

SEJ 2014: A Time of Transitions

Part I by Amy Nordrum (mentee)

The SEJ 2014 conference came at a particularly opportune time for me. I arrived fresh from a summer of covering climate change for *InsideClimate News*, primed and ready to think about how reporters might better present news on complex and daunting environmental topics. The conference also fell right before my final semester in graduate school in New York University's Science, Health and Environmental Reporting Program — so I was eager to hone my reporting skills before taking the next step in my career.

On the first day, I hopped aboard a boat to hear how Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill impacted the area's oyster industry. It was clear to me that following that oysterman out to check his catch enabled a form of storytelling that a reporter could never gather from her desk. I think hearing his story firsthand that day brought to light the importance of on-the-ground reporting for everyone on that boat, myself included.

In New Orleans, I was also reminded that the media tend to give less attention to southern issues unless they are of national significance. After noting this and returning to New York City, I reported and wrote a story on wild pigs — which are largely concentrated in the south — for *Scientific American*. The conference challenged me to look for topics and stories that originate in places far from the nation's media centers — a habit that I think can set me apart as an enterprising reporter.

Another great opportunity from the conference was the chance to meet my SEJ mentor, John Platt, who is a freelance environmental journalist. I had started to pitch and earn freelance assignments by the time we met and had grown curious about the ups and downs of pursuing freelance work as a full-time career. When we met up, John was willing to walk me through his own career path, clientele list and business strategy. That conversation was incredibly helpful to me as I try to make a frank assessment of freelance journalism as a career option.

I appreciate the opportunity to attend this year's conference through the fellowship program, and am grateful for the thought and effort by the SEJ community that went into creating such a worthwhile experience in New Orleans.

Part II by John R. Platt (mentor)

I didn't originally see the SEJ conference in my plans for 2014. Yes, the previous event in Chattanooga had proven to be one of the defining moments in my career to date, but my impending move from Maine to Oregon didn't leave much room in my budget for conferences or travel. The move, I'll admit, was also somewhat interfering with my ability to mentor Amy Nordrum through the SEJ Mentor Program. We spoke several times on the phone and over email, but the time that I spent packing boxes was time that I couldn't spend mentoring.

Enter the SEJ Elyssa Rosen Memorial Fund. Not only would the fellowship make travel possible for me, it would give Amy and me the chance to sit down and do far more than we could electronically. I talked with Amy about applying. We decided we had to give it a chance.

The SEJ conference in New Orleans had a lot of highlights for me – eating invasive species, meeting several wildlife experts, and trying my hand at the pitch slam among them – but for me the best of them all was finally being able to sit down with Amy for an afternoon while everyone else was

attending the mini-tours. I asked a lot of questions about her goals and aspirations. She, in turn, asked great questions about my experiences and how I fared in the industry's potential pitfalls. I had to dig pretty deep to find all of the answers.

You see, mentoring is not a one-way street. Mentoring is an opportunity for people who have achieved something to impart their experiences and give back to the next generation, but it doesn't always end there. The same process can also help to crystalize the mentor's own views and philosophies and maybe provides a little extra clarity about why they have done what they have done and why it has worked. That's how it happened this year with me: I think that I learned a few things about myself while helping out another talented writer and SEJ member. I came out of SEJ 2014 and the mentoring experience knowing that I was on the right track but also with some long-suppressed goals back at the forefront of my mind.

Like Amy, I also want to thank the SEJ community and the friends and family of Elyssa Rosen for this opportunity. The fellowship helped us to make the most of our mentoring experience. I look forward to seeing what Amy accomplishes after she graduates.

I also look forward to mentoring more young SEJ members in the future, and I encourage any of you to do the same.