

# J-SCHOOL'S SHEILA O'CONNOR:



# ONE OF THE 999

"THE NEWSROOM EXCITES ME," says broadcast major Sheila O'Connor. "With the wire service machines clacking and the telephones ringing and people talking and typewriters clattering, it really gets my adrenalin up. I love it."

Sheila is one of 999 students enrolled in Mizou's J-School. The school's enrollment has tripled since 1961. Some people blame the enrollment explosion on post-Watergate Woodward/Bernstein hero worship; others say students are looking for a "practical" major; and still others believe that students see the "Fourth Estate" as a way to serve an ideal master in the marketplace — Truth.

Whatever the reasons, students surely are attracted to Mizou by the worldwide reputation of Missouri's School of Journalism — the world's first. Every J-student learns the founding date (1908) in Dr. William Taft's encyclopedic and exhaustive History and Principles of Journalism class, which is required of all.

Sheila was being practical. Like many of her classmates in the J-School, she dreamed of becoming a writer. At the private, Catholic girls' high school she attended in Chicago, she enjoyed standing up and reading what she'd written to the other members of her creative writing class. But she didn't think she could make a living writing The Great American Novel, so she came to J-School.

"I've always been very analytical," she says. "My friends in high school always said I thought too much. That was one of the reasons I thought I could make it as a reporter — I always wanted to get to the bottom of everything, to get at the WHY."

The 999 "reporters" — *The New York Times* has only about 600 — make Columbia, Missouri, the "most covered town in the U.S.A." Some oft-interviewed townspeople and busy public figures show their irritation when, semester after semester, they are approached by fresh-faced reporting students on their first assignment who want to know "everything that ever happened." A class in which city and county officials background the neophyte reporters en masse has helped some.

**CAN WE TRUST THE NEWS MEDIA?** is a universal question. In Columbia, the memory for misquoting is long, and tolerance, not trust, is the prevailing attitude.

Yet, Mizou's reputation is built on giving students practical, not textbook, training. Radio students work at KBIA, the University-owned National Public Radio station. Television students man the cameras and are anchorpeople at KOMU, the University-owned NBC affiliate. The news editorial and photojournalism students put out the daily *Columbia Missourian* and compete fiercely for scoops with the *Columbia Daily Tribune*. Columbia is one of the few towns of its size to have two daily newspapers. Magazine majors produce "Vibrations," the Sunday newspaper feature magazine.

J-School is very competitive. Some prospective J-students just worry about their grades during their first two years of college. They have

to have a 2.75 (B- average) grade point average to be accepted as Juniors. Others — the more aggressive ones — get jobs with the commercial media or on the Campus student newspaper, *The Maneater*, or on the yearbook, *The Scavitar*.

**SHEILA BEGAN WORKING** at KCOU, the Campus radio station, when she was still a freshman. She also has worked at two of Columbia's commercial stations: KTGR and KFMZ.

Sheila O'Connor's beat this summer was the Missouri General Assembly. Talking to government officials and just waiting around to interview legislators occupied her days in Jefferson City and at the Capitol Building. Her news stories regularly were broadcast to six stations in the state through the Missouri Radio News Network. "There's a lot of drama in reporting," she says.



Last year, she produced an 11-minute radio documentary on a bill in the state legislature concerning the testimony of rape victims. It was not a class assignment. She did it "for fun." It was broadcast on KBIA and won her first place for radio documentaries in major markets in the annual Missouri Radio and Television News Directors' Association competition. That means she won over professionals from Kansas City and St. Louis radio stations.

During the early part of the summer, Sheila had the state legislature for her beat. It kept her busy. She drove her cream-colored Volkswagen to Jefferson City most days, stopping enroute for a chocolate-frosted donut for breakfast.

In the Capitol, she checked in with Phil Brooks, who supervises the radio broadcast students whose work will be heard on KBIA and on six other stations throughout the state through the Missouri Radio News Network. Brooks told her what bills were coming up in the House and Senate and briefed her on the day's hot stories.

"I can remember feeling inept walking around the Capitol the first day on the job. I felt alone. When you're a radio reporter, it's just you and your tape recorder. You have to show self-confidence, know what you're doing and background yourself."

**"IT WAS HARD FOR ME** at first because I felt that the legislators knew I was green. I mean, I was obviously a new face and a girl, and they tested me for a while to see how much I could take. But you know it's something that toughens you up.

"That first day, I started asking a legislator some questions and he wasn't really doing any more than saying 'yes' and 'no' to me. Then I

remembered that I hadn't introduced myself. I had forgotten to tell him who I was. That's something I thought I'd never do. So I stopped and said, 'I'm Sheila O'Connor, Missouri Radio News Network.' Then he started talking to me as if I were a professional.

"There's a lot of drama in reporting," says Sheila who has taken an acting course at Mizou. "After a day of talking to people you're really worn out. That first day, I felt like I had been

smiling all day. When I went home the muscles in my cheeks were tired!"

She had days that were too rushed for her to eat her peanut-butter-and-butter-on-whole-wheat sandwich that she usually brought from home for lunch. Sometimes, on the way from one interview to another she'd grab a Snicker and a Coke. "I'm the envy of all my friends. I never have to worry about my weight. I run it off," she laughs.

**"YOU MUST BE PERSISTENT,"** she says. "Once I looked for a senator for two days. He never would talk to me. I think if I had pestered him long enough, he would have talked to me to get me off his back. I don't think I'd do that too often, but if I had a story that nobody else had and that I wanted very much, I'd pester." She stops. "In a nice way.

"That's what the J-School has done for me — brought out my talents. I have found that I can maintain my composure under pressure; I'm pretty good at handling technical equipment; I'm independent and I can get people to open up to me."

As Sheila interviews, she tries to ask the questions that lead to "a golden moment." "That's when after a question you pause, and you look them in the eye and encourage them to talk to you, and you stay quiet and let them say something golden. That's when a person really starts to open up."

Since July Sheila has been a TA (teaching assistant) at KBIA. Getting a paid position as an undergraduate is not unheard of, but it does mean that she is the respect of her professors. Sheila also picked up a few dollars producing news shows for KOMU. She took the television production course, and after the class was over,

Diana Nelson researched this article for the Missouri Alumnus. Already busy taking reporting and covering the University for the Columbia Missourian, she squeezed in interviews with Sheila O'Connor and a trip to Jefferson City to watch her in action. Bob Dickerson, who used to be a teacher, is starting a second career in photojournalism. Along with assignments on the Missourian, he managed to freelance a couple of stories for Missouri Life magazine this summer.

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From her observation post in the gallery, Sheila follows the debate and parliamentary maneuvering on a bill in the House. On the air, she stays calm even when a fast-breaking story is thrust under her nose in the middle of a broadcast. "I just want to be a professional — someone who knows her trade well. I want to make it because I am a woman."



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the station kept her on and paid her. She's not sure yet whether she'd rather go into radio or television.

"Right now, I think radio provides more comprehensive news coverage," she says. "With TV you can get caught in the pictures. Sometimes TV becomes more concerned with show biz, with turning broadcasters into celebrities."

Barbara Walters is not her idol. "I think she asks dumb questions. I agree with Castro. What business is it of anybody's if he's married?" Sheila asks.

**HER FAVORITE TELEVISION** reporters are Dan Rather ("He's so intelligent.") and Charles Kuralt ("I'd love to do something like his 'On the Road.' He keeps the human element in the news stories at the forefront.")

Sheila isn't worried about getting a job — yet. "We demand high quality content under pressure," says Roger Gafke, director of the broadcasting sequence. "If you can do the job here at Mizou well, you can do it anywhere. Sheila is representative of our outstanding students, whatever their major."

Employers apparently believe that Mizou graduates are well-trained. Mizou ranked first in the country in job placement last year ('75-'76) with 94.57 percent taking journalism related jobs. This year's preliminary statistics look even better.

"This is the 'real world,'" says Gafke. "We service the residents of central Missouri with the news."

"But KBIA is not a commercial station," Sheila points out. "I consider it a job, but I also think of it as school. And the powers that be don't really trust you to analyze stories yourself. At some point, you feel you're doing a formula that's been set out for you. And when you get to the point that you've done the formula enough times, you say, 'Wait a minute. I want to tell somebody how I see it. To put in what background I know and to come to some conclusion with it. And you're scared to."

"When you get out and get a job, you're expected to have some insights."

Sheila's pace wore out the reporter and photographer who spent a day following her to Jefferson City, through the Capitol corridors, back to Columbia, to the KBIA news room and finally home.

**"J-SCHOOL REQUIRES OVERTIME** work if you want to be good. And I enjoy it, so I try to spend some free time at KBIA. But I do try to find some time for myself," she says.

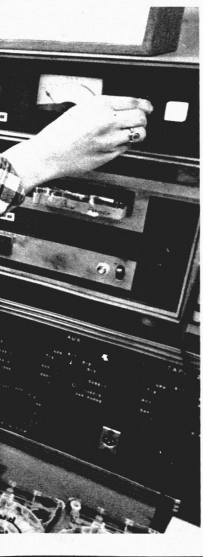
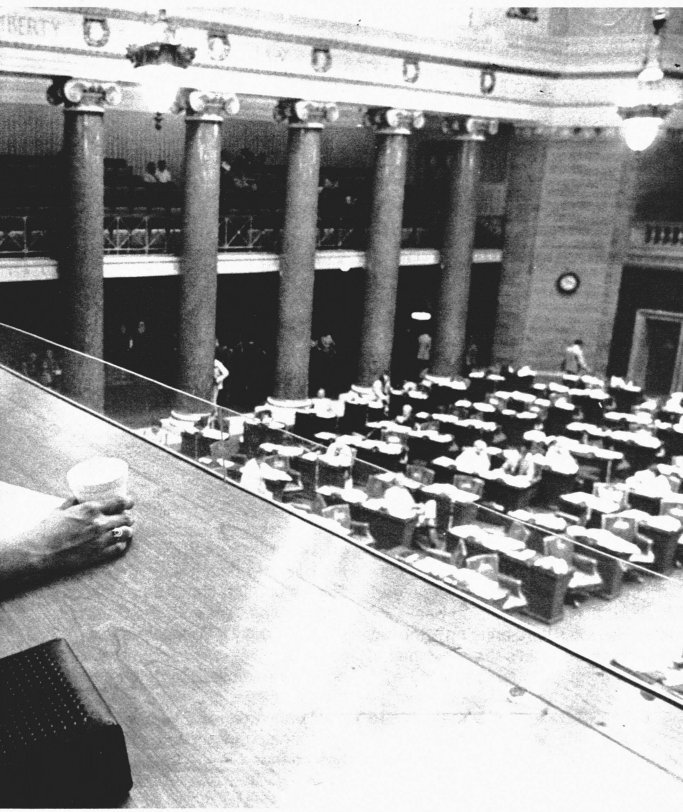
Sheila lives with another J-student in an apartment near Campus.

"In my spare time, I wash my clothes and try to keep healthy. I try to unwind. Sometimes I just lie down on the floor and do some yoga exercises that I learned in my acting class. They help. I listen to music. I like to bake — chocolate cakes and cornbread — but I don't have time."

As an afterthought, she adds, "I also have another job. I work 15 to 20 hours a week at a record shop downtown. It's relaxing, because you don't really have to think. I'm pretty much on my own and need the money."

"Someday, when I have some time, I'll have to think about which I want to do — radio or TV. I just want to become a professional — someone who knows her trade well. I want to make it — because I am a woman. I know I can do as good a job as a man, but I know I'm up against all the old wives' tales about hiring women. That seems like a special reason for making it in broadcasting — to prove that a woman can do it."

"Soon I'll have to decide between radio and TV. Maybe something will happen and I'll just have a 'golden moment,'" she says, "and I'll know I have made the right decision." □



"I'm pretty good at handling technical equipment," she says, editing tape and working with KBIA's modern facilities.

