

**Erica Gies & Kendra Pierre-Louis**  
**Victoria, BC / New York**

November 5, 2014

Dear Elyssa Rosen Memorial Fund Administrators:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to attend the 2014 SEJ conference in New Orleans via the Elyssa Rosen Memorial Fund fellowship. We both got so much out of the trip.

Erica Gies benefitted professionally from the conference, and she really enjoyed meeting Kendra Pierre-Louis in person and having the opportunity to share some work experiences. She found Kendra to be not only the bright, savvy, hard worker that came across during their year of Skype sessions, but also outgoing and a lot of fun. In general, Kendra has really impressed Erica with the energy she has rallied to grow her freelance business – while still working a full-time job.

Kendra similarly benefitted both from attending the conference and from getting to meet Erica in person. The fellowship gave Kendra the unique experience of seeing a savvy freelance journalist in action. Erica provided Kendra with guidance both prior to and during the trip on how to navigate the conference to get the most out of it, from connecting with editors, to mining the conference sessions for article ideas. Kendra recently published an article in *Newsweek* inspired by the conference session “Crowdsourcing and Sensors: Citizen Science Tools for Journalism.” Her piece is titled “How Civic Science Is Changing Environmentalism.”

In New Orleans Kendra and Erica had the opportunity to talk about many things. Erica was struck by the depth of Kendra’s knowledge base for the kinds of stories she wants to report: environment stories that impact people’s health. Kendra respected Erica’s command not only of subject matter expertise related to environment and the natural world but also of how that connects to and informs her journalism. Kendra and Erica attended the same tour in the field, “If the Gators Don’t Get You ... the Sinkhole Will.” The session deepened our understanding of the environmental pressures the region faces and the way it creates discord between the region’s two largest economic sectors: the petrochemical industry and its fishing, hunting, and tourism. Seeing cypress trees in what is effectively a living cemetery — the constant flooding of the Atchafalaya basin makes it impossible for the trees to reseed themselves — while drifting past industrial pipelines has a way of putting the issue into stark relief.

The experience at SEJ has only strengthened Kendra’s commitment to the field of journalism. Consequently, Kendra is now applying to grad school for journalism, and Erica has written her a heartfelt letter of recommendation.

For Erica, the conference was an opportunity to share her experiences with the journalism startup she cofounded this year, helping to raise her profile among attending editors. Erica also reconnected with an editor for whom she used to write; he is now with a new publication and

would like her to write for it. Similarly, Erica met a woman who works for Mongabay who encouraged her to apply for one of their \$20,000 focus grants.

At the conference, Erica had the opportunity to introduce Kendra to Paula Cross at the Food Environment Reporting Network (FERN) and to many people she's come to know over the years at SEJ, people who have become part of her professional and friend community. Erica encouraged Kendra to introduce herself to editors, and she is especially excited about connections she made with editors at two prominent publications.

For Kendra, the conference was also an opportunity to expand her peer network. She met several writers and editors with whom she has developed an ongoing relationship. In addition, the freelance pitch slam offered Kendra the opportunity to see how editors think in real time. The result has been sharper, better crafted pitches, and more chutzpah. Spending time with editors during meals and events helped Kendra to feel less intimidated when pitching them. Now she can see them as ordinary people, working to get a job done.

The SEJ conference provided an opportunity for both Erica and Kendra to deepen existing expertise as well as to learn about new topics. Erica sat in on a great panel on water issues — something she regularly covers — to get new perspectives from both esteemed colleagues and experts whom she would not have known to contact otherwise. On a mini-tour, Erica visited the Lower Ninth Ward, which she'd last seen in 2006 after Hurricane Katrina had wiped it off the map. It was both heart-warming to see the regrowth — and troubling — as the neighborhood lies several feet below sea level and the new homes were built below Katrina's flood stage levels. Since the conference, Erica has been busy with pre-assigned stories, but now she is pitching stories about the Lower Ninth and about wetlands reconstruction, inspired by the conference.

Kendra also visited the Lower Ninth Ward on a separate mini-tour, where she saw an alligator gar for the first time and was able to see firsthand the lingering harm that the region's hurricanes and uneven environmental planning has had on both the city's human inhabitants and the larger ecosystem.

In short, the Elyssa Rosen Fellowship has been a tremendous asset in helping Erica and Kendra grow and evolve, both in their mentorship relationship and as journalists. Thank you again for this tremendous opportunity.

Sincerely,



Erica Gies & Kendra Pierre-Louis