

# Alumni Gazette



# Building Instagram

Tyler Kieft '09, '10 (T5) helps develop some of the photo-sharing app's latest features.

By Caitlin Mack '12, '13 (T5)

WHEN **TYLER KIEFT** '09, '10 (T5) SHARES striking landscape photos of the San Francisco Bay, scenes of New Zealand, and shots of picturesque forests on his Instagram feed, he receives hundreds of likes from almost 6,000 followers. You would expect nothing less from Kieft, an Instagram engineer who has helped design several of the photo- and video-sharing application's flagship features.

Instagram, a massively popular application among smartphone owners, each month allows over 200 million iPhone, Android, and online users to edit photos and videos and share them with followers.

"When I started at Instagram, the entire staff could fit around a single table," says Kieft. "It's exciting to work on something that touches the lives of so many people."

In the last year, Kieft has been integral in the design of several Instagram features, including "Photos of You," which enables users to tag friends; the app's video-sharing feature, which allows users to create and share videos up to 15 seconds long; and Instagram Direct, which lets users send photos and videos to specific followers.

Kieft joined Facebook in June 2012, two months after the social media giant acquired Instagram for what was then a headline-grabbing \$1 billion. In November 2012, he was one of the first engineers hired from Facebook to work on Instagram and the second person to work on the application specifically for Android smartphone users.

Most recently, he was the sole engineer on a project to update Instagram for Android, working with a designer to update the app's look while also reducing its size and making the application run faster.

"I take great pride in the quality of Instagram for Android," says Kieft. "My aim is to make the app feel great and add features that enhance every user's experience."

Kieft says the appeal of working for Instagram lies in the small-time feel of a start-up with the perks of a big company. "Instagram is sectioned off from Facebook," he says. "In some ways I feel like I've found the perfect space for myself."

During his final year at Rochester, Kieft hit it off with a Columbia University student at a career fair and began collaborating

on an online video transcription service. After graduating in 2010 with a degree in electrical and computer engineering and a minor in computer science, Kieft and two cofounders launched the service as SpeakerText. Though Kieft and his cofounders raised \$1 million through Silicon Valley investors and garnered five-digit monthly revenues, they failed to agree on a cohesive business model, resulting in Kieft's departure from the company in 2012.

The decision to choose an entrepreneurial experience right out of college prepared Kieft for the job at Instagram. "The business impact it had made me a stronger engineer," he says. "You need to think about



more than the product itself. What is the biggest reason that people use your product? What kinds of features are customers calling for? Sometimes you need to gauge these questions yourself."

For Kieft and the Instagram for Android team, the mobile platform poses challenges associated with the scope of Android-powered hardware, which ranges from inexpensive small phones to high-definition fast phones with large screens.

Philip McAllister, engineering manager

▲ **PICTURE THIS:** Photos from Kieft's Instagram feed (opposite) provide a picture of his interests as an avid user of the photo-sharing application that he has helped develop as an early member of the San Francisco-based company (above).

for the Instagram for Android team, says Kieft has "made a huge impact on millions of people by making Instagram look beautiful and feel great on the thousands of different Android phones." According to McAllister, Kieft has led Android engineering efforts on video playback, sponsored posts (which most users know as advertising), and client performance.

The success of tech start-ups like Instagram has led to an increase in demand for software engineers, with many software companies vying for the same people.

"You don't see how software is ruling the world until you come out here," says Kieft. "There is a mind-set of dreaming big and

the most important thing is ability. You're judged less on formal qualifications."

Kieft says his alma mater's open curriculum prepared him for the entrepreneurial mind-set of the tech industry. "At Rochester, you get to craft your education and make your own decisions. That affects your confidence and your career," he says. "It's important to choose what you're passionate about rather than choose the 'right career.'"

For Kieft, his passion follows him wherever he goes. "When I see people using Instagram on a train or at the airport, I think, 'Wow, I helped make that,'" he says. "There is such a huge positive association with the app." **R**

*Caitlin Mack '12, '13 (T5) is a Rochester-based freelance writer.*

# The Future of Broadcasting

Broadcast talent agent Richard Leibner '59 pays close attention to the evolution of the industry he helped pioneer 50 years ago.

By Caitlin Mack '12, '13 (T5)

LONG RECOGNIZED AS A RESPECTED PREDICTOR of cultural shifts in the news industry, **Richard Leibner '59** is used to adapting to the constantly changing national media landscape. In response to the growth of online news and competitive cable channels in the past decade, Leibner predicts that competition among broadcast news outlets will only increase in years to come.

"There will be a shakeout of a lot of small start-ups and newer media outlets like *The Huffington Post*, which get a tremendous amount of traffic," says Leibner, the founder and president of the talent agency N.S. Bienstock. "Local television and regional television news will also gain importance as people age and the demographic changes."

Leibner, who represents over 600 broadcast professionals, including stars like Anderson Cooper, Bill O'Reilly, and Robin Roberts, says that audiences for network broadcast news have declined, particularly after the 2008 recession.

"Shows used to reach audiences between 20 and 28 million people a night; now it's closer to 6 or 7 million," he says. "In the last 10 years, cable news channels like MSNBC, Al-Jazeera America, and Fox have grown—they command smaller audiences but are still huge drivers of news."

N.S. Bienstock, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year, has also had to adapt to changes in the news industry. In January, the company became a unit of major Hollywood firm United Talent Agency, a shift that Leibner says will give his clients "more reach and access into the ever-changing media and entertainment landscape."

In recognition of their own talent for staying ahead of that changing landscape, Leibner and his wife and business partner, Carole Cooper, were among 11 industry leaders honored last fall at the 11th annual Giants of Broadcasting ceremony at New York City's Gotham Hall. Other nominees at the yearly event, sponsored by the Library of American Broadcasting, included Disney/ABC Television Group President Anne Sweeney, television personality and *Jeopardy!* game-show host Alex Trebek, *60 Minutes* correspondent Morley Safer,

and Black Entertainment Television (BET) founder Robert Johnson, and others.

According to Leibner, the intersection of media, entertainment, and news has shifted over the years. Satirical news shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* air in prime time and ABC's *Good Morning, America* is a "lighter broadcast that focuses more on pop culture, not hard news."

"The success of *60 Minutes* as a cash cow changed attitudes toward news as something you do for prestige and public spirit," he says. "Dick Salant (former president of CBS News) used to ask at the morning meeting, 'What does the public need to

license, Leibner went into business in 1964 with his father, Sol Leibner, and insurance agent Nate Bienstock, whose clients included legendary CBS correspondent Eric Sevareid and several other broadcast journalists.

"At that time, news was beginning to reach more people in a vivid way," says Leibner. "You could watch developments in the civil rights movement, the race to the moon, and the Vietnam War at dinnertime. The day Kennedy was shot, the country just stopped and watched the news."

Leibner has garnered respect for his command of the broadcast industry and for his attention to his clients' interests. Known for



know?" Now it's become more "What does the public want to know?"

Leibner questions the quality of online news, which, while providing the world with instantly available information, generally doesn't adhere to the editorial codes that traditionally existed in television and print. "The Internet has no standards," he says. "I don't think this is healthy unless they find a way to monetize it so they can pay for serious investigative journalism."

Equipped with a degree from Rochester, followed by a master's degree and a CPA

▲ **INDUSTRY GIANTS: Spouses and business partners, Leibner and Cooper were honored at last fall's 11th annual Giants of Broadcasting ceremony, sponsored by the Library of American Broadcasting.**

working hard for his clients, he negotiated a then unprecedented 10-year, \$22 million contract for Dan Rather to replace retiring *CBS Evening News* anchor Walter Cronkite in 1980. He also helped win a \$6-million-a-year deal for ABC's Diane Sawyer in 1994. CBS News special correspondent Bernard Goldberg once said that Leibner was "like a spouse, except he knows some clients *better* than a spouse."

Despite a long career and extensive industry accomplishments, Leibner still finds wonder in the evolving world of media. "From the very beginning this industry has fascinated me, and there's so much more knowledge now," he says. **R**

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# In the News



**PRIME TIME:** Talley, a Hajim School graduate and entrepreneur, made a successful pitch for his company U-Laces to celebrity investors on the ABC television reality series *Shark Tank*.

## Shark Bites

Entrepreneur **Tim Talley** '88 has reeled in a prominent venture capitalist. Appearing on the ABC television series *Shark Tank*, in which entrepreneurs present their business plans to celebrity investors, Talley pitched his product, customized shoelaces called U-Laces. One of the sharks, billionaire Mark Cuban, bit.

A graduate of the Hajim School of Engineering & Applied Sciences,

Talley has been producing and selling his colorful, self-styled laces since 2009. He auditioned for *Shark Tank* in spring 2013, and beat the roughly 1-in-200 odds to win a spot on the show.

Cuban's agreement to invest \$200,000 in return for a stake in U-Laces offers Talley the opportunity to tap into a major target market: basketball fans. As owner of the National Basketball

Association's Dallas Mavericks, Cuban offered to sell U-Laces in Mavericks team shops. Chances are those U-Laces will be blue, black, gray, and white. But U-Laces are available in all kinds of colors and designed to encourage endless combinations.

Talley shared some lessons from his entrepreneurial journey in a public talk at the Center for Entrepreneurship in April.

## Guiding the MoMA

**Darby English** '02 (PhD) has been named a consulting curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A leading scholar of American and European art with a specialization in work by black artists, he joins MoMA to help the museum in its strategic goal to strengthen its collections of work by black artists.

A graduate of Rochester's program in visual and cultural studies, English began his career teaching modern and contemporary art and cultural studies at the University of Chicago. In 2013, he became director of research and academic program at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Mass. He'll maintain that role.



**ART ADVICE:** English, a graduate of the program in visual and cultural studies, has been hired by the Museum of Modern Art as a consulting curator.



**MILITARY STAR:** Schanely received her brigadier general star pin in a promotion ceremony that included her husband, Steve.

## A U.S. Military First

**Miyako Newell Schanely** '95 (MBA) is making military history with her promotion to the rank of brigadier general in the U.S. Army Reserves. She's the first Japanese-American woman and the first female engineer to reach the rank, and the second-ranking Japanese-American woman in the entire U.S. military, following Air Force Major General Susan Mashiko.

A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Schanely served in Germany and Panama

before becoming part of the Army Reserves. She's the deputy commander of the 412th Theater Engineer Command in Vicksburg, Miss., and as a civilian, serves as executive director of the State University of New York North Country Consortium, a collaboration to bring undergraduate and graduate programs to Fort Drum and northern New York.

Schanely is the granddaughter of Japanese immigrants. Her mother, father, and stepfather served in the U.S. military.