

Look Again: Finding fresh and original stories on your campus

By Michelle Balmeo, Monta Vista High School, michelle_balmeo@fuhsd.org

Kids at your high school will likely attend for four years.

That's four Homecomings.

Four graduations.

Four senior classes that think they're the best class ever.

Lots of dances where "freaking" upsets teachers and parents.

Lots of rallies and spirit weeks with themes like Disney and Famous Couples.

And tons of kids who play sports, join clubs, win awards, and...

eat 23 tacos off the dollar menu?

If you say there's nothing interesting going on at your campus, then I say look again.

Explore the (un)familiar. Often, some of the most commonplace and mundane parts of our lives are incredibly secret and unfamiliar.

- ▶ One of the most fascinating doubletrucks I've ever seen was on underwear.
- ▶ Recently, I saw a story on wisdom tooth removal. So many kids get this done, but do they know why? Do the ones who don't get it done know what it's like?
- ▶ Another recent story: a student and his friends frequently challenge each other to see how many dollar-menu items they can eat in one sitting.

Watch for trends. And I'm not talking about skinny jeans or graphic tees.

- ▶ When did food trucks go gourmet? A local Korean burrito food truck has made two appearances on our campus. Most recently, it was like a scene from "The Great Food Truck Race."
- ▶ Here's a fast-growing trend: cell phone photography. Now that so many kids have smart phones, how has it changed the way they take and share digital photos? And how are they processing those photos differently?

Take a new look at the old. Yes, Homecoming happens every year, and yes you have to write about it. But that doesn't mean you have to write about it the same way you have for years. Look for fresh angles on old stories.

- ▶ Send a reporter to the Homecomings of other schools in the area. Watch from the opposing side's bleachers, and then watch your own from the opposing side's bleachers.
- ▶ Cover float building, but do it from day one. Follow one item – say, a hammer – from day one of float building until the end. Who uses it? What do they use it for? Tell the story of building a float through a new vehicle.
- ▶ Juxtapose male and female preparations for the dance. She's getting her hair done, he's playing Call of Duty. Are they with friends? They start at the same place (the ask) and end at the same place (the dance), but how they get there may be entirely different.

Talk to people you don't know. By venturing to parts of campus that you don't usually frequent, you may find members of your student body that *aren't* recurring features in your newspaper. Ask them what they'd like to see in the paper, and you might be surprised by what they tell you.

- ▶ Maybe there is a group of friends who swap lunch items every lunch.
- ▶ If you head out to the back of campus, you might find a few students who have unique interests like magic, balloon animals or role-playing games.
- ▶ Visit the scrabble club at lunch, and instead of writing a generic "There's a Scrabble club on campus" story, you may find someone who is an amazing genius with words. That's a spiffy feature story.

And if they refuse to talk to you, eavesdrop. Some of the best story ideas come from overheard conversations. And remember, your peers will be much more open to you than they would to me or any other teacher figure.

- ▶ Excuse me. Did you say that so-and-so's parents are going to college *with* her?
- ▶ I'm sorry, but did I just hear you say that at the dance you saw people with alcohol flasks that look like cell phones?

Take beats seriously. Some of the best story ideas come from well-done beats. These four alone came from one staff meeting:

- ▶ There are students on campus with brittle bones that break easily. These students have special emergency teams assigned to them in case of emergency.
- ▶ Teachers on campus have been contacted by tutoring centers requesting copies of assignments and updates on student grades. This is a breach of privacy.
- ▶ Google Documents is a powerful tool for collaboration, but some students may be using it to plagiarize their peers' work.
- ▶ Teachers are being advised not to interact with students outside of school, but what about Facebook, Twitter and Gchat?

Investigate rumors. And do it all the way. I see a lot of high school newspapers doing "investigation" by researching on the Internet and gathering sources from online databases. You've got to get out and answer your own questions if you really want to tell the audience something *new* and *local*.

- ▶ Think the 7-Eleven down the street is selling alcohol to minors? Contact the local sheriff's department and ask if you can tag along on a sting operation.
- ▶ Curious about the spread of germs on your campus? Swab a few key areas – door handles, staplers, desk tops – and ask the Biology department to test it for you.
- ▶ You know that there are lots of unpermitted cars parking in the student lot and taking away parking spaces from permitted cars. Walk out to the parking lot and count during one period, then contact the sheriff to see how much a parking ticket is, and calculate how much revenue those parking tickets would bring in for the school.

Don't be afraid to break form. Some stories are crying out to be told in a different way. Whether it is narrative or enterprise or participatory or multimedia, you've got to be ready to try something new.

- ▶ What's it like to be a new student at a school when you don't know the native language? Follow someone's journey through a series, and see how the person changes throughout the year.
- ▶ You heard about cross country girls and boys TPing each others' houses. Rather than write a story that no one will read ("There are many traditions that sports teams have. One such tradition is BLAH BLAH BLAH... I'm bored already), ask to ride along one night and write a narrative in which your observation tells the story.
- ▶ Know someone who's starting a new job that's a little different? Ask the person to chronicle his/her first weeks in a blog. Or better, create an audio slideshow or video diary to post online.

Keep a notebook. It's pretty simple: if you don't write something down the minute you think of it, you'll lose the idea, and when it comes time to pitch story ideas, you'll be pitching the same old "so-and-so won an award" story. Here are some suggestions:

- ▶ Carry a notebook that's small enough to carry on you at all times. I carry mine in my purse, always. If you have one, use your smart phone to record ideas.
- ▶ Record memorable quotations. Even if you never end up using them, they're fun to look at later.
- ▶ A lot of students find it more convenient to record their story ideas in one location within their school planners. If this works for you, go for it.