

# Elissa A. Nadworny '10

## The Joseph C. Palamountain Award for Young Alumni Achievement

In a year that many Americans spent sequestered at home, Elissa Nadworny took an extended road trip across the U.S. An education reporter for National Public Radio, she spends much of her time “in the field” by choice. This past year was no exception. With protective mask and safety protocols in place, Elissa toured colleges and universities from coast to coast for over four months. Her goal: to document if and how institutions of higher education were operating safely in the midst of a pandemic.

The young journalist has always found the heart of her craft in the field. When COVID hit, the pull to be there intensified. “There were so many stories that weren’t being told because people were cut off — and so were we.” Elissa continued to log studio hours filing stories for NPR’s two most popular broadcasts, Morning Edition and All Things Considered. Her ability to successfully pitch story ideas like the college tour was “in many ways, a saving grace.”

It’s not the first time Elissa has “made a place” for her brand of storytelling. She arrived at NPR in 2014, excited and a bit awed. A self-determined major who studied documentary filmmaking, she saw the need for reporting across multiple platforms, including video, print, photography and social media. At the time, it was unfamiliar terrain for senior staffers. Undaunted, Elissa continued to advocate for her ideas. “I must have sounded like a broken record at every meeting,” she recalls with a laugh. “I was blinded by my enthusiasm and drive. What a blessing it was to be so naïve!” Starting out as producer and photographer for the travel series Our Land, Elissa transitioned to education editor, then higher education reporter. Throughout, she spearheaded the cross-platform approach, collaborating with a small team of colleagues. Her persistence paid off in 2017, when she landed the prestigious Edward R. Murrough Award for Innovation. Today, cross-platform reporting is widely considered an industry best practice.

Elissa’s skills in immersive reporting were evident early on. As a graduate student at Northwestern and McCormack Fellow, she traveled to the Middle East for USA Today to interview Syrian refugees. Elissa chronicled their response to a new food voucher system that allowed recipients to buy food locally, replacing U.S.-produced government food aid. Her investigation was captured on video and in a written piece. “I can still remember the sounds and smells of those markets,” she notes. “It was then that I knew that I belonged in the field.”

While covering the K-12 education beat at NPR, she asked a classroom of fourth-graders to tell their teacher’s story. After equipping each budding reporter with a disposable camera, Elissa “just stepped out of the way.” The result was a fresh, rarely seen perspective that refutes clichéd narratives about public education. In another innovative piece, she celebrated a group of eighth-grade girls fed up with the shame-inducing taboo against discussing their periods. The story prompted the donation of a year’s worth of feminine products to their Bronx middle school and garnered Elissa the 2020 Gracie Award from the Alliance of Women in Journalism.

Elissa’s passion for storytelling was sparked by curiosity that often drew her into conversation with people, something she’s enjoyed since childhood. At Skidmore, faculty mentor Tom Lewis helped Elissa identify and hone her skills, focusing on the medium of documentary film. He was quick to praise good work, bolstering her growing confidence. “That relationship shaped my life and career,” she reflects. “Tom Lewis taught me how to be a storyteller.”

At his suggestion, Elissa signed on for a work-study position at Skidmore’s Media Services freshmen year. “I worked with faculty and staff from all parts of the College, each of whom possessed a knowledge base entirely different from what I was learning in class.” For Elissa, the position functioned as an extended internship in “what was essentially continuous problem-solving.” Assisting students from varied backgrounds, she was exposed to the campus life beyond her immediate circle of friends and crew teammates. “I was extremely lucky to have had this experience,” she observes.

“But the single most important skill I picked up at Skidmore was the ability to make 5 a.m. rowing practice on Fish Creek — for four years. When I learned that I’d have to be up by 4 a.m. for Morning Edition, I thought, yeah, I can definitely do this.”

She still hears from Professor Lewis, who regularly listens to the broadcast. He recently sent Elissa yet another congratulatory note, adding that he was proud of her.

Lately, recognition has also come from unexpected places. Last year, Elissa received a James Beard Award for a food-related story about a Chinese community in the Mississippi Delta. “My coworkers started suggesting that I write a cook book. But as I cannot cook, it is unlikely that anyone would buy it,” she quips.

“Winning this award is special to me because my mom, **Jan Brydon '70**, is also an alumna. Skidmore is a place she really cares about and a connection that we share. She strongly encouraged me to enroll. So it feels like her award, too.”