

Spider in the Spotlight

An interview series with Richmond alumni sponsored by the University of Richmond Alumni Association.
Students are encouraged to learn about the career paths of fellow Spiders and connect with the Richmond network as they get started on their own path.



Joseph Williams, '84

Deputy White House Editor
Politico

A daily spectator to events both momentous and trifling in the nation's capital, Joseph Williams, '84, serves as Deputy White House Editor for *Politico*, the website and newspaper devoted to national politics.

Your career followed the path you set in school. What keeps you at it?

I always planned to be a reporter, even before college. My interest goes back to high school. Being an editor is like being a fighter pilot and police dispatcher and surgeon—there are elements of each. Like a fighter pilot you work in a fast and stress-filled environment where you have to make critical split second decisions. Part of the job is dispatching—you have to know how to get the story down, to get the right information to the reader as effectively as possible. And like a good surgeon, there's got to be movement—you've got to get stories moving in and out.

So this is a beat you've done for a while.

I started as a reporter at the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* right out of college. From there I went to the *Miami Herald* and then to the *Boston Globe* where I was deputy bureau chief of the Washington Bureau before coming to *Politico*.

What did you learn while at Richmond that made your career possible?

I learned the value of work, patience, and curiosity. If you are going to show up and be taken seriously it requires a lot of work. I learned I would have to work hard and to have the patience to take the time to gain mastery. And of course the most important part of being a good reporter—or a good student—is you've got to have curiosity. Lucky for me that was something I always had. I was the kind of kid who would get in trouble for taking the clock apart because I wanted to see how it works.

Was there a favorite professor who helped you learn these lessons?

Actually, there were several. Gary Gunter was my freshman advisor and I remember he looked the part of an English professor, all tweedy and like he should smoke a pipe. When I told him I intended to major in English he sort of leaned back and said, 'Well you won't get much recognition, but you'll lead a good life.' And then of course there was Professor Steve Nash. I owe my career to Steve Nash. He taught me discipline and you can't be a reporter without discipline. In fact, I don't think you can be much of anything without discipline, so maybe that should be the word: Hard work, discipline and curiosity. You really can't be a good journalist unless you're curious: Where did it come from? Why did it become that way? What will happen next? I came to school with that curiosity, but all the other stuff I had to learn. Thanks to Steve I acquired those skills—how to be assertive, how to write quickly, how to be accurate. But I suppose the one thing that can't be taught is how to be curious. You can learn to value it and make use of it, but if you're not curious about stuff you really shouldn't be a reporter.

What advice would you give current Richmond Students?

Ask questions—lots of questions. Make the most of this opportunity. And don't be afraid to be pesky—challenge authority. Be assertive in your questioning. You can do this if you really want to make the most of your education. One of my regrets is that I didn't do more of that when I was sitting in the classroom.

Is Richmond a place where you can get away with questioning authority and challenging your professors?

I think Richmond is one of those places that welcomes a give-and-take. Too often at schools you see the students passively writing down what the professor tells them and then giving it back on a final examination in order to get a good grade. To my thinking, pushing back is good. One of the things about where we are as a nation is that we haven't been willing to question authority often enough. And if you don't ask the question then what you're being told may be leading you down the wrong path. There aren't enough people out there pushing back. Critical thinking is absolutely necessary in a democracy, and that means thinking for yourself and coming to your own conclusions.

Careers are hard to come by now. How do you get out there and get established? How do you network?

One of the best ways to approach it is to think about who you know. Social networking is a great example of how to make that connection. You want to find somebody who knows somebody else who can help you. And don't forget to rely on your contacts from the University of Richmond. The second semester of my senior year I had a journalism class with Earle Dunford (R'48), who taught copy editing and was a classic old time newspaperman who worked for years at the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. I made sure I sat in the front of the class. I made sure I did every single assignment. I asked questions. One night they were having something called 'Careers for English Majors' and Earle was there. I made my move. I went up and told him how much I wanted to be a reporter and asked if he had any openings at the paper. Earle was really gruff—sort of, 'I'll keep ya' in mind, kid'—nothing more. But he remembered me. And a couple months later when he had an opening he gave me a call. I got hired and started as a general reporter. When that happens, that's when you learn all the things you don't learn in school, starting with it's a big wide world out there and you have to prove yourself. It was a struggle to learn to be a professional. I remember one of the first assignments I had was to cover a Board of Supervisors meeting in Hanover County and it was deadly dull. It went on and on and I'm driving back and I know Earle is waiting for my story and I knew I was late on my deadline. This is before e-mail and cell phones and when I got to the paper Earle let me have it—'You've got to be a pro!'—he taught me that you need to be writing your story long before you sit down at the keyboard. It was an eye opening experience, but it taught me that there is still a lot of learning you need to do, even after you're out of school.

When you're not working what do you like to do?

I usually try to exercise. I run. I played defensive back on the football team and I still try to stay as athletic as possible.

You cover the White House. If you had the chance to turn Barack Obama on to a great song or a great artist you think he wouldn't know, who would it be?

I would say Ray LaMontagne. He's country and rock and blues and jazz all rolled into one. His songs like 'Trouble' and 'Joline' are really, really cool. I first heard him on my favorite Internet radio station, WRNR out of Annapolis, Maryland. It's really eclectic, which is perfect for me. I love music and I go to hear jazz all the time. My musical taste is all over the map—I'm into classical and reggae and hip hop. Recently I've been listening to the Rolling Stones' 'Gimme Shelter' and Regina Carter, the jazz violinist.

You work in a profession where famous people are part of the landscape. Is there a famous person living or dead you would like to spend time with?

Charles Darwin because he was a genius. Malcolm X later in life, after he discovered the true Islam and became a man of peace. And Louis Armstrong. I think Louis Armstrong is really misunderstood. Among my friends they kind of dismiss him as this old-timey kind of hokey guy singing 'What a Wonderful World' but true jazz aficionados know he was really a genius. I would love to talk with him.

A favorite place on campus you remember?

The Quad—right there by Maryland Hall and Ryland Hall—in late October with a clear blue sky sometime after classes when it's very, very quiet and you can hear the carillon.

What does Spider Pride mean to you?

Two things really. Because I played football I always think of the fight and spirit and being true to your school. And the other thing is just knowing that you are part of this incredible legacy and the pride in knowing you've gotten this world-class education at Richmond.

— Mike Field reports from Baltimore

Where are you headed? Visit the Office of Alumni and Career Services online at richmond.edu/oacs to get started on your path.