

Paper Man

Eric Jacobs has been at the *Daily Pennsylvanian* since articles were written on typewriters and layout was done by (actual) cutting and pasting. The newspaper's longtime general manager is also a shared connection among every *DP* alum of the last 40 years. But this summer, he plans to leave the only job he's ever had.

By Molly Petrilla

Before anything else, there was a short article, only six paragraphs long, published several pages deep in the *Daily Pennsylvanian* on October 8, 1976: "Area Schools Sponsor Conference For Handicapped College Students," read the headline, and just below it, a name: By ERIC JACOBS.

Jacobs EE'80 was a freshman living in Hill House at the time, and though he'd been an editor for his middle and high school papers, this was his first byline in Penn's daily student newspaper.





Overcoming That Ole MSU Magic

By RYAN MELIKER
 It's not just the Quakers' new mascot that's making headlines. It's the team's record-breaking season. After a 17-game losing streak, the Quakers are now 11-11. The team's record is a testament to the coaching of Coach Mike Krzyzewski and the leadership of Coach John Butler. Butler, who has coached the Quakers since 2007, has led the team to a record of 11-11. Butler's coaching has been a key factor in the team's success. Butler's coaching has been a key factor in the team's success. Butler's coaching has been a key factor in the team's success.



To lead Michigan State, Penn State and the Spartans, Coach Krzyzewski.

The Daily Pennsylvania

PHILADELPHIA, THURSDAY, MARCH 22, 2018

The Sky's the Limit!

Quaker Dream Becomes Real Tonight

The Quakers' record-breaking season is a testament to the coaching of Coach Mike Krzyzewski and the leadership of Coach John Butler. Butler, who has coached the Quakers since 2007, has led the team to a record of 11-11. Butler's coaching has been a key factor in the team's success. Butler's coaching has been a key factor in the team's success.



Meet The Spartans

CRISPIAN ASSASSIN (L) would be a great addition to the team. He is a former college basketball player and has a lot of experience. He is a former college basketball player and has a lot of experience. He is a former college basketball player and has a lot of experience.



PHILIP JENKINS, Mr. Major

Quakers Don't Lie

TEAM	PTS	FGA	FTG	REB	AST	STL	BLK
QUAKERS	100	40.0	15.0	35.0	12.0	8.0	2.0
SPARTANS	95	38.0	14.0	32.0	10.0	7.0	1.0

The article was direct and factual, previewing a three-day conference. Exactly the sort of story that generations of *DP* reporters have counted as their debut. “No one could have known where things were going to lead,” Jacobs says now, laughing, because almost 44 years later, he’s still working at the same campus newspaper.

Morphing from devoted newbie reporter to student managing editor to official adult-on-staff and, at times, the *DP*’s only full-time professional employee, Jacobs has stuck by The Daily Pennsylvanian, Inc.—today no longer just a print newspaper, but a \$3 million student media organization that’s fully independent from the University. He works for the *students*, some of whom are technically his bosses, but also *for* the students, so that they can continue to have a thriving and student-run enterprise, even at a time when media companies are facing their greatest threats.

While his title of general manager has remained the same since 1981, Jacobs’s unofficial mantles stretch in all directions: tech whiz, bill payer, alumni liaison, *DP* historian, tax filer, furniture fixer, printer contact, and—not least of all—guy who calms and advises panicked students at all hours of the day and night.

“He wears a thousand caps, which is why replacing him is probably going to be one of the biggest challenges the *DP* has,” says Julia Schorr C’20, a fine arts major who served as president of The Daily Pennsylvanian, Inc. last year. “I can’t imagine the *DP* without him.”

Whether they pursue careers in journalism or leave it behind at Penn, virtually every student or alum who’s been connected to the *DP* over the last 40 years has encountered Jacobs either face-to-face, by name and reputation, or through one of the print letters and emails he blasts out—most likely, all of the above. Some alums like to joke that they majored in the *DP* at Penn. If that’s the case, Jacobs was their TA, professor, dean, RA, alumni mentor, and academic advisor rolled into one.

“For several generations of *DP*ers, Eric Jacobs is near synonymous with the *DP* and our unforgettable experiences there,” notes Helen Gym C’93 GEd’96, a *DP* alum and community activist who now serves on the Philadelphia City Council.

“There’s no one person who has shaped the *Daily Pennsylvanian* more than Eric Jacobs,” says Amy Gardner C’90, a political reporter at the *Washington Post* who recently became president of the Daily Pennsylvanian Alumni Association (DPAA).

But this summer, after seeing the paper through a clean break from the University, forays with new technology, its flush years ever, and now its post-Facebook-era battles to stay relevant and attract revenue, Jacobs plans to retire from the only job he’s ever had.

There are just a few more things he wants to do first.

There’s a new issue of the *DP* out today.

That’s a rarer statement than it used to be. Three years ago, faced with plummeting ad sales and looking to beef up its digital offerings, the daily paper dropped down to two print issues per week.

But these days, the *DP* extends well beyond a print product. In addition to the *Daily Pennsylvanian* and *34th Street*, it also produces three digital newsletters, a humor blog, multiple podcasts, videos, web-only stories for thedp.com, and social media accounts that top out at nearly 20,000 followers. Except for the *DP* and *Street*, everything on that list emerged during Jacobs’s tenure.

On this Monday morning in early February, a stack of fresh newspapers sits outside the *DP*’s office building at 4015 Walnut Street—its home base since 1975. Just inside, it smells like bread and coffee thanks to the organization’s longtime downstairs neighbor, Metropolitan Bakery and Cafe. Head upstairs and through the *DP*’s door, then turn left, and you’ll be looking straight into Jacobs’s office. It’s surprisingly tidy for how long he’s been there.

Jacobs is on the tall side with glasses and, most often, a big grin lighting up his face. He laughs easily and has a light Philly accent—the product of growing up in nearby Havertown, Pennsylvania, and sticking within a 45-minute drive ever since.

“Everyone has their EJ impression,” Schorr says affectionately, which is exactly what cast members on *Saturday Night Live* always say about Lorne Michaels. “That’s an apt comparison,” she notes. It even applies to Jacobs’s role as anchor to a revolving mix of increasingly younger-than-him creatives.

Schorr has noticed that he always orders the same salad with a large iced tea from Panera Bread and breaks out his sweater collection when chilly weather hits. He’s been listening to Bruce Springsteen since 1976 and estimates that he’s seen “The Boss” in concert well over 20 times now. And on weekday mornings for over three decades, he’s driven 45 minutes—or much longer, depending how snarled I-95 is that day—from his home in Bucks County to the *DP* office, where he stays until well past dinnertime.

His workday often continues even after he gets back home, since the *DP* goes out to the printer in the darkest hours of the morning, and since web stories are now published round-the-clock.

Schorr remembers a Sunday night last spring when the newspaper team was cranking along on Monday’s print issue and suddenly the power shut off. “We called him in a panic late at night,” she says. Jacobs, calm as ever, called the electric company to find out what was happening. (Wrangling utility bills is on his long list of responsibilities.) Power eventually returned and the paper came out the next day—along with an article about the local blackout.

“Whenever we thought something was going horribly wrong and it was the end of the world, he always had a story that would trump it,” Schorr says. “It would make us feel a bit better to know we weren’t ruining the *DP*—that we’re not the first ones to deal with these problems

“Only in more recent years do I sometimes go into the restroom, look in the mirror, and realize I do not look like everybody else I was just looking at in that room.”



and we probably won't be the last. That was really important to hear.”

The brief blackout would only be a sidebar—if that—in the history of dramatic moments Jacobs has seen during his tenure. To start, there was that time in 1981 when US Secret Service agents showed up and locked themselves inside a *DP* office with a student columnist to question him for having written, after John Hinckley Jr.'s assassination attempt on President Reagan, “Too bad he missed. That's the result of sending an amateur to do a professional job.”

Then there was the morning in 1993 when almost 14,000 copies of the *DP* went missing, stolen off the racks by Penn students who left signs announcing that they were protesting “the blatant and voluntary perpetuation of institutional racism against the Black Community by the *DP*” and Penn. Jacobs contacted the printer, explained what

had happened, and had an extra 6,000 copies on campus by the early afternoon.

There have been reporting gaffes that drew national attention and student editorial boards who just couldn't seem to get along. When we talk again in mid-March, there is the novel coronavirus, which ends up closing campus and suspending the *DP*'s print editions for the first time since World War II.

But even in the most chaotic moments, no one can remember a time that Jacobs lost his composure or tried to seize control of the *DP* from its student leaders.

“He's always really respected that, technically, the students are in charge,” says David Burrick C'06, who served as executive editor on the *DP*'s 120th board.

“He has zero voting power on every board—he cannot decide anything,” notes Katherine Ross, who has worked with Jacobs on the *DP*'s professional staff since 1995 and is now its director

of sales and marketing. “Yet he still needs to make sure that whatever they decide to do gets done. It takes a level of tact and finesse that, to me, he has seemingly always had.”

“I've always felt like I was one of them—a collaborator with the students,” Jacobs explains. “Only in more recent years do I sometimes go into the restroom, look in the mirror, and realize I do not look like everybody else I was just looking at in that room.” But even as the years proceed and his hair continues to gray, “I still feel like I'm one of the team.”

For most students, especially those not on the *DP*'s editorial board, Jacobs's day-to-day work is murky or even invisible. Ross says that's true for every member of the organization's professional staff, which currently includes her, Jacobs, an office manager, and a recently hired director of development to drive the organization's expanded fundraising efforts.

Jacobs pays the bills and makes sure the lights (and internet) stay on. He places orders for new computers and printers. He sits in on meetings with the *DP*'s board of directors, its all-student executive board, and the Daily Pennsylvanian Alumni Association. One moment he may be spackling a hole in the wall, the next he's sitting down for three hours with the *DP*'s podcast editor to talk about equipment needs.

“Then 20 minutes later, the sports editors complain because the couch he just fixed broke again, and now we have to lug it down to the dumpster and buy a new one,” Ross says. “Twenty minutes

after that, he's on the phone with the printer because the color's been off for the past two weeks."

And on and on it goes.

"It's a very weird situation," says Bur-
rick, "because you're technically in
charge, but you're also a 20-year-old who
has never run a multimillion-dollar busi-
ness before. Having Eric around was
essential. I'm sure there were ten thou-
sand things that went on at the *Daily
Pennsylvanian* that I was technically in
charge of and didn't even know about,
because Eric was doing those things."

There's a video Jacobs made in 2011 and
has continued to update since. It
sweeps through the history of the *DP*,
beginning with the newspaper's launch
as the *Pennsylvanian* in 1885 and conclud-
ing with a spool of sentimental quotes from
alumni whose lives were affected by their
time there. The whole thing is set to epic
movie soundtrack music—John Williams-
type stuff—which Jacobs happened to have
handy already because he's a fan.

"People always cry after watching it,"
Schorr says, "because you see how much
the *DP* has grown and changed over the
years, but how the core mission has
stayed the same."

The Jacobs Years start just about half-
way through, with a photo of five guys
in suits and ties. Jacobs is on the far
right in big glasses and even bigger curly
hair. It was 1979, and *DP* leaders had just
signed a \$130,000 contract to install the
newspaper's first computer system.

That contract is what kept Jacobs at the
DP, at least in the beginning. As a com-
puter science major and the paper's man-
aging editor, he led the charge to bring
computers into the newsroom. (Up until
then, students were still using Smith Co-
rona typewriters and editing articles
through a manual cut-and-paste process.)

When his graduation date neared,
there were still "a lot of loose ends that
I thought could fall apart" on his beloved
computer initiative, Jacobs says. So he
handwrote a proposal to the *DP*'s stu-

dent business manager, offering to see
the project through the summer of 1980
and into the fall.

"It was going to be a four-to-six-month
job," Jacobs remembers, but then he kept
thinking up more missions for himself
to tackle. He suggested that the *DP* hire
him as its first full-time, year-round of-
fice manager. They did, and by the sum-
mer of 1981, he was bumped up to gen-
eral manager, which he's been ever since.

"Had anyone suggested back when I first
started here that I would be here 40 years
later, I would have laughed," he says. In his
early days on staff, he often thought of his
roommates—one heading to med school,
another to grad school in engineering,
"and I'm still hanging out at the college
newspaper," he says. "It didn't feel like it
was really quite grown up. But the fact
was, there were all these things to do, and
I got to dabble in all these different fields."

With the new computers in place, Ja-
cobs began developing systems to pro-
fessionalize the paper's advertising sales,
from designing new rate cards to imple-
menting sales staff trainings.

His next major project came when the
DP decided to fully separate itself from
the University. He helped navigate the
yearlong process of officially turning the
student newspaper into a not-for-profit
corporation, The Daily Pennsylvanian,
Inc., in 1984. Along with the student
editorial board, Jacobs figured out ev-
erything from running a payroll, to find-
ing a lawyer, to striking a deal on rent
with the University.

As the 1980s progressed, the *DP* intro-
duced a summer edition, *The Summer
Pennsylvanian*, and in 1986, Jacobs helped
form the *DP* Alumni Association, which he's
been actively managing ever since.

In 1987, much of the legwork and proj-
ect management fell to Jacobs when the
DP spent \$100,000 to gut its office on
Walnut Street, transforming it into the
Pink Palace that it remains today. (The
nickname comes from the sheer amount
of a certain color on the walls, carpet,
tile, and even desk chairs.)

By the mid-1990s, the *DP* had a web-
site, was pumping out full-color issues,
and had acquired a small fleet of Mac
desktop computers and advanced laser
printers. The professional staff bal-
looned to five full-time employees. In
2000, the annual operating budget hit
an all-time high of \$1.5 million. "The ads
were raining down," Jacobs remembers.

But even in those flush years, he
championed prudence. "We didn't go out
and buy a car, a helicopter, whatever," he
says. "We put the money aside." That's how
the *DP* has managed to weather the life-
threatening storm no one saw coming.

When the country crashed into a re-
cession in 2008, Jacobs knew it
would eventually hit student
newspapers like the *DP*. And sure
enough, ad sales soon began to sink. He
wasn't especially worried, though. Ja-
cobs figured the *DP* could wait out the
lean times, just as it had in the past.

But then people started reading the
news online and on their brand-new
smartphones. The one-two punch of the
recession and the rise of online media
was devastating for all newspapers, the
DP included. Suddenly everything that
had helped to make the *DP* a high-earn-
ing enterprise in the 2000s wasn't work-
ing anymore. "I didn't initially under-
stand that the world was turned upside
down and the way people interact with
media was completely changing in a
very short period of time," Jacobs says.

He notes that for the last 10 years,
from an operations standpoint, the *DP*
has been running at a deficit, living off
of the financial cushion he helped stu-
dent boards sock into investments dur-
ing the ad-rich years.

Today most of the *DP*'s revenue still
comes from advertising, but that ad re-
venue has been chopped nearly in half.
And so, like every other media company,
the *DP* has had to get creative about
earning money. From that has sprung
the newsletter aimed at Penn parents
and alumni, which requires a paid sub-

scription; the student-led Product Lab team, tasked with developing innovative moneymakers; and the Summer at Penn magazine and upcoming year-round visitors' guide to University City, both produced by the *DP* and filled with advertisements. Also: the organization's first-ever director of development.

"It could be that fundraising support is the model—from *DP* alumni, and even from a broader base of Penn alumni who see the importance of having an independent student newspaper reporting on what's going on at Penn," Jacobs says.

In spite of some modest successes and the countless hours Jacobs has spent brainstorming with the student and alumni boards, "so far, we have not developed anything that has really blossomed into a major source of revenue," he notes. "We just haven't figured it out, and it will probably take some time to figure out."

That's where he thinks some new blood managing the *DP* could be a good thing, although it's not the reason he's leaving. He also doesn't feel burnt out, or short of projects to tackle. But he always imagined retiring early if he could—visiting his nonagenarian parents more and traveling the world with his wife—and this summer he'll turn 62. Jacobs recognizes that "for me and for the organization, there comes a time where new ideas, new insights, new approaches can be good."

Gardner, the DPAA president, sees it too. Acknowledging that it's difficult to say goodbye to a beloved fixture who's done so much for the *DP*, she says Jacobs's retirement also presents an opportunity "to hear from a new perspective about new directions that the institution should go in to preserve its financial autonomy, grow its audience, [and] grow its revenue."

People from across the industry have been applying to fill his post—editors, reporters, business managers, publishers. Gardner says the next general manager will be tasked with stabilizing and pro-

tecting the organization for generations of students to come. "But I don't say that with gloom and doom," she adds. "I say that as an opportunity. I really, truly believe that it's doable and we're putting the pieces in place to do it."

Jacobs admits that it's still a little strange to see students roaming campus *without* copies of the *DP* tucked under their arms. But he gets it. He reads a lot of his news on screens now, too.

"The reason I'm not in a state of despair," he says, "is that there's still a lot of content we're publishing, just in different media. That's not necessarily a bad thing, as long as we're publishing things that people want and that they engage with. That's really the challenge."

He's further heartened that right now, the *DP*'s staff is the biggest it's ever been: nearly 400 students. "If students were looking and saying, 'The *DP*. Newspaper. Ew. That's old, why would I do that?' that would be troubling," he says. "Instead, what we've seen over the last decade is an increase. Part of that is because we're doing cool things—podcasts, analytics, coding—that we didn't do five or 10 or 15 years ago."

Few can picture Jacobs completely detaching from the *DP* when he retires this summer—and that's not his immediate plan, either. Once a replacement is chosen, he'll continue working full-time during the new general manager's early months on the job, then stay on part-time for a little longer after that.

"I don't want us to fumble a lot of things I've helped build just because no one knew that Eric used to do this, so it didn't get done," he says. So much of his work has boiled down to providing structure and consistency in a place where everything (and everyone) else is constantly changing. Anchoring his own transition will be no different.

After that change-of-hands period, "I'm sure I'll stay connected in some way," he adds. "But I don't want it to be like, the old guy's hanging around and still talking about the way we used to do things."

EJ fandom was on full display at the *DP*'s 135th anniversary reunion, held at Houston Hall this past fall. In addition to his role in helping organize the whole weekend, Jacobs was among the first batch of *DP* alumni inducted into its new hall of fame. The standing ovations were plentiful, including when he gave a speech and Helen Gym, the Philly council member, read an official city resolution honoring his work at the *DP*.

"One of the things that really jumped out at me was just how many generations of *DP* people felt like they owed Eric something—that he contributed to their education and life experiences in a meaningful way," his friend Rich Gordon C'80 says. "The number of people whose lives he's touched is just remarkable."

For some students, Jacobs is the first person they've ever turned to for advice on managing their peers or negotiating disagreements with coworkers. For top-of-the-masthead editors like Burrick, he was also a first employee. "The first time I had to have a discussion around someone's raise and bonus was Eric Jacobs," he says.

But here's what Gardner wants you to know: Even after 40 years there, with the number of decades between himself and current students continuing to grow, Jacobs doesn't see himself as above any task—and continues to put the *DP* first.

She recalls leaving a recent DPAA board meeting and seeing Jacobs, Ross, and another *DP* staffer hand-folding and stuffing the latest alumni newsletter into envelopes. There were stacks of hundreds to tackle. Fold, stuff. Fold, stuff.

"As I walked by, he said, 'Oh! Hey! Save the *DP* a stamp. Take yours,' and he found the one with my address on it and gave it to me as I walked out," Gardner remembers. "That's Eric: in the trenches, incredibly organized, thinking quickly, smile on his face."

Molly Petrilla C'06 is a frequent contributor to the *Gazette*, and a *DP* alum who served as editor of the *Summer Pennsylvanian*.