A Conversation with the Ensian’s 1971 Editor-in-Chief

Alumna Joey Porcelli graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Journalism from the University of Michigan in 1971. Her four years at UM jumpstarted a decades-long career full of writing accomplishments and publications with still many more to come. Crucial to Porcelli’s experience was her time on the Michiganenian Yearbook staff as Copy Editor of Michiganenian LXIV and Editor-in-Chief of the 75th anniversary edition. Porcelli reminisces on her Student Publications experiences here.

What has life been like since the Ensian?

My experience at the Ensian launched me into a creative and fulfilling career that took various colorful twists and turns. My first job out of college was at a small newspaper in Arizona, where I wrote obituaries. Next, I answered an ad for a scriptwriter in Denver, although I had no idea what that entailed.

Eventually, I became the creative director of that international multi-image company and worked for corporate clients such as IBM and AT&T.

When I decided to start my own production company, I applied the skills I learned at the Ensian as both a copywriter and editor. These included: how to manage and supervise a creative staff, how to budget, how to create a visually attractive design, and how to assign and write copy by the deadline (I am proud to say I haven’t missed a deadline in over fifty years). Above all, I learned the benefit of collaboration in the creative process.

The next chapter of my career took me into magazine writing and editing as both an employee and a freelancer. I wrote and edited a newsletter for the Lower Downtown Denver Historic District and worked for local magazines. I will never forget the thrill of seeing one of my travel stories illustrated with my photographs in print. Assignments took me to Finland, Ecuador, the Galapagos, Cuba, and aboard the Rocky Mountaineer from Vancouver to Banff.

When my son went off to college, I decided to fill my empty nest with three published books. I wrote Rise & Dine, a restaurant guide to breakfast, collaborated on The Gyros Journey, an ethnic food guide, and co-wrote and published Take 30, a coffee table book commemorating the 30th anniversary of the Denver International Film Festival.

Today, I teach memoir writing at an arts center. My focus is now on writing fiction. One of my short stories was published last summer in a literary journal, and I am knee-deep in a novel.

Yet, as I look back, I find the inspiration for all my career choices originated during my four years at the University of Michigan. My film appreciation class instilled a love of the moving image, my journalism and English classes taught me how to organize my thoughts and edit my words, and my photography class sent me out into the world to capture images to illustrate my stories.

I am forever grateful to my parents for sending me to Michigan for this exceptional education.

What was your favorite story from your time on staff?

In my junior year as Copy Editor, Ensian editor Sally Watson gave me the freedom to write whatever I liked. I dabbled in free verse and loved putting words on the page. I wrote about everything from the moon landing to the Beatles to the student sit-in at the LS&A building.

The end of the ’60s and early ’70s was exciting and turbulent, and I had the good fortune to pay witness to this era. Two stories stand out as my favorites: First: The 24-12 win over Ohio State. In 1967, my father promised me a trip to Pasadena if our football team ever went to the Rose Bowl during my four years at UM. He was pretty confident that wouldn’t happen. Our new coach Bo Schiebelcher and a talented team changed all that. Sitting in the stands watching UM beat Ohio State was a thrill I will never forget. Tearing down those goalposts qualified me as a fan for life, and I wrote about that day in bold letters in the Ensian. I try to go back every fall for a game. Go Blue!

Second: The Moratorium March on Washington — Nov. 15, 1969

This experience was life-changing for me. I rode in a bus caravan from Ann Arbor to D.C. with hundreds of other students. We slept in a school gymnasium and, on a cold November morning, joined a crowd of over 500,000 protesting the Vietnam War. Writing about this experience for the Ensian taught me the importance of documenting historic events and capturing the moment for future readers.

What do you think has changed the most about the yearbook?

Yearbook production changed with the invention of new technology. In 1971, before computers (I know most of you reading this cannot comprehend how we survived those dark ages), we selected photographs from a contact sheet and printed them in the darkroom. We wrote the copy on manual typewriters, cut and pasted the layout on dummy sheets, and measured space for each page on a grid. Once these were snail-mailed to the printer, we waited patiently for the proofs to come back. Then, we made corrections with a grease pen. Each step was awkward, time-consuming, and required many late nights in our one-room office at 420 Maynard Street. We fortified ourselves with bags of Doritos and cans of Coke. It took teamwork and a special kind of camaraderie to finish those yearbooks, and we loved every minute.

What has stayed the same?

Universities across the country have canceled their yearbooks for lack of interest. What remains the same at UM since I left is the student and faculty enthusiasm for the Ensian; those who still see the value in preserving lasting memories in print and online and those who work endless hours to create the book. The growth of the Ensian staff from a dozen in 1971 to over 40 students today tells me how important this publication is to the University of Michigan community.
What is your fondest memory on your time on staff?

One of my fondest memories is sitting on the Diag selling the Ensign at a card table soon after the book was printed in my senior year. An older, well-dressed woman, probably someone the same age I am now, walked up to me, picked up a copy of the yearbook and said, "Who's responsible for this?"

I braced myself for the worst and said, "I am."

She then told me how much she loved the new format and was a big fan of our work. Her reaction encouraged me to believe in my instincts and take risks. I am pleased to see that the editors who followed expanded the book's scope to include national events, personal challenges, and other thought-provoking content in addition to campus life. I am so proud to have been associated with this dynamic publication.

A Note on Giving Back—The Joey Porcelli Scholarship

My husband and I are honored and grateful to be able to contribute a scholarship to a University of Michigan publications student. We were fortunate to attend four-year colleges without any debt or financial stress. So, paying this gift forward means a great deal to us. Hopefully, this fund will give future journalists and creative writers more time to hone their craft and enjoy what I told my children is "the best four years of your life."

Joey Porcelli currently lives in Golden, Colorado and is working on a novel based on her Italian family. Porcelli says, "My years at UM on the yearbook gave me some of the best times of my life and launched me into a career that has been exciting and satisfying. Except I have one more goal and that is to get my novel published in my seventies. It's never too late!"