

Elise Soukup
Interviewed by Stephen Jones
on January 13, 2007

Education and Training: B.A. in Communications, BYU, 2002

Current Employment Position: Associate Editor, Newsweek

Family: She and her husband, Dean, have one child, Dallin

Awards and Honors: Elise Soukup was named the 2002–2003 Intern of the Year by the Cooperative Education and Internship Association for her work at *Newsweek*. She wrote her first cover story, “A Mormon Odyssey,” in 2005. She has been a guest lecturer at Brigham Young University and New York University.

Career: Elise Soukup has worked in the Periscope section of *Newsweek* for the past five years. She reports, writes, and edits items about religion, media, and cultural trends—covering stories as diverse as the current ideological schism in the Episcopal Church and the latest fashion trends among political candidates. She has a particular interest in religion stories, specifically those concerning Mormonism. She wrote her first cover story, “A Mormon Odyssey” in 2005 and most currently contributed reporting to this year’s profile of Mitt Romney. She is currently on maternity leave.

How did you end up at Newsweek from BYU?

I started my first semester at BYU in 2000 and finished my course work in 2002, but I still needed an internship to graduate. *Newsweek* was my favorite magazine, so I called the chief of correspondents and offered to work for free. He told me to send my clips and resume. When I called to follow up, he asked when I could start.

I moved to New York in the fall of 2002 for a three-month internship. I worked in the Periscope department, which is a section in the front of the magazine. When the three months were over, I was hired as a temporary employee for another three months. Around this time, there was some shuffling within the magazine. A reporter in the National News department left to write a book and one of my editors was tapped to replace him. That left an opening in my department and they were able to hire me. I started as an editorial assistant. About a year later, I was promoted to assistant editor. Another year and a half later, I was promoted to associate editor, which is what I am now.

How many other LDS people work at this magazine?

Right now I’m the only one

When did you develop the desire to be a journalist?

I’ve always enjoyed journalism and I remember making my own mock newspapers when I was younger. The first time I really considered writing for a newspaper was during my

senior year of high school. I was frequently quoted in the school newspaper because I was the drama club president and I could always come up with something entertaining to say. I was quoted in so many different articles that the newspaper advisor put me on a “do not quote” list. I took that as a challenge. I talked her into letting me add the class during my last semester. I ended up getting an acting scholarship to Southern Utah University and an academic scholarship to BYU. I chose BYU and I majored in print journalism.

What are some of the things you learned as an intern that you couldn't have learned at school?

Practical experience. I was able to publish something the first week that I arrived at *Newsweek*. It was an interview with Donny Osmond that ran in the Newsmakers section. Of course, I had writing experience before I got there; I worked for the paper at BYU as a reporter and as an editor. But even the best university can't give you the experience of working with real professionals. I'm constantly amazed at how brilliant the people are around me. I think my work has improved just by watching how they work and trying to emulate them.

Do you remember some of your other early assignments?

My editor loves to tell the story of the first assignment that she gave me. Krispy Kreme was unveiling a new line of coffee, so I was supposed to write an item about the difference between Krispy Kreme and Dunkin' Donuts, which had reigned supreme in that category. She asked me to go attend a coffee tasting. This was obviously difficult for a Mormon to do, but I didn't want to turn down my first assignment. I went to the tasting, but I took another intern with me. We showed up at the event, which I assumed would be attended by other reporters as well, but it turned out that it had been set up specifically for me! So I sat down at this table with six Krispy Kreme executives and told them, “No thanks, not for me. My taster will be drinking the coffee.” The other intern would taste it and say something like, “Mmmm . . . bold and robust” and I'd make a show of writing down “bold and robust.” I never explained to them why I wasn't drinking the coffee. I like to think that they thought that I was just so important that I had a full-time “taster” to do this kind of work for me.

Why do you think you got hired? There were several other interns at the same time, what made the difference for you?

I think it was a combination of my editors liking the work that I did, liking me personally and then just plain luck. I was lucky that a position became open in my department while I was there, but I wouldn't have been hired *me* if they hadn't enjoyed my work. I really made an effort at BYU and during my internship to do more than was asked of me. While I was at the *Daily Universe*, the requirement was to write three articles each week. I made it a goal to write four and to get them on the front page. I think something like eight or nine out of ten got on the front page. I approached my internship the same way. I took every assignment and I was constantly researching and pitching ideas of my own. I also offered to do the low-profile things that no one else wanted to do like to save copies of our section in a binder so that we could reference them later or to distribute the mail. I think that a lot of interns come in and just want to get published, but I wanted to make

myself indispensable. I felt like my job was to make my editor's lives easier even if that meant taking on less glamorous jobs.

What does it take to be a good writer?

I think the most important thing at a magazine is to have your own voice. I can often read the first paragraph of an article in *Newsweek* and tell you who the writer is without looking at the byline because the writers at our magazine each have their own distinct writing style. For me, I try to write as I would talk to a friend. I try to write conversationally and with some humor. I remember working on an item early in my internship and I was really struggling with the first line. Jon Alter, a columnist, walked by and told me to stop trying to be witty and just to write something simple. I haven't forgotten that. Some of the best leads get straight to the point. "The box was empty." "She hadn't seen her mother in 40 years." "The research changed everything."

I think something that can make you not only a good writer, but a good employee is to embrace what sets you apart. From the beginning, I talked openly about my faith and that distinguished me from the other interns pretty quickly. My Mormonism was something that I brought to the magazine that was uniquely mine. I not only wrote about LDS and religious issues, but I kept a swear jar on my desk. If someone swore in front of me, they owed me 25 cents. A polygamy joke was a dollar. When you're an unpaid intern, you have to come up with creative ways of getting by!

How did you survive as an unpaid intern?

I waitressed in college so I had some money saved. When I first moved to New York, I lived in a one bedroom apartment with two other girls. Before I met my husband, I was eating a lot of generic corn flakes and items from McDonald's dollar menu. Once we started dating, he would drop off groceries at my apartment because he felt so sorry for me. I survived, but I used my own personal savings and I lived very frugally.

What do students need to be prepared to pay for rent?

I shared a one bedroom apartment with two girls and I think that I paid \$700 a month, plus utilities. That was more than four years ago, so it's more now. But the rent will depend on the neighborhood, the size of the apartment, and the number of roommates.

What were the pros and cons of your BYU Education?

The practical experience that I got while working at the *Daily Universe* was awesome. I came into *Newsweek* knowing how to write and produce a publication on deadline. That's something that some interns who came from other universities had to learn during their internship.

As for a con, I felt that the standards could have been higher at BYU. My favorite classes were the ones that were really challenging, but there weren't enough of those in the communications program. I felt that my professors should have expected more from my classmates and from me. Also, there's an inherent problem in majoring in journalism. On the one hand, you know how to write, but on the other, you generally don't have an area of expertise to write about. I minored in English, but I would have been in a better

position if I had minored in something like history or science. I've written a fair amount about religion, but I've had to do a lot of researching on my own to be able to write about it. I would have been better served if I had been able to double major or minor in something that just happened to interest me.

How do you feel about being a working mom now that you have a baby?

I'm actually on maternity leave right now. I'm covered by the Writer's Guild, so I get 15 months of maternity leave.

Do you feel like there is an unwritten rule about working mothers?

It's a very difficult decision to make as a Latter-day Saint. Statistically, there are just as many working mothers in Utah as anywhere else, but we know that our church leaders discourage it. I respect mothers who stay at home with their children. I also respect mothers who can find a true balance between work and family. That's very difficult to do. I'm still trying to figure it out.

What was your experience about writing the Oct. 17, 2005, cover story of Newsweek, "The Mormon Odyssey"?

It was an amazing experience. I had been asked by our managing editor, Jon Meacham, to think about a possible Mormon story for the magazine. *Newsweek* had done a Mormon cover during the Olympics and it had sold very well. I came back to him the next day with several ideas, one being the 200th anniversary of the Prophet Joseph Smith's birth. I remember just hoping that he'd let me be one of the reporters on the story, but in the end, he asked me to report and write the story myself.

It was a difficult process. Not only had I never written anything of this magnitude before, but I wasn't well acquainted with Mormon history. It was baptism by fire. But it was exciting work. I got to visit Nauvoo, speak with Joseph Smith's great grandson Wallace B. Smith in Independence, Missouri, and interview President Hinckley in Salt Lake City. That interview was so nerve racking. I interviewed him with Jon Meacham, so here I was in the same room with one of the most important men in my spiritual life and one of the most important men in my professional life. And I had to ask tough questions! It was one of those moments that you just don't enjoy until it's over.

In the end, though, the article was generally well received and it was one of the top sellers of the year. I did get a fair number of critical letters to the editor, but I had people writing in saying that I was both too easy and too hard on the church. So I feel like I did my job well.

What is it that drives you and how can students learn from you?

I don't really know how to answer that question.

Dean Soukup (Elise's husband): Elise has a very clear vision; she sees the end clearly. She doesn't get bogged down in the details along the way. She knows what needs to happen to get to the end and she's very perceptive and stays focused on it. Jim Quigley

said, “There’s no entitlement, only opportunity.” Elise has no sense of entitlement at all. She sees the opportunity and she goes for it.

Elise: That was very nice. Thank you!

Do interns from BYU have this entitlement or is that from other schools?

I wish that I could say that it was only people from other universities, but we’ve had some bad experiences with some BYU interns, too. There have been a few who came with an expectation that writing opportunities should be given to them—when really they should have been pitching story ideas themselves. But I think that’s pretty atypical for BYU. Actually, when my editor had the choice between me, a BYU student, and another intern who was from an Ivy League school, she chose me. She later said it was because she felt that the Ivy Leaguer would feel like he was doing her a favor to be there. I think that I wrote more and worked harder because I was from BYU and I knew I had to prove myself.

What’s on your reading list right now?

Other than *The Pigeon Has Feelings, Too* and *The Going to Bed Book*? I naturally gravitate toward nonfiction. I love a good memoir. I just checked out *The Places in Between* by Rory Stewart from the library. It’s about a guy from Scotland who backpacked around Afghanistan shortly after the Taliban was ousted. I also got an advanced copy of *My Father’s Secret War*, which is by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Lucinda Franks. It’s a true story about her discovering that her father was a spy in World War II.

Required reading for students who want to go into journalism:

Read any of the publications that you want to work for. You want to get a feel for the kinds of stories that get published—and you want to avoid pitching something that’s already been written about. Also read your competition. I read *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report* because if a story is in their magazine then I’m not going to want to write about it in ours. You should definitely have an awareness of the world around you, so it’s a good idea to read a national newspaper and a local one. It’s also a good idea to follow the news about Mormons. It’s likely to come up at work and you’re going to want to know about it.

Is there anything else you would like to tell BYU students who are preparing to work as writers and journalists?

I would say to go the extra mile, work hard and don’t come in with a feeling of entitlement. On a personal level, I would say don’t hide your faith. I wouldn’t have guessed it beforehand, but embracing my faith—openly talking about it—has really helped me in my career. And get to know the people you work with. If they like you personally, as well as the work you do, they’re going to want to keep you.