



THE NETWORK

For 10 years now the Nora Magid Mentorship Prize has been giving former students of the legendary nonfiction-writing teacher an excuse to get together and swap war stories—and helping to launch a new generation of Penn students into careers in journalism. *By Alyson Krueger*

WHO *is Nora Magid and why won't Lisa DePaulo stop talking about her?*

That was the thought running through my head at the inaugural meeting of my profile-writing class at NYU's Graduate Journalism School. DePaulo C'82, a widely published magazine writer who was then a contributing editor at *GQ*, was teaching the course, only for some reason she was instead spending a good portion of the first class raving about this "Nora" person, who taught nonfiction writing at Penn from 1970 to 1991 and was some kind of fabulous mentor to her students—including DePaulo, obviously.

In the classroom she meticulously critiqued their writing and wrote quirkily inspiring comments on their papers such as, "Is this a fluke? See me after class!" Then, when her students were about to graduate she would sit them down, ask what they wanted to do with their lives, and make calls on their behalf. With her help, former students secured coveted freelance assignments and actual jobs at magazines and newspapers and broadcast outlets.

Nora's former students were so obsessed with their teacher that they dubbed themselves "Nora-ites," and kept in close contact with her long after they graduated, exchanging handwritten letters and inviting her to their weddings. And they remained so grateful that, after she died, they established the Nora Magid Mentorship Prize (writing.upenn.edu/awards/nora_prize.php) so that they could do for others what Nora did for them.

Since 2003, the prize has been given annually to a graduating Penn senior who shows great promise with his or her writing

and wants to pursue a career in journalism. It comes with a \$1,000 stipend to help offset the costs of traveling to job interviews and meetings with editors and reporters, but the winner also gains access to the network of Nora's former students, who have spent the past few decades working in journalism and have a wide range of experience and connections. And this isn't something the Nora Prize recipient enjoys for a semester or a few years only. He or she is now part of that network for life.

As DePaulo giddily told us how much fun the group had when they met at an annual lunch in New York to welcome the newest member, swapping war stories and exchanging gossip, and recounted how well the prize-winners were doing, working for outlets such as *The New York Times* or NPR, most of the class just looked confused as they waited for her to get to some of the juicy details of her own high-profile career—like how she had recently managed to score an exclusive interview with Rielle Hunter, John Edwards' mistress, just as a for instance.

I, on the other hand, was simply feeling utter jealousy. Unlike the rest of the class, I had been an undergraduate at Penn, but graduated without managing to have a single Nora-esque professor to whom I felt close. Nor had I applied for the Nora Prize, which wasn't even on my radar at the time, since I studied international relations and hoped to become a diplomat. Now—just as I was about to complete journalism school and craved contacts and support and mentors the most—it was way too late to apply.

For the rest of the class I could barely pay attention to anything DePaulo was saying. I just kept thinking, *Why wasn't I part of the Nora Network?*

TO understand the Nora Magid Mentorship Prize you have to understand the relationship Nora Magid had with her students, which is what the prize is trying to replicate. Even now, more than two decades after her death (and another decade on top of that since many of them sat in her Bennett Hall classroom), Nora's students are still attributing their life successes to her inspiration and example.

Award-winning investigative journalist and author Stephen Fried C'79—who has taught for several years at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and last fall visited Penn to teach a section of English 145 (Nora's old course number)—believes he is a good teacher because he is emulating what she conveyed in her classes, which is the importance of making every piece of writing, from a full-length feature to a business letter, as engaging as possible.

Fried has been one of the prime movers in organizing and managing the Nora Prize, along with Eliot Kaplan C'78, executive director, talent acquisition for Hearst Magazines and a former editor of *Philadelphia* (where Fried was also on staff and later served a stint as editor). Kaplan even ascribes his 2009 marriage to financial journalist Jean Chatzky C'86 to his former teacher's influence.

"I met Jean because Nora would send people: 'Eliot Kaplan's working at *GQ*, Jean had just graduated. Go see him, he's looking for an assistant,'" he explains. "I didn't hire her—I hired another person from Nora's class instead ... but I always say it was because I knew I wanted to marry [her] one day."

(Chatzky survived this early professional setback, gaining fame in the intervening years as a personal-finance columnist and author, as well as "money guru" for the *Today* show.)

Miriam Arond C'77 claims she wouldn't even be working in the media business had Nora not encouraged her. The author and former editor of *Child* magazine, who currently directs the *Good Housekeeping* Research Institute, which "triple-tests" all the products endorsed by the magazine, still remembers getting back her first paper in Nora's class: "She wrote, 'Ms. Arond, where have you been my whole life?' and I always say, with that she changed my life," Arond explains. "She really made me believe that you could go out into the journalism world and succeed."

Like Kaplan, she recalls Nora sending soon-to-be Penn grads her way for possible jobs and career advice. "Even though I didn't know them personally, I felt like I knew them, because she would write to me about them," Arond recalls. "I just think it's a trust. It's sort of like, if Nora thought you were good, we know you are good. If Nora believed in you, then I believe in you. If Nora loved you, then guess what? I love you ... She created this whole circle of people who were part of Nora's world."

Even now, when they need guidance the Nora-ites think back to what their professor would say to them. "I would love to bring Nora back ... and tell her what is going on in this business," says DePaulo. "She would kick us all in the ass, and say, 'You people have talent.' I would love to have that *séance* ... We need Nora now more than ever."

If it seems unusual for a professor to have such a long-lasting effect on her students, Nora wasn't a normal professor. In "My Last Paper for Nora," an article published in *Philadelphia* magazine soon after her death, Fried described her impact:

No student ever forgot that first day in Nora's classroom at Penn. She was invariably dressed in an inside-out sweatshirt adorned with a strand of pearls. Baggy pants and beat-up moccasins with no socks completed the ensemble. Her cheeks were redundant with rouge, her full lips bright with red lipstick, and most of her long graying hair was piled high on her head. Dropping her canvas bag on the floor, she sat crosslegged on top of her wooden desk, lit a cigarillo, took a few puffs from it, and then either crushed it out on her shoe and returned it to the pack or just crushed it out in the pack itself. Then she began to speak—her voice deep and musical and almost cartoonish—and this improbable woman of unguessed age and background would proceed to provoke the hell out of 20 or so teenagers, who never imagined that they would ever take education so personally or that a teacher could ever take her students' ideas so seriously.

She was suspicious of authority, sure that the administration was going to fire her every time they performed a standard evaluation of her work. And she never adhered to bureaucracy, always more interested in "what inspired her students rather than some stupid frickin' rules," says DePaulo. When the University asked her to turn in a self-evaluation of her year, for example, Nora submitted a list of what her former students were doing in their careers.

Her teaching approach was just as unconventional. Though she'd done a little teaching before coming to Penn, her main experience was 14 years working for *The Reporter*—a liberal biweekly news magazine that had folded in 1968—and she treated her class "like a little magazine staff," remembers Fried. Each week the class would analyze a publication, and then write a piece that could be sold to the editors there.

"Her approach to her students was the same thing she did with professional writers who submitted things to *The Reporter*," says emeritus English professor Gerald Weales. Though he and Nora were a couple for many years, "she didn't want to get married," he says. "I think it was some sort of superstition. She had some theory that if we got married I might die on her." (He established his own memorial to her in the form of the biennial PEN/Nora Magid Award, which "honors a magazine editor whose high literary standards and taste have, throughout his or her career, contributed significantly to the excellence of the publication he or she edits.")

Nora didn't like everybody—and not every student "got" her, either, says Fried—but the students with whom she had a positive relationship benefited enormously as she tirelessly championed them. Nora served as a career counselor—hooking students up with her friends at publications like *The New Yorker* and *The Washington Post*—and as a sounding board—inviting them over to her apartment on 43rd Street to talk about whatever was on their minds. She was also dedicated to connecting her past and present students with one another, encouraging them to meet and help with jobs, advice, or friendship.

DePaulo recalls attending a memorial service for her and realizing how vast her own network had become through her professor. "I just remember seeing so many people again, and people that I had never met before but had either spoken to or heard about through Nora," she says. "It was like a reunion

of people who had never met but maybe knew each other.”

Nora’s importance to her students was heightened by the fact that no one on the faculty was doing what she was doing. While the English Department offered a slate of classes covering fiction, poetry, and playwriting, she basically functioned as Penn’s one-woman journalism school.

“People who went to Penn and went into media [in the late 1970s and 1980s] were like X-Men,” says Fried. “We were definitely like these mutant people.” In addition to teaching the only nonfiction writing course, Nora also single-handedly convinced students to become journalists and did her best to make sure they succeeded. It was “Nora on one side of the rope, and your parents on the other end, saying, ‘What about law school?’” says Fried.

And while she may have had her doubts about how the administration viewed her, Nora greatly impressed her colleagues in the English Department, remembers Peter Conn, the Vartan Gregorian Professor of English. “She was widely admired for her teaching skill, for her professional record, for her commitment to her students, for the fierce commitment she had towards the careers of those students,” he says.

Initially hired on an annual contract as a lecturer, she eventually was given a multi-year contract and the title of senior lecturer. In 1988, she received the University’s first Provost Award, created to recognize distinguished teaching by non-tenured faculty, similar to the Lindback Awards for tenured professors. An announcement of the award in *Almanac*, the University’s journal of record, said that “colleagues call [her] ‘an institutional treasure,’ noting that her English 145 is one of the most oversubscribed courses at Penn.” (“It really was like Springsteen tickets,” says DePaulo.)

“And that [award] was very well-deserved. Her reputation was school-wide,” says Conn. “I think you can describe Nora—and I say this with real deliberation because I want to be understood to really mean this. I think she was not only sensational, she was irreplaceable.”

Nora’s death in 1991 was unexpected. She’d been ill with the flu, but it hadn’t seemed life-threatening. Weales was up early making coffee when her cat, Pissy Mewkins, came into the kitchen and rubbed against his leg. “I knew something was up, because the cat would never do that before she was up,” he recalls. “And I came in, and she had died.”

The idea of a mentorship program in her honor, something that would nurture young talent and keep their network growing, emerged almost immediately, but the Nora-ites’ own lives and careers, plus working out the logistics and the details of how the program should work and be funded, combined to delay the first awarding of the prize for a decade.

Fried and Kaplan spearheaded the process, pulling together an advisory board of a dozen alumni who agreed to contribute financially to fund the prize and mentor the winners. (Disclosure: *Gazette* editor John Prendergast is on the board.) They set up a fund at the Philadelphia Foundation, which administers a variety of small charitable organizations, and then got to work deciding who would receive the award and how.

The criteria for picking the winner is a perennial subject of discussion. Obviously, the prize-winners had to be passionate about journalism and dedicated to pursuing a career in the media. They should also be people that Nora would have liked, “somebody who had a little bit of quirkiness,” says DePaulo. “She wasn’t into cookie-cutter paths.” Beyond that, the members continue to debate every year whether the prize should go to the best person they see, or to the person who will benefit most from their help. “Ideally it is the same person,” says Kaplan, “but not always.”

They also wanted the application process to be challenging enough that those willing to go through it would be serious—someone who would use their help, strengthen the Penn media community, and someday give back to the next generation. “We’re inviting you into this family,” says Fried. “It’s not, ‘Hey, here is a thousand bucks. Go spend it and put on your resume that you won a prize.’ It’s like, ‘Here is a prize, and we expect you to come to the family reunion every year, and we expect you to care about each other.’”

They settled on an application package that would include a cover letter, resume, three writing samples, and a sealed letter of recommendation from a professor familiar with their writing. From the initial round of applications, finalists would be chosen and required to sit for an interview, at which Fried, Kaplan, and a rotating third board member quiz the applicants about their past writing experience, knowledge of journalism, goals, and what they expect to get out of the Nora Network.

“There was a lot of lore around these interviews, and that they would really grill you to make sure you knew your stuff,” says Jessica Sidman C’08, the prize-winner from 2008. “I think there was a rumor that they made someone cry once.”

Jessica Goodman C’12, last year’s winner, agrees. “The interview process is really intimidating,” she said, “But I guess I bore it!”

In recent years, the board has also partnered with Kelly Writers House to get the word out about the competition and attract more applicants. Board members and past prize-winners have also participated regularly at Writers House in panels about the writing life and media careers. (This year’s winner, Joe Pinsker C’13, was announced in February.)

Once a winner is selected, he or she meets with the board—a ritual that has usually taken place at a lunch in Midtown Manhattan. At this session, the old Nora-ites and their newest member sit around a long table and get to know one another.

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“We ask them what they want to do and how we can help them,” Kaplan explains. “They may say, ‘I really want to work for newspapers,’ or ‘I want to be an editorial assistant at a magazine,’ and then we think about who will it make sense for them to get together with.” After that event the winners are on their own to use the board members as they see fit. “They’ve got to drive,” says Kaplan. “We’re not just there to give them everything. They sort of have to work it a little bit.”

DePaulo jokes about telling friends who are involved with charities that work to cure cancer or feed hungry kids that she’s on the “board of something that helps Penn kids get jobs in magazines!” But while it’s not exactly changing the world, in its 10 years of existence the Nora Prize has made a significant difference in the lives of the winners and the University.

Jason Schwartz C’07, the 2007 winner, is a senior editor at *Boston Magazine*. Melody Joy Kramer C’06, who won the year before, worked on multiple shows on NPR and was the web producer for Terry Gross’ interview program *Fresh Air* before starting medical school this past fall. Sidman is a food editor at *Washington City Paper*. If you were following the 2012 presidential election in *The New York Times*, you saw the byline of 2005 winner Ashley Parker C’05, who covered the Romney campaign for the paper. (“We like to take credit,” quips Kaplan.) In February, she was assigned to the paper’s Washington bureau, covering Capitol Hill.

Even if the winners didn’t secure their jobs through the Nora Network, they will tell you that the board at least helped them on the road there. When 2011 winner Matt Flegenheimer C’11 couldn’t decide whether to proceed with an internship with *The New York Times* or accept a full-time job outside of the city, he weighed the merits of each option with Kaplan and Fried. (Having chosen the *Times*, he is now there in a staff position, reporting on transportation-related issues.) Goodman got advice on whether and where she should go to journalism school—yes; Columbia—as well as on which classes to take and who at career services to seek out while she was there.

Sidman, who graduated right after the market crash, sought out board members for encouragement as well as job leads, which were even scarcer than usual at the time. “That was kind of the worst period for newspapers, and everybody would tell you, ‘Get out while you can, this is a dying industry,’” she says. “To have that network and not feel totally hopeless, to feel there is a chance of finding a job even if the economy is terrible—even if I just graduated from college. I have these people who are willing to help me.”

Beyond helping Nora Prize winners get where they want to go professionally, the Nora-ites are helping make Penn a more enticing place for aspiring journalists to spend their undergraduate years, says Al Filreis, the Kelly Professor of English and faculty director of Kelly Writers House. “It contributes to the atmosphere that Penn students who are writers feel now,” says Filreis, “which is that they are going to be helped and supported. They are not just going to be taught classes; they are actually going to be supported.”

Certainly journalists and other writers have more reason to feel at home at Penn than Fried and his fellow “X-men” did a few decades ago. Kelly Writers House itself—which opened its

doors in 1995—serves as Exhibit A in this ongoing process. Nonfiction writing courses are regularly taught by journalists like Paul Hendrickson, for many years a feature-writer at *The Washington Post* and author of several books, most recently *Hemingway’s Boat*; Anthony DeCurtis, who has written for *Rolling Stone* for 25 years; and political reporter Dick Polman, who spent 22 years at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Since the Fall 2010 semester, students have even been able to pursue a journalism minor. (The *DP* and *34th Street*, meanwhile, always an extracurricular haven for aspiring writers and editors, are still going strong, along with newer entries like *Penn Appetit* and the Penn fashion magazine, *The Walk*.)

The Nora Prize has also created “a model for extracurricular support,” says Filreis. Penn students can apply for a variety of other writing mentorship programs, prizes, awards, internships, scholarships, and apprenticeships, but none of them are quite like the Nora Prize.

For starters, it is one of the only awards strictly for Penn students that is run by people outside the University administration. “The prize was generated by the former students of a beloved writing teacher and created on their own. They did their own investing, they did their own fundraising,” says Filreis.

The Nora Prize is also one of the few that presents winners with a wide community of mentors, rather than just one or a few, who can all offer varying opinions and life experiences. Fried calls this “competitive mentorship,” and believes very strongly that it is a good thing; this way the prizewinners can seek out a range of perspectives.

In an effort to secure the prize’s long-term survival and “make it economically self-sustaining,” Kaplan says the board is pursuing efforts to expand the Nora Network to include Penn alumni who might not have been taught by Nora but are excelling in journalism. They are also working to increase the size of the prize, either by giving more money to each winner or choosing more than one winner per year in the future. (To help broaden awareness, for the 2012 Prize gathering the invitation list was expanded and the event changed from a luncheon to a cocktail reception at the *Good Housekeeping* Research Institute, which also featured various desserts prepared from Nora’s old recipes, those being another set of gifts she had passed down.)

Encouragingly, the recent winners also express interest in keeping the prize going and taking a leadership role one day. “I can see myself staying involved,” says Flegenheimer. “I hope that I’m in a position to be able to [mentor]. I can think of no better way to stay involved with Penn and younger journalists.

“But I’m nowhere near that point yet,” he adds. “I don’t think that I’m done getting advice from people in the network.”

As for me, just as I was getting angrier and angrier about missing out on the Nora Prize while listening to DePaulo in that class at NYU, she stopped talking, looked around the seminar table, and loudly declared, “I’m going to give you all exactly what Nora Magid and the Nora Network gave me.”

So maybe I’m part of this after all. ♦

Alyson Krueger C’07’s first feature article for the *Gazette*, on author and Jesuit priest James Martin W’82 [“Bless Me Father, for I Have Published,” Mar|Apr 2012], started out as an assignment in her profile-writing class with Lisa DePaulo.