

Emerson alum works to empower Afghan women through running

By **Amanda Hampton**



Emerson graduate Taylor Smith talks to journalism students about her experiences in the Middle East

For most, the idea of facing verbal and physical abuse for the simple crime of walking down the street of your own town is unfathomable; for Taylor Smith and the girls she works with, it's part of everyday life.

The 26-year-old Emerson alum headed a Q and A session at her alma mater today in which she discussed her time in Iraq and Afghanistan and the struggles women face in the Middle East.

After graduating in 2015, Smith took a teaching job in Iraq and began consulting for non-profits on the side. She eventually was offered a position as program director with the organization Free to Run, which uses adventure sports to support girls living in areas of conflict. Smith moved to Kabul in 2016, and has remained there as the program has expanded.

At first, it was difficult to recruit girls to be a part of the program; with the stigma in Middle Eastern countries against girls participating in sports or even walking outside without a male companion, many girls were hesitant to risk their personal safety.

Smith experienced this adversity firsthand, commenting, "I was struck by how difficult it was just to go outside for a run...I'd always get harassed."

However, Free to Run was able to slowly gain the trust of the local community through outreach programs. While the group still must take extensive measures to ensure the girls'

safety, Smith feels it's worth it, explaining, "It's an opportunity for them to take ownership of something new that society and culture hasn't said they can't do yet."

Smith's story was met with awe from her listeners, as well as surprise at her ability to cope with such a dangerous environment. Freshman Heather Stevens commented, "I really don't think I could do something like that. Just the thought of that constant fear...I think I would just lock myself in my house."

Hanna Marchesseault added, "This really opened my eyes to how journalism doesn't bind you to the U.S.- it's all about expanding and learning. Taylor Smith is benefitting others with her work, but learning a new culture benefits her too."

Despite the threats she faces, Smith is fully committed to the work she does and the girls she helps, and that commitment keeps her going. "If I take a girl up into the mountains, she's completely different than she is in town," Smith says. "It's a feeling of freedom, of power. When you cross the finish line, there's this euphoria...that's something these girls can take home with them."

REFLECTION

One of the biggest things I took away from this assignment is that you don't always go into an interview or situation knowing your angle. Going into the Q and A, I didn't know what angle to take since I didn't know much about Taylor Smith or her story, so I took copious notes and wrote down any quotes from her that seemed significant. Once I had that, I took note of things that stuck out to me, most of which had to do with the adversity women face in many Middle Eastern societies, and built an article from there.

Since she gave such an abundance of interesting anecdotes, it was a little difficult to focus only on information pertinent to my angle in order to keep my article on track. I ended up having to delete some quotes I really liked but found to be unessential to my article as a whole to help with word count. Speaking of, it was a lot more difficult than I thought it would be to condense my three pages of tiny, handwritten notes into a 400-word article. It really does all come down to relevancy and impact.