Senior Farewell: Max Scheinblum

Max Scheinblum, Executive Editor

At the very moment I’m typing this, I have a tick over 300 words down, largely in the form of fragmented sentences and bullet points. Some highlights:

The profound “emoji fun”; the eloquent “no furniture=sitting on floor”; and, my favorite of them all, “Ron Burgundy Cutout.” Two hours well spent. Good times.

Truth is, this is hard to write. And it’s because I don’t really know how to say goodbye to TNH, even though I technically did at the end of last semester. But the “Oh by the way, I won’t be at the last meeting because I’m going to a Mariah Carey concert. It’s been great working with you all!” throwaway comment wasn’t exactly up to snuff for something (and a lot of somebodies) so crucial to my college experience.

But to do this I had to turn those idiosyncratic morsels into something worthy of your attention. So, I consulted senior farewells of yesteryear for a jump. What I found was mostly familiar: the Rhi Watkins, Julie Boyock and Cam Bealls of the world. But in that thicket of memories was someone who I’d never met: Benjamin Strawbridge.

Most of the current TNH staff likely only recognize that name from a plaque command-stripped on the newsroom wall, if at all. But when I first joined TNH as a staff writer during the Spring of my sophomore year, Strawbridge stories came up often enough where I was compelled to click on his final column two years later – and boy did they undersell him.

His over 5,200 word (!) farewell is tailor-made for a fellow writer. It is the strongest and most eccentric thing I’ve ever read in TNH. And I admire the amount of elbow grease that went into that, especially under the uncertain future looming in April 2020. Ben, if for some reason you’re reading this, it’s the universe telling you to pick up the pen.

“...this farewell is truly dedicated to an organization that gave me a social foundation to begin with, one that I felt belonged to and where I truly found my college calling,” he wrote over four years ago. “Because if I’m being honest, if it were not for TNH, I have no clue where I’d be.”

"Mike Breen voice" Bang. That’s it right there. The thing that brings us all into the newsroom at 5:30 p.m. on a Monday. The thing that made me want to become executive editor after only one semester on staff. The thing that drives countless alumni – especially Mike Minigan, who’s generosity to both TNH and the UNH journalism program is unparalleled – to pay back their TNH experience today with their wealth of knowledge and wisdom.

“...if it were not for TNH, I have no clue where I’d be.”
Yes, it’s true. TNH has been the hallmark and most consistent thing during my time at UNH. There’s something about it. Strawbridge felt it, Josh Morrill, who was executive editor when I joined staff, felt it, and when I walked in that newsroom for the first time, I felt it too. The feeling and energy was obviously different then (Covid, general student apathy, first year of discontinuing print), but there was a baseline of seriousness and dedication nonetheless.

It’s not just about The New Hampshire as a storied institution and distinguished name in media circles across the state, New England and beyond, which it undoubtedly is. It’s about what The New Hampshire represents: a tight-knit community committed to storytelling of the highest standard. The mutual values of integrity, honesty, transparency and whatever other journalism cliche you want to throw in there are the glue. And that’s why so many former TNH staffers have gone on to long and successful careers. People just give a shit.

Despite my romanticizing, it’s not like every second of my TNH time was hunky-dory. From pushback on abortion rights coverage to countless failed newsletter launches, and a new website that’s definitely coming sometime in the future, there were, and, still are, growing pains. That’s the joy of working in a college newsroom: 25¢ per hour pay for something that you really care about but don’t always have the capacity to deal with. Add in four classes, other jobs and even an iota of a social life, and you’re in for a real treat.

There were also the personal struggles. Last March I was diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, which, simply put, made it so I could barely eat for several months. I lost over twenty pounds in that short span, spending most days laying in my bed with a heating pad draped over my stomach. I couldn’t keep up with my classes anymore, so I took a leave of absence for the rest of the semester. It was unequivocally the worst period of my life. But I kept showing up on Mondays at 5:30, ready to lead another meeting.

Looking back, I made a mistake. Maybe I even knew at that moment that it wasn’t the right thing to do. But with my body fighting itself and everything else in my life on pause, I needed something I could control and try to find joy in. For better or for worse, TNH gave me at least some of that, even though I couldn’t give anything near what I was or wanted to. I tried to find a semblance of “normal” life, but that was to the detriment of the staff. Mel Mats, I cannot thank you enough for your support and willingness to step-up during this time. You’re incredible and I’m incredibly lucky you said yes to be Managing Editor. TNH wouldn’t be anywhere near the level it is today without your resolve, kindness, approachability and compassion.

This might be a little too vulnerable for a senior farewell, and I truly don’t know if it will make it to publication, but because TNH has given me so much, I feel like I owe it to you. Last semester, a new staff member and I were talking after one meeting about the end of last year, and they said something along the lines of “whenever somebody brings it up, everyone gets weird.” Though I didn’t particularly notice, it was probably true. That is 100% on me, both last year and the aftermath that carried over to the fall, and I am deeply sorry to all that were involved and around TNH during that time. I did what I thought was best with the information I had at the time, and, sometimes, that’s all you can do.

I read somewhere once that there will always be some form of suffering in anything you do in life, so you might as well choose things you love and care about enough to make the inevitable pain worth it. And, thankfully, the bulk of my TNH experience has been joy. It started with covering the Mill Pond Dam controversy, where I learned how to cover a heat, source, follow a tip and all the other nuts and bolts of the trade. This was my first semester on staff, and by the end of it, I somehow ended up as executive editor. I had no editorial experience and had only been seriously writing for the last year, so I was pretty nervous and had no idea what I was doing. And we were entering only our second year of being all-digital – cherry on top.

Luckily I wasn’t the only newbie: five out of the six editors were brand new to editing too, and most of the staff writers were new to TNH altogether. Through awkward couple announcements and some distinctive scratch and sniff sticker combos, we banded together in the sweet, windowless cauldron that is MUB132 to bring in a new era. We reinvented our social media platforms and strategy, we finally got around to the newsletter and, most importantly, we are now a staff that communicates (most of the time!) and is committed to both the org and each other.

This isn’t just me blowing smoke. We were recognized at several awards ceremonies in New Hampshire and New England, not only for our general excellence (their words, not mine) as an outlet, but for our social media, our 2022 Midterm Election coverage, our podcast network and our website. And that’s not even including the myriad writers and editors who won awards for their individual features, hard-hitters, photos and the like. It’s definitely not the be-all-end-all, and I’d be content if we won nothing knowing we still produced quality journalism, but it’s a testament to the vigor of everyone who’s stepped in the newsroom over the past 2+ years.
The first time I heard about TNH was when I was taking Tom Haines’ newswriting class in Fall 2021. Masked up in his office going over what was likely a terribly written story, he brought it up and suggested I join. I said something along the lines of “Yeah. I want TNH to be my thing while I’m here.” I don’t know exactly why I said that, but two and a half years later, writing this, I’m fortunate enough to say that TNH was indeed my thing.

And now, paying homage to the TNH Farewell template that my fore-editors bestowed upon me, it’s time for some shoutouts.

To Josh Morrill, former executive editor, and Hannah Donahue, former content editor, thank you both for welcoming me into TNH and encouraging me to lead its next iteration.

To Anna-Kate Munsey, former managing editor, thank you for being my Mill Pond Dam editor (damn that feels like long ago!) and taking all my panicked calls during that first year. You gave me the best TNH advice I received.

To Ember and the rest of the MSM team, thanks for being such good room- (shoutout to the mural) and budget-mates with us. Honestly could not have navigated SAFC or U-Day without you and for that I am forever indebted.

To Cameron Whitney, thank you for making the newsroom a little brighter when you walked in and for bringing us together.

To Sarah Donovan, thank you for all your enthusiasm and energy during, well, everything. You have been there since the beginning and TNH would not be where it is today without you. You really care, and it doesn’t go unnoticed. The world needs more Sarah Donovans.

To Alex Rapp, thank you for being my podcast pal, or, more accurately, for letting me be your podcast pal. We’ve won awards because of you, and you’ve laid the foundation for the next generation to continue that momentum. Also, cheers to an uncanny amount of unplanned, semi-coordinated outfits. You’re a friend for life.

To Isabel Dreher, thank you for your willingness to take on all the organizational, editorial and reporting duties that you have. I don’t know how you do it. It’s also kind of crazy that we ended up doing a lot of the same things over these last 10ish years, from band to Spanish and now TNH. It’s a special thing. And there you have it, Isabel is a total legend.

To Tom Haines, thank you for all your advice and inspiration throughout these past three years. You’ve given me both the skills and confidence to succeed wherever I end up next. Thank you for helping me realize I love this stuff.

To Melanie Mats, thank you for well, everything. The conversations outside the MUB after every meeting, your ability to make people feel comfortable and respected and for taking on way too heavy of an editing load last year (we finally fixed the system!). There isn’t anybody else who I would’ve wanted as my number two. We killed it.

To Kaylin, who has already done a great job in her first semester at the helm, thank you for your dedication and willingness to go above and beyond every step of the way. I remember when you first reached out over email to cover the PPAG protest after the Dobbs decision leaked. You wrote maybe one article for us and only started reporting a couple months before, but you took that on right away. There are professional reporters who wouldn’t even think of sniffing that topic at all, let alone in the immediate aftermath. That’s commendable, and I’m not surprised at all that you’re here now. I’m so excited to see where you take this thing. It’s your show. Also, when your sister ends up at UConn, you better get me a ticket.

And, finally, I’ll end with a story. (And if you think I’m close to Strawbridge’s magnum opus, I’m not even halfway. I’m telling you, it’s incredible. I don’t know how he did it and would love to meet the man)

During my first meeting as executive editor, I put up one of those corporate strategy pyramids on the TV to try and galvanize the new staff into a year of inspired reporting, like Ron Burgundy (where’d that cutout go?) leading the Channel 4 team into battle against Wes Mantooth. The top four levels read “Purpose,” “Mission,” “Vision,” and “Goals,” all of which I tried to outline during what I’m sure was an awkward, convoluted diatribe on the hallowedness of collegiate reporting and how TNH is an important institution. From what I remember, my heart was in the right place. I wanted to start the year off with everybody together and on the same page as we came out of 2+ years of pandemic doomscape.

But now that I’ve had ample time to think about the goals and mission of TNH, hopefully this is a little more articulate:
We, for better and for worse, are held to a different standard than professional media organizations. Sometimes that means we aren't taken seriously, but that leeway, as corny as it sounds, leads to innovation. We are afforded the opportunity to throw things against the wall and see what sticks. Make a documentary about the Libby's basement. Deep dive into UNH's endowment portfolio. Talk to the Jesus people (Well... I'll leave that one up to you). Point is: take risks and don't think anything or anyone is off limits. I wish I did more of that, and now, hopefully, the foundation is set enough where you can do this.

Journalism is in a freefall right now, and it's mainly because no outlet has figured out a way to engage our age group or how to be profitable without being print. TNH has seen some success with that first one and we've planted the seeds on the second. Honestly, that's more than most news organizations can say. Obviously different funding structures, staffing, etc., but I truly believe that college media has a better chance of cracking the code than most major outlets because we 1) have the ability to experiment in a way that professional news outlets don't and 2) don't necessarily have to worry about being a sustainable business. It might sound hyperbolic, but UNH has the potential to save journalism. Why not?

Though my two-years-ago-version was much more of a patchwork, there is one goal I recall for certain: to leave TNH in a better place than I found it. I believe we did that, and Kaylin, Meredith, Abigail and beyond, it's up to you to do the same. TNH is important. It means something to many people, and that shouldn't be taken lightly. Keep the ball rolling. I know you will.