

Sally Deneen, Mentor
Kelsey Dayton, Mentee
Post-New Orleans Narrative

On the last day of SEJ's annual conference, Kelsey Dayton ran out of business cards.

A few days earlier she'd sat drinking coffee with Sally Deneen, her SEJ mentor. They were finally face-to-face and Sally offered up an important tip. Freelancing is a solo job that's dependent on other people. It's all about networking, building a support system of like-minded journalists and getting face-time with editors who will buy your work. It was nothing new and it was advice Sally could have given over the phone. But thanks to the Rosen Fellowship they were together in New Orleans for the annual SEJ conference and Sally could offer a caveat: By the end of the weekend, Kelsey should be out of business cards. As soon as they finished their coffee, Sally started introducing Kelsey to everyone she knew.

Sally's attended many conferences through the years, but this was the most rewarding. Here, she easily could connect Kelsey to people who could help her in her freelancing career. What Kelsey needed most was to learn ways to finance reporting trips for her story ideas, break into news outlets and gain the confidence that working as an environmental journalist was doable. While Sally's a seasoned freelancer and had been able to offer advice by phone and email, the conference offered a wealth of opportunities to hear from many experienced journalists and also network with people from all over.

Attending the conference together energized Sally and Kelsey. The freelance pitch slam revealed concrete do's and don'ts from real-life pitchable editors. Networking chats on a field-trip bus brought a sense of camaraderie and unexpected inspiration -- one freelancer they met on a bus mentioned his resolve to make 30 pitches in 30 days, sparking Kelsey and Sally to plan to increase their pitch volume, too.

They learned about funding reporting projects through grants, beyond SEJ's important funding opportunities, such as the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting.

And one of the best parts was sharing the experience. After each session or field trip they were able to quickly debrief, brainstorming ways they could take what they'd just learned and apply it to their own work.

For years Sally's stock line about freelancing versus working as a staff reporter has been: "I like everything about freelancing better -- except the pay."

It seems each year the pay gets worse and the assignments thinner. It can be tough to maintain enthusiasm, even as a veteran journalist. Sally found herself inspired by Kelsey's enthusiasm.

Kelsey started freelancing only a couple of years ago, originally as a stop-gap when the newspaper she worked at eliminated its environmental reporting position -- which she held. While she captured enough assignments to keep her working, she felt alone, missing the support of colleagues and guidance of an editor. A big reason why she joined SEJ was the mentorship program. While Sally was responsive and supportive from a distance, she still felt alone.

Going to the SEJ conference invigorated them both. It provided that sense of "Yes, this is why I am a journalist." The camaraderie shared with other members provided reassurance and motivation to keep going.

While attending this year's conference would have been valuable no matter what, attending together made it even better. Kelsey, despite having a job requiring her to talk to strangers, is shy in new groups. Alone, she would have likely hung back a bit, not knowing anyone. Instead she went home with a stack of business cards-- none her own, and a connection and friendship with Sally cemented by meeting in person and that will last even though their official mentoring year has now ended.