



UNIVERSITY OF
MARYLAND



PHILIP MERRILL
COLLEGE of JOURNALISM

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PANEL DISCUSSION:
HOWARD CENTER GRADUATES DISCUSS HOW THE
HOWARD CENTER PREPARED THEM FOR PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS

*“The Howard Center gives you a mindset of possibilities
instead of a mindset of limitations.”*

- Trish Ahmed, Class of '22

OVERVIEW

After introducing themselves, their backgrounds, and what led them to Merrill, these five recent Howard Center graduates shared their thoughts and recollections on their experiences as Howard Center students. Below are snippets of the graduates' backgrounds and samples of their responses to a Q&A led by Howard Center faculty, followed by questions from the audience.

INTRODUCTIONS



Trisha Ahmed graduated from the Philip Merrill College of Journalism in May 2022 and currently works for the Associated Press (AP) as a State House Reporter in Minnesota. Trisha completed her undergraduate studies at Johns Hopkins University, studying neuroscience, sociology and social policy.



Kara Newhouse, a May 2022 graduate, is working for the public radio station KQED in San Francisco, as an editor for MindShift, a podcast and web vertical focused on the future of learning. The podcast has a national audience primarily of teachers. Kara entered Merrill as an older graduate student who studied anthropology as an undergrad. Prior to Merrill she was a local education reporter.



Luciana Perez Ulibe McMillan, a May 2022 graduate, is working for the Raleigh News and Observer covering politics and the US Senate races. She majored in political science as an undergraduate of North Carolina State University. After graduating from Maryland, Luciana worked with Searchlight New Mexico as a Roy W. Howard Fellow.



Aadit Tambe, a May 2022 graduate, is working for the Washington Post as a news designer focusing on interactive development and storytelling. Aadit completed his graduate studies at the University of Iowa with a BA in journalism and mass communications and a minor in German.



Nick McMillan graduated in December 2021. Post-graduation, he worked with NPR's investigative journalism team through a Roy W. Howard Fellowship. At the end of the Fellowship, NPR offered Nick a full-time job as an associate producer. Nick attended Rice University as an undergraduate and majored in statistics. Post-Rice, Nick had a Scripps Howard Fellowship with Newsy.

How has the Howard Center impacted your careers and your lives as journalists?

“As an editor, in terms of experience, the leadership opportunities at the Howard Center gave me real skills and the confidence to be in this role.” - Kara

“The projects the Howard Center takes are real-world projects, and what comes with that is the skill of solving real-world problems. “[T]he Howard Center really set me up to be my own problem solver.” - Aadit

“The collaboration at the Howard Center is second to none. You are working with undergrad and graduate students, and I think that is what is really beautiful. You’re always learning something new, which enables you to take things from idea to prototype and bounce them off each other. When you’re able to talk about your stories and work with people outside of your department, you realize the benefit of being collaborative.” – Nick

From your perspective, what effect has the Howard Center had on the Philip Merrill College of Journalism?

“The Howard Center is what put the University of Maryland (UMD) on my radar. It was through a Howard Center project that I became really impressed with what UMD Howard Center students were putting out as journalists. It’s why I decided to come to UMD.” – Kara

“Pretty amazing how many other students get involved in the Howard Center work. Whether doing public records requests in their undergrad work, media law classes, undergrad data classes, motion graphics classes, or doing work for a Howard Center project, the Howard Center brings them together to work cohesively. From what I saw, a lot of pieces of this real-world journalism was happening before the Howard Center, but the Howard Center has been able to bring them together into more cohesive structures and missions. So, I think that has made a huge impact on the school of journalism.” - Luciana

“The first project when the Howard Center opened was “Code Red.” We did one piece of it focusing on Baltimore, and NPR did a more national story. Our data analysis contributed to their national story.” - Nick

Were post-graduate Roy W. Howard Fellowships helpful in launching your professional careers? (Nick and Luciana received post-graduate Roy W. Howard Fellowships)

“Yes, it helped get my foot in the door and gave me the opportunity to show the scope of the projects that I worked on right out of graduate school. Without the Howard Center and/or the Roy W. Howard Fellowship, it’s hard to show just how impactful the work you were doing was or the complexity. I was able to collaborate with the Data Biz Team at NPR even though I was on the investigative desk. That goes to show that my experiences at the Howard Center allowed me to take the reins [at NPR] and take the next step.” – Nick

“The Fellowship allowed me to work with Searchlight New Mexico, and the Howard Center gave me the data skills that help me with that reporting and helped me with deep investigative reporter – so it was very helpful. Now at the Raleigh, I do a lot more daily, but I do a mix of long-term pieces, which the Fellowship and my Howard Center training helped with.” - Luciana

Is there anything in the newsroom that surprised you that maybe you didn't learn at Merrill?

“Not going to lie, it has been hard starting up, not just at the AP but in a role that is so different from the investigative reporting I learned how to do at UMD, but what has made it a lot better is the fact that I can call my Howard Center mentors..., and this community of Howard Center friendships has helped so much... just knowing that I have people to ask questions who have a range of experiences is really helping me a lot.” – Trisha

“I was amazed at how robust the investigative fact-checking process was at the Howard Center compared to the real world. At the Howard Center, you had to build in enough time for really robust fact-checking, and I thought, oh, I'm going to be fact-checking just as much as the Howard Center, but I found that it is not as much of a process. I was grateful for the amount of fact-checking the Howard Center requires of us.” – Nick

Do the two Howard Centers (UMD and ASU) collaborate with each other?

“ASU is collaborating with us on one of our current projects with the Associated Press. Both Howard Centers attend the weekly meetings with the AP. And it's just fantastic.” – Kathy Best

Has the Howard Center prepared you to combat mis/disinformation?

“Going back to the Howard Center fact-checking process, my brain is constantly working in that capacity. Almost on default nowadays, questioning is this misinformation, is this disinformation, how should I tackle this, how should my team tackle this? All the time, even more sometimes than my professional colleagues who have been doing this for twenty years. The Howard Center fact-checking process, and the Merrill process, have engrained this deep sense of duty that I need to fact-check every single word, and that foundation has just been the focal point. It's a big part of my identity as a journalist.” – Trisha

“For me, a big thing I learned at the Howard Center was to check your bias. Even though I hear many things that I think are misinformation or I say, ‘I don't believe it,’ I like to go to the source, the primary source, speak to a lot of people, and make sure I am understanding it right. At the Howard Center, you really learn to do that, and it's very important when covering the US senate race.” – Luciana

“At the Howard Center, we do data analysis along with our stories. We work to trace our findings back to their data sources. Even though I don't deal with data on a day-to-day basis, what you learn allows you to be able to take your editor back to the source and tell them how you got to where you are, learning that has been really valuable.” – Aadit

How do you see the Howard Center shaping and impacting the journalism industry?

“I know the people coming out of the Howard Center are five thousand times ahead... which is a huge benefit, whether in investigative roles or not. It benefits any kind of journalism role. My role is not as a data journalist, but I am bringing more data journalism capacity to the newsroom I am going to.” – Luciana

“[The Howard Center] is building a community of journalists and the type of journalists who are not afraid of thinking outside of the box. A lot of the solutions we come up with for our projects allows us to think big and execute on those ideas. When you have journalists with our type of training and you get into a newsroom, you can push those different ways of thinking by combining different technologies and resources in innovative ways that many people don't think are possible or feasible...” – Nick

“The projects the Howard Center takes are real-world projects, and what comes with that is the skill of solving real-world problems. Often what is taught in classrooms is dealing with cleaner data, or data that is more structured, but the problems we encountered at the Howard Center really set me up to be my own problem solver and work through things...” – Aadit

“The industry is filled with journalists who think about their limitations. The Howard Center gives you a mindset of possibilities instead of a mindset of limitations.” – Trisha