

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversation Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Ryan Smith:

So one day on my lunch break, while I was up for partner, I jumped in with her, a camera guy, and a sound guy, and we ran all over New York City for about an hour and a half and I shot a seven-minute reel that she then cut together.

Oh, it was so tough at so many times but I have to tell you from the moment I started doing it, I loved it. It was intoxicating for me, so I wanted to keep pushing forward. I'll tell you two stories that encapsulate how difficult it was. So the way I got to Court TV, one day I was practicing law in LA and some random person who I did not know called me and said, "Hey, work with HLN. Would you want to talk for a little bit?" So we talked for about an hour about a bunch of different subjects. Never heard from this guy again for about seven months. Calls me again and says, "Hey, do you want to meet for dinner? I'm in New York right now." So then I meet with him at dinner.

While we're sitting at dinner, and I hadn't spoken to him in months, only met him once, he said, "I want to offer you a job co-hosting a show on Court TV." And I said, "Okay." He said, "You've got to come down and read and just make sure you can do the job. But I'm sure you'll be fine at it." He says, "You know prompter and all that stuff. Right?" I'm like, "Yeah, of course." So he says, "Great. I'll see you in Atlanta in a week." So I go home and I say, "What am I going to do?" So I got ... The only thing, and this is what I did a lot with television, I didn't know what I didn't know, had to sort of think of what I thought it might look like to learn how to do elements of the job. So when I saw people reading a prompter, I immediately thought about what it was like when I use a wireless mouse reading my computer screen. Nobody can see my hand moving, and I'm just reading the words on the computer screen if I'm scrolling up, so I did that.

I bought a wireless mouse, had my computer, put it about 10 feet away from me, made the print really big, and practiced that for about three hours a day a week long until I got it right. And that's how I learned how to read a prompter. I went down there, I wasn't amazing, but they were like, "You're good enough. We can work with that." The other thing that will say is, the other thing that underscores how difficult it can be to be in two different worlds at once was I was practicing law, when you're practicing law, you can't just stop. Sometimes you're still working with clients. So I was working with a client and they called me about 30 minutes before the show with an urgent matter. So I'm on the phone talking them through this deal. It was a deal we were trying to put together. It was supposed to be later that day.

I'm talking them through the deal. I'm looking up at the clock and my show starts in 10 minutes. So I'm running down to set, this is when I was at CNN, and nobody there thankfully knows this story I guess until now. I was running to set, on the phone talking to this guy through the deal points. I was still on the phone as I was sitting down in the chair getting miked up. And I was like, "Don't forget clause 3B, and then 4A. And then don't forget how that intersects with this and that. Got it? Okay, can I call you back in about an hour because my show is an hour long?" The guy's like, "Yeah." Okay, hang up the phone, a minute later we're on air. There was a lot of that in the beginning. Thankfully, everything went well. I never had a problem with clients, but there were a lot of challenges.

But what fueled me the entire way is what I think probably a lot of people think who work in this profession is wonderful and intoxicating in so many ways. You get to tell stories. You get to exercise your curiosity in ways you could never imagine. And from the moment I did it for the first time, I thought this is what I will love doing. And it really hasn't changed since.

John Boccacino:

Now we'll get into how you've merged your passions into this awesome career. But are there any skillsets you can point to from being a lawyer that really parlayed well to being on air, to being in journalism?

Ryan Smith:

Oh, yeah, two big ones. First, I will say this, I say this to anybody's interested in getting into journalism. Curiosity is your most important tool, just plain curiosity. A lot of times when I think being in this field, because I'm relatively new to this field compared to the people that I work with, I try to break things down to the simplest elements because you try to think too much about the guy I'm working next to, he has 25 Emmys and I just got here five minutes ago, you're going to piss yourself out. It's really a lot simpler than that. It's this person next to them might be good because they ask good questions, or they're curious about what they're talking about.

Channeling that curiosity is the most important tool I have had, and that's what I had to do as a lawyer. When somebody walks in my office with a problem, I want to know everything about it. I want to know everything about them. I want to know everything about the other side. And then I want to figure out a way to figure out the problem. Journalism in many ways is like that. You come in you're asking questions, you're asking the right questions. You're asking deep questions, and you're trying to find out everything you can about something.

The other thing that really helped me was, when I was a lawyer, one of my strong suits, I was not an amazing lawyer, but I was okay, and one of my strong suits was I could take something complicated and make it simple. And I always thought of it this way, before I was a lawyer, there was so much I didn't understand. And when I went to law school, I didn't come ...

You're absolutely right. For years, I spent so much time in television having a lot of different jobs, and I kept saying, "Some day when I really make it, I'm just going to do one thing and it's going to be great. I'm just going to focus on that all the time." And the last couple years I've kind of realized I think my best skills that I am probably better when I'm doing more than one thing. And that's hard sometimes because you've got to be on a bunch of different wavelengths. When you're thinking about being a legal analyst, it's a very different skill than being an anchor, which is a very different skill from being a correspondent. And sometimes it can become frustrating trying to separate all of those things. But one thing this industry has taught me is we have different skills. And I've learned over the years to kind of lean into these differences because they serve different parts of what I do. I've done a correspondent interview on 20/20 allows me to really get to know people personally. I do a long form story. Doing Sports Center gets me more on the enthusiasm side. I get to tell a story quickly and punchy, and in a way that people really want to hear it and get fired up over it. And then doing legal analysis allows me to really kind of get in touch with what I really love about law and explain complicated concepts in a simple way. So to me, it's all of these different things that I always like doing and accepting the fact that, hey, if that means I do three different things, it's good for me.

John Boccacino:

If you had to pick one of the hats that you wear, is there one that you love more than the other? Or does it kind of depend on the story you're telling?

Ryan Smith:

I would say I do love anchoring more than anything else. It's a lot of fun anchoring, hosting, which is when you're sitting at a desk, you're at a show, and you see the host of the show come on, or the anchor on Sports Center come on, I love that more than anything because there's a certain fun when you can control the flow. Producers help us set up everything and they basically are at different stages where we need to be and what we need to be doing. But when you're hosting a show or anchoring a show, you get to control the flow of the information, and how things go and what you focus on. And you get to sort of run where you want to put more emphasis and where you want to dial back a little bit. That's a lot of fun.

But I will say, I will always have a special place in my heart for being a legal analyst because making the complicated simple is something I love to do. And I will always in some way seek to do correspondent interviews because it goes back to the curiosity thing. I love talking about people's stories and I think a real skill that we could have as journalists is exercising empathy. And I think that's really what you have to channel when you're a journalist. I think for years, there was this idea of hard-hitting journalist when you're tough and you don't let up on people.

I always looked at that differently. I always looked at it like I am here to tell someone else's story, and I love doing it. My job is to be curious about their story, to get out every bit of their story, and maybe even take the person I'm interviewing into places [inaudible 00:16:06], maybe sometimes didn't want to go. But it's all in service of trying to get the word out about who they are. And I still love to do that, so anchoring might be my number one, but those two are close second.

John Boccacino:

I'm going to age myself a little bit here, Ryan, when I say this, but you get a boo-yah, you get a (μ P }, cool as the other side of the pillow. Sports Center is such an institution, man. I mean, I grew

up watching Sports Center. I'm sure you grew up watching the greatest of the greats go through ESPN and Bristol. Just how surreal is it that you get to sit at that desk?

Ryan Smith:

It's awesome. There are times when I'm saying something on Sports Center and while

about the athlete in general, and that makes it easier to tear them down from the pedestal that they might get placed on.

Ryan Smith:

It does. I mean, think about the Ja Morant story. If not for social media, he wouldn't have been suspended a game. The whole thing is because he put it on Instagram. That's it, if there was no

where the basketball team worked out. And it was so funny because you'd just be walking around routinely seeing guys like ... Well, Seikaly was already gone,

John Boccacino:

Well, speaking of incredible, it's been a fascinating conversation here with Ryan Smith. You can catch him at ESPN's Flagship Sports Center program, catch him on Outside the Lines, News, 20/20, all over the place.