



Alumni Corner

Renita Jablonski: What Forensics did for Me Ohio University Forensic Alumni (1998-2000)

Renita Jablonski



Renita is a Senior Editor for NPR's *All Things Considered*. She previously served as an editor for *Morning Edition* and the network's Newscast Unit. Before coming to NPR, she was a producer and fill-in host for American Public Media's *Marketplace Morning Report*. Renita competed for Ohio University, 1998-2000. Taking first in Duo at DSR-TKA nationals was one of her proudest accomplishments. It meant a lot because she and her duo partner had taken a risk by running a new piece. Her favorite memory is of her first competition -- the Novice State Tournament. She recalls that even picking up the chalk to sign into her first round was exhilarating. When she took first in Informative Speaking, a fellow novice leaned over and whispered, "this means you're going to nationals." She was hooked.

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Washington, DC

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ALUMNI CORNER: *The forensic community is filled with alumni who will tout the benefits they received through their participation in intercollegiate speech and debate activities. As directors of forensics programs face battles for budgets and sometimes for their program's very existence, having a collection of published testimonies about the positive influence of forensics can be a tremendous help. To that end, Speaker & Gavel is setting aside space in each issue for our alumni to talk about how forensics has helped them in their professional life. These are our alumni's stories.*

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I talk to myself all the time. I get paid for it. In the open-office layout of NPR's newsroom, I write copy and read it out loud at my desk. I am constantly listening to myself and others read words from a page or computer screen. I have to ask whether that copy makes sense, if it is engaging, and whether listeners will be able to follow it without prior knowledge of the subject matter. I check and re-check the dates, figures, and sources cited in copy. I run a stopwatch. If a story or interview does not fit into the designated segment time it cannot air. This frequently makes me think of my forensics coaches and the stopwatches in their hands. I would try to decipher the looks on their faces as I rehearsed an event because I knew if I went too long, I would not be allowed to run it.

Forensics empowered me to take on deadlines in a new way. Competing on a team is so much more than submitting a paper by a requested due date. It means putting in whatever time is necessary to make your events unique and compelling. If you care about your performance, your audience will care as well. If you are not invested in what you are saying, your audience will not be either. Think about what happens when you are listening to a radio program or podcast. You can hear when a host, reporter, or guest is really into a particular subject and inevitably that draws you in and makes the listening experience more enjoyable. The moment you sense the person on the air or in that podcast is not engaged, it will impact your own interest. Forensics also showed me that sometimes -- despite laboring on a project for hours -- it is better to walk away from it or start all over if it is not working. Put another way, forensics taught me that good enough is not good enough.

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The way forensics parallels my work today is striking. What I hold onto most -- beyond the invaluable practice of writing and finding my voice -- is how forensics taught me to listen. Listening to your teammates is key to supporting your



teammates -- to sit, undistracted, and take in each word they say as they work out their material is important to a team's success. I learned to listen analytically, critically, and productively. This is the foundation of being a peer coach to your teammates or future colleagues. Forensics also requires learning to give feedback in a thoughtful and respectful way. It is not unusual, in a

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classroom setting, to be called on to make assessments of your peers' work. But then you walk out the door at the end of a class or move onto the next assignment. The investment is deeper in forensics. You watch your teammates take their work in front of judges and competitors. You watch

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their speeches, debate arguments, and interpretive performances evolve. You also watch them evolve as competitors -- nervous ticks turn into confident gestures, the eye contact clicks, and voices stop shaking. You learn to be emotionally invested in the success of others. You applaud their achievements and support them through their stumbles. In my professional setting, I may not be sitting in a van with my coworkers for hours and hours, but the feeling is not far off. I spend more waking hours with them than I do my family. My job is to make stories and interviews sound their best. That means letting producers, hosts, and other editors know that I have their back. They trust me to tell them when a segment sings and when it falls flat. They expect me to make specific suggestions for what to do differently. It is my job to help them succeed. It also does not hurt to occasionally make them laugh. That is certainly something that hours upon hours in a van with your peers will teach you: the value of a good sense of humor.

To this day, I try to make my forensics teammates laugh. I have not stopped applauding their successes or showing my support through life's trials. I think this goes back to that capacity to truly listen. We did not just sit through each other's events. We wanted to know about the person giving them. I suppose being dedicated to forensics meant we had to be dedicated to each other. A decade after I stopped competing, I looked out at many of those teammates as I said my wedding vows. When my husband and I were expecting our daughter, they were among the first with whom we shared the news. 15 years on, we still have an annual holiday gathering of the old team. I looked at the faces at this year's party through FaceTime on my laptop and marveled at our years of friendship. If I need a shoulder to lean on, an honest opinion, or someone to simply listen, I know who I can call.

Renita's Advice

*"Do something that scares you.
Can't imagine doing extemp?
You've got an entire half an hour
to prep, you'll be fine! DO IT. You
say you're not an interpreter? Oh,
I bet you are."*

