Emily Kwong “Everyday Women of Sitka” Interview 5.18.18

Can you please tell me a little about yourself? How long have you lived in Sitka? What types of things are you involved in here?

Do you have something you’d like to say to other women in Sitka?

I have lived in Sitka for almost 4 years. I came up here for a fellowship with the local public radio station, Raven Radio KCAW. When I arrived, I immediately knew I was in some place very special and very different from what I knew. I grew up in suburban Connecticut, went to school in New York City, and this environment was really striking to me. I didn’t know what it meant to live in community until I moved to Sitka. When I got here, I dove pretty quickly into my job at the radio station as a daily reporter. I also took up a few hobbies. When I have time, I teach radio workshops to people who are interested, I taught radio workshops in Kake and the Sitka School District. I also do Aerial Silks on the side which is a form of circus arts. That has been the kind of the thing I do to counterbalance the demands of work.

What is your biggest struggle right now?

What is boils down to is my biggest struggle is being wise about my use of time. Time is finite, but curiosity and ambition are infinite. I will wake up and be blooming with ideas about stories I want to do, people I want to call, projects I want to work on, conversations I want to have. It is like a million grains of sand trying to fit into a 16 oz. jar. So how much sand can you honestly pack into that jar. It has been a lifelong struggle how to prioritize what you want to do in a given day, and to be realistic about what you want to accomplish and to make sure you are building in time and layers of sand in the jar for play and rest and unstructured time. If you spend the days only in a structured way, it depletes your creativity, your energy, you are no fun to be around or a good partner. What I love about Sitka is that you can have a multifaceted life, and the way people fill their days with such a variety of things. One of the reasons I wanted to stay in Sitka is because people have such rich extracurricular lives.

What does a normal “Day in the Life” look like for you?

I tell people who aren’t in Sitka, that my life is a combination of Gilmore Girls and Parks and Rec television shows in which I am one of many colorful characters in community that is full of do-gooders, but not always do-it-perfecters. Everyone is so clearly trying to take care of themselves, their families, their community. We tell the stories of Sitka doing that.

A lot of my work is around the city of Sitka and the municipality and the City Assembly. I host the City Assembly live broadcast which are these 4 or 5 hour meetings which we share live on Raven Radio. It is fun because we are one of the few public radio stations in the country that I can honestly say that broadcast their local government meetings in full and that is a rare kind of access to government, and something I am pretty proud to provide every other week.

I also cover whatever story rolls in. You never know what your rollercoaster ride is going to look like on a given day in news. You will show up and have a story idea in mind, and then the news will break and suddenly you will have to abandon that and jump on whatever new news arrives. Whether that Sitka is receiving a fast response cutter, bringing in more Coast Guard families, or local artists winning a statewide award, you become an expert very quickly at whatever your story assignment is. It is a little bit like being in college and cramming for a test every time. Just trying to absorb information like a sponge, soak it up, and retool it in a way to make it accessible for people. A lot of my day is spent around gathering interviews, researching, writing, and then editing and producing the story. That is fun, that is like making an audio layer cake where you are recording your voice and mashing with the sounds of other people and ambient sounds as well. I always feel that reporting is not only cramming for a test and becoming an expert on something really quickly, but it is also a chance for creativity and artistry which I really enjoy. I honestly see it as a gift for people. You are giving them a story to dive deeply into, and perhaps feel something from. I love those kinds of stories where you have a story or a character that is very difficult to understand and by the end you not only understand it, but you really feel the news.

My day is very dynamic and diverse, and also very people driven. The work is only as good as the relationships you form with people. It is so dependent on trust, and their willingness to open up to you. There is this perception of journalists being aggressive and like getting the scoop and this kind of investigative work you see in movies like Spotlight, but really daily reporting while you are skeptical and you have to maintain a certain level of objective distance, I found my best reporting comes from actually being honest about information I have and genuinely empathetic and curious about people. That is the kind of reporter I try to be, the kind of reporters I look up to to, and the kind of reporting the world could use more of.

What makes you proud to be a woman?

What an era it is to be a woman in the world. I look close and I see role models and I look into the distance and I see role models. There are so many women running for office, stepping into leadership roles, and spearheading creative projects right now in this country. I remember when I was younger having this book of women throughout history, I think every girl at some point should get a book like this. Just an almanac of everyone from Harriet Tubman to Harriet Beecher Stowe because women’s resiliency is a theme throughout history. Women emerging as improbable and exactly the right leaders when called for. I am proud to be a woman because of how I see this generation redefining feminism and also making it more inclusive.

I am 27 years old and I did not really call myself a feminist in college. I was kind of shy for a lot of my teens. I was always very curious but had a hard time putting myself out there and dealing with any criticism or rejection that would potentially follow. I was a little thin skinned. So it is funny to me that I am a reporter. It is a job for thick skinner people. It was absolutely on purpose. I put myself in a position where I have to face my fears every single day, fears of not being perfect, fears of my work being immediately open to scrutiny from people I didn’t know. These are scary things, but also a real source for growth. I think I didn’t understand the importance of identifying as a feminist or saying that word out loud until later on in life. Now that I have, it has kind of changed my world view.

One thing I have been purposely doing in Sitka, is seeking out one-on-one time with women. So once a week, I try to go for a walk on a trail or in town with a woman who is my friend, or who I haven’t had time to spend one-on-one quality time with, or someone who I am just getting to know. I call it female Fridays. I realized that I wanted more time getting to know women and women in my life in a meaningful way rather than in passing. And to have these conversations. What I initially said is true, I am proud to be a woman because I see so many other women claiming that identity and redefining what that means and stretching its boundary to include women of color, women with disabilities, women of different ages, transgender women. It is not something that looks one way, it looks as many of billions of ways as there are billions of women on this planet. So I am proud to be a woman for that reason in this era. If I could spend one-on-one time with every single woman on the planet and interview her, I would if it meant I got to live 10,000 lives and got to know all the women and girls I would.

Say to women in Sitka

I’d like to say something specifically to young girls in Sitka. I do reading buddies at the Sitka Public Library. I had a little girl tell me by the end that she wanted to be a reporter, but in outer space. She wanted to be the correspondent from the Mars Mission. What I want to say to the girls of Sitka is to take our work and make it even better, build on our legacies, don’t be afraid to tear down what your predecessors have done and create something very new and different and to reinvent the system. To be a reporter in outer space seems impossible now, but the future requires that kind of thinking. For girls in Sitka to know that they can challenge the women of the previous generation. Their mothers and grandmothers hold enormous wisdom, but their purpose in life is not to be carbon copies of them. Their purpose is to take the wisdom from women before them, to make a list of your female heroes and research them, to spend time with women different than you to learn lessons from them very deliberately, to think about the lessons you want to take away lessons from your parents that serve you and let go of the ones that don’t, and to very much know that the kind of woman you become is up to you and you are not trapped or destined by anyone else’s path.

I think a lot about girls in Sitka, and reminding them they have choices. There are resources and other women they can lean on to go against the current and make their own path respectfully. Hopefully without the people who lived before them thinking “oh, she is better than us, she is leaving town and going to college, or she doesn’t want to date boys that’s weird, or she likes girls that’s weird, or she protests and is a tattooed democrat and I am a republican that’s weird”. Women have to know that they can defy the mold they are born into. I worry about that in Sitka a little bit because it is a hard enough in Suburban Connecticut to feel a pressure to be a certain way and break out of that mold. I can’t imagine in a town of 9 or 10,000 that is even harder to just say “you know what, I am just the person I am and I am going to figure out what that means for me and not allow these definitions to be applied to me”.

If girls decide they want to be a reporter, get in touch. My email is emily@kcaw.org and I am always happy to talk to people who are curious about public media, reporting, and journalism.