**Dave Knachel** graduated from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in 1981 with a bachelor’s degree in communication journalism. After holding various positions at newspapers in Virginia, he has spent the last 18 years of his full-time employment at his alma mater in the athletics communication department.

Knachel gave the following interview to Katharina Elberti for a Virginia Tech **Media Writing** class on Wednesday, February 26.

[*Edited for content*]

**What is your official title in the Virginia Tech Athletic Department and how did you acquire the position you are currently in?**

My title right now is photography manager. Over the course of my 18 years of full-time employment here, my title and list of duties has greatly changed. When I was initially hired my title was sports information director. In addition to doing photography, I did design work, writing and media relations dealing with student athletes. The scope of my duties then was larger than it is now; however, since the office has grown my area of focus has been narrowed down to photography. The only writing I do is brief things in HokieSports, a weekly publication for which I serve as the managing editor.

**Did you start working at Virginia Tech directly after your undergraduate studies concluded?**

I worked on and off for the company that owned the Radford, Christiansburg and Pulaski newspapers for six years. They were small newspapers, but I learned a great deal, because without a large staff, you end up doing more things than if you worked for a big newspaper. When I worked for newspapers, I did photography and also occasionally wrote news stories. Approximately a dozen times I was fortunate enough to be asked to write the lead story. I was promoted to design editor and led the redesign of all three newspapers. Sadly, no pay raise came with that promotion – that is how communications jobs tend to work.

**I know more work than meets the eye goes towards making HokieSports come out every week. Can you please explain the process you go through to make the weekly publication the success that it is?**

For HokieSports Weekly, we try to do a feature page for every sport that’s in-season. We actually wanted to do way more with the publication than we ended up doing. However, like most things involved in media, we’re limited by our resources – the biggest one being time. The sports information athletic communication people write the content, but they don’t write it to a finished state; they would all get F’s if they turned it in to a newswriting class. The majority of the pieces they give me are shortened versions of articles they have written for other things. They tend to focus mostly on number and game statistics. What we want for the weekly [publication] is to have something less numbers-based and more focused on the feature. The overall goal is to keep everything short.

**Is your current job what the “10-year-old you” imagined for his career?**

When I was that age I wanted to be a gym teacher, so at least I knew I wanted to be involved in sports. I didn’t do anything in high school that led to my career here. I always enjoyed photography, but I came to Virginia Tech to major in forestry. My very first day on campus there was an advertisement in the Collegiate Times about a meeting for people who were interested in photography. I went to the meeting and decided I wanted be involved in that. Within a few weeks, I wanted to switch my major to communication journalism and the rest is history.

**It’s great to see how you are a product of the atmosphere I’m currently in and where you’ve ended up today. It gives my career aspirations hope.**

When I was in school, I got a great deal of hope like you’re saying. Working for student publications and things like that allowed me to work alongside the professionals. I would look at the Roanoke Times on Monday and notice my pictures were just like theirs. Seeing that is what made me say, “Hey, I can do this for a living.”

**You mentioned that you had been involved in newspapers as well. Would you care to elaborate on that experience?**

I worked for a company that had three papers, but I basically worked at the one in Christiansburg. It was a small newsroom with two or three reporters, a news editor and myself. It was a small newspaper so everyone got his or her hands involved in every aspect. The only thing I didn’t do at the newspaper, was run the presses. To me, that was one of the neat things about working for a smaller newspaper because I was involved in each edition from start to finish. If the circulations people didn’t show up, I even had to load the truck. [Laughs.] I did whatever needed to be done to get the newspaper out. Something that’s interesting about newspapers is that everything revolves around deadlines and every day you put a product out to the public. It gets you in a different frame of mind where the paper is going to go out one way or the other, but it also gets you into the mode of finishing things. When you put out a newspaper and you make a mistake, it’s gone. Everyone in the county or whoever gets the newspaper sees that mistake; there’s no chance to put it back on the press and run it again. There’s certain finality every day when that paper goes out: you’re done for that day, and then you start on the next one.

**What made you decide to come back to Virginia Tech full time after all of your work with Virginia newspapers?**

I never quit working for the athletic department at Virginia Tech, but the first time I received a paycheck for full-time work was in 1984. Even when I worked for the newspapers, I still did some freelance photography for Tech. I had a full-time job with the papers but I also worked about 15 hours a week putting together the Hokie Huddler, which later turned into HokieSports magazine. HokieSports is the predecessor to Hokie Huddler. If you add up the whole scope of everything that I have been involved with in Virginia Tech Athletics, not only does it span a multitude of years but also an incredible amount of new technology.

**Is there such a thing as a Monday through Friday, 9 to 5 with a profession like yours? Is it ever a burden? What about this job makes you willing to dedicate so many hours?**

At this point of my life this lifestyle has been my reality for around 30 years. From the day I went to college I’ve been getting up in the morning, going to work, going to sleep, and then getting up the next day and doing it all over again. I’m fortunate that I get to do something every day that I really love to do, so it doesn’t seem like work. To me, it would be boring to have a day when I don’t have to work; I wouldn’t know what to do with myself. My wife thinks I’m crazy, but at times I will literally sit there twirling my thumbs because I’m not working; it’s always been that way.

**With sports photography it is said that getting the perfect shot has everything to do with luck and being in the right place at the right time. Have you learned any tricks of the trade over the years to overcome this stereotype?**

I’m very self-critical when it comes to my work, so I am still looking for the perfect shot. People think I take good pictures, but usually when I look at my images I’m seeing all sorts of things that I could have done better or could have gotten luckier with. There’s a good deal of luck in sports photography, and I’ve yet to see the perfect picture. I certainly haven’t taken it. [Laughs.] It’s some of what makes that part of the job fun: getting to be competitive with myself. I try to do well every time I go out and shoot and am always looking for the perfect shot.

**“Getting experience” is something that is preached to 21st century college students, whether it is with internships, clubs or paid jobs. What is your perspective on this idea?**

Internships are vital if you want to be in the communications industry, especially athletic communications. Media is something you have to get involved in early on in your college days. I could write a list a mile long of people who have come into this office at the start of their senior year and offered to volunteer and I have to turn them away. It takes at least a year to learn how to do things in this field. While it does help them prepare for a career, if they come in as a senior and we take an entire year teaching them, it does nothing to benefit us. My advice to anyone would be to get involved in things like that early and often. The athletics communication area is a very small, specific discipline and there are a finite number of colleges and positions. I can guarantee that nobody in the entire country has ever been hired for a full-time job in this field without having an internship.

**You have had the opportunity to work with numerous Virginia Tech Division 1 teams over the years, so if you had to pick a team to join – just for fun – which team would it be and why?**

I was a pole-vaulter in high school so that would definitely be my calling here. When I’m shooting track, I sit on the sidelines and have this dream where I’m going to run over to the pole-vaulters, pick up their pole and start running. I love shooting it because I understand it. The first thing I do is look at the pictures and analyze the athlete’s stance and positioning. I like shooting all different sports because they all have different challenges to them. Some sports are more exciting than others but, from a personal standpoint, when you’re shooting the sport you love it’s much more fun.

**Is there anything you wanted to do that you’ve yet to accomplish? Is this career what you want to be doing until the day you retire?**

I never really set out to do this kind of job. From the beginning, I came to Virginia Tech to do something completely different. When I switched to doing photography, I never really gave any thought to whether or not it was what I wanted to be doing forever. I’ve had a few opportunities over the years to do other things, but I never pursued them because I enjoyed doing what I was doing. If they’ll let me, I will probably work here for the rest of my career. It would be hard to do this job and work this hard somewhere where I didn’t care about the school. I am very passionate about Virginia Tech and Virginia Tech sports, so it’s easier for me to have a 17-hour day or get up on the weekends to come to work when I’d rather be doing something else.

**What personal advice would you give to a college student who aspires to work in your current job?**

That’s an interesting question because still photography is somewhat of a dying art, so my advice to someone who wants to focus solely on photography would be to not do it. Make sure that you learn other skills and can offer a variety to anybody that might employ you. I don’t think the need for great photography will ever go away. You also better be able to write regardless of what field you get into in communications. Most people are surprised too because if they don’t know me and they don’t know what I do, they think, “Oh, he’s just a photographer.” However, I have a journalism background, and I would like to think of myself as one of the better copy editors in this department. I don’t always speak well and I don’t always write well, but if I need to, I know the proper ways to write and edit. It blows my mind when I get pieces from people who have graduated from college, are well-educated and they can’t write; it’s horrible.

**Is there anything you would like to add or any questions you have for me?**

It helps to know about the sports that you’re shooting and I think that logic carries over to any job you’re doing. If you’re going to be a good court reporter, you better learn about what happens in the courtroom. If anyone thinks that they’re going to go to college and spend four years learning and then go out into the world and do what they learned, that’s just a silly notion. I’m 51 years old, and I have to learn something new every day. Technology is changing, and it’s a non-stop learning process. New things come around so much faster these days, and you better be prepared to keep learning for the rest of your life. It doesn’t matter what field you’re in, you’re going to be doing something different next year than you were last year.

A bit of advice that I would also give to people – which I haven’t followed myself, which is why I feel qualified to give it – is that it’s important to have other things in your life than just your career. If you’re a motivated person and you want to succeed, it’s easy to forget that and to not give any attention to other parts of your life; I didn’t. I’m a workaholic, I overwork, and I don’t spend enough time with my family. Looking back I regret that I didn’t stay involved in other things and know I should have spent more time doing things outside of work. It’s all a balancing act.