

Molly Burkhardt:

Hi everyone and welcome back to All Careers Considered! My name's Molly and I'm your host. Today I'm here with Hannah Alani, who's an alum and a Chicago based journalist who works specifically for Block Club Chicago, which is a nonprofit organization with a focus on local neighborhood news.

Today we're going to talk about what inspired her to start a career in journalism and what her experiences have been like since graduating from IU a few years ago. So thanks for being here, Hannah.

Hannah Alani:

Yeah. Thanks for having me. Thanks for inviting me. Yeah, of course.

Molly:

I know you graduated from IU at Bloomington in 2017 with degrees in journalism and anthropology. I'd love to hear a little bit more about you and how you chose those majors.

Hannah:

Yeah, I actually was one or two credits shy of getting my Anthro major. I technically was a minor at the end of it.

I had colleagues at the Indiana Daily Student who certainly did pull off double and even triple majors, but back to back semesters of being editor, and then finally being editor-in-chief at the IDS, uh, you kind of get to a point where you're picking between spending those extra hours in the newsroom and then, you know, doubling up on classes. So, I was close to an Anthro major,

But, um, yeah. I fell in love with journalism as a high school freshman, sophomore — can't remember. But I took an intro to journalism class. I had always really liked reading and writing. English and history were my favorite subjects. What I loved about journalism instantly was that it felt like kind of a combination of those skills.

Like, you're documenting history in real time, like the history aspect and making sense of current events. I always loved current events. Paying attention to what's

going on in the world. Then, you know, with English writing, you know, kind of putting my creative writing skills to a more tangible use.

Then when I realized you could like, get paid to do that, like literally just have a job where someone pays you to go out and see the world and ask questions and make sense of it, or try to make sense of it. That was very appealing to me and it did, it really helped.

I grew up in Bloomington. I'm a native Hoosier, actually a third generation, Indiana university graduate. It helps that IU's journalism school was right in my backyard. And I literally, from my high school, I would get on the — I think it was the number three — city bus from my school and take it down to campus and when I was allowed to do so, sit in on some of those lectures, especially when professors would have kind of the post-class like colloquium, uh, having, uh, folks from the industry, come in to speak to their students.

Sometimes they'd open those up to the public and I would go and just kind of sit in and I was just living and breathing it. I was just so obsessed with it. I had an internship at the Herald times my last trimester of high school. Again, geographically convenient. The Herald times was right across the street from my high school. So I literally used to go by the Starbucks and then walk over across the street.

I just really fell in love with it, and once I got to IU, it was like, I hit the ground running before I was fully moved into my dorm. I went to the IDS newsroom before classes had even started. I was asking for assignments and yeah, the IDS was such an important part of my journalism education and growing my passion for the field.

It's really true what they say. You know, you go to college to take classes and you do learn a lot from your classes and from your professors, but especially for these hands on majors, I think journalism certainly and I think business is another one too, where you really learn so much by doing. And the IDS was such a great learning lab to learn by doing.

Molly:

Wow. That's incredible. Thanks so much for sharing all that information. And also, I think I took that same bus when I was a graduate student at IU, my apartment to campus. So that really brings back memories, but very cool. So, it sounds like that was something that you always were just really passionate about even growing up in

Bloomington and everything like that. Um, and yeah, it sounds like your work at the IDs, not only, you know, it was really helpful in figuring out your career, but also kept you busy as a student, it sounds like.

So, what was that like, you know, as a student kind of managing, you know, just being a college student and then also, having this almost full-time job working for the Indiana Daily Student.

Hannah:

Yeah. I mean, it really was a full-time job. It was kind of a day-by-day basis of, okay: Do I sacrifice my sleep? Um, my grade on this quiz or the story assignment that I picked up that I want to do really well on. And I think that that in itself, like that never goes away. When you leave school, the responsibilities just become more real and more adult.

Like, I still feel like I'm, you know, every day, okay: Do I lose sleep or do I take care of this personal thing? Like pay this bill all? Or do I make these deadlines for my work? Like, and I think that's not just, I mean, journalism is a very deadline-oriented fields, but I think that all industries kind of have that.

It's uh, it's amazing to me, how many people work at the IDs and don't go into journalism. I have so many friends from the new student newspaper who have gone into public relations. Uh, many of them were in law school. I have a really good friend who also in Chicago, she just graduated from Loyola. She's about to take the bar. She was one of my editors. So the IDS and, um, those skills of like, You know, managing all of these different things, the time management.

And in addition to the IDS being a student and all that. I also was working off campus. I worked at a restaurant a couple of nights out of the week and pretty much every Saturday for all four years that I was at school.

Yeah. Um, so yeah, it's, uh, it was a lot, but it was definitely, it made me really appreciate that time that I had in the newsroom. Like when I was physically there, I was like, okay, this is the time I have, I want to make the most of it. Um, and it's really. Funny how quickly time goes by. Like at the beginning of my four years, I was just this little, like, very scared, like, Oh, just, you know, trying to like find my footing.

Okay. And I had so many just instant mentors, like people who are juniors, seniors, sophomores, you know, sitting with me editing, but not just editing my stories, giving me career advice, giving me life advice, giving me boy advice.

And it was so. Looking back. It's so funny how quickly that time went by suddenly I was a senior and I had little freshmen that I know little, I don't want to say little like, you know, patronizing, I think, but, you know, I had like the mini versions of myself that I feel like I was just, you know, I was just at that stage.

And then I was suddenly the mentor. Those relationships don't end. Once you leave IU, the IDS is like such a... it doesn't even matter if you're in journalism or not. You know, people reach out to me, they email me like, Hey, I live in Chicago. I read this article. Scientist. I'm an engineer. I do this, I do that, but I wrote a column at the IDS when I was at IU.

And it's like that instant network, that instant connection. It's like anyone who's worked for their college newspaper. It's like, we're kind of in a club. Like we know the drama and how difficult it is. And it's kind of just, something that you kind of carry with you.

Molly:

Yeah. Yeah. It sounds like it was a really big part of your time in IU and really helped you grow as just a person and a professional and everything. Um, so tell me a little bit about what it was like, you know, you're getting ready to graduate and the spring of 2017, was it pretty easy for you to find a job or what was that kind of job search experience like?

Hannah:

Yeah. It's um, yeah, it's tough. Like job searching in journalism, I think was always tough. It was always really competitive. Um, a really big shift that our, that this generation of journalists is dealing with. And certainly, it's one that I dealt with too. And I'm sure a lot of industries are dealing with this as well.

There used to be a pretty standard, a pattern that you would follow after school, you would put your application out there, put your resume out there and some daily newspaper at somewhere in the country would say, okay, we need a beat reporter. We need someone to do overnight, you know, crime courts reporting, and you would

go, you would, wherever you got the job, you would go and then you would stay there for a few years, a year, whatever.

Either work your way up there or jump to a new paper and like kind of keep working your way up. But with the demise of newspapers and traditional news, that is not really the case. I mean, I was extremely lucky. I did actually get one of those, you know, kind of city, government reporting type jobs at a daily newspaper in Charleston, South Carolina.

I was very lucky. These jobs, don't just, it seems like every single year. More and more newspapers shut down or scale back, or have hiring freezes for a while. It was layoffs and every single year, that's it. That's that many fewer college graduates who can get their foot in the door somewhere. Um, and then kind of a weird inverse situation is happening to at large corporate owned media companies.

They're hiring college graduates, but when the college graduates show up, those companies have done such a good job, such a thorough job cutting the newsroom. Editors, people who are mentors, older reporters, more seasoned reporters, those people are gone or they're on their way out. And that mentorship, the people that you learned from when you're starting out, um, they're already out the door or they're already gone.

Obviously this affects, you know, communities to have that lack of local news presence, but it also affects, uh, journalists who are graduating, trying to find their footing and find experience in the industry. For me. I, like I said, I was really lucky, but even when I was, is that the newspaper, the Post and Courier, which is an excellent newspaper and it's a remarkably, it's still family owned.

Those are very few and far between. I felt like I was craving a different newsroom experience. It gets still you. It was just so looming every single day. That kind of feeling of like, are we going to have a layoff or are we going to have another round of buyouts or you know, when it comes to raises, because at a certain point, even when you're young and starting out, like you need to eat, you need to compete for the money that you deserve.

And if raises aren't there or benefits, aren't as good as they should be. It's like, it's hard. Um, and then also, I mean, this is just into the bigger shift within journalism, but

I think a lot of us graduating, you know, recent graduates are graduating now or graduation's coming up. We want to find a newsroom that's going to embrace digital.

The digital part of the news industry and many newspapers are getting there, but okay. I think the sad reality is just they're getting there too late. Um, so it was, it was tough. It's really tough to be entering this field right now. And for any journalism students who are listening to this do not give up.

Block Club was founded after I graduated. That is how quickly this thing got started. And I have so much hope and faith that things like Block Club, a nonprofit, a non-ad driven completely digital local news organization. I hope I see something like this in Bloomington someday. I hope I see it in every town, city in America.

This is so shocking to me as a recent grad because you hear, you know, the industry's dying people don't pay for news. People pay for news at Block Club. It's it is so humbling. We have high, I forget the exact stats. I should have looked this up. Sorry, but I, the last time I heard we had, uh, around 12,000 paid subscribers and we're only two years old. And we do have a big market. Chicago's a big market, but I mean, that's incredible to me.

And then in addition to that, we have like a hundred, some thousand people signed up for our morning newsletters and every single day we get new subscribers. It might just be one or two every single day, but every day we're getting more as more and more subscribers. And in addition to the subscribers, people have given us donations.

Sometimes people just like by our merch, like our tee shirts or our bags, because they want to support us and. And that's awesome. And, and I hear from my readers almost on a daily basis, how thankful they are for what we do and, uh, Yeah, it's a, I don't know. I'm sorry. I feel like I kind of went off on a tangent there.

Molly:

No, you're fine. That actually transitioned perfectly into kind of the question I was going to ask about what was the difference between your experience kind of working at that newspaper in South Carolina, and then moving into this role at Block Club.

So, I'd be curious to hear. What your experience has been? Like, you talked a little bit about it, about how, you know, it was a little nerve wracking, worrying about raises

and are they going to cut more people? It seems like now, in the position you're in, if things feel a little more stable.

Hannah:

Yeah. It's a, it's a weird thing to say that I feel stable. I feel more stable in a newsroom that's two years old, that is using a business model that not many people thought would work, than I felt in newsroom that was 200 years old. That had been a pretty well-oiled machine in terms of like workflow.

You know, the people who had worked there had lived and worked in that community for decades. You know, their whole lives, some of them.

I feel like it's because I feel that stability because every day it just gets better. Like we have yet to hit a roadblock. We've yet to get to a point where we are, you know, nervous — knock on wood.

It's not even just so much like the financial stability and the financial security or the job security. It's every single day, I truly believe in the mission of what I'm doing and I know that it works. I know that the way we're doing news works.

Something, we did, getting to Corona stuff. You know, at the very beginning of the pandemic, day one, like the very first post, it's story we wrote before we even knew it was going to be what it became in this country. We made a decision as a newsroom to remove the paywall on all of those stories. We didn't want anyone to have to pay for any Corona coverage.

We were really scared to do them. I must say. We, my editors, I think were a little nervous, a little hesitant to do that because there was a fear that if we, you know, make it free. Okay, that's it. It's chicken or that kind of thing, but we were nervous about it. We were like, okay, if we're just giving all this away for free?

Through our coronavirus coverage. We got so many new readers, so many people, we made a daily, in addition to our morning newsletter that goes out to everyone. We created a brand-new afternoon newsletter that was just coronavirus specific coverage from the neighborhoods.

This business just closed because of COVID. This neighborhood leader just died from coronavirus, that kind of stuff. But also, like here's a giveaway of medical supplies.

Here's a backpack giveaway. Here are all these community events happening. And then of course here's the latest on the science. Here's what city public health leaders are saying.

Like all of these stories, we just kind of funnel them into one newsletter. I can't remember how many people have actually signed up for that newsletter. But I know we haven't lost subscribers. We've actually gained thousands of subscribers since the start of the pandemic. So, to think that at a time when people are struggling financially, they've probably been furloughed or are worried they might become furloughed by the end of this year.

They are taking \$6 out of their pocket every single month and giving it to us because they, even though it's free, they believe in what we're doing and they want to keep it going.

And it's like, I get chills talking about it. It's so humbling. And for me, it's like, that gives me more, a sense of like stability and security than anything else. Just knowing that what we're doing is working and that people appreciate it. And that it's of value to them.

Yeah, I can imagine it feels really meaningful to be able to kind of work for a nonprofit organization and really make, it sounds like an amazing positive impact on your community. Um, which is really cool.

Molly:

I'd be curious to hear if there's anything about your experience, kind of, um, working in this type of environment where you're providing kind of local neighborhood news. Is there anything about it that has maybe surprised you or anything that's been kind of challenging about covering those specific topics?

Hannah:

Yes. Um, I think so. So in a typical, uh, newsroom, um, even at the IDS in like a pretty conventional newsroom, that's not so like geographically, like oriented, like my beat is a neighborhood and that means I cover everything in a neighborhood. Like today, before this call, I was covering a string of armed robberies.

I was covering a court follow up on a murder that happened last week. I was covering an obituary for a long time, beloved dive bar owner who just passed away. And, Oh, I

was covering a neighborhood GoFundMe for an ice cream man who's been delivering ice cream for 42 years in this neighborhood. That's like a typical day for me.

So, at a regular, you know, typical, more conventional news organization, you would have a food and bar scene writer who would do that bar dive bar obituary, you would have a completely different staffer. The crime and courts reporter covering the murder trial. You would have someone totally different, maybe a general assignments or features reporter, doing the ice cream truck guy. But that person, those people who have those like themed beats would be doing it citywide.

Whereas in Block Club we are hyperlocal neighborhood focused and we are doing everything, any, and all of that, everything in between business openings and closings, neighborhood obituaries, the features, the breaking news.

I mean, we are kind of, kind of doing it all. And on top of that, we don't have a staff photographer. I take all my own pictures. I'm often taking video. These are skills I didn't learn. Um, and while I learned them in journalism school, but I didn't use them until I came to Block Club. Because typically newsrooms have, you know, a staff photographer.

Oh, I'm writing a newsletter. I write a neighborhood newsletter twice a week that goes out just to Block Club readers who elect for my neighborhood news. So I have, I think like six or seven thousand people who get that twice a week. And those are people who signed up for my newsletter. Like they live in the neighborhoods or they care about the neighborhoods.

They want to know what's happening in the neighborhoods I cover. That's the skill, newsletter writing, editing. Like these are skills that I have had since I've gotten here. I think they've made me a much better journalist because I feel more connected to all the different parts of the job.

However, you're, you're constantly spinning plates. Like you can't get too focused on one thing for too long because you're doing something else. So that's been a big challenge, but it's something that I feel like most journalists will eventually have to kind of be able to master all of those different things.

Um, specifically to neighborhood reporting something that's been... Oh, I don't know if I would say challenging, but it's been kind of a surprising at times, annoying. I live in

the neighborhood I cover; I live in Westtown. I cover Westtown. I will be out walking with my boyfriend or on a run or going grocery shopping.

I will literally run into sources who are like, not responding to my emails or someone who's been trying to reach out to me. And I haven't responded to them. Sometimes I'll run into them and they'll be like, Oh, why aren't you, you know, getting on this.

And I think a tough thing, you know, Objectivity is a big thing that we talk about a lot in journalism ethics.

Sometimes I'll literally be covering something like a zoning meeting that would affect me, like personally, directly on my block affect me, like whether or not a stop sign is going to go in at the end of my block or not. And it's hard. It is hard to cover those meetings because my neighbors will see me there and they'll be like, Hey, what do you think about this?

I'm like, well, okay. I can't really say how I think about it, what I think about it, but just it becomes, I think harder as a neighborhood journalist to create distance. Um, whereas when you're a, you know, a beat reporter in a newsroom, you go to an office every day, you cover a topic, your sources are experts in the field, not necessarily the people who you share a sidewalk with, you know what I mean?

Molly:

That's fair enough. It would be really energizing to kind of be, you know, providing the news for your own community, but then also kind of hard to create that work life balance, because you really are there in your area of work. So, I could imagine that would be really exciting, but also kind of challenging.

I'd like to go back to what you said about how some of those skills, like newsletter writing and editing, taking pictures, video. You said that you kind of had to learn those skills. So how did you learn those skills? Did you just kind of hit the ground running and just try it out? Or were there any resources used to kind of help you learn those things?

Hannah:

Yeah, I really leaned up on my coworkers a lot.

I had a really good one foundation for photo journalism. Jim Kelly, who is also my mentor, my honors program mentor in journalism. He teaches a really, really good kind of foundational-like photo journalism class.

You use the DSLR — kind of a fancy camera — for that class. That class was probably the last time I touched one of those cameras, my sophomore year of college. But I was able to kind of go back to some of the basic skills he taught, you know. How to adjust exposure when it's super overcast skies. Like that kind of stuff, you know. Rule of thirds. So, I felt pretty confident with my photo skills. Once I was able to get one of those cameras back in my hands, I kind of, sort of came back to me from his class.

Uh, the newsletter writing. That's a bit trickier because. It's not just, I think the newsletter writing thing is also talking about, you know, like your social media writing skills, like my social media presence is much more important for this job than it has been for previous jobs.

A lot of my news tips come from Facebook posts that are in private, uh, neighborhood, Facebook groups, like the Westtown neighborhood watch. That's where I get a lot of tips.

I have to learn how to strike a balance between being conversational, but not being too personal because it is my Facebook page. That's like writing the stuff and then people message me and, you know, see pictures of my cats.

And that's kind of a weird thing, but I'm not getting dragged into Facebook fights, like getting what I need from a group and then getting out, you know, like those kinds of like soft skills.

I think you really only learn through experience. Luckily my editors, they all had previous print newspaper experience, but they also, before starting Block Club, they were the editors of a digital newsroom and did a hyperlocal digital newsroom that pre-existed before Block Club was started.

So, they had really good digital skills. Um, they were very literate and all of these things. They definitely like, sometimes I'll literally just like, if I have a draft of something I'm going to say in one of these Facebook posts, which can get really heated, uh, if you've been on Facebook lately, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about.

Yeah. Uh, sometimes I'll send it draft of like what I'm going to say to a reader or to a neighbor, to my editors. And I'll be like, Hey, does this sound okay? Is that the right tone? They will literally like workshop it with me and send it back.

That kind of stuff is so helpful because I feel like I'm still kind of finding my voice on social media. It's a weird thing because Twitter is like, we need to be on Twitter as journalists and we need to be on Facebook as journalists.

My editor just had this statistic handy. She was sharing with the newsroom. It's like 22% of Americans actually use Twitter. And when you think about our news traffic, like, not even 10% of our stories, people clicking on our stories. They're not coming from Twitter. It's like 10 or less percent are actually coming from Twitter. So while it's important, it's kind of, I feel like a skill that I've picked up is like not, uh, relying too much on Twitter for my news gathering or my sharing of news stories or crowdsourcing for quotes, because I know it is such a limited pool of people who are actually on that website. I feel like it's, like learning every single day, kind of what works and what doesn't.

But with coronavirus it became much more important because suddenly I couldn't go out in person to find stories or interview people. I had to do things over the phone or social media. So, it's a process.

Molly:

Yeah. Well, it sounds like you're doing an amazing job. I'd be curious to hear if you have any, you know, goals for the next few years. Are there any, you know, things you have your sights set on career wise?

Hannah:

I don't mean this to sound corny, but I feel like I'm finally at a place in my career where I'm not thinking about the next thing. Like I do think up until this job, I was thinking of each piece, you know, every internship, my first job, it was all kind of in my mind, like I think it was a stepping stone to the next thing.

I just feel like I am learning so much, doing what I'm doing. Of course, someday, eventually I would love to be, you know, doing long form journalism, full time or investigative reporting. Full time. I really love government corruption stories. I think we all, most journalists, kind of live for those.

And I have been able to crack some of those at the Block Club. Um, but it's really, it's tempting as a young journalist who want to skip this part, skip the local news part and go straight to the big, fancy, deep dive investigative journalism part. But the thing of it is, you don't get those stories, you don't get those scoops, unless you're a beat reporter first.

I think the skills required to pull off those kinds of stories. Which are, yeah, you might not be producing as much. Like I'm writing, you know, sometimes two or three stories a day, As a investigative reporter, you're not. You might be writing two or three stories a year.

But it's not less work. It's actually probably a lot more work. And it definitely requires a lot more skills than, than you would have if you didn't do this kind of work at first, I think. In terms of goals or like places I want to be, I don't really have anything in mind.

But I don't, I don't know. Maybe I'll do this for the rest of my life. We'll see. Yeah. I'm very happy with it. Right where I am now. And I think that's advice I would like to impart on current students or recent grads as well as try to just take it day by day, be happy with where you are.

You know, learn, enjoy the learning experience with where you are now, because it does go by fast. Like my time in Charleston went by so fast. Also, I should say, I thought I was going to be in Charleston a lot longer than I was. This opportunity at Block Club kind of came up out of the blue.

Um, so, you know, when you see an opportunity, definitely go for it. But at the same time, take your time. You know, enjoy, enjoy the process, enjoy the journey, I guess.

Molly:

Yeah, absolutely. For students who might be curious about kind of getting a job, like the one that you have right now, more of a nonprofit community-oriented newsroom, what kind of advice would you give?

Is there any, you know, places that they should look to be finding those jobs or people they should be talking to or anything like that?

Hannah:

Well, definitely reach out to me. My DMs are open on Twitter, and I know you're going to put up my information. If there's a play you want to be, a city you want to be in — it's possible something like this already exists.

You know, either myself and my editors will probably kind of know about it already, because I do think nonprofit journalism is already a very small industry.

And then within that, like the nonprofits, you know, the Block Club, we're kind of even more insulated. Like I think we all kind of know each other and yeah, what's going on.

And we've encouraged people in newsrooms who are interested in starting something to reach out to us if they want any advice on how to get something like this going in their own communities.

If it doesn't exist in the city, you want to live in or work in, you can start it, you know. It's hard, it's tough. But I do think there are readers in every community who wants something like this, and that's kind of the economy of it. Like if it's good, people will be willing to pay for it.

The North shore newsrooms in the North suburbs of Chicago, they were part of a company called 22nd Century Media that folded. Um, those editors have just launched a Kickstarter. They just finished a Kickstarter and they're launching their own newsroom called The Record. So literally in Chicago's backyard, like right up the way, we have already — like some, not exactly — what we're doing.

I think every community needs its own unique newsroom to fit its unique needs, but there's something so much similar to what we're doing happening so close to us.

And who knows it could be happening in your backyard, do you wherever you want to be? It's not like there's a networking website. Like there isn't any kind of Rolodex. I think we're all so like scrappy, and I don't know. Hard to describe.

There's also the Institute of Nonprofit News. The INN, they probably keep like a running list of nonprofit newsrooms, at least that are within their network.

I know we were, or we are an INN member, so that might be a good place to look to.

Molly:

Yeah, definitely. I can link that website below if students are interested in finding that. Well thank you so much, Hannah for joining me today virtually. It was really awesome to meet you and hear your story. It sounds like you're doing really awesome things.

Hannah:

Well, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it. And to everyone listening, I mean, it — reach out if you want. If you want to chat or if you have any questions. I had so many people, still have so many people, older than I, alums, mentoring me and I would love to pay it up forward and do that for others as well.

Molly:

Awesome. Well, thank you so much again, Hannah, and thanks everyone for listening to another episode of All Careers Considered and we'll see you next time.