

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kayakers_in_Redwood_City,_California.jpg

Recap of 10/27/20 session with Kurtis Lee, L.A. Times

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

As we carry on through the pandemic this year, something is changing: the atmosphere in the room is getting warmer and more trusting. I've tried to capture that in a screenshot; unless everyone is smiling at once, it doesn't work. Since the default mode for our sessions is listening, thinking, and then talking, it comes across as absorption and engagement but not necessarily as warmth because the emotional piece doesn't transfer (MIT CSAIL has been working on this). We've been on Zoom for two years and have finally achieved rough atmospheric equivalency with prior dinners in DC. As far as content goes, to get it all you've gotta be in the room.

It was a delight to talk with Kurtis Lee, who was joining us from Madison, Wisconsin. The first order of business, even before introductions, was to comment on his covid beard! Several male participants were sporting beards we hadn't seen before, and we admired them all before moving on.

Kurtis traced his career trajectory before describing this year's work. He graduated from Temple University's journalism school in 2009, at the height of the recession, and moved to DC. One source of early help was [Brian Friel](#), our dinner speaker in May, 2006. (That link will point you to a couple of Government Executive articles of Brian's that are still useful.) Kurtis landed at the PBS NewsHour, spending a few years in the DC area until he moved to the Denver Post, one of his must-read newspapers growing up. He did state and national reporting, covering legislation and Second Amendment and other

issues. In mid-2012, he was part of the team that covered the Aurora Theater shooting in Denver (and subsequently received a Pulitzer Prize, although he didn't mention that). Kurtis's reporting caught the eye of the Los Angeles Times, where he moved to cover the 2016 presidential campaign and election. The night we spoke, he was covering the 2020 election from Madison.

Kurtis's assignments have evolved from a lot of day-to-day reporting (which he found more challenging because it meant having to get the story from state political appointees who were stonewalling him) to longer, magazine-style stories that begin with his talking to people in the community and building relationships with them. He would also like to get into podcasting. I was hearing a personal mission statement when he said, "Tell stories with empathy."

2020: "fascinating and newsy"

Kurtis has spent much of the year driving, although he flew from El Paso to Louisville to cover the Breonna Taylor decision. He told us about driving around the Navajo Nation (27, 000 square miles of territory in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah) earlier this year to cover the pandemic and issues that make it harder for residents and the tribal government to cope with it, such as the availability of clean water and healthcare.

George Floyd's death in Minneapolis on May 25th did not draw him there immediately because he tries to do his reporting when the cameras are gone – "it's about conversation." He went a month later and talked to the Black community. He also did a feature on the Minnesota Freedom Fighters, a security force that grew out of the shooting aftermath to protect the Black community and serve as a bridge by building relationships with the police to help the community, which lacks trust in the police.

He went back to the Southwest, visiting small towns such as Lordsburg, NM, a railroad town that was one of the stops on Charles Lindbergh's transcontinental Spirit of Saint Louis air tour. Lordsburg was also the site of one of the World War II incarceration camps. There's a lot of history there, still alive to the children and descendants of the Japanese Americans who were incarcerated. The museum that has helped everyone understand Lordsburg's history has closed. Small towns are having a tough time, since "states are hemorrhaging, red and blue."

Kurtis was in Tulsa, Oklahoma when the pandemic started, doing the groundwork for a story that ran on the 99th anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa race massacre. During that short event, the entire Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, known as Black Wall Street due to worker migration from the Deep South to Tulsa to work in the oil industry, was destroyed. Read Kurtis's story at <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-22/one-newspaper-never-forgot-the-tulsa-race-massacre>. I think there will be continuing national coverage of this story, due to both next year's Centennial and last week's discovery of a mass grave that may be connected to it.

The last couple of paragraphs illustrate Kurtis's observation that there's a lot of lost history in this country. Some of it will need to be found, and that's going to take some work. For example, to understand what we're seeing and tackle questions like "Why are

all of the Black people on the west side?" before arriving at answers, it's necessary to learn about things like redlining and covenants.

Links to these stories and others can be found on Kurtis's L.A. Times bio page at <https://www.latimes.com/people/kurtis-lee>.

"Truth, honesty, and facts"

One participant asked whether objectivity conflicts with empathy. Kurtis's answer was that having empathy is critical for a journalist: "I see you. I empathize with your situation." At the same time, he's looking for truth, honesty, and facts.

We also had a brief discussion about a few occasions when other reporters have passed Kurtis's work off as their own (minus attribution). For numerous reasons, including the continued existence of high-quality journalism, I think this dishonest behavior is important to call out if we see it.

We were polled!

Kurtis asked each of us where and how we were getting the news. That discussion, which reflected local coverage and national digital, print, and broadcast sources, was fun and very interesting – as were his observation about the polarization of cable TV and his characterization of social media as a double-edged sword.

We asked Kurtis how he takes care of himself in the midst of the grind and heightened emotional tension. Partly, he seems to be wired to roll with whatever's happening. He also tries to take weekends off and put the phone down!

"It's all about bringing other journalists up."

Finally, we asked about mentors – an obvious question coming from this group of capable mentors who keep learning from others. Kurtis acknowledged the deep influence of his parents as well as of [Gwen Ifill](#) and [Greg Moore](#), former executive editor of the Denver Post. Kurtis, who talks to students in L.A. and at his alma mater when he can, thinks it's *all about bringing other journalists up*.

Participant affiliations

ASPA National Capital Area Chapter
Charlestown, RI Town Council
Department of Commerce
Department of Energy
Department of Veterans Affairs
Giffords
Los Angeles Times
Project Management Institute-Pearl City Chapter
Securities and Exchange Commission

Participants joined from Pullman, WA, Colorado Springs, CO, Madison, WI, Wickford, RI, Hyderabad, India, and the DC Metro Area. Please consider joining us in the future.

Sincerely,
Kitty Wooley