

cover story

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TO THE TRAVIS HEIGHTS ELEMENTARY

PHOTOJOURNALISM TEAM



Eric and Adrian proudly display the wares they created for Market Days. The boys smile with confidence as they sit behind a desk with hand-made toys spread out in front of them. Dutch looks through the viewfinder of his camera and asks the boys if they're ready. "Yep," they respond. He squats down to get a good angle. A flash of light and, click, Dutch has the first photo for this week's assignment. He shows the image to the boys to get their approval before moving on to another table.

Dutch is a member of a team of students at Travis Heights Elementary called the "Photogs". They work as photojournalists, documenting student learning and activities around the school. These young photojournalists publish their news on a blog called "Thunder News", the name is a take-off of the school mascot, the Thunderbirds. Anabella Davis, one of the Photogs, feels empowered from the experience. "I like that we're only elementary students but still have the power to blog on the website. We've learned a ton of tips for taking photos, how to post, and how to write short paragraphs."

Three years ago, volunteers at the school updated and revised the school website. The website was a great means of sharing school information with families and community members.

The volunteers could keep up with posting upcoming school-wide events, and share a lot of information there. But parents asked questions about the in-depth, multidisciplinary units their children were learning in their classrooms. There was amazing learning going on in the school. They began to ask: how can we share it? Who would know the most about those units? Who in the school could learn and use the technology with ease? The answer came to them: the students! This is how the Photogs came to be.

That first year a small group of 4th and 5th graders applied to become part of the team. They had to be willing to give up one lunchtime with their friends once a week. Professional photographers were brought in to teach the children how to take interesting and appealing pictures. Using cameras purchased on eBay, the children practiced taking photos while thinking about angle and composition. They shared their pictures with each other and gave feedback about what they liked. As Elissa Ulrich, a 4th grader, describes it, "I have learned that taking a picture isn't just a click of a button, you have to get bendy and take one picture from a bunch of different angles."

A Travis Heights resident and retired teacher, Mary Friedman, meets the children once a week during their lunchtime. She helps them under-

stand the social ethics of photojournalism and the courtesy of checking with the subject about each picture. She arranges for professionals to visit with the children and teaches the students how to use WordPress to publish their images and writing. "I'm not an expert in photojournalism. I'm learning along with the children," says Mary. "My next goal is to have the students learn from professional journalists. They are excited about the possibility of seeing their work in a magazine as well as on the school website."

This year the team has grown to seventeen 4th and 5th graders, with new 3rd graders joining mid-year. Lunchtimes together are noisy and busy. The students joke around while supporting each other and providing a valuable service to the school. "I like the way everyone in photojournalism seems like a family," says 5th grader, Adeline Sinatra.

When they get stuck, they call over a teammate and get their advice. Some days no posts are finished, other days five are completed. Students teach each other, as well as learn from experts. Another 5th grader, Maya Leija, says it like this, "I like the way we have fun while still being able to get our work done!"

Look out for work from these young photojournalists in *Life in Travis Heights Magazine* over the next year!

If you'd like to find out more, want to visit, or would like to support this work, you can find our contact info on the website at: <https://www.travisheightselementary.com/thundernews>






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