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The Villanova hands behind the pope's social presence



Lauren Dugan reporting for Fox29 last September from St. Peter's Square. The Vatican internship was the reason she chose to attend Villanova, she said. She will be covering the pope's Philadelphia visit next month.



GALLERY: Lauren Dugan reporting for Fox29 last September from St....

By Susan Snyder, Inquirer Staff Writer

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They go behind the Vatican walls, sometimes to places the public never sees. They helped start the pope's official Twitter presence and have ferreted out impostor accounts.

And remember when the Vatican launched its pope channel on YouTube? It was one of them who proposed advertising it on Facebook.

They are Villanova University students who - as interns at the Vatican - have become the knowing hands behind the Holy See's social media.

Mika Rhabb, a 2013 grad who researched Twitter accounts of other world figures to help with that launch, stood on stage near Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI when he sent his first tweet via an iPad.

"Although it was just a click, it was kind of like a silence . . . that quiet moment before something big happens," said Rhabb, 24, who now works at Penn Fertility Care. "It was kind of humbling."

Now, some former interns have roles in Pope Francis' visit to Philadelphia.

Danielle McMonagle - who began work at the Pontifical Council for Social Communications the day after Benedict resigned as pope - is serving as communications manager for the World Meeting of Families.

Lauren Dugan, who interned in fall 2014, is reporting on the pope's visit for both Fox29 and Catholic News Service. For Dugan, the Vatican internship was the reason she decided to attend Villanova.

"It really gave me the opportunity to write history as a journalist," said Dugan, 21, a senior from Flemington, N.J.

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She developed a video documentary series on young peoples' perceptions of Francis while also interning for Fox29.

"I just didn't sleep for four months," she said, "but it was the experience of a lifetime."

She was reporting from Rome when Francis confirmed at a news conference that he would visit Philadelphia. When she returned, her Fox colleagues began calling her "Vatican Girl."

Villanova's partnership came about in 2003 after the Internet Office of the Holy See told some of the Main Line university's alumni that it needed computer programming help. The school sent computer science majors to assist, said Bryan Crable, a communication professor and director of Villanova's Waterhouse Family Institute. In 2005, the program was opened to communications majors, and the relationship with the Pontifical Council for Social Communications - the Vatican's social media arm - began in 2008.

The university sends between five to eight students per semester overseas. This year's group leaves next weekend.

"We tell our students they will have an experience that no one else will have," said Crable.

And the Vatican, in turn, gets a fresh perspective on social media.

"The students also learn, what does it mean to be on Facebook as one of the faces of the Catholic Church?" Crable said.

Villanova interns in 2009 filmed a virtual reality tour of the Sistine Chapel, even moving inside the small area where the ballots are counted in the election of a new pope - an area normally roped off to the public. While other universities may send students to work in the Vatican, Villanova is the only school with such a long-standing and sustained relationship, Crable noted.

Not all interns meet the pope, but many have, he said.

Dugan got a handshake. Rhabb got to chat at the Twitter launch.

"This was a big moment for my family, too," Rhabb said. "My dad was like, 'Wow, I never expected this from you going to Villanova.' "

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