Chapter 1

Journalism in the Age of Social Media

Nic Harter and Katherine Olson

I first met Nic Harter when he moved in across the hall from me in Ellingson Hall at St. Olaf College in the fall of 2002. We were freshman and both excited about the prospect of starting college. Later that year (or perhaps it was the following year), I remember that he burned a copy of the movie American Beauty onto a DVD, so that my friend Mia and I could watch it together. Nic was always willing to be helpful, and he was ambitious in the best sense. He had a broad smile and seemed to live life with a full heart. Certainly, time provides what the poet Eliot Khalil Wilson has smartly called “the honeyed light of memory,” but I firmly believe that Nic was a kind and generous person. In the spring of my freshman year at St. Olaf, I somehow managed to break or at least injure my left foot. Doctors never found a break, but I wouldn’t be surprised if I at least had a stress fracture. Either way, I needed to rest for several months, and so I used a wheelchair to get around from about January until about May of 2003. I became indebted to my college friends, including Nic, who often helped push me from class to class and generally provided assistance with everyday tasks while I was wheelchair bound.

St. Olaf College is located in Northfield, Minnesota, and the college is atop a hill. For this reason, the college is sometimes
colloquially referred to as “the college on the hill.” Needless to say, winter in Minnesota can be brutal, with frigid temperatures and wind chills that reach −10 or −20 Fahrenheit. The coldest wind chills I remember experiencing were somewhere between −45 and −50 Fahrenheit. St. Olaf was cold and windy in the winters. Accordingly, on a nice and relatively warm day in March, if the temperature nears 50 or 55 degrees Fahrenheit, it is not uncommon to see people wearing a light jacket, as they proclaim that spring has arrived. It was on just such a spring day that I remember seeing Nic walking toward the student union. He was wearing a t-shirt and had on a pair of shorts. When I asked if he wasn’t a bit cold, he simply said, “It’s a beautiful day.” Nic had a wonderful sense of optimism, one that I admired and still remember to this day. The t-shirt in March story is my favorite one about Nic, because I think it captures both his positive outlook and the full spirit with which he seemed to approach life.

Nic Harter died in a scuba-diving accident in the Mississippi River. As I have written in the past, one of our professors noted that he “had the heart of a Northwoodsman.” In telling Nic’s story, I hope that others might come to know him as well. When Nic died, St. Olaf had a memorial service for him on campus; it was a gathering in Boe Chapel. I remember that I spoke at that service, that I shared some memories, but I don’t recall exactly what I said. Something about the importance of a sense of place comes to mind as I write these words now, but I can’t recall the precise nature of my remarks. The gathering in the chapel happened and then it was over. After remembering Nic, we went home to our apartments and dorm rooms.

A few years later, another college classmate of mine, Katherine Olson, was murdered after she answered an advertisement on Craigslist. The story of Katherine’s tragic death received extensive media attention, but rather than recount the story of her death, I remember a brief story about her life. Katherine had a fireball of red hair, which matched her vivacious personality. She was extraordinarily outgoing, much like Nic, and I remember her as a kind and gentle person. I must admit that I did not know Katherine, who was affectionately known as “K.O.,” very