

PHOTOGRAPHY

Abigail Harrison '19 was a sophomore at Haverford when she bought her first camera on a whim—a secondhand Canon Rebel point-and-shoot she envisioned using now and then to capture scenes from her daily life. Soon after, she caught her friend, **Maya Behn '18**, sitting in her dorm room window, her form silhouetted by the incoming light, and spontaneously snapped a photo that changed everything.

"Something just happened," Harrison remembers. "I'd never felt that way before, like having created this beautiful picture breathed fresh air into my life. That feeling precipitated a whole new path. I started photographing everything and everyone."

The new path was a welcome one. Harrison, who was recruited to run track at Haverford and once aspired to be an All-American athlete, had spent almost two years recovering from a career-ending injury. She had also begun questioning her decision to major in geology—the field in which both of her parents worked. Energized by her newfound passion, she began taking on-campus photography assignments as a student worker for the College Communications department and pursuing freelance jobs around Philadelphia.

A Maryland native whose father (**Dana Harrison '85**)—along with his own father (**Earl Harrison '54**) and brother (**Colin Harrison '82**)—attended Haverford and whose paternal grandmother attended Bryn Mawr, Harrison quickly realized that photojournalism was what really interested her. She didn't want to take posed portraits in front of carefully arranged backdrops; she wanted to tell stories. So Harrison started by self-designing a senior thesis that involved interviewing and photographing women working in mines in Paonia, the rural town on the Western Slope of Colorado where she'd spent her childhood summers visiting relatives. (Harrison is the descendant of a long line of coal miners on her mother's side.) Connections made through that thesis research ultimately led her to move to Paonia full time and teach a photojournalism seminar at the local high school.

She eventually left Colorado for a year to earn a master's degree in journalism at Columbia, then returned to the state and became a reporter for a daily newspaper, the *Gunnison County Times*, where today she covers the local energy and agriculture beats and occasionally contributes photography. And Harrison is still teaching. In 2021, she founded the Western Slope Photojournalism Workshop, an intensive, month-long summer program for teenagers interested in visual storytelling.

"Doing the workshop rooted me in this valley more than anything else," says Harrison, who ran the program for a second time last June and will revive it again this year.

"Developing the skills to go into a new space and photograph people, and then come back and think critically about your images, mitigates the information overload we constantly have through our phones and computers," she explains.

"This work requires slowing down, understanding context and ethics and artistic expression and that the way you portray somebody matters. There's power in those lessons and in developing that critical awareness of the news."

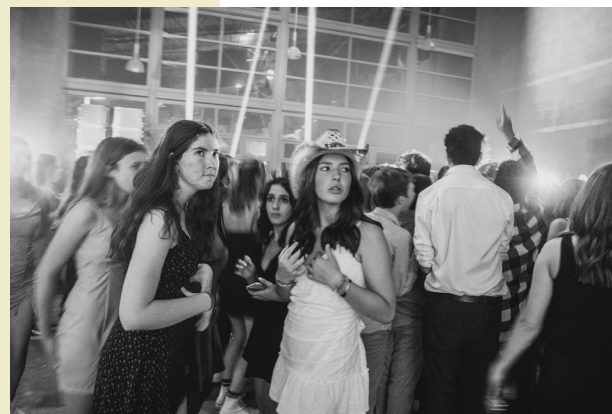
Beyond imparting the fundamentals of photography and storytelling, Harrison enlists a variety of professional photojournalists to serve as workshop "co-teachers"; last summer, these included a war photographer who flew in from Ukraine and an expert in vibrant, commercial-style photography.

"We're giving students the camera, the skills, the network, and the ability to analyze why photographs have emotion and what their perspectives add to their work. For me, it's personal, because when I was at my lowest, my camera and the conversations I had through it were a tool for healing," she says, recalling the angst and loss of identity she felt when her running career was cut short. "Engaging with this art form lifted me out of a tough situation, and I know it can do the same for others."

To see more of Harrison's photography, go to abbyathenaphoto.com.

To find out more about the photojournalism workshop she runs, go to westslopephoto.com.

—Karen Brooks




(top) A self-portrait by Abigail Harrison; (bottom) a high school homecoming dance in the Colorado town where Harrison works as a newspaper reporter and runs a summer photojournalism program for teens.