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IWU Senior Experiences Broadcast Journalism with Summer Internship

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--From Bloomington to Oxford, England to Atlanta, Ga., Josh Butts, an Illinois Wesleyan University senior and native of Mt. Zion, Ill., has done his fair share of traveling this past year, capitalizing on several "once in a life time" opportunities.

Just days after returning from his year of study at Pembroke College, one of the 39 colleges of Oxford University, Oxford, England, Butts left for Atlanta, Ga., to put his broadcast journalism skills to the test while interning with Cable News Network (CNN) and Time, CNN's news-magazine television program.

Butts was one of three interns under the supervision of Senior Investigative Reporter and Emmy award-winner James Polk. Throughout the summer, he assisted several producers in researching a variety of stories, often working on three or four stories at the same time.

"My experiences at CNN gave me a very good overall view of how the business works at that level," said Butts, an English major who is considering pursuing broadcast journalism after college. "I was given a lot of responsibility and learned a lot about broadcast journalism and national and international events."

One story in particular captivated Butts' attention. He was responsible for finding information on an underground organization that helped Somolian women escape from abusive spouses. Butts had to track down the organization and find women who were willing to talk about their present situation.

"It was stories like these I found particularly interesting," said Butts. "I got to talk with people from different countries and learn about other cultures."

"One Friday I found an organization in Ethiopia that was unable to send me an e-mail until the following Tuesday because the entire country goes without power on Mondays," explained Butts.

Under Polk's supervision, Butts and his fellow interns also were invited to reconstruct a story that had run several years ago. Though the research already had been done, the students were encouraged to determine the story's sequence, determine who they would interview, what camera shots they would use and other decisions necessary to make an idea for a story become a news segment. The interns were then shown the original final clip to see how their decisions compared to it.

Over the course of the summer, Butts spent one week shadowing the producer of the 8 o'clock news show and another three nights following a producer of CNN-International.

Butts observed producers reading scripts, deciding why one story would run over another, determining the placement of stories in a newscast and determining which pieces various news anchors would read.

"I learned the news is not as set as it seems. Many variables including the length of a story and how well a story might appeal to the show's demographics are considered before including it in the news," explained Butts.

As an intern, Butts was able to participate in weekly seminars that explored topics such as how to break into the field of journalism, ethics in journalism, international reporting and what one needs to be successful in the field.

"It was neat to have access to that information and to pick the brains of these people who are so well-known in the industry. It helped me make some decisions that I was unsure about," said Butts.

Despite the long hours and numerous responsibilities at CNN, Butts was able to enjoy some rest and relaxation this summer. He attended several Atlanta Braves games, one courtesy of the president of CNN-domestic, and also went to a free concert featuring pop-star Ricky Martin.

Butts will intern at WHOI-TV, located in Creve Couer, near Peoria, this fall. His responsibilities will include writing for the 6 o'clock and 10 o'clock newscasts and going out in the field with the program's reporters and photographers.

"I think this internship will really confirm whether or not I want to go into broadcast journalism," said Butts. "CNN is where every broadcast journalist wants to end their career, but the local stations give a realistic impression of the field."

Butts feels that both recent experiences have prepared him for life after graduation.

"CNN is very well respected in the broadcast journalism field and Oxford really taught me how to sift through vast amounts of information and create a coherent idea -- a very good skill for a journalist to have," said Butts.