

Erin Richards

Director of Strategic Partnerships and Newsroom Development, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
Member Since May 2021

When Erin Richards heard a grad school professor speak about narrative journalism, she knew she had to take her class. The course was full, but like the horses she has trained, Erin finds a way to get over or around obstacles.

Erin got a spot in the intermediate writing course by looking up the time of the first class and showing up unnoticed. When the enrolled students filtered out, Erin lingered and told the professor, “You have to let me in your class.”

That gutsy move says a lot about Erin, and it had a big impact on her life. The professor, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Jacqui Banaszynski (a Wisconsin native and Marquette University grad), became Erin’s mentor.

“Jacqui is the most talented writer I know. She taught me a lot about perseverance, and I wouldn’t be where I am today without her guidance.”

Born and raised near St. Louis, Missouri, Erin fell in love with journalism in high school. She graduated from Murray State University in Kentucky with degrees in communications and equine science, then earned a master’s degree in journalism from the University of Missouri–Columbia.

Her love of horses also began at a young age—a passion passed down from her grandmother to her mom, to her and her brother, and eventually her dad, too. Her lower-middle-income family—mom was a community college art professor and dad a freelance photographer—scrimped and worked industriously to pursue this passion, eventually building up a small but successful boarding and training business.

“We lived very modestly to afford our sport. Looking back, it seems really intense—getting to the barn at 6 a.m., after school and a final night check. I don’t really know how I survived that,” said Erin, who seriously considered becoming a professional horse trainer.

As a freshman at Murray State, Erin lost out on a spot to board her horse in the student barn. She wouldn’t spend time in the saddle that year, but she found a seat in a shell instead. One day, leaders of the crew team spotted her tall, strong physique and recruited her on the spot. Lured by a much-needed scholarship, Erin found herself on the rowing team.

“I’d never done a team sport before and all of a sudden I’m on Kentucky Lake at 5:30 a.m., bonding with the girls on the team and enjoying the travel and perks of being a Division 1 athlete.”

Erin also joined the Murray State News. By sophomore year, she moved up to an editing role, but late hours in the newsroom made rising before dawn unsustainable. She gave up crew, but a stall opened in the barn to allow her to bring a family lesson horse to school. By junior year, she brought a second horse, a young Thoroughbred cross that needed training. To afford it, she struck a deal with the equestrian team, which used her first mount for lessons and competitions. She’s still riding her project horse today: Hobbes, now 27.





“These days we just amble through the woods. As soon as I get in the saddle, I feel at home. That never goes away,” said Erin, who lives in Bay View with her dog, Elroy.

Embracing her passion for writing, horses and travel, Erin finished her equine science degree at a prestigious equestrian and agriculture school in England, where she cleaned stalls for grocery money. While working towards her master’s, Jacqui encouraged her to apply for an internship at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. When the paper hired her full-time, she worked as a journalist by day and moonlighted as a riding instructor.

Erin soon became the lead education writer, and later won the prestigious Spencer Fellowship for Education Reporting at Columbia University in New York City, where she spent a year working on an in-depth story about Milwaukee’s school voucher program. After that, she won a Marquette University fellowship to study the damaging academic and social effects on students who repeatedly switched schools.

After about a decade with the Journal Sentinel, Erin became a national education reporter for USA Today, where she wrote an award-winning series about how urban districts successfully reopened during the pandemic. She then pivoted and took a position as editorial director for a nonprofit organization. Today, she’s back at the Journal Sentinel as its new Director of Strategic Partnerships and Newsroom Development. She’s focused on building connections, strengthening partnerships and raising money to expand local journalism.

“I have so much passion for Milwaukee and what we can accomplish as a community. I want to find the best way to invest in the city and amplify the stories and voices of Milwaukee’s neighborhoods.”

Her other goals involve raising support to bolster coverage of the Great Lakes and the environment, K-12 and early childhood education, and arts and culture issues.

Rotary dovetails nicely with Erin’s drive for making a difference.

“Rotary is a place to develop relationships that are important for the future of our city. It’s a big melting pot of go-getters who are all looking at issues from different angles—a diverse group of people drawn together by wanting to do good in the world.”



Editor’s Note: *Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich.*