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Today's News, Tomorrow's History

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“This is a selfie I took on the rooftop of the advertising firm Publicis. I was interviewing the director. Their offices offer a view of the Champs Élysées and the Arc de Triomphe.”
-Eleanor Beardsley '86

today's NEWS *tomorrow's* HISTORY

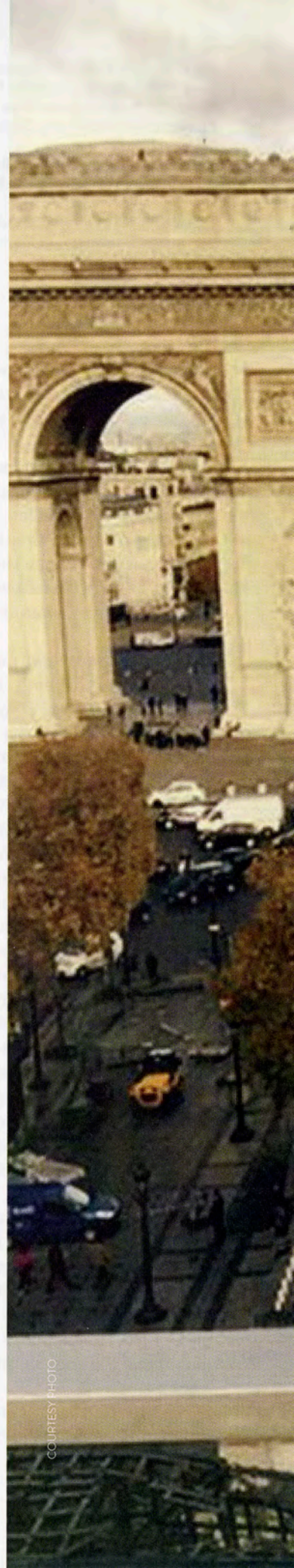
BY COURTNEY
TOLLISON '99

The oft-repeated phrase “journalism is the first draft of history” reveals the media’s deep and enduring influence. Journalists significantly shape the public’s understanding of our world. Throughout the 20th century, reporters such as Walter Cronkite, Eric Severeid and Edward R. Murrow have significantly molded what American readers, viewers and listeners not only felt was important but also why it was important.

Eleanor Beardsley '86 may one day join this revered group of journalists.

Indeed, her work has been cited in academic journals, master’s theses and doctoral dissertations. It is frequently referenced in the shaping of public policy and diplomacy in Europe and North Africa. Recently, she was invited to speak on terrorism in Paris at the Pentagon but had to decline.

For more than a dozen years Beardsley has had a front row seat to history as National Public Radio’s Paris-based correspondent. A Columbia, South Carolina, native, she has filed stories from political hot spots in Europe and North Africa. Each week, her steady but engaging voice—with a



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slight Southern lilt—reaches nearly 30 million listeners.

Beardsley has guided her U.S. audience through a tumultuous decade in Europe: the Greek debt crisis, the strife in eastern Ukraine, the Syrian refugee crisis, the Arab Spring and Brexit. Beardsley, too, has reported from many sites of terror including the 2015 attack on *Charlie Hebdo* and the siege on the Bataclan. Last year, she covered the Bastille Day massacre in Nice.

While the present-day news cycle dictates much of her work, Beardsley is drawn to the past. One of her favorite places is Normandy. “I always find beautiful stories there,” she says.

Recently she recorded “Les Fleurs de la Memoire,” or “Flowers of Memory,” a program founded by a French couple in which Normans adopt the graves of American servicemen whose families are unable to visit. In another story, Beardsley featured a group of 50 people who gathered in Bordeaux to retrace the pil-

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grimage made by those saved in the early years of World War II by Sousa Mendes, a Portuguese diplomat known as Portugal’s Schindler, who issued 30,000 visas to Jews.

Beardsley typically records six feature stories a month. But during times of crisis, she is expected to report on the hour, live, and often from the scene. In eastern Ukraine, while covering the Malaysian Air flight that was shot down near the Russian border, Beardsley rushed to escape a nearby explosion and shelling. The next day, she wanted to get closer to the downed plane but was advised against it. Before her now 10-year-old son was born, she might have chanced a closer

look. But not now. “I am adventurous but not stupid,” she says. “I would never want to leave my son without a mother.”

Her most challenging assignments usually involve European Union summits in Brussels, where she must efficiently and creatively summarize information in ways that will resonate with American audiences. Among her most rewarding assignments have been those in Tunisia, where she has covered the nation’s transition to democracy. Beardsley has been surprised and delighted by the extent she has been able to “unlock” this North African society with her fluency in French.

Beardsley was a relative newcomer to journalism. After graduating from Fur-



1 “I interviewed this older lady in eastern Ukraine. We were looking for the boyhood home of Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovic. We found it. She was his next-door neighbor when he lived there as a youngster. She told us about him as a boy.”

2 “I first met this Tunisian gentlemen on the night of the revolution. I had seen police beating up young people, and he was running from the police. I let him sleep in my room, and I slept with a colleague. When I was covering Tunisia’s first democratic election

after the revolution we met again. He was working as an election observer when this photo was taken.”

3 “This was taken while I was doing the story on Aristides de Sousa Mendes (see pg. 44). These people came to France from a variety of countries to retrace the steps of their parents and grandparents as they escaped Europe with his help. This woman gave testimony. She was 16 and from the Netherlands when the diplomat got her out with her family.”

man with a B.A. in history and French, Beardsley moved to Washington, D.C., where she served on U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond’s staff. In 2000, she visited a friend working with the United Nations in Kosovo and became fascinated with the stories she heard from those who had endured the recent Yugoslav wars. Soon thereafter, she left the United States to accept a position as a spokesperson in the press office of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo.

Later, she was hired by a French broadcasting company who needed someone who spoke French and could explain the American electoral process to a French audience. Beardsley used the position as a springboard to land a freelance job for NPR in 2004 and has been moving up the ladder since.

Her skill set and life path seem perfectly suited for the job. Beardsley’s father, a former historian at the University of South Carolina, nurtured his daughter’s interest in French culture and life

beyond the United States. From her father, young Eleanor learned the value and art of good storytelling. During a South Carolina History course that focused on the theme “Transportation and Communication,” she captivated her third-grade class with a story about Chinese leader Mao Zedong’s 5,600-mile march in 1934–35. At the age of eight, Beardsley had already grasped that telling a story about human suffering and passionate commitment to political ideals was a more interesting and effective way of learning about concepts such as transportation and communication.

At Furman, Beardsley became immersed in 19th and 20th century history classes (her favorite professor was John Block). A semester-long study away experience in Versailles stoked her passion for French culture and a quest for knowledge and greater understanding.

“I was inspired by all the world had to offer,” she says. “And I knew that I’d be back.”

Now 52, Beardsley says she owes her success, in part, to her Furman education. The liberal arts and sciences and experiential learning helped her understand “how countries and relations came to be” and gave her an “understanding of the broader picture.” The critical thinking and adaptive learning skills she developed in college helped Beardsley navigate different cultures and career paths.

She encourages young people to be inquisitive, search broadly and not be discouraged if they don’t know exactly what they want to do. Be curious, follow your passion and have patience, she says.

“Don’t look for that great, well-paying job when you’re 22, because you’re not going to get a great job when you’re 22,” Beardsley says. “Think about the job you’re going to have when you’re 34 . . . and go for a meaningful job. Build a base, layer after layer.” ●

The writer is an assistant professor of history at Furman, specializing in American and South Carolina history.

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