

Dawn Stover and Allie Wilkinson: Our Story

About Dawn:

I'm a charter member of SEJ and have attended 15 of the past 24 annual conferences. Even though I have three decades of experience, including nine years as a freelancer, the journalism landscape has changed so dramatically in recent years that I sometimes feel as though I'm just beginning my career. It has been both useful and inspiring to connect with Allie, my fourth "mentee" at SEJ, who shares my interest in environmental journalism (and freelancing in particular) but is different from me in ways that make our partnership interesting. While Allie lives in Washington, D.C., and is breaking into a variety of new markets with mostly shorter stories, I live in a rural area of "the other Washington" and focus mostly on long-form writing and editing for magazines.

About Allie:

I'm an early career journalist, with about two years under my belt as a bona fide journalist and freelancer. Prior to that I was attending a journalism Masters program and interning within the communication department for a few scientific organizations, which is where I ultimately wanted to end up. But a dearth of opportunities for recent graduates and the freelancing workshop at the 2012 SEJ conference in Lubbock inspired me to contemplate other options, and I dove into freelance journalism a few months later. I now wear multiple hats: reporter, writer, fact-checker and podcaster.

How we got introduced:

Allie and I became partners in the SEJ Mentor Program because Allie felt that her graduate journalism program did not offer enough preparation for freelancing. At the time, she was looking for suggestions about how to find story ideas and publications to pitch. After our earliest conversations by phone and email, though, I could tell that Allie not only had plenty of great ideas but also a lot more know-

We got e-introduced in March 2014, after a long hunt to find a mentor who was a good fit. My first mentor through SEJ was great, but I found that I really needed someone who was a full-time freelancer—someone juggling different roles, having to face the same ethical issues, and really living the life. I couldn't be happier when Dawn volunteered to take me on as a mentee, since her career

how and confidence than she realized. These conversations were good ones, but there is no substitute for building relationships in person, not just between mentors and mentees but also between journalists and their colleagues, editors, sources and funders—and that is especially true for freelancers who work mainly in isolation. Allie and I are grateful to the Elyssa Rosen Memorial Mentoring Fund for giving us the opportunity to connect with each other and with our fellow SEJers in New Orleans.

mirrored the vision I had for my own.

Our first face-to-face meeting:

It was easy to spot Allie at the opening ceremony of the conference, because I arrived early and was on the lookout for people wearing “Fellow” ribbons. Those ribbons also gave us an opportunity to introduce ourselves to other mentors and mentees, many of whom were attending an SEJ conference for the first time. Extroversion doesn’t come easily to me, so I have always loved the collegiality of SEJ members and their efforts to make newcomers feel welcome. As it turned out, Allie and I already had several friends in common. Like any well-adjusted couple, we spent time independently as well as together at the conference. We took time out one day to meet for a leisurely breakfast, during which we talked about everything from Allie’s upcoming move to daily planning tools, interrupting our conversation

Since Dawn and I lived on opposite ends of the country, we didn’t meet in person until the opening ceremony of the conference in New Orleans. She found me shortly before dinner, and we sat talking until the evening’s speakers took the stage. Two days later, we met for breakfast, which provided us the opportunity to speak in depth and discuss how I could pursue my goals. Dawn walked me through how she approaches feature stories, and gave me some suggestions for pursuing several of my story ideas. It was really nice to have that time in person to go over things. Although Dawn always made herself readily available to me by phone and email, I’ve always been conscientious of how busy freelancers’ lives are, so I tried not to take too much of her time. Having the opportunity to sit down when we were both “off the clock”

frequently to wave down passing SEJers and make introductions. Allie didn't need much conference advice from me—just a string of Mardi Gras beads for the dance party at Rock 'n' Bowl.

allowed me to pick her brain for longer than I would have under normal circumstances. I'm thankful that the Elyssa Rosen Mentoring Fellowship awarded us the opportunity to have that face-to-face interaction.

What we got out of the conference:

Introducing Allie to others gave me a good excuse to approach people, and reminded me of how many comrades I have met through SEJ over the years. It wasn't a one-way street: Allie introduced me to some of her friends and contacts, too. It was great to match faces with names I knew only from bylines, mastheads and websites. Boating through the Atchafalaya Basin and walking in the Barataria Preserve swamp were welcome chances to see Louisiana wildlife and talk with local residents. The concurrent sessions sparked some story ideas, and the pitch slam gave me some fresh leads on where to pitch those ideas. Perhaps the most valuable sessions for me this year were the ones that focused on ideas and contacts for funding reporting through fellowships, partnerships and other mechanisms. The little things matter too—I learned of new ways to do everything from making videos to creating business cards. If I could sum up the whole conference in one word, it would be "energy." It's a topic I expect to be covering a lot in 2015, and the conference gave me a jolt of personal excitement about the year ahead.

The conference gave me the opportunity to revisit BP oil spill, which I had written a feature story on for my capstone project in grad school. Most of the sessions I chose to attend, as well as the field trip, pertained to the BP spill. They enabled me to see an oil cleanup operation firsthand, learn what issues are still ongoing, and hear about the latest research findings. I also attended the session on funding the freelance life, which gave me ideas for new outlets to pitch and new strategies for promoting my work and making money.

What's next for us:

Thinking back on the recent conversations I have had with Allie, I realize that she is mentoring me, too. Unlike many people in my own age bracket, she isn't whining about the state of journalism; she's forging ahead and taking advantage of tools that didn't even exist a few years ago. This year both of us plan to step beyond our comfort zones. For Allie, that means tackling some big feature articles; for me, it means taking a deeper dive into the digital world with projects such as building a website. Allie is much more tech-savvy than I am and has passed along some great tips about products that make freelancing easier. Whether we're talking about big ideas or sweating the small stuff, our exchanges often make me rethink—and then reinvent—my own practices. It is great to have a colleague and friend with a fresh perspective, and I hope that Allie will go on to mentor others in the SEJ community.

I plan to use Dawn's advice and recommendations as I move forward in pursuing my goal of writing features. I'm confident that we'll still keep in touch, even after our year of mentoring draws to a close. Working with Dawn, and discovering that she was learning just as much from me as I was learning from her, made me realize that I'm capable of mentoring others.