

Introducing Public Dialogue Consortium's Diversity & Inclusion Facilitator

"From Teddy Bears to Televisions: Bob Rucker's Transformative Journey" - SJSU media relations adaptation



As a child, Bob Rucker would often use a portable blackboard in the basement of his family's South Side Chicago home to teach his teddy bears, all lined up in chairs, before heading upstairs to watch America's "Most Trusted TV Newsman" Walter Cronkite. So it comes as no surprise that, more than 50 years later, the now professor emeritus of journalism and mass communications at San José State University enjoys facilitating conversations, in both the media and local communities, which focus on diversity and inclusion.

Professor Rucker inherited this passion from his parents, born and raised in the segregated South, who were active in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. His father had rocks thrown at him when he marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Chicago. Robert senior also attended the historic 1963 'March on Washington.' Professor Rucker says his "mother and father never finished high school, but they were very big on reading the newspaper, and watching newscasts. My mother always stressed the importance of knowing what's going on in the world because it would have an impact on whatever job you have."

That perspective came in handy years later, when young Bob Rucker joined his college friend's radio DJ program at Northern Illinois University, where he read news headlines starting at 6 a.m. Sunday mornings. A campus journalism professor happened to hear Rucker's voice on the radio, and called the newsroom to invite him to try out for the campus television news program. The diehard Cubs, White Sox and Bears fan was happy to do so, and secured the sports anchor job. Later he became the sports writer and producer.

A single gesture by a caring professor had unknowingly redirected Rucker's career plans as a political science major. Instead of becoming a lawyer and politician, the 1976 graduate got his first TV news reporting job in Des Moines, Iowa covering statehouse politics. Later he'd become a CNN National Correspondent in San Francisco, a medical reporter for Group W Westinghouse in Philadelphia, and a national TV news producer and reporter for Newsweek Broadcasting in New York City. During his live television career, Rucker also anchored the weekend news in the Delaware Valley where he reported on the efforts of first term U.S. Senator Joseph R. Biden. In 1979, Rucker covered the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, and spent nine days providing updates on the health risks from dangerous radiation leaks. Later that year, the devout Catholic got a chance to meet and interview Pope Saint John Paul II on live television during his first papal visit to the United States.

Despite a successful seven-year career as a professional broadcaster, Rucker was forced to leave the news desk behind at age 29 when he suffered a mild heart attack. His doctor warned the stress of his work could be fatal. When Rucker called his mother in despair, she reminded her distraught son about those teddy bears in the basement, and his college minor in education. Soon an opportunity to teach journalism on the faculty of home state University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign would give him a chance to earn a master's degree in journalism. He took that as a clear sign of "destiny calling."

It did not take long for Bob Rucker to fall in love with higher education. For him, college teaching combined imparting knowledge and history with “real world” lessons not in any textbook. Like his NIU professor, he also wanted to help students discover new career possibilities. In every course syllabi, Rucker always included a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln which says ‘Before you shoot off your mind, make sure your brain is loaded.’ Professor Rucker would go on to teach thousands of media bound students, at two major universities, that “The First Amendment, ‘freedom of the press’ is a great noble calling,” and that “the nation’s founders at the outset realized truth-telling would be essential to keeping everything honest, trustworthy and moving forward.” Rucker insisted on getting facts straight because “your reputations would depend on it.”

During his 30 years in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Professor Rucker closely monitored how the news landscape was shifting rapidly from print based media to broadcast television, then online and social media news platforms. Again truth-telling would remain the key foundation, and for career flexibility later students, should always embrace keeping up with current events and public criticism of media efforts with the long term goal of having a respected reputation in the future.

During the mid-1990s, the journalism school director asked Rucker to redesign their outdated “Minorities in Media” course, and make it more inclusive and attractive to all students across campus. His new “Diversity in Media” course would include the study of new media platforms as they focused on issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, religious bias and disability in media messages. By the start of the 21st century, enrollments expanded from 25 to 70 students per class. Professor Rucker taught everyone how to open up, learn from each other’s life experiences, and identify common ground embedded in diverse community ideas and traditions.

When Bob Rucker was chosen by faculty to be school director, he prioritized embracing new thinking in all functions, including the selection of the nationally coveted William Randolph Hearst Foundation award for outstanding public service by professionals in journalism, public relations, advertising and mass communications. He helped raise SJSU’s national profile by securing people like CNN Chief White House Correspondent Jim Acosta in 2018, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in 2020. Last year’s first ever all-virtual ceremony, live streamed on YouTube due to the Covid 19 pandemic, attracted tens of thousands of global viewers with a focus on the deadly impact the virus was having on ethnic communities. SJSU Journalism has nominated the award program for a regional Emmy Award for outstanding public service in higher education.

In February, 2021, California Assemblyman Ash Kalra knocked on Professor Rucker’s door to deliver an official state legislative proclamation recognizing his two careers in education and broadcast journalism. “Bob Rucker was an easy choice for our Legacy honoree for African American History Month Celebration,” said Kalra. “He is not only an outstanding teacher, but a leader in our community who has dedicated his life to uplifting the voices of those marginalized in our community, and sharing their stories.”

Following the brutal death of George Floyd last year, and humanity’s outcry and protests worldwide, the Public Dialogue Consortium invited Rucker to join them as a facilitator for candid community discussions of diversity and inclusion in Fremont and Livermore, California. His YouTube channel showcases numerous examples of one-on-one and class interactions where sensitive cultural issues are respectfully addressed, including those involving policing and human services.

If the goal is to find “common ground for working together for solutions,” Rucker believes “the road less traveled” becomes far more inviting, and worth the time and effort by others over time.



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