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2010-04-30: Turning the routine into the special

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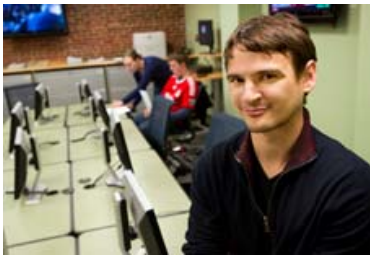
Turning the routine into the special



A Boston Globe story written by graduate student Marino Eccher has been recognized by the Society of Professional Journalists. *Photo by Mary Knox Merrill.*

April 30, 2010

Journalism graduate student Marino Eccher took a routine class assignment to investigate public records and turned it into an award-winning story that ran on page one of the Boston Globe.

In April, the Northeastern University student was honored with a Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) award, taking first place in the northeast region in the General News Reporting category for his story revealing an apparent conflict of interest for U.S. Rep. Stephen Lynch of Massachusetts.

The piece, which ran in the Globe on Nov. 10, was born out of an experiential learning assignment Distinguished Professor Walter Robinson gives every student in his **investigative journalism seminar** — a public records investigation of a public official. Eccher was assigned Lynch, and he ultimately reported that the congressman had "engineered" grants for two community organizations with which his wife was affiliated.

Robinson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and longtime chief of the Boston Globe's investigative reporting team, teaches the ambitious course, which has, in three years, produced 15 stories appearing on the front page of the Globe. The goal, he said, is to teach students how to effectively use the investigative tools at a reporter's disposal, such as seeking public records and interviewing.

"This opened a whole new realm to me of techniques, of places to look, and beyond. It raised the bar in terms of what I expect of myself and the work I hope to produce," said Eccher, who is in the midst of a co-op at Boston.com as a business producer.

Northeastern graduate student Kelly Glista and undergraduate student Pamela King won a second-place regional SPJ award in the In-Depth Reporting category for their story on state officials lagging on reporting certain donor information. The story included additional reporting by graduate student Aaron Lester, undergraduate student Michele Richinick and Eccher.

Regional first-place winners advance to the national round of judging, and SPJ will announce the national winners on May 3.

The journalism seminar has been offered since 2007. Robinson praised the hard work of all of his students, who, he said, tackle challenging assignments on serious subjects. He said the goal of a good reporter should be to seek the truth, a difficult task but one that can be made easier by knowing how and where to look for information available to the public.

"[One thing] that constantly amazes me is how really smart these kids are and how quick they are," Robinson said. "Most of them love the chase. They love doing what is essentially detective work, and they are really committed to finding out the truth on some really important stories."

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