



PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Julien Gorbach

Phone: (781) 799-8576

Email: gorbach@hawaii.edu

Written by Julien Gorbach

Stephens begins term as president at a crucial time for journalism historians

Donna Lampkin Stephens of the University of Central Arkansas has assumed the presidency of the American Journalism Historians Association this year with a new sense of urgency about the organization's mission.

"I hope each of us will take advantage of our opportunities to address charges of fake news and bias in the industry," she said. "We can no longer afford to be above the fray—we must answer those critics, praise good journalism and call out the bad. Both journalism and journalism history need each of us."

First Vice President Aimee Edmondson of Ohio University and Stephens have talked about how AJHA members are in a unique position to address those issues at the national, local and individual levels.

"We have also seen a drop in submissions for the conference and to the journalism history journals, so we hope to address and reverse those trends," she said. "We continue to be plagued by revisionist history, and the journalism industry continues to be attacked by some politicians and their followers."

Another thing the leadership wants to focus on this year is the further dissemination of the report spearheaded by David Sloan and Erika Pribanic-Smith on the state of the teaching of journalism history across the country.

"It will do no good if no one beyond our organization sees it," she said. "We will get the results sent to chairs, deans and provosts at all the answering universities. This will help to praise those universities who do a good job teaching history and will be a nudge to those who don't. And this is not a one-time survey. We want it to be an ongoing assessment. Ultimately, the teaching of journalism history at the undergraduate level is the first step toward shoring up our graduate student numbers and, ultimately, our membership."

Stephens came late to academia, but her roots with the AJHA community trace back to its earliest days.

She had been a sportswriter for the *Arkansas Gazette* until it closed in 1991 and then a teacher in public schools. She first joined the AJHA as a doctoral student at the University of Southern Mississippi in 2008, when a paper she wrote for Dave Davies' history class was accepted for the Seattle conference. But she had first met Sloan, AJHA's founder, back in 1983 as an undergraduate at the University of Arkansas, when she took his photography class. That was just after he had established the association, and before he had finished his doctorate and moved on to journalism history at the University of Alabama.

"Imagine my pleasure when Dave Davies, who had also studied photography under David Sloan at Arkansas and worked with me at the *Gazette*, told me all those years later about AJHA and how we had Dr. Sloan in common," she said.

Stephens' paper won the Robert Lance award that year for outstanding graduate student paper.

"I was hooked," she said. "I have attended every conference since 2012 in Raleigh."

There she became involved with various committees, and her dissertation, "'If It Ain't Broke, Break It': How Corporate Journalism Killed the *Arkansas Gazette*" was an honorable mention for the Blanchard Award in New Orleans in 2013.

In the summer of 2014, Sloan asked if he could nominate her for a position on the board, and she was elected in St. Paul. She served for the Oklahoma City conference in 2015, St. Petersburg in '16 and Little Rock in '17, which she hosted along with her colleague at University of Arkansas-Little Rock, Sonny Rhodes. The summer before the conference, Sloan called to ask if he could nominate her for Second Vice President.

"I was so honored that he would ask me twice to be involved in a leadership position for an organization he had helped found," she said.

As Second VP, she worked with President Dianne Bragg and First VP Ross Collins, and learned more about the organization from them. Last year as First VP, she served with President Ross and Second VP Edmondson. She added that Carol Sue Humphrey and Erika Pribanic-Smith have been excellent mentors on the ins and outs of AJHA.

"The way the terms and responsibilities are set up is an excellent way to learn the details of the organization," she said. "When I first joined, I was nervous and wondered how I could measure up to such an esteemed group of scholars. I quickly found, however, that everyone is as nice as they are esteemed—encouraging, stimulating, eager to share this important field with new scholars, whether young or old. I can't imagine a more welcoming organization. Over the years I've learned that, like me, many of us are former journalists who have moved into academia. Perhaps that explains the good vibe of the organization—almost all of us have had 'real' jobs before. That is rare in so much of academia."

Becoming a co-host for the Little Rock conference in 2017 helped her to become more engaged and meet even more members. Involvement with the planning details proved an excellent way to further her research interest of the *Arkansas Gazette* and its coverage of the Central High Crisis in 1957. The local panel included former *Gazette* journalists recalling the Crisis and its aftermath, and the local history tour included a stop at Central High. Feedback indicated the Little Rock conference was well received by AJHA members. She was tired but elated when it was finished, she said.

"I think my experience with AJHA is typical," she explained. "New, young scholars are embraced and welcomed warmly by long-time members and senior scholars, and those relationships continue. When I arrived in Dallas, it struck me that it was like a family reunion—so many warm hugs and hellos. It is vital for the future of our organization that we continue that vibe. Once those new scholars/members are hooked, they will then be invested in the organization and will take their turns as leaders. That will ensure the long-term viability of AJHA."

Stephens added that for several years, the officers and board members have realized the future of AJHA lies with getting those graduate students and young scholars invested and involved in the organization early so that they stay involved throughout their careers. Besides the continued warm and welcoming conference, she would like to see continued growth in efforts to help fund graduate student travel.

Stephens will continue to serve as AJHA president through the 2020 national convention, held Oct. 1-3 in Memphis. On Oct. 3, Stephens will move into another role, that of immediate past president, when current first vice president Aimee Edmondson assumes the title of president.

Founded in 1981, the American Journalism Historians Association seeks to advance education and research in mass communication history. Members work to raise historical standards and ensure that all scholars and students recognize the vast importance of media history and apply this knowledge to the advancement of society. For more information on AJHA, visit <http://www.ajhaonline.org>.

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