

Valerie Brown, Mentor
Amy Mathews Amos, Mentee
Post-New Orleans Narrative

New Orleans was both a culmination and a beginning for Amy. She had lurked for months on the SEJ-Freelance listserv, absorbing everything she could about the culture, ethics and business of being a freelance environmental journalist. When she needed more direct advice and emotional support, she turned to SEJ's mentoring program and met Valerie remotely – through telephone and email. Valerie shared her personal experiences and advice freely, and talked about becoming a mentor to give back to the SEJ community. A few months later, Amy interviewed SEJ member Sharon Guynup for a Q&A she wrote for *The Washington Post* about Sharon's recent book, "Tigers Forever." Sharon generously offered to chat post-interview about the freelancing life and raved about the great people in SEJ and past conferences. Amy began to discern a pattern of mutual support revolving around SEJ unlike anything she had experienced in her previous professional life in conservation.

Amy had arrived at the conclusion Valerie experienced when she first joined SEJ. She had met an SEJ member at a NASW meeting who recommended she join SEJ because it was a very lively and supportive group. He was right. And Valerie took great pleasure in assuring Amy that her tentative perceptions were correct, and that she could look forward to a wealth of resources ranging from concrete story ideas to a virtual shoulder to cry on or a sympathetic ear to listen to a frustrated rant. Valerie has always deeply appreciated SEJ's level playing field which allows freelancers and staffers to occupy the same professional territory, so that the wit and wisdom gleaned from both spheres is shared by all.

Amy's growing realization about SEJ's support culminated at the 2014 SEJ Conference in New Orleans. She met her mentor Valerie in person for the first time and had actual face-to-face conversations. Valerie introduced Amy to colleagues she had known and valued for years as a freelance journalist, and whose names Amy recognized from her listserv lurking. We compared notes on our field trips – highlights of the trip for both of us. For Valerie, Amy was only the second mentee she has been able to meet face-to-face. After the awards dinner they adjourned to the foyer and chatted a mile a minute until it was time for dinner. As a mentor, Valerie took great pleasure in being able to introduce Amy to her own support group within SEJ.

And so New Orleans marked the beginning of the next phase in Amy's freelancing career, in which she has a growing network of colleagues and friends (both through Valerie's introductions and her own interactions with others). She had a blast at the beat dinner "If you can't beat 'em, eat 'em," and managed to publish an article about the event. She learned about creative ways to make the freelancing life work from presenters Erica Gies and Meera

Subramanian, and how to improve pitches at the pitch slam. She now feels less like a lurker, and more like part of the SEJ community.

For her part, Valerie looks forward to seeing Amy take off and outpace her. And to watch Amy start to share her own deep well of experience and her acute perceptions with the rest of us.

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