

Medill - Northwestern University: New York Times Reporter Tells Students to Ask the Right Questions

Story by Katherine Nugent, BSJ07

The best reporting and writing arises from a true passion for the subject, New York Times reporter Jennifer 8. Lee said in a November 21 lecture at Medill titled "Reporting on Other Worlds."

"Journalism isn't necessarily the highest-paid profession," Lee said. "So you owe it to yourself to do something you're passionate about."

Lee's talk was the latest in the Literature of Fact series, sponsored by the Northwestern University Center for the Writing Arts. A candid and bubbly Lee sat cross-legged on a desk as she spoke, often eliciting laughter from the 25 students and faculty members filling the room in Fisk Hall.

Lee was an applied mathematics and economics major at Harvard, where she also served as vice president of the Harvard Crimson. An impressive resume, which included internships at the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal and Morgan Stanley, led the New York Times to offer her a position as a staff reporter at the age of 24. As a Times reporter, Lee has covered environmental policy and consumer technology, as well as general assignments.

In the space of her short career, Lee has learned some truths of the business that she posed in the form of 10 tips for writers. In her first point she said keeping your writing exciting and fresh is all about nailing down the perfect questions.

"The best journalism will always come when you're asking the questions others aren't," she said. Unusual questions can sometimes provoke the most insightful responses--for example, "Is it OK for straight men to share an umbrella?" she asked, prompting some laughter and head scratching from the audience. "Interesting questions lead to interesting answers."

Lee's tips ranged from keeping a journal and reading poetry to learning how to bake brownies.

"Write down why you're becoming a journalist. It comes in handy to use as a compass when you have to make a difficult decision." As the child of immigrant parents, Lee said she decided early on that her reason for pursuing journalism was to give a voice to the voiceless. "I never saw people like me represented, so that's what I wanted to do."

This conviction was one reason Lee took an intense interest in child pornography and reported on this topic for the Times. In her research, she came across evidence of "hundreds of photos of girls being abused, being traded like baseball cards." She also learned the importance of learning to interact with law enforcement. With some stories, they are a journalist's most valuable resource.

"You have to get to know them, and learn to speak in their vocabulary. If you do that, they will respect you," she said.

Lee emphasized that discovering your strengths and interests is ultimately the way to becoming a better writer.

"The idea is to know how to work who you are," she said. "There's no right way to be a journalist. You have to play with the tool kit you are given," she said.



Photo by Katherine Nugent

Jennifer 8. Lee was offered a staff writer position at the New York Times when she was just 24.

"At the top level of the business, what differentiates us is not the reporting. It's the writing."

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