

“The Coolest Experience That I’ll Never Forget”

This spring, Kent State students traveled to Italy to discover the art of documentary storytelling—and returned with stories of their own to tell for years to come.

BY ALEX ZITO AND J KEIRN-SWANSON

Peabody and Emmy award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker Tom Jennings, BS ’85, had been thinking of ways to give back to his alma mater for some time. He’d offered internships with his California-based film and content production company, 1895 Films, to students from the College of Communication and Information (CCI) for several years—and recently hired a Kent State graduate in digital media production who had interned with his company. However, the pandemic had turned those internships into virtual ones, and it just wasn’t the same.

So when travel restrictions began to loosen and CCI Dean Amy Reynolds asked Jennings to teach a three-week intersession course on documentary storytelling, he was all for it. He would teach the course, CCI 40095 From Ideas to Stories: Storytelling in Tuscany, at Kent State’s campus in Florence, Italy. Based in the beautiful Palazzo Vettori, the Kent State University Florence Center is just a short walk from the city’s most famous attractions. And he would be co-teaching with Fabio Corsini, PhD, CCI Florence program coordinator, who has taught at the Florence campus since 2010.

Departing for Italy in mid-May and returning to the United States in early June, 19 students in the CCI course were some of the first from Kent State to study abroad since pre-pandemic days. They learned to be open to new ideas and evaluate them as potential projects for film, photography, design, writing, advertising or public relations. Jennings shared his expertise—many of his documentaries

are based on rare footage and focused on a historical figure or event—and helped students develop an idea into a “pitch” for their own use.

“I found it fascinating to learn about Tom’s journey as a Kent State graduate to where he is currently in his career,” says Josh Bailey, a senior from Parma, Ohio. “Studying journalism as he did, I felt a connection to him and was able to understand where my future could take me. The class challenged me, and I now have so many new skills that I can apply in my journalism career.”

During the 3-credit-hour course, students attended classes, screened and discussed films, and learned techniques to transfer their ideas into real projects. They also went on guided trips to various sites in Florence and Siena and explored Italy on their own.

“The trains were a little confusing at first, but once you get the hang of things, it was an extremely easy way to travel,” says Lainey Smith, a senior from Marion, Ohio, majoring in digital media production, film/video and photographic arts. “My personal favorite place was Venice. It felt smaller and quainter than some of the other places I visited. [In Venice] we would often stumble upon beautiful alleyways without another tourist in sight.”

The intersession course proved to be a perfect way for students to get a great experience. “Prior to this trip, I never thought studying abroad would be possible for me,” says Alex Miller, a sophomore from Wadsworth, Ohio, majoring in visual communication design and photography. “I gained insight into documentary filmmaking from Tom Jennings. We learned what goes on behind the scenes. Tom brought in (over Zoom) several experts he works with, including a music producer, copyright clearance manager, director of photography, accountant, location manager and more. I am so thankful for this experience and will carry it with me for the rest of my life.”

Celia Martin, a senior from North Canton, Ohio, majoring in visual communication design with a minor in user experience design, echoes those sentiments. “Everywhere we went was life changing,” she says. “And I was able to connect a lot back to an art history course I had taken a couple years ago. When we went to the Uffizi Gallery, I recognized many of the artworks we were shown. And I got to see my favorite painting that I’d learned about in that course—*Judith Slaying Holofernes* by Artemisia Gentileschi—so it was cool that I got to see it in person.”

Perhaps the most “cinematic” story of all was a moment described by Sophie Young, a junior from Sidney, Ohio, majoring in journalism. “I went to Mass in Il Duomo, which was incredible,” she says. “I walked right in as the choir started, and it felt like



Above: CCI Intersession 2022 students gather outside the Palazzo Pubblico during a field trip to Siena. Front row, kneeling, left to right: Tom Jennings, tour guide Alessandra Mazzanti, Fabio Corsini. Courtesy Tom Jennings

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[I was hearing] angels in heaven. It was the coolest experience that I’ll never forget.”

As for Tom Jennings, he says “magical doesn’t come close” to describing his experience. “Florence is, of course, one of the most captivating places in the world. However, most enchanting was the Kent State/Florence faculty and staff. They breathe life into the programs with incredible focus and passion for the content of the classes and the beauty of the city and environs. My co-instructor, Fabio Corsini, was the perfect person to pair me with, since I had no previous experience teaching a course. Together, we worked with the students on how to look behind the surface-level beauty of Florence to find stories that no one had ever thought to tell.

“On the final day of class, the students pitched their ideas for documentaries. Fabio and I were both amazed. Every idea was new, fresh and something that could be made into a documentary film. Everything about the Florence program reignited my sense of wonder. The proof of our success was how our students discovered the art of storytelling, which I can promise you is alive and well and living in the City of Lilies.” ⚡

By Alex Zito, a sophomore from Hudson, Ohio, majoring in public relations (one of the CCI students who went on the trip), and J Keirn-Swanson, director of strategic communications and external affairs at CCI.

Scan the QR code to view a four-minute reel of the students’ field trip to Siena, which one of Tom Jennings’ video editors in LA created using footage that Jennings and Corsini shot during the trip. Shown as a surprise after the students’ presentations on the last day of class, “It was the perfect way to end my experience in Florence,” Jennings says. “It was such a joy to watch these students laugh at seeing some of the things they did in Siena.”

Scan the QR code to view a minute-and-a-half video of Tom Jennings as he talks about finding stories in Florence and the value of study abroad.

