

SEJ Conference Narrative – Abbey Dufoe (mentee) / Matthew Wheeland (mentor)

The New Orleans SEJ Conference, somehow more than two months behind us already, offered a great adventure and a hands-on experience of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast as well as the most pressing issues in environmental journalism today.

Our mentor-mentee pair followed fairly divergent paths at the conference, going on different tours and largely attending different sessions, but we were able to meet up several times to chat and had a nice mentoring lunch on Friday. As a result, our experiences may vary.

For Matt, this was my third SEJ conference in the 12 years I've been an SEJ member, after attending the Vermont and Stanford conferences. From a professional standpoint, the conference was another great opportunity to see old friends, make new friends, and build professional relationships. And as a freelancer attending my first SEJ conference, the possibilities were even broader: I met so many other freelancers, as well as people from so many publications, that there were almost too many leads to follow up on.

And serving as a mentor also reminded me how an SEJ conference can be simultaneously intimidating and welcoming to newcomers — the crowds are so full of old friends and colleagues it can be hard to make room for new faces, but I've always found SEJers to excel at that, and meeting new people is easier at an SEJ conference than almost anywhere else.

This conference also marked my third visit to New Orleans, and I saw an entirely new side of the city. I'd come back to New Orleans in early 2007 and seen the earliest stages of rebuilding and recovery happen, but taking the "Long Road Home" tour during this year's conference, I got to see up close some of the inspiring results of the recovery process, as well as seeing the overlooked places that still have a long journey ahead.

For Abbey, I knew what to expect heading into this conference, having been to so many conferences throughout my academic career. Through the conference standpoint, I found myself facing the same decisions – do I have a networking lunch with someone I met from the forums, or do I go to an important speaker? Do I go to this session on water, or do I take that time to instead prepare for an interview I have to conduct? I felt the same way as Matt – I met so many people, some of which I haven't even had the time to follow up with yet.

However, I wasn't expecting it to be so personal. On the bus to my full-day tour, I bonded with someone from Greenpeace who told me to "find my own happiness" and live a little before getting an "adult job." Alternately, talking with some of the more experienced journalists made me realize that I'm excited for my future as an environmental writer, as dismal as it may seem.

Lastly, I learned that the journalism world needs people like me who are adept at many skills, including web design, print/tablet design, blogging, social media promotion and editing on top of writing. Even though I felt the future of environmental journalism was portrayed as a little bit hopeless during some conversations I had, I think my skills can help pull me out of that trap.

Together, we're having a hard time believing we're already halfway through our mentorship year — but it's been fun and rewarding already. For Matt, the experience has given me a chance to reflect on and share some of the big-picture lessons I've learned over the years, as well as to get a ground-level view of what starting journalists are learning and doing, both at J-School and in the workforce. For Abbey, the experience has given her a sounding-board for Master's project questions and inquiries about what it means to be a freelancer and work largely from home, making it work for her family while writing on the environmental beat.

Time will tell if we are able to collaborate on projects in the future. But for now, Matt has his career and Abbey has her Master's project. We hope to continue to stay connected through the rest of our mentorship year in support of each other's projects.