Channel 2 News to Reach Audience of 9 Million

by Mary Anne Lynch

The proof of a program is its success. Channel 2 News, the University’s totally student-run station, can boast that its students are so secure in their skills that sometimes they are hired before they graduate. Also boast-worthy is viewership that has expanded locally to 150,000 through local public access stations. And Varsity Television Network in Texas will air segments of Channel 2 student broadcasts across the country this summer, potentially reaching 9 million homes.

The fact that the station won Society of Professional Journalists and Golden Web awards this past year is no surprise to those who have worked at Channel 2 News. “I am a television news reporter at the ABC affiliate in Billings, Mont. I owe all of my knowledge and experience to Channel 2 News,” says Mike Baldyga ’01, former news director and general manager at the University’s student-run television station.

Tim Robinson ’02, producer for NBC’s Channel 28 in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, Pa., had job offers before he received his diploma in May.

Robinson chose the University of Hartford because of the small size of the television station, locally known as STN, or Channel 2. “You can get involved right away. Channel 2 was really the springboard for me,” he says. Robinson’s job is a move up to a mid-sized station, but, he says confidently, “I feel plenty prepared. I was able to walk in and say I know how to do this, I know that equipment.”

“Our station is unique because it is 100 percent student-run. It gives you an amazing understanding of how TV works, from the technical to business aspects,” said Ezra Shanken ’02. He started at Channel 2 as a technician behind the scenes and just graduated from the station’s news anchor spotlight. “Being an anchor on the news is absolutely a fabulous experience,” says Shanken, who is seeking a press relations position in Washington, D.C.

“The station is great because you can change hats at any time,” offers Robinson, who also started by pushing buttons behind the scenes before moving into news production and occasionally serving as weather anchor.

“We chose the stories reported, the angles we took, our own budget, and managed our own people,” Baldyga recalls.

Fifty student volunteers put on Channel 2’s half-hour, weekly newscast covering campus, state, national, and international news. Student Government Association debates are broadcast live, and this past year, Channel 2 began live coverage of sports events, which entailed renting a truck and wiring and building their own equipment for broadcast in the field. “We do as many sports games as we possibly can,” says Robinson.

“We try to do a lot of special programs,” he adds. These marathon productions have ranged from coverage of the Clinton impeachment hearings to following President Bush’s inauguration week. To produce both programs, Baldyga, Robinson, and Shanken traveled to Washington, D.C., with press passes that gave them the same access to Capitol events as the top television crews in the nation.

The University station, which will celebrate its 10th anniversary of broadcasting in the upcoming school year, has experienced tremendous growth.

“The University has been very supportive,” says Robinson. Cameras cost between $8,000 and $10,000, which is why there is always the need for more funding. Channel 2 has converted half of its equipment to digital technology, he adds. “We use the exact same equipment that is used in the field.”

“This upgrades the station’s capabilities to the highest grade of broadcast production,” according to Baldyga.

Robinson and Baldyga attribute their jobs in television to their experience at Channel 2 and internships at Hartford’s Fox 61 television station. Robinson did two internships with Fox in news and writing. “Each day was different,” he recalls. He taped, ran cameras, and worked in audio, sports, and writing. “All that experience comes back to us at the station. The training gets passed down because we train each other; you learn from each other. It makes us really strong; you can experience it all.”

“We’re really good at what we do. Our program is so good that we have placed people at Fox 61 right out of college,” Shanken beams.

“We have a lot of students from the [University] station,” says Bob Bennett, senior news producer at Fox 61. “And they all do a fantastic job.

“They are comparable to a small-market television station. They put out a very good product,” says Bennett, who has voluntarily met with the students at Channel 2 and critiqued their scripts and productions to enhance their learning.

“They are understanding the news values better than ever and growing by leaps and bounds,” he says.