

From Humble Beginnings to National Acclaim: The Story of Jennifer Berry Hawes

Written by: Brooke Brewer

Raised by her single father, a college professor, Jennifer Berry Hawes developed a love for writing from an early age but was unsure if it could turn into a realistic career.

“I didn’t think writing could be a job,” Hawes admitted, recalling her initial doubts about the field’s reputation for low pay and instability. A random encounter at a party, however, would change the trajectory of her life. Hawes noticed a “cute guy” captivated by a radio broadcast about an armed robbery. Intrigued, she struck up a conversation and learned he was freelancing for newspapers in Chicago.

That conversation didn’t just spark a romance, it shaped her future. The “cute guy” became her husband, a photographer she has been married to for nearly 30 years. Inspired by the practicality of his freelance work, Hawes began to see journalism not only as a passion but as a potential career.

Today, Jennifer Berry Hawes is a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist who focuses on criminal justice, religion, race and the welfare of women and children. With decades of experience, she brings depth and humanity to the most complex and challenging topics. On Thursday, October 24, 2024, during a virtual talk with Auburn University journalism students, Hawes offered valuable insights into her career and the core values that fuel her work. Her journey from uncertain beginnings to national acclaim serves as an inspiring example for aspiring reporters and storytellers. Despite facing setbacks and uncertainties, Hawes pushed through and built a meaningful name for herself in journalism.

Determined to pursue her passion for journalism, Hawes took advantage of tuition-free education at the college where her father worked. She earned a scholarship to Roosevelt University and began freelancing for various outlets such as the *Chicago Tribune*, refining her skills as a health writer. Although, after graduation, Hawes faced a challenging job market during a national recession. Despite this, she took a chance and accepted a position at a small newspaper in rural South Carolina in 1998. This job opened the door to a 20-year career at the *Post and Courier* in Charleston, where Hawes developed a unique talent for investigative narrative writing and found her calling in feature writing.

During her years at the *Post and Courier*, Hawes focused on writing stories about deeply rooted issues in Southern culture, such as systemic racism, economic inequality, and domestic violence. Her work contributed to the groundbreaking series “*Till Death Do Us Part*,” which exposed South Carolina’s failure to protect women from fatal domestic abuse. This series earned the 2015

Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. She was also a 2019 Pulitzer finalist in Feature Writing for “*An Undying Mystery*,” a series examining the execution of George Stinney Jr., a Black 14-year-old wrongfully convicted in 1944. Through her work, Hawes has the ability to tell impactful stories that highlight important, often overlooked issues.

“Feature writing is descriptive. It should give you a feeling about something,” Hawes explained, reflecting on her approach to storytelling. She emphasized the importance of authenticity and immersing herself in her subjects’ environments. “If you’re writing about a pastor, go watch the pastor preach,” she advised.

Hawes now works at ProPublica, a nonprofit newsroom dedicated to holding the powerful accountable. “I’ve found my sweet spot here,” she said, describing how ProPublica’s mission aligns with her belief in journalism as a tool for reform. Here, she feels she can expose complex issues and injustices. For Hawes, journalism isn’t just about telling stories—it’s about exposing overlooked truths and advocating for change.

“Journalists are the eyes of the world,” she says, quoting the Grateful Dead. This belief drives her to tackle complex, often controversial topics with purpose.

Her work at ProPublica has also deepened her focus on the South, a region she feels is often misunderstood. “A lot of race stories have been whitewashed,” she noted, highlighting the need for more storytelling that accurately reflects Southern history and culture. This need for uncovering the truth keeps her driven, even in the face of challenges such as resistant sources, high-stakes deadlines, and legal risks.

“It can be hard writing about people who don’t want to talk to you. This gets very wearing. I sometimes miss my feature writing days when I used to write fun and happy stories,” she admitted. Rather than being discouraged by these obstacles, she sees them as part of the necessary process for bringing difficult stories to light and making a difference.

During her talk at Auburn, Hawes offered practical advice to students. “Get your writing out there,” she urged. “The more you’re involved, the better prepared you’ll be.” She emphasized the value of internships and freelancing as ways to build portfolios and gain real-world experience.

Hawes also encouraged students to develop a specialty outside of journalism. “Having an additional area of expertise can set you apart in a competitive industry,” she explained.

Hawes’s story left a lasting impression on both students and faculty at Auburn University. “She sets a high bar for students pursuing a career in impactful journalism,” one professor remarked.

Senior Sydney Wells reflected on the impact of Hawes’s story, saying, “Jennifer’s journey is incredibly motivating. Her work pushes me to challenge myself and tell stories that truly matter.”

She added that Hawes's career inspires students like herself to recognize the huge impact that journalism can have on people and society.

Hawes ended her talk with a powerful piece of advice for Auburn's aspiring journalists. "Go somewhere unexpected," she urged, reflecting on her decision to take a job in rural South Carolina early in her career. "Stepping out of your comfort zone can lead to incredible growth," she said.

Jennifer Berry Hawes's career serves as a powerful reminder that journalism is more than a profession and that it is a calling to advocate for meaningful change. From her modest beginnings as a freelance writer to her Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative work, Hawes exemplifies the transformative power of journalism. Her commitment to amplifying underrepresented voices and addressing complex issues has made her a respected journalist and an inspiration to students aiming to be truth-seekers and changemakers.