

Dear SCSPA Journalist of the Year Committee,

To define the character of the most talented student I have ever taught and the greatest student journalist I have ever known, I want to lay before you some memorable moments from Sophie Winnick's career that truly exemplify why she is this state's premier scholastic journalist. I know this is unconventional for most letters of recommendation, but a once-in-a-lifetime student like Sophie calls for an unusual approach:

- **Dedication:** While driving home one Friday afternoon her junior year, Sophie's car overheated and, ever the independent young woman, she tried to fix the radiator herself. Boiling water spewed on Sophie's face and arm, and her mother had to rush her to the hospital. Sophie had planned to photograph the Wando football game that night and teach new photographers how to shoot the game. *With one half of her face (including her eye) and arm bandaged for second-degree burns, Sophie argued vehemently with the doctor and her mother for an hour because they would not allow her to go photograph the game.* She assured them she could still shoot pictures even in her physical state. Sophie was also T-boned by a tanker truck this year on her way to school one day, her car totaled. She ignored her mother's demands to go to the hospital and instead came to yearbook class.
- **Initiative and Compassion:** Two days after the Mother Emanuel tragedy that claimed nine lives in Charleston, Sophie ventured to the church on her own with her camera. No one on the yearbook staff had assigned her to cover the event. She took beautiful, captivating photos of the church and people mourning. Sophie wrote a moving editorial for the yearbook about how the tragedy affected her. She created the spread for the yearbook all by herself. It was one of the finest additions to the 2016 book, and she took the initiative on her own to cover it. Her editorial and her photos were picked up by *The Island Eye News*.
- **Excellence:** The Town of Mount Pleasant Planning and Development Department hired the Wando yearbook staff for freelance work to create their 2015 annual report. Sophie became the lead student for the project with her photos and design. She also spent her free time on the weekends and Christmas break to shoot more photographs for the project. *The final product won a Hermes Creative Platinum Award, an international honor won alongside Fortune 500 companies and businesses including Pepsi, Sony Pictures, Time Warner, and IBM. Sophie's work is so good that it stands beside the best marketing and PR firms in the WORLD.* She did this all while excelling in her yearbook duties.
- **Leadership and Talent:** Sophie revolutionized the yearbook's photography department as the 2015-16 photo editor. Aside from her astounding photography that has netted her three SIPA Best in Show awards, her leadership and teaching skills have propelled the other photographers to produce award-winning work. *No student media program in the entire Southeast won more photography awards in 2016 than Wando yearbook, and we have Sophie to thank for that.* Those photographers would have followed Sophie onto a battlefield if she simply asked them to.
- **Service:** People across the school ask Sophie to lend her journalism skills to help them, and she accepts each time without requesting anything in return. Last year, one teacher asked Sophie to photograph her wedding reception on a Saturday. When the teacher came back from her honeymoon, she presented Sophie with a sizeable check for her services. *Sophie looked back at her with shock and refused the money because she had not expected to receive any compensation.*
- **Expertise:** Sophie teaches the basics of photography unit to my Journalism I class simply because she's better at it than I am.
- **Legacy:** One only needs to walk through the halls of Wando High School to see the permanent mark Sophie has left on the school. The walls are now covered throughout the school with either her photography or the photography of a student she mentored. Two giant banners Sophie designed and shot pictures for hang in the school: one as a general banner for Wando and the other for the Freshman Academy. She took the final photograph of Wando's late, legendary principal, Lucy Beckham, four days before Beckham died. That photo hangs on the walls or sits on the desks of numerous faculty members at this school. *Of Wando's 4,000-plus population, no single student has made such a visual impact on the campus. Sorry, let me reemphasize that. The very halls and rooms of Wando High School stand as a testimony to the journalistic impact created by Sophie Winnick.*
- **Responsibility and Balance:** Sophie works two jobs, takes multiple AP classes, and she still prioritizes yearbook and journalism while making good grades in all her classes. She is a pure journalism machine.
- **Volunteerism and Team Mentality:** Sophie serves on both the SCSPA and SIPA student board. She gives her free time to serve these organizations. She has taught sessions at these conferences to students and advisers alike. We also took on a special needs student to yearbook this year, and one of his assistants asked yearbook students to

volunteer to spend a day with him each week. I told Sophie she was too busy to volunteer, but she just shot me a look and signed up anyway. Every Monday, Sophie sits Zach down beside her and shows him how to work on the yearbook despite the fact that she takes on more work than anyone else on staff.

In my 11-year career, I've had two SCSPA Journalists of the Year (Ashley Brown in 2009 and Coralia Balasca in 2012). ***Sophie has brought in more individual awards than the two of them COMBINED.*** But Sophie wants more than individual awards. She is hungry for the yearbook staff as a whole to win top honors, and she is dedicated more than ever to that cause as this year's editor in chief. I only permit the best of my best to apply for Journalist of the Year. But Sophie is ***the*** absolute best I've ever taught and worked with.

Sophie is the most decorated student in Wando yearbook history (see list of awards). This includes winning third place in NSPA's environmental portrait photography contest, ***which marks the first time in history a Wando yearbook student has been a national finalist for a photography award.***

Sophie is bold; she brims with self-confidence. There is literally no task she believes she cannot accomplish in yearbook, from hanging off the side of a sailboat in the Charleston Harbor to snap an award-winning picture (she excelled at that) to trying to carry a massive speaker by herself at yearbook distribution day (she didn't excel at that). Sophie speaks with the confidence and maturity of someone 15 years her senior, and she is often mistaken for one. She leads the entire staff with a firm, commanding style, but she also wins their adoration with her positive attitude. But most importantly, her commitment to the yearbook and scholastic journalism has been infectious. Sophie sets the bar for the work ethic and ambition in yearbook, and she sets it sky-high.

Wando's yearbook's staff size has doubled in the past three years. We have to turn away half the students who apply. Our staff is now comprised of 42 students. Many of these students Sophie personally recruited to join the staff. Her sheer raw talent and journalistic power is only matched with her commitment to helping me build this program.

Sophie and I have spent hours upon hours over the last three years talking about journalism, leadership, and ideas for the yearbook. She has always listened to my advice intently and put it into practice as a leader. She admits her mistakes, and she is always hungry for more knowledge on how to be a better journalist and editor. We argue a lot; sometimes Sophie feels like more of a little sister to me than a student. But her arguments are always well-intended. She has lofty, phenomenal ideas for making the yearbook soar, and she isn't scared to challenge me—or our Jostens rep—when she believes we aren't seeing eye-to-eye with her. But I must say that sometimes I enjoy admitting to her that she was right and watching a smirk sneak across her face. Sophie wants us all to win, and she won't let anyone block that path.

Despite our enormous and bustling staff, Sophie takes time to pull staff members aside and sit down with them to review their story or spread design. She pours emphatic praise on them for stellar work, and she guides them with constructive criticism on how to improve. She is a natural leader, and there hasn't been a day in yearbook where she wasn't one: sports editor as a sophomore, photo editor as a junior, and now editor in chief her senior year.

The entire school—from the administration to the teachers to the students—knows Sophie. They know her for her physical work, and they know her for her reputation as one of Wando's strongest leaders. The Town of Mount Pleasant knows Sophie. Her photography and design have sung from the pages of their annual reports. Her writing on Charleston's worst tragedy in years has spoken to and moved people across Charleston County. And now people across the world have seen the beauty of her work.

The newspaper program at Wando wants her. The broadcast program wants her. They would trade their best for her and have told me so. But I got to be the lucky one when she chose to sign up for yearbook. Students like Sophie may only come around once in a career. For many advisers, maybe never at all. I'm sure there are many out there who think they've had a Sophie, or that their special editor is just like her. But I've met students from other schools. I've worked with other scholastic journalists from all over. There isn't another Sophie Winnick. Not by a long shot.

The most heartbreaking moment of my career as an adviser was when I left my previous school for Wando and said goodbye to my student media kids. I think that moment is going to be surpassed on June 1. That's the day Sophie Winnick walks the stage at graduation. I'll always cherish those years with her on the yearbook staff, but I know she will forever be the measuring stick to which I hold up every future student. No one worked harder. No one gave their heart more. No one accomplished as much as she did. No one taught so many so much. No student taught me as much as an adviser. There will never be another like Sophie Winnick because no one has this much drive and passion for something as simple as a high school yearbook.

***Sophie Winnick is your scholastic journalist of the year. She is your scholastic journalist of a lifetime.***

Phillip Caston  
Adviser, Wando High School yearbook

List of Sophie's Awards:

**National Scholastic Press Association**

Third Place, Environmental Photograph of the Year, 2016

**Southern Interscholastic Press Association**

First place, Sports Writing, 2016

Best in Show, Scenic/Pictorial Photography, 2016

Best in Show, Special Effect Photography, 2016

Best in Show, Academics Design (with Des Armstrong), 2016

**South Carolina Scholastic Press Association**

First place, Feature Photography, 2016

Third place, Sports Photography, 2015

Third place, Feature Photography, 2015

**Hermes International Creative Awards**

Platinum Award, 2016 (Sophie was the lead student on the project)