

Taylor Houston

Advanced Reporting: Women in Journalism- Q&A Assignment

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Taylorrhouston8@gmail.com

614-584-9898

In this interview Tracy Townsend explains the life she leads as a journalist, the challenges she has faced and how she ultimately overcame them. Townsend sheds light on what it means to be Black in journalism while also being a woman.

Q&A

Tracy Townsend 10 TV News Columbus

10TV Columbus news anchor, political reporter, mother and cancer survivor Tracy Townsend has done more than just write and report stories about Columbus community issues. She has touched hearts around her community with her passion to tell the stories of those individuals who are overshadowed. Her success is not defined by the big names she has interviewed or the opportunities she has fought to have, but instead by the confidence and determination she has in her work. In this interview Townsend talks about how her passion for journalism started, and the challenges she has faced as a Black woman in White- majority news rooms.

Taylor Houston: How did you find your passion for journalism?

Tracy Townsend: I'm an avid reader and I always have been. I grew up outside of Cincinnati in a suburb. My mother was a nurse and then she stayed home with us and then she was a librarian. she always wanted me to read. Because of this, I could read very early. I just loved to read, loved to write and I was nose. I was always asking why; I wanted to understand things. My mother used to take me and my siblings to the library the way other people go to the mall. I would always want to get these books, and the librarian at one point said to my mother oh she can read that book, so I had to sit there and read to the librarian. She couldn't believe that this little brown girl could read. Fast forward: When my neighborhood got more diverse, they stopped running buses to the neighborhoods, so we were supposed to walk, but my parents were not going to let me walk. I am the oldest of four, and my dad drove me to school every day, and I would listen to the public radio station. None of my friends wanted to ride with us because it would be so boring to them. But that was all I listened to NPR and I just fell in love with the news. And we always had the newspaper and that's where I found my why- You can get answers to things. That's where it all started.

TH: When you were growing up, did any teachers or other people doubt your capability or your dream to become a journalist?

TT: Absolutely. When I was in high school, I took a typing class and the teachers didn't have these very big hopes for African-American girls. They said you will be a great secretary and I said there is nothing wrong with being a secretary, but I am going to be a reporter. The counselor couldn't get her mind around me being a reporter, and none of my teachers could either. They would say 'Why would you be a reporter? Are you going to major in English or communications?' I said that I was going to major in journalism and that I was going to tell stories, that's all I wanted to do. I knew it.

TH: Did your parents believe your dream of becoming a reporter?

TT: My parents did not know anyone who was a reporter or who worked in the field of journalism. Because of that, they suggested I go to law school, but I did not want to do that.

TH: How did you get your start in journalism? What was your first job after college?

TT: [Townsend starts laughing] I worked for GE Capital, calling people and telling them to pay their bills.

At GE Capital, I sat in a cubicle, and the girl two cubicles away from me went to Ohio University Scripps School. She had said she wanted a job in the TV world but said obtaining those jobs was difficult. One day she came in and told me about a job she found as a promotion assistant at WKRC in Cincinnati. I had no idea what promotion was. I just knew I loved to write and had to get my foot in the door. I applied for that job. I did some research, but it just so happened that the promotion manager was reading this book called "The Good War" by Studs Terkel and I had read it. And we bonded over the fact that I liked history and he did, too. And that's how I got my first job. I worked in that department for six months, and when the news director would come upstairs to her office, I would know every headline and all the news stories, everything. I was ready. After that, they hired me in the news department.

TH: Have you ever been doubted in your capabilities because of your race or because of your gender? If so, how did you overcome it?

TT: Yes, yes, yes. And I have grown into being able to handle it better. In my first job when I was the promotion assistant, I did not understand it. As a Black woman you learn a lesson: you have to be better, you have to work twice as hard. So, I took that to heart, and I did not mind producing and learning how to market and going out with a film crew.

On one of our projects we worked with a film crew that was looking at sites for the movie Rain Man. I learned everything about the camera, that was really helpful. But there was a woman who worked in the art department, and in her mind, I should be making coffee every morning. My parents did not send me to school to make coffee, and I was not drinking coffee every

morning. I would stop by the bakery and pick my coffee up. I did not understand why she couldn't too. And so, I had to learn very quickly that she was underestimating my ability. And when I went to the news department, she quickly discovered I was doing more than making coffee. I had to learn not to always say what I was thinking, I had to learn how to show them. And it's been that sort of dynamic in a number of positions that I had.

TH: Have you ever been doubted in your journalism abilities by someone you had to interview?

TT: Yes, particularly because I do a lot of political reporting. Sometimes they look at a Black woman like 'What do you know? Who do you know?' I love to throw them off by just hitting them with the words, the knowledge, and the homework. I don't mind working hard at all.

TH: Do you find yourself still having to prove yourself and your abilities even now, at this point in your career?

TT: When I started, we were owned by the Wolf Family, which had a big name in Columbus. Back then they were a conservative white family, the newsroom had more control over what went out and what didn't. The flip side of that was people were pigeonholed so they had maybe three Black reporters, one Asian reporter. We did not have a Latino reporter, we did not have anybody that might represent Muslims, and hardly any people of color.

Now we are owned by Tegna and it's much more diverse. We have had Black women wear their hair naturally, which I never thought I would see. Tegna is a whole different ball game and so I like that but by the same token, we still have very few people of color in the management ranks. In the fall we did have a situation where they did make us audition for our jobs. It was very frustrating, but I prayed and went in there to kill my audition, I don't even think that they saw me coming. I know that this is my gift, this is what the Lord has given me, and I am just going to let it manifest itself. I want to tell you that everything you learn in school is great, but you got to keep your faith. They will come at you with all kinds of nonsense.

TH: Your career has been filled with proving yourself and your identity. Just when you thought you overcame all the obstacles, you received a cancer diagnosis. How did you find the strength to pursue your passion while also battling illness?

TT: I thought of my son and my husband. My son was in the third grade and I was in the hospital and I had just woken up. He had his face next to mine and he had his hot little kid breath blowing in my face and he asked "Mom are you going to get out of the hospital?" and I thought yes I am. I am going to get out of the hospital. I have stuff to do. I have stories to tell. This is just a thing that I had to go through to be more empathetic when I talk to people. I think before that, if someone told me that they had cancer, or had a loss in their family, it would be very hard for me to be able to connect with them. I would be nervous that I would make them cry.

TH: Do you find it easier to separate your emotions from your work, or is it easier to be in touch with emotions when you are writing?

TT: A little bit of both. Sometimes I think it will help me connect with people to get a story or to be relatable to their situation. But sometimes I do have to separate myself from whatever it is. And it's hard. I remember the day of the Sandy Hook shooting. I was on the air and I remember they were telling me there was a shooting and it was at a school. And I covered Columbine and so I thought 'Oh it's a school shooting' but then I looked up and I saw the picture of the kids holding the rope and I had to stop for a minute because all I could think of was my son and all the parents who sent their kids to school that day. And I thought this is too much for me. But it also helped me convey to the viewer this is not an ordinary school shooting. this is not an ordinary moment in our time, and we have to do better than this.

TH: What has been the highlight of your career?

TT: I got to interview Barack Obama which was phenomenal for me. At the time I co-anchored a political show with a white colleague, and everybody thought that he would get the interview. I just kept asking and bugging the White House people to get that interview. My name is familiar to them because I have a brother who is a secret service agent, so they called and it kind of worked out. I also enjoyed it because I got to see my brother in action and covering political campaigns, so that was very cool.

I have also had the opportunity to go to the Democratic Convention and the Republican convention. I was in the elevator one time with Aretha Franklin and I almost passed out because it was Aretha Franklin, so those kinds of things are cool. I still get starstruck. I've interviewed LL Cool J and thought I was going to lose my voice because it was LL Cool J. I've interviewed Gayle King. Those types of things I still think are fun. On the other hand, I still like to do regular stories where we just help somebody.

TH: Has there ever been a time where you experienced imposter syndrome, when you doubted your abilities and questioned whether or not you wanted to move forward?

TT: When Barack Obama won the election, and I was covering a rally and the Tea Party was starting to bubble up and, that's when I thought I did not want to cover politics anymore because I hadn't covered a situation where people were pushing and shoving. I had gone to a rally and it was kind of like January 6th, 2021, and I didn't like that. The photographer and I were out there, and there was a guy and his temper was so short and he was ready to fight. I knew that I was not going to be out there fighting; that is not my style. That's when I had my first thought of 'I don't know if this is something I want to do' because I am not the type of person who hates people because of what they look like. When I was looking at other people, many of whom live in the suburb area [Townsend makes a face] that's when I realized this may not be something I want to do. I shook it off after a while, but it took me a minute.

TH: After everything you know now, if you could go back and tell your college self a piece of advice regarding your career, what would you say?

TH: I would tell myself I am enough. I did go through a phase where I thought I was too brown, I was not pretty enough, or even that my hair was not straight enough/long enough. I would go back and tell myself that none of that is true, that really what matters is in your mind. My parents would tell me that, but I would not fully believe them. Now I do.

This article was edited for length and clarity.