

HANNA WONDIMAGEGN IS DOING IT ALL

AN ETHIOPIAN PHOTOJOURNALISM STUDENT FIGHTING AGAINST INJUSTICES

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Senior photojournalism major Hanna Wondmagegn is many things. In her Instagram bio (@hannawon72; you should follow her on everything), Wondmagegn lists some of her identities — global citizen, storyteller, Ethiopian, HAH-Nah — but there are many more titles where those came from.

World traveler. TikTok dancer. Late-night chef. Unflinching activist. Wondmagegn seems to be doing it all — but her success has not come without effort.

For much of her childhood, Wondmagegn was raised by a single mother, a first-generation Ethiopian immigrant. Their Charlotte, N.C. neighborhood, Rosehaven, was a global community that quickly became their home.

“I used to have this rank order of Mom #1 was my mom mom, Mom #2 was my babysitter from Pakistan, Mom #3 was my babysitter from Somalia,” Wondmagegn said. “All these people helped raise me. And it wasn’t just me, it was all the kids in the neighborhood. I think that goes to show the collective nature of a lot of the cultures. We all just looked out for each other.”

As she grew up and started school, Wondmagegn’s community continued to grow with her. Her mom worked in the elementary school cafeteria, so all the teachers knew and supported her. In addition to being an excellent student, Wondmagegn took an early interest in food, having grown up around it in Rosehaven and spending afternoons in the lunchroom kitchen.

Her sophomore year at East Mecklenburg High School, civics teacher Martha Deiss inspired Wondmagegn to start her #NoFoodWaste

campaign. After writing a letter to Michelle Obama critiquing the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, Wondmagegn started thinking about actions she could take in her own community, like replacing styrofoam plates with paper and collecting unopened milk cartons.

That night, she emailed John Williamson, president of Food Rescue in Indiana, who was eager to help her establish a similar program.

“There were so many small things that led up to this one moment,” she said.

“In 1.5 academic school years, we donated over 4,800 unopened prepackaged food items to the library across the street.”

Many students waited there after school for their parents to finish work, and librarians often spent their own pocket money on cheap snacks. The program was eventually shut down after it garnered too much publicity, but Wondmagegn’s efforts made a lasting impact on the community.

Junior year, Wondmagegn joined the school newspaper, sparking a love for journalism. Growing up, she always loved to read but hated writing. Through programs with the North Carolina Scholastic Media Association and UNC, Wondmagegn found broadcast journalism. As a college freshman, she also tried print and audio, but nothing stuck.

Her sophomore summer, Wondmagegn decided on a whim to buy a camera, something her orientation leader coworkers made fun of at the time. She enrolled in a photojournalism class and fell in love.

“I remember my jaw dropping and I was like, oh my gosh, this is what I want to do,” she said. Now her friends joke about what a good investment that

camera was.

“Ultimately, why I love journalism and got into journalism goes back to that community that I grew up in Rosehaven,” Wondmagegn said. “We were just this small little bubble of people from all over the world, and there was so much strength in the stories they would share through food or music or just being together.”

When immigrant communities made the news, Wondmagegn didn’t recognize the narrative she saw. “I grew up with these people, I am one of these people, and this is not our story,” she remembers thinking. Today, she is driven by the desire to tell inclusive and representative stories.

That same summer as an orientation leader, Wondmagegn’s boss was adamant that she apply to Semester At Sea, something she herself had done and thought Wondmagegn would love. Wondmagegn applied on a whim and was accepted. She would spend four months on a ship, traveling to 11 countries with students from around the globe.

This new adventure came immediately after returning



from a summer abroad in Italy, where she was officially studying food and unofficially documenting the Ethiopian migrant crisis.

Her scholarship directors said the program was too expensive, which Wondmagegn took as a challenge. “I ended up getting the entire thing covered, on top of Italy,” she said.

Wondmagegn struggled to transition back to campus life after months of independent travel, spotty WiFi and a live-for-the-moment mentality.

One afternoon, she impulsively hopped on a bus to Georgia to visit a friend, not realizing how out-of-place her behavior was in the U.S. until someone pointed it out later.

Things were finally starting to feel normal over spring break when Wondmagegn went with her Global Storytelling class to cover climate change in Belize. Then, everything was uprooted again, this time by a global pandemic.

Through her experiences, Wondmagegn learned to speak up and make the most of every moment. In recent years, she has become less afraid to call out the University.

Via social media, Wondmagegn has decried food waste in the dining halls, failures of the Fall 2020 Roadmap, restrictive social media policies and institutional white supremacy in campus housing, to name a few.

Her posts have had the power to make real change. “I’ve just been tweeting and for some reason it just gets traction,” she said.

Now, people reach out to Wondmagegn to share their personal stories and concerns. “As a Black woman at UNC, our experiences aren’t often given any platform, so I know that feeling of not having a place to share things and be listened to.”

She has also used her work to spotlight environmental injustice in Kinston, N.C., a small town that classmate Chris Suggs introduced her to. “It was so powerful, the connection to land that people had there,” she said. It was a chance to tell a larger story on how environmental issues disproportionately affect Black communities through photographs and stories of individual people, and she hopes to return when it is safe to travel again.

The last few months have been incredibly draining, from COVID-19 to police violence against Black Americans to the upcoming election.

Wondmagegn referenced James Baldwin’s 1961 quote: “To be a Negro in

this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time.”

“There’s always something that happens. There’s always something that you’re being attacked by,” Wondmagegn said.

This summer taught her the importance of having a solid foundation that she can return to when the world gets chaotic. “I had to actively make time for me.”

Though she originally downloaded TikTok to connect with potential story sources, it has since become her daily challenge to master a new dance every

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morning and evening.

In other expressions of self-care, she got a plant, goes on more walks outside and is focusing on her hair and skin care routine. “I feel like a physically and emotionally better person in a lot of ways,” she said.

She tries to be equally transparent on social media about both positives and negatives. “It’s so easy to see someone’s life in posts or what they’re doing and think that they have it easy and think that it’s perfect, and you end up judging your own life,” she said.

Wondmagegn’s transparency recently looked like posting an Instagram story about failing Psychology 101 — for the second time — to show Carolina undergrads that being a successful student doesn’t require perfect grades.

Since going abroad, Wondmagegn’s priorities have shifted. “If it’s something that I don’t want to spend time on or doesn’t bring me joy in some way, I’m not going to waste my time on it,” she said. After talking with refugees about their experiences and living on a ship traveling the world, she no longer has the energy to entertain petty arguments.

“The only person who you need to worry about pleasing — and who can also be your worst enemy — is

yourself,” she said. She advises everyone to take time alone to know themselves better.

After losing a close friend while living in an age of fear and confusion, Wondmagegn knows what it’s like to be faced with mortality. “I have the chance to exist in this world another day,” she said. “Let me live it and pursue it as much as I can.”

Photos by Alex Barrett.

