

*Hello and welcome to COM-Versations, your School of Communication podcast. Here in the School of COM, we know how to make Fell Hall fun. Tune in often to hear the latest COM-versations among faculty, staff, and students. After all, we're the best in the Midwest for a reason. I'm Julie Navickas, your host of COM-Versations, and today I am joined by special guest and School of Communication alum Jeff Conway. Emmy-nominated TV host and Hollywood and Entertainment Senior Contributor at Forbes. Wow! Welcome Jeff!*

JC: Thank you, you're making it sound so special, I appreciate it.

JN: Well, I mean, it is kinda special, just look at that byline right there.

JC: Thank you, yeah it's nice. I mean it's been a few years—it's been a long time coming. I mean I graduated in 2008, it's 2023 now, so, uh, it's nice to be able to put that to my title. And it's been a lot of hard work and I do think a lot of the work and the talent that I have to this day came from my foundation that I learned at Illinois State.

JN: And that's so fantastic to hear. I mean we have incredible alum all over the world from the School of Communication and it's just such a cool honor when they want to come back and spend a little bit of time here in Fell Hall and share a little bit about their knowledge and their journey with our current students. So maybe Jeff, let's start our conversation today. Just what brings you back?

JC: So, I'm actually back in town. I live in Hollywood, California now. It's where I mainly work. But I visited my nieces and nephews up in Chicagoland, which is where I'm originally from.

JN: Awe.

JC: And I actually had like a day open. I was like, you know what, I haven't been back to Bloomington-Normal in I'd say 10+ years for homecoming.

JN: Oh, no way!

JC: I stopped going because I was like, you know what, I could wear a hoodie and go in for a while. And then my crow's feet started coming, I was like, I can't even try to fake a fifth-year senior, can't even fake that anymore.

JN: Can't even pretend anymore.

JC: But it's good to be back, and it's great to see old faculty, see the places I really spent my life in. I lived in the Fell Hall basement, and it's great to see these new generations kind of going on the same path. And it's inspiring to see these people, and you know, we have nothing but encouragement, the alumni that come back, because we know how much hard work it is but how much fun it is too and the families you create here.

JN: Yeah, without a doubt, and you know—Jeff, you know, you and I were just talking and saying hello a few minutes ago and we discovered that we went here at the same time.

JC: Yeah!

JN: And I'm sure we did cross paths.

JC: Totally did. We were at Pub II at the same time.

JN: Oh, without a doubt.

JC: Guaranteed.

JN: And you just went there for lunch?

JC: Sure did. It was so nostalgic and nice. Hasn't changed a bit, and I'm glad it hasn't. If it's not broken, don't fix it.

JN: Exactly. You can't come to Bloomington-Normal and not enjoy a cheeseball.

JC: It's a rite of passage.

JN: It is! It absolutely is. Pub Wednesday, it's never changed. Well Jeff, thanks so much for coming back and spending a little bit of time with us this afternoon. Would you be willing to share just a little bit about kind of your time here in the School of Communication, you were a journalism major. Talk us through what your classes were like, what you chose to do, how you spent your time.

JC: Yeah, thanks, Julie. Yeah, I started in...broadcast journalism was my major. I actually started in theater, realized this wasn't for me. I can't really act or read lines, so I was like, you know what, I do feel like I want to do more of the interviewing kind of way. So yeah, I started with TV-10 around sophomore, junior year. Also they had, I believe it's still here, I spoke with a student recently today, Student Television Workshop—

JN: Yeah!

JC: —which is a great way for you to create beyond the structure of things that already existed at the School, which is really awesome. And I did TV-10 News. I created a show called *Hollywood Corner* with another student that was like an entertainment show where we talked about celebrities and new movies, we'd show clips. It was a very cool variety show that I did for about three years here. From my sophomore to my junior and senior year, and it definitely helped build my confidence for one, but also build my resume for the real world.

JN: Absolutely. And that's so funny to hear that, you know, you started in Student Television Workshop creating a show, right, on the Hollywood lines and that's where your career path took you!

JC: Yeah. I mean, you always hope, you know, that's gonna be the case, but it's not always that case. We see with friends, I see with fellow alumni. Sometimes, we know, we change passions or paths because of whatever, family, whatnot. You know, choices we make. It's nice that I'm

still doing what I went to school for, and it's not an easy thing to say and saying that, I'm really prideful to be able to say I'm doing it.

JN: Oh, without a doubt. Yeah, you're right. Especially with communication, it's such a versatile major. I tell this to prospective students, current students, all the time. It's like, *Well what do I do with this degree?* And I'm like *Ah, I don't have a great answer for you because you can literally do almost anything.*

JC: Especially now. I think when we went to school like, you know, 2007-2008, it was still great, but we didn't have the TikTok, we didn't have the Instagram, we didn't have these outlets that are such brilliant PR engines that are free. That if you use them right to your advantage, you can do so well, you know. So, I think this is the perfect time to be actually joining and learning these things at ISU because I wish I would have had the outlets. We made the best we could—we still did amazing things back in 2007-2008. But now you're...it really is endless opportunity. So, there is no thing about being pigeonholed, you can do whatever you want to do.

JN: Exactly. And there's so much value in that and, you know, when you think about all the different opportunities that didn't exist when you and I were students, and there's just a whole world out there. And I would love to hear about kind of your path and your, you know, trajectory. So, like you graduated from School of Communication in 2008, how did you get from there to where you are today?

JC: So, it didn't start out very well, to be honest. And that's okay. Actually, I'm pretty happy to see how it all went ultimately. But I graduated as the outstanding senior in journalism for Illinois State, it was awesome to get that honor from the School. And I didn't have a job lined up. There was the opportunities that I had in like Peoria and Quincy, which are great options. But I always wanted to do entertainment, and that's what my teachers like Laura Trendle-Polus and Bob Carroll always were like *We know that's what you want to do, so we're not gonna make you do these other parts.*

JN: Right.

JC: So, they really gave me opportunities to do entertainment on the newscasts, and they really respected my path and my want but there was no...I want to do either Chicago, LA, New York. You know which is it's a high hope thing for a new student though, a new grad.

JN: Yeah.

JC: But I found out there's a new show on NBC called *24/7*. It was like a new late night entertainment TV show. Went in for an internship interview. Got hired. I was one of five interns. Worked six months full time, zero pay, which is rough. I even had my parents saying to me like *Jeff, you have to go get a real job.* And I was like, *Guys, this is a real job. And I promise you this is just how it works.* Some industries are different. This is one of them. I have to earn my key first. And I did. And you know, I was the newest of five interns. Two months into my internship, they're going to Italy for filming. They bring me because I stayed the longest, I

worked the hardest, I complained the least. And so, you know, and I became the show's producer about a year later, the sole producer at the age of 23. When I asked if there was an on-camera opportunity they gave me an on-camera reporting side. And then from there I worked with a couple of privately owned Comcast channels as a host on a TV show. And then from there I worked for a London-based fashion men's magazine where I interviewed up and coming actors called *Candid Magazine*. And then, oh gosh, from there, Chicago scene. I was the director of multimedia. And then from there, the pandemic happened, and I was working red carpets in Chicago. And they all shut down, no one could be around each other. And it was really hard for a lot of people. I had friends that were on this red carpet with me in Chicago. It would be like *Jeff, I'm gonna start working at a nursing home cause I just have to have a job.* and I totally understood, and I respected it.

JN: Yeah.

JC: We have to work. I was like, as a creative, as a person that went to ISU in the COM department...if I can't use my creative juices, I will go mad. I know me. I know how I'm hardwired. So, I just started reaching out to companies including Forbes. They weren't even hiring. I just reached out and showed them my work. Said *I would love to, you know, write for you guys* cause I always had a writing background including my video-journalism background that I learned also at ISU, and it was...they took me on as a contributor first. So, I started with a few little articles here and there. And then I made my niche being articles on celebrities beyond Hollywood with like their passion projects outside of Hollywood.

JN: Oh, fascinating!

JC: So that became my niche, and I became a senior contributor. And now I am fortunately to say the most read Hollywood writer and reporter at Forbes today.

JN: That's incredible, Jeff. Congratulations!

JC: Thank you!

JN: Just listening to, you know that path. And what I appreciate so much about it, is it seems like you just took advantage of every opportunity that came your way. You just said *Yes*.

JC: Yep. I would say that, anybody out there, keep your eyes and ears open. You could be at a coffee shop and eavesdropping. The only reason I got this internship job for this 24/7 show, and I didn't have a job outside of ISU, was because I was eavesdropping at a friend's going away party in a house. This guy had another conversation, was talking about the show. I turned to him and said, *Hey, I need that contact.*

JN: Oh my gosh!

JC: He didn't know me but he gave it to me, and you know so I would say eyes and ears keep them open.

JN: That's wild!

JC: Yeah.

JN: Wow, and what I admire, too is you just said, you know, *I just reached out to Forbes* just cause, right?

JC: Yeah.

JN: Why not?

JC: I mean the worst I've learned—is taking...a lot of us, we all have a hard time with rejection in every aspect of life.

JN: Absolutely.

JC: I think that I am at a place in my career where, *No* doesn't scare me. The worst thing for me is not trying. So, I'd rather at least put myself out there and they say no. Their loss. And I move on.

JN: Yeah.

JC: And, you know, it's not ego. It's just, I know the caliber of work I can do. And if you're not gonna see that right now, wish you well. But I gotta keep going.

JN: Absolutely. It's not the right time for us.

JC: Yeah.

JN: Wow! Oh my gosh, that is just absolutely fascinating. And I was reading through your work this morning, and it looks like your most recent interview you did was with Christina Aguilera.

JC: It was.

JN: Tell me about that.

JC: So, it's really funny. I got an e-mail, which is fortunate in my career now. I used to try to like hit up these random publicists, DM these celebrities in the most wild attempt and be like *Let me interview you!* And that's the way you have to do it early on in your career. And I get it. That says you gotta be tooth and nail and just going at it. But I got reached out to by a PR company saying Christina is working with a new company. She's a cofounder of a company called Playground which is a sexual wellness for females, personal lubricant company, which at Forbes I do have to be careful, you know, I mean, it's also you know, it's a professional thing. She's a cofounder now and a chief brand advisor for them. So, I got to interview them. We had a great interview, she even told me she liked my questions and appreciated that I wasn't all about gossip.

JN: My goodness!

JC: So, it was nice to hear that from the Queen Christina and I put out the article yesterday. And so I did an interview with her for Forbes, and she also spoke with Cosmopolitan and Allure magazine, all three of us. She only shared my article and that felt really, really good. So that's all over her Twitter right now and it's pretty amazing.

JN: That is so cool. I mean, like when you talk about compliments, right?

JC: Yeah!

JN: And actions speak louder than words. And so, without a doubt, that's really fascinating.

JC: Thank you.

JN: Well, Jeff, tell us a little bit about what's your interview process, right? I mean, when you get such a high stakes person or such a celebrity, I would get immediately terrified and nervous, right? How do you maintain your cool? How do you...?

JC: Deep down I'm always a little bit terrified and nervous but I learned--I'm a runner, naturally I've always been a runner that I--it's almost an adrenaline high that I actually, I live for. I like the nerves almost because it makes me focus more for some reason.

JN: Well, it works for you.

JC: Yeah, but interview wise, if I know I'm gonna be interviewing someone, I first find out how much time I'm gonna get and then see what questions I should and could ask. Sometimes these PR people will be like, even Christina are like *Jeff, no music or album questions, no personal questions*. So, you gotta learn and see what you can and cannot ask. And then just doing a lot of research on the subject like trying to learn every little detail even to the point where I'm learning about their birthday because I know their birthdays coming up. I'll usually start being like, *Hey by the way happy birthday*. I might know it's coming up in two days. That little way of like ice breaking and showing that you did your research, they actually will give you better answers because they already feel more appreciated and more comfortable. So always find ways to kind of ice break. Like *Oh you went to ISU as well?* You know, it's a great ice breaker and hey, if I'm ever interviewing like Sean Hayes or Jane Lynch, that's an easy way in, you know what I mean?

JN: Good start!

JC: So, you know, always finding ways to get these people comfortable to be able to speak with you like a friend at the other end of a bar rather than the robotic way that I unfortunately see a lot of times in media where it seems very transactional and just kind of a little bit forced. I'm very much about speaking just as another human, and a person that's working hard. Yes, you may get more compensation sometimes and more notoriety, but you're still also just another working professional. And I like to dig down to see the human of that.

JN: Yeah, I mean, honestly, just personal experience here. But I can feel that, you know, we're just sharing a conversation.

JC: Yeah.

JN: And there's so much value in that. I think that's something that we really try to instill in our students here in the School of Communication. I mean, these are all growing professionals. They're hoping for a wonderful career like yours. So, Jeff, I wonder, would you share any bit of advice to current Redbirds who are getting ready to graduate here in the next couple of weeks? What advice would you share for someone who's just getting started in their career?

JC: First, I would say again, don't take rejection as hard as you probably will or naturally plan to, because rejection happens to all of us, rejection happens to me. I mean, you read my title. It's a really wonderful title—

JN: Yes.

JC: —But I still get *No's*. And knowing it's gonna happen to any of us at any level of our career. But know your skills, trust your skills, and own your skills. You know there's a line between ego and confidence. And I think if you can make sure that you're confident and just let your work speak for itself, people are gonna see you. People are gonna knock on your doors and I would just say find your own niche. Because I was saying to Laura and Bob recently who were my teachers, now are my friends here at Illinois State that teach, that you have to find your niche because everybody is trying to do, in any kind of industry but especially in the communications industry, there are so many people trying to do the same kind of jobs and what's gonna make you stand out? So, you gotta find something about you, whether it's a special question you always ask during your interviews or a certain thing that you do, you know you got to find ways to make you different. Otherwise, you're going to be a face in the crowd. And sometimes a face in the crowd can be employed, which is wonderful. But if you really wanna be that trailblazer to an extent, you have to find a way to really, you know, know our society, know the times and do something that's going to really make you stand out.

JN: Yeah. And you know you said something that just kind of hit with me. Do you have any signature questions or things that you do when you're in an interview?

JC: Yeah, so I don't do it all the time, this is much more pre-pandemic—

JN: Okay.

JC: —But I used to always give gifts during my interview. So, like for example, I interviewed Halle Berry at a Chicago red carpet. And it was her birthday coming up in a few days, and I said *Hey, Halle, I know your birthday's coming up*. So, I got her a Chicago snow globe cause I told her that my favorite *X-Men* character was her Storm who can shoulder weather, and we were in Chicago for this interview, which is the Windy City. And I said, *Just like your character in X-Men*—She also promoted a new movie—*Kidnap*, which is about her kid being abducted and

going to get him back, which is an amazing story “— *just like your character in Kidnap*. And just like her, she's actually had a pretty tumultuous life herself. I was like, *You know how to weather the storm. That's why I'm giving this to you*. And she loved it. She kissed me on the cheek in the interview. I had this on...I haven't washed my face in about 5 years.

JN: Never gonna do it again.

JC: Never gonna do it again, but yeah, that's kind of my schtick, just because it gets a rise out of people. It's never just a gift just to give a gift. It either goes with the movie they're doing, or it goes around their life through my research, and they really do see that. So, it's a very playful, very simple, but I think as simple as it is, it really does make it really pop.

JN: That's incredible.

JC: Yeah.

JN: And I guarantee you she never forgot that.

JC: Yeah, and hopefully. And so, I interviewed her recently. It's funny, I interviewed her recently again, and she wasn't gonna do media for something. I found out she was doing something for a pharmaceutical company and the PR people were like, *Sorry, she's not doing any media*, and I was like, *Well, I've interviewed her before!* and they were like *Well send us the YouTube, we'll send it on to her*. Two hours later, they called me back and was like, *You know what, Jeff, she'll make an exception, she'll do the interview with you*.

JN: Wow.

JC: So, it helps when I think just being a good person,

JN: Being nice.

JC: Yeah, being nice. But being clever can do well for you in this career.

JN: Yeah, without a doubt.

JC: Yeah.

JN: Wow, that...and that's such good advice too. You know, it's one of those industries that I think you just don't really know how to do it well, right, until you just get in there and start trying.

JC: 100%.

JN: Trying to figure it out.

JC: You gotta--you just gotta go out there. I've trialed and errored, you will after you graduate, while you're at the School, but the School gives you time to do that trial and error so that you



can somewhat master it before you leave so you can leave with a confidence to go to an employer and say that *I am ready to do this*.

JN: Exactly. And that's all that we're about here in the School of Communication is setting our students up for success so that way when they do cross the stage, they feel ready to go and they feel competent in their skills that they've learned here in Fell Hall.

JC: Absolutely. And I was just saying to you Julie too, like, I have no bad memories of this school, the whole university, but the School of Communication. Like I lived in the basement of Fell Hall, and I loved every second. I would work the most random days editing things just because it was my way of being a creative and being out there and I was grateful to have the services here. And I, you know, I had other schools that I was thinking of when I was deciding to apply to schools from high school. And it was this one or a couple others. And I kept coming back to the school. There was something about this school and it was the best decision I ever made.

JN: Oh, without a doubt. You know, I would even share my personal experience too with that. But there's a reason I still work here even though I went to school here so many years ago. There's something special.

JC: There's a true community feel. And as big of a school as it is and I'm not gonna--my sister and brother went to University of Illinois which is also a very nice school--There's something that I noticed and obviously I'm biased because I went here. I could even just tell by the environment and surroundings that as big of a school we are here at Illinois State, you really do feel like a small campus feel, like you do feel like you are somebody here. You're not just lost in the crowd.

JN: Exactly. Exactly. I mean, most of our classes right now, I would say about 20-25 students on average.

JC: Awesome!

JN: You get that personal attention no matter where you're at.

JC: And I remember that during our school too, which is so nice that it wasn't all these big lectures where my teacher never knew my name the entire time I was there. We were actually having regular conversations. I was given eye contact to constantly. I was being called on. It was the best.

JC: Absolutely. And it's the same.

JC: Good to hear.

JN: Hasn't changed.

JC: I would expect no less.

JN: Exactly. Well, Jeff, you have been wonderful to get to know this afternoon. Thank you so much for coming on and spending some of your time here in Fell Hall. For anybody who's listening, how can people follow you or find you?

JC: So, if you go to forbes.com and you just look up Jeff Conway, C-O-N-W-A-Y, Jeff, J-E-F-F, you can find all of my articles or you can go on my Instagram at Jeff\_Conway. Or Twitter at Jeff Conway. It's almost like a Matt Smith. You never think that Jeff Conway was a common name, but unfortunately, a lot of people go for Jeff Conway.

JN: That's so funny.

JC: Oh well.

JN: Well, wonderful.

JC: Thanks, Julie.

JN: Thanks again for your time. I really appreciate it. And we are looking forward to another fun COM-versation with you in the future. Thank you so much and thanks for listening.