

Helen Soteriou – The Guardian

Part one - Panic and shattered illusions

On the briefing day, I was welcomed with a chorus of 'Tim knows everything', from various people around the room. They were of course referring to Tim Radford, science editor of The Guardian newspaper. Slight terror seeped in, as I though I had better prepare for a bumpy ride. Tim knowing everything, and Helen doubting how much she actually knew, seemed to be shaky foundations for a stress free placement.

Oh, how wrong I was. Apart from the fact that Tim does actually know everything, (you could easily listen to him talk all day, as he eloquently merges information from different fields together, along with a spattering of quotes to make a point). I sensed I would learn a lot under his guidance, I also sensed I would have fun, as our e-mail and phone conversations indicated that he was genuinely interested in making the placement a positive experience for me.

Like Charlie in the Chocolate Factory, Tim handed me the golden ticket - a tour of the Guardian, a couple of weeks before the placement. However, it is fair to say that I was no stranger to The Guardian. I have passed 119 Farringdon Road many times. Sitting on the top deck of the bus peering out, wondering what it would be like inside. My Clark Kent / Louis Lane visions were, however, quickly quashed, People do not scream to each other across the desks, no one is frantically chewing gum whilst loudly tapping away at their PCs, trying to meet looming deadlines, and the editor is not enclosed in his ivory tower, with his feet up on the desk.

The first floor of Farringdon Road is huge. It is open plan, with various sections allocated to different specialities. When we got to the science section, I was introduced to everyone, and made to feel very welcome - and not at all like I would be shoved in a corner somewhere, and called upon to make tea, and arrange packets of digestives on side plates that have seen better days.

I spent a lot of time reading in the couple of weeks before my placement. Plus making sure anyone and everyone knew that I would be working at The Guardian, an exhaustive lists which included my postman, driving instructor, and a spattering of bus conductors, security guards and cleaners. It truly is a great honour to work at such a prestigious newspaper.

As the 16th August approached, I became more and more nervous. The same questions just kept churning around in my head, unable to find an outlet- 'what if I'm rubbish?'. Well, I was soon to find out, as the appointed day arrived, and I turned up at the offices, in what was my fifth change of clothing that morning.

Part 2 – work hard and play hard

My placement was divided into two chunks. Three weeks would be spent at offices of The Guardian in London, and one week at the b.a. festival of science in Exeter.

During my first week, I was involved with Life's science fiction special. My role was to conduct telephone interviews with eminent scientists, to find out what their favourite sci-fi book or film was. Many did not have an interest in sci-fi, whilst those who did, talked passionately about what their favourite film / book meant to them.

I was also involved in the dispatch section, which is a page of brief news clips from around the globe. I was shown the press releases, learnt what makes a good story, and how to write articles - although my long rambling style got me into a lot of trouble. Tim tried to teach me to use two or three words instead of fifty. He also taught me to keep things simple, and not to add formulas and technical jargon, if I was unable to understand it myself.

During my second week, I got to attend the Beagle 2 press conference, where we received an explanation of what went wrong with the mission. I also got to see the experienced hacks in action. Tim took me to Crystal Palace for my second trip. Where we saw Shaolin monks perform for the press, well...us, and 'nuts' magazine. Tim wrote a lovely piece on their history, and the science behind their strength.

During the Festival of Science, the ba requested my help. One evening I was asked to report on a session hosted by Prof. Robert Winston, another day I was interviewing PhD students about their research, and the importance of being able to communicate science to a general audience, whilst another days assignment involved reporting on a hypnosis talk and demonstration.

At the festival, there were press briefings every half an hour during the morning, a number of talks during the day, and various activities during the evening. Plus, of course, the receptions - I now know what Tim meant by living on canapés and wine for the week!

By Friday afternoon, everyone was packed up, and ready to go home, I however, was awaiting the sci-fi film all nighter. A challenge I could not refuse, after my contributions to the sci-fi special edition. And in case you were wondering – no, I did not manage the whole 13 hours.