted to do.”

Her father is a third-generation banker, so that had been a consideration. Benbrook also had dreams of being a dancer.

Her trip to Washington, D.C., included a visit to Mt. Vernon and the National Mall, as well as a trip to the National Zoo.

In high school, Benbrook entered the VOD competition each year. And each time, she placed at the local level.

After high school, she attended Oklahoma State University and graduated in 2017 with a degree in journalism. She worked on air in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at a CBS affiliate before attending Northwestern University, where she earned a master’s degree with an emphasis in politics, foreign affairs and policy making.

Benbrook is now a Spectrum News D.C. bureau reporter covering the Kentucky congressional delegation. In her role, she reports on stories within the Kentucky delegation, and how news and issues happening on Capitol Hill affect Kentuckians back home.

‘ONE OF THE BEST SCHOLARSHIPS OUT THERE’

Her experience with VFW came full-circle in March when she interviewed then-VFW Commander-in-Chief Matthew M. “Fritz” Mihelcic during VFW’s Washington Conference.

“Patriot’s Pen is a wonderful opportunity that opened so many doors for me,” Benbrook said. “I would tell students to take the time to dive into a story. This is one of the best scholarships out there.”

When Benbrook took a dive into her own family history, she learned about her paternal grandfather, Temple Benbrook, who served in the European Theater as a first lieutenant in the 14th Armored Division. His service earned him a Bronze Star.

Her maternal grandfather, Norman Eugene “Gene” Stevens, served on the USS Houston (CA-30), which was sunk by the Japanese during the Battle of Sunda Strait.

Stevens survived 14 hours in the water before being taken prisoner by the Japanese. He was held for three and-a-half years. When he returned home at 24 years old, he weighed 95 pounds.

These stories inspired Benbrook to include the following in her essay: “We need to honor

and remember both past and present veterans for their bravery and love for this country. Each one of them has made a change in their lives, a sacrifice, so that we can have all the rights that we take for granted.”

Had it not been for Benbrook’s English teacher, Amy Whitewater, who assigned the Patriot’s Pen essay as a class project, she would not have learned her family history so deeply.

“Patriot’s Pen allows you to grow as you are writing and to learn,” she said. “Through it, there are opportunities to meet people and continue to learn.”

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