

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Ryan Smith:

So one day on my lunch break, while I was up for partner, I jump in a van with her, a camera guy, and a sound guy, and we ran all over New York City in about an hour and a half and I shot a seven-minute reel that she then cut together. And from there, it ended up landing on the desk of somebody at BET, and BET said, "Oh, we're doing this show called My Two Cents. Would you want to be a guest on it?" So I went to be a guest on that. And they said, "Would you want to host it?" Said, "Okay," because they didn't have a set host yet, so then I hosted that with a couple other people. Someone else saw me on TV One and said, "Would you want to join a talk show that we're doing there?" So I ended up doing that talk show, and then somebody on CNN saw that. And they asked me to come on and talk about the Iraq War, which I knew nothing about. But I then went on TV and talked about that and one thing led to another.

I eventually ended up landing a job at Court TV, and that was tough because I had to sort of ... For a while I was practicing law and doing that, but eventually I ended up transitioning full-time to Court TV, then moved on to CNN, HLN, hosted shows there, then ABC and ESPN. But it was really that moment of feeling like even though I really loved practicing law, I really did, I really enjoyed it, I just thought there was something more. I just couldn't put my finger on it. And this friend of mine happen to say by chance, "Why not television?"

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast, he is Ryan Smith, an anchor on ESPN's flagship Sports Center program. He's also a sports Emmy winning host of ESPN's Outside the Lines and E:60. And he's a legal analyst for ESPN and ABC News. While you'll see Smith anchoring on your television, his path to a career in journalism was quite unorthodox. After earning a political science degree from the Maxwell School here at Syracuse, Smith went on to earn his law degree from Columbia Law School. While a successful lawyer, Smith didn't quite feel satisfied with where his career was at, so he made a huge career pivot, decided to pursue a career in television. And today, Smith is combining his love of law and his passion for journalism. Ryan, I'd say your decision to better yourself certainly paid off. Didn't it?

Ryan Smith:

It did. It did. I got very fortunate. I was in many ways in the right place at the right time, but overall, man, I loved being a lawyer, but I love this a lot more. I'll say it like that.

John Boccacino:

Tell us that moment. Obviously, you got success as a lawyer and you were working for the Jacksonville Jaguars. Right?

Ryan Smith:

Yep, yep.

John Boccacino:

I mean, you were a big time attorney in New York City. And you made a really fascinating pivot to go back and teach yourself journalism. What led to that moment?

Ryan Smith:

Yeah. This was really incredible. It's a great question. So I was up for partner at an entertainment firm in New York. And it was me and another person, we were both up for partner. And one day, I walked in her office and we were in the midst of this sort of ... When you're up for partner, you're working really, really hard, trying to prove to the partners that you can be one of them. And then the whole rat race of being a junior lawyer starts all over again, except on a partner level. So I walked into her office one day and I was like, "You know what, I just feel like I'm not feeling it. I feel like I'm not ... I don't know if I want to be a partner."

And so she started talking me through it. She's like, "Well, what do you like?" I said, "I don't know. I mean, all I know is being a lawyer. I enjoy it. I just don't know where I want to take it." And she said out of the blue, "Why don't you do something on television?" And I said, "I've never done anything on television before. How would I know how to do that?" She's like, "I don't know. How hard could it be?" And I was like, "Okay." So I called up ... I was an entertainment lawyer at the time, so I called up a producer that I was representing at the time, who produced TV shows. And I said, "Okay, I'm thinking about television. What would I need to do?" And this producer said, "Oh, we need to do a reel. Here's what I'll do. I'll come pick you up one day and we'll shoot a series of interviews. One will be you just talking to a camera, another will be interviewing somebody else. And we'll just do it all in one day."

So one day on my lunch break while I was up for partner, I jump in a van with her, a camera guy, and a sound guy, and we ran all over New York City in about an hour and a half and I shot a seven-minute reel that she then cut together. And from there she said, "I'll put it out to a few friends of mine." It ended up landing on the desk of somebody at BET, and BET said, "Oh, we're doing this show called My Two Cents. Would you want to be a guest on it?" So I went to be a guest on that, and they said, "Would you want to host it?" I said, "Okay," because they didn't have a set host yet. So then I hosted that with a couple other people, someone else saw me on TV One and said, "Would you want to join a talk show that we're doing there?" So I ended up doing that talk show. And then somebody on CNN saw that, and they asked me to come on and talk about the Iraq War, which I knew nothing about.

I then went on TV and talked about that, one thing led to another and I eventually ended up landing a job at Court TV. And that was tough because I had to sort of ... For a while, I was practicing law and doing that. But eventually, I ended up transitioning full-time to Court TV, then moved on to CNN, HLN, hosted shows there, then ABC and ESPN. But it was really that moment of feeling like even though I really loved practicing law, I really did, I really enjoyed it, I just thought there was something more. I just couldn't put my finger on it. And this friend of mine happened to say by chance, "Why not television?"

John Boccacino:

I think you did a really great job of both encapsulating the move, but also kind of downplaying the difficulty. I mean, you make it seem like it was so easy. I mean, for our audience, you were teaching yourself how to read a teleprompter. You were teaching yourself the cues of actually being ... The pros make it look effortless. The fact that you could accomplish this is a testament to your work ethic. I mean, just how difficult was it working full-time, saying no to the partner opportunity to pursue this unknown in sports journalism?

Ryan Smith:

Oh, it was so tough at so many times, but I have to tell you from the moment I started doing it, I loved it. It was intoxicating for me, so I wanted to keep pushing forward. I'll tell you two stories that encapsulate how difficult it was. So the way I got to Court TV, one day I was practicing law in LA and some random person who I did not know calls me and said, "Hey, I work with HLN. Would you want to talk for a little bit?" So we talked for about an hour about a bunch of different subjects. Never heard from this guy again for about seven months. Calls me again and says, "Hey, do you want to meet for dinner? I'm in New York right now." So then I meet with him for dinner.

While we're sitting at dinner, and I hadn't spoken to him in months, only met him once, he said, "I want to offer you a job co-hosting a show on Court TV." And I said, "Okay." He said, "Well, you've got to come down and read and just make sure you can do the job. But I'm sure you'll be fine at it." He's like, "You know prompter and all that stuff. Right?" I'm like, "Yeah, of course I do." So he says, "Great. I'll see you in Atlanta in a week." So I go home and I say, "What am I going to do?" So I got ... The only thing, and this is what I did a lot with television, I didn't know what I didn't know, so I had to sort of think of what I thought it might look like to learn how to do elements of the job. So when I saw people reading a prompter, I immediately thought about what it was like when I use a wireless mouse reading my computer screen. Nobody can see my hand moving, and I'm just reading the words on the computer screen if I'm scrolling up, so I did that.

I bought a wireless mouse, had my computer, put it about 10 feet away from me, made the print really big, and practiced that for about three hours a day all week long until I got it right. And that's how I learned how to read prompter. I went down there, I wasn't amazing, but they were like, "You're good enough. We can work with that." The other thing I will say is, the other thing that underscores how difficult it can be to be in two different worlds at once was I was practicing law, when you're practicing law, you can't just stop. Sometimes you're still working with clients. So I was working with a client and they called me about 30 minutes before the show with an urgent matter. So I'm on the phone talking them through this deal. It was a deal we were trying to put together. It was supposed to close later that day.

I'm talking them through the deal. I'm looking up at the clock and my show starts in 10 minutes. So I'm running down to set, this is when I was at CNN, and nobody there thankfully knows this story I guess until now. I was running to set, on the phone talking to this guy through the deal points. I was still on the phone as I was sitting down in the chair getting miked up. And I was like, "Don't forget clause 3B, and then 4A. And then don't forget how that intersects with this and that. Got it? Okay. Hey, can I call you back in about an hour because my show is an hour long?" The guy's like, "Yeah." Okay, hang up the phone, a minute later we're on air. There was a lot of that in the beginning. Thankfully, everything went well. I never had a problem with clients, but there were a lot of challenges.

But what fueled me the entire way is what I think probably a lot of people think who go to Newhouse who work in this profession, it is wonderful and intoxicating in so many ways. You get to tell stories. You get to exercise your curiosity in ways you could never imagine. And from the moment I did it for the first time, I thought this is what I will love doing. And it really hasn't changed since.

John Boccacino:

Now we'll get into how you've merged your passions into this awesome career. But are there any skillsets you can point to from being a lawyer that really parlayed well to being on air, to being in journalism?

Ryan Smith:

Oh, yeah, two big ones. First, I will say this, I say this to anybody who's interested in getting into journalism. Curiosity is your most important tool, just plain curiosity. A lot of times when I think about being in this field, because I'm relatively new to this field compared to the people that I work with, I try to break things down to their simplest elements because if you try to think too much about the guy I'm working next to, he has 25 Emmys and I just got here five minutes ago, you're going to psych yourself out. It's really a lot simpler than that. It's this person next to me, they might be good because they ask good questions, or they're curious about what they're talking about.

Channeling that curiosity is the most important tool I have had, and that's what I had to do as a lawyer. When somebody walks in my office with a problem, I want to know everything about it. I want to know everything about them. I want to know everything about the other side. And then I want to figure out a way to figure out the problem. Journalism in many ways is like that. You come in, you're asking questions, you're asking the right questions. You're asking deep questions, and you're trying to find out everything you can about something.

The other thing that really helped me was, when I was a lawyer, one of my strong suits, I was not an amazing lawyer, but I was okay, and one of my strong suits was I could take something complicated and make it simple. And I always thought of it this way, before I was a lawyer, there was so much I didn't understand. And when I went to law school, I didn't come ... There were no lawyers in my family, so when these people are talking about all these high-minded concepts in law, I had no idea what they were talking about. And I really thought from then on as I started meeting clients, maybe clients are in the same position. They don't know what I'm talking about when I talk about the complicated parts of a deal point in an M and A deal, or in a sale lease back.

My job is to make it easy for them to understand, so I did that all throughout my legal career. I saw my job, number one, as being able to take all this complicated stuff I'm learning as a lawyer and making it simple for the client. Once I started doing television, especially legal analysis, I realized that's the same thing you think for the viewer. You do the same thing for the viewer. You're taking something that might seem like this person's on trial for this, and this might happen and that might happen. Here's Ryan Smith, explain it. And my job is to take that, whether it's in 30 seconds, a minute, or three minutes, take that and let the viewer see this like it's simple, so they can turn around and talk to somebody else about it. And I do the same thing when I anchor Sports Center.

It can be something ... I still see one of our roles on Sports Center as even if everybody in the world knows the Denver Nuggets and the Miami Heat, maybe some people don't understand what's going on in that series, and so in some ways, I'm always trying to find ways to take anything that's complicated and make it simple. Take anything people might not know and find the shortest, quickest way for them to get that, to be able to communicate it to somebody else. And that's kind of what I saw my role is as a lawyer, and that was something I applied to television.

John Boccacino:

Well, it definitely shows. I mean, if our audience has not watched any one of your segments, and I love the diversity of your talent. I mean, not many people could do an Outside the Lines, could do a Sports Center, and then do a true crime drama on 20/20. I mean, it's the depth and the breadth of knowledge that you bring to this position. I feel like you really encapsulate that phrase that you should be a mile wide and an inch deep when it comes ... No insult to the inch deep part because you cover a mile worth of territory.

Ryan Smith:

You're absolutely right. And for years, I spent so much time in television having a lot of different jobs, and I kept saying, "Some day when I really make it, I'm just going to do one thing and it's going to be great. I'm just going to focus on that all the time." And in the last couple years I've kind of realized I think my best skill is that I am probably better when I'm doing more than one thing. And that's hard sometimes because you've got to be on a bunch of different wavelengths. When you're thinking about being a legal analyst, it's a very different skill than being an anchor, which is a very different skill from being a correspondent. And sometimes it can become frustrating trying to separate all of those things. But one thing this industry has taught me is we all have different skills. And I've learned over the years to kind of lean into these differences because they serve different parts of what I love. The correspondent interview on 20/20 allows me to really get to know people personally and tell a long form story. Doing Sports Center gets me more on the enthusiasm side and I get to tell a story quickly and punchy, and in a way that people really want to hear it and get fired up over it. And then doing legal analysis allows me to really kind of get in touch with what I really loved about law and explain complicated concepts in a simple way. So to me, it's all of these different things that I always like doing and accepting the fact that, hey, if that means I do three different things, it's all good for me.

John Boccacino:

If you had to pick one of the hats that you wear, is there one that you love more than the other? Or does it kind of depend on the story you're telling?

Ryan Smith:

I would say I do love anchoring more than anything else. It's a lot of fun, anchoring, hosting, which is when you're sitting at a desk, or you're at a show, and you see the host of the show come on, or the anchor on Sports Center come on, I love that more than anything because there's a certain fun when you can control the flow. Producers help us set up everything and they basically tell us at different stages where we need to be and what we need to be doing. But when you're hosting a show or anchoring a show, you get to control the flow of the information, and how things go, and what you focus on. And you get to sort of run where you want to put more emphasis and where you want to dial back a little bit. That's a lot of fun.

But I will say, I will always have a special place in my heart for being a legal analyst because making the complicated simple is something I love to do. And I will always in some way seek to do correspondent interviews because it goes back to the curiosity thing. I love talking about people's stories and I feel like a real skill that we could have as journalists is exercising empathy. And I think that's really what you have to channel when you're a journalist. I think for years, there was this idea of hard-hitting journalist when you're tough and you don't let up on people.

I always looked at that differently. I always looked at it like I am here to tell someone else's story, and I love doing it. My job is to be curious about their story, to get out every bit of their story, and maybe even take the person I'm interviewing into places [inaudible 00:16:03], or maybe sometimes didn't want to go. But it's all in service of trying to get the word out about who they are. And I still love to do that, so anchoring might be my number one, but those two are my close second.

John Boccacino:

I'm going to age myself a little bit here, Ryan, when I say this, but you get a boo-yah, you get en fuego, cool as the other side of the pillow. Sports Center is such an institution, man. I mean, I grew

up watching Sports Center. I'm sure you grew up watching the greatest of the greats go through ESPN and Bristol. Just how surreal is it that you get to sit at that desk?

Ryan Smith:

It's awesome. There are times when I'm saying something on Sports Center, and while I'm saying it, I'm like, "Oh, my God. I used to watch this when I was at Syracuse. Oh, my gosh, we watched this every day when I was at Syracuse." I do that all the time. There's a friend of mine who works on Sports Center, Hannah Storm. It's so funny because she's become a really ... She's a great person, great person to work with, fantastic, phenomenal anchor. But I even had to tell her, I think I told her once, the first time I anchored with her I was like, "Oh, my gosh. I'm anchoring with Hannah Storm. I grew up watching you. How is this even happening?" There's so many moments like that, and it's just honestly, I have to say, and I want to say this to people who might be watching, about what it means to dream.

When I was a little kid, I wanted to be a sports caster, and for whatever reason in life, it's one of the reasons I went to Syracuse. I wanted to go. There was a broadcaster in Philadelphia, his name is Harry Kalas, and he was a broadcaster for the Phillies, and I worshiped him growing up. My mom met him at an art show and said, "My son wants to be a sports broadcaster. Where should he go?" He said, "Go to Syracuse." That was part of the reason I went. I ended up not going to Newhouse because I wanted to do other things in life, but I never forgot about that dream.

There are so many times when I walk onto Sports Center when I say, "Wow, even though it wasn't a straight line, I got to the point I always dreamt about." And I always tell people, just because it might not be what you're doing right now doesn't mean you should let go of that dream, whatever it is because for a person like me, especially even when I got into television, I never would've guessed I would end up on Sports Center, not ever. I mean, it would've been the furthest thing from my mind. And yet, here I get to do this show that I grew up worshiping, where I knew, just like you John, I knew every single phrase there was. And now I have to stop myself from using those phrases because I know them so well, so it's a really cool thing, man.

John Boccacino:

What was the moment when you knew that this betting on yourself and on this transition had paid off and you had made it? Did you ever allow yourself that moment to be like ... Because I know you always got to be on your toes. Right? Someone's coming for your job. You got to be fighting and making sure that you're the best of the best.

Ryan Smith:

Yeah. I would say, you know what's funny, it took me a long time to feel like I made it because for the longest time, I always thought that ... I just have this mentality kind of like an athlete, every game counts. But sometimes in television because it can be so dog-eat-dog, I guess you can call it, you have this feeling sometimes, I did when I was younger in my career, of man, if this show doesn't go well, this could all go away, that the dream could vanish. For me, it took a while for me not to feel that way, especially because I was working with so many people who had been doing this for so many years. And I was like, "Somebody's going to see that I don't know this as well as I think I do. I'm going to be ... I just learned how to read a prompter six months ago and my co-anchor's been doing it for 15 years. Someday, somebody's going to find out that I don't know what I'm doing."

But I think the made it moment for me, I signed a deal with ABC and I was a correspondent there. And about two months in, I had been doing a bunch of stories. I did this high profile story on the sale of the

Clippers to Steve Ballmer, the whole Donald Sterling controversy. So they had me on air a lot, and about two months in, one of the people at ABC came to me in the hallway and they said, "Hey, we're going to give you a new role tomorrow." I'm like, "What's that?" They're like, "We're going to have you anchor on GMA." And I was like, "What? Why would you do that?" That was the first thought that came into my head. I was like, "I just got out of here. Why are you ... What's going to happen?" And I remember after I did that show and it went off without a hitch, I said, "You know what, if I'm anchoring GMA, I must be doing something right."

I don't think it's ever quite felt to me like I've made it. I think the feeling that I've always had is I must belong here because I keep getting opportunities and I keep working for those opportunities. But the made it thing, that GMA moment was like, "Wow, if I can do this, then I think at least I trust my ability to at least try other things."

John Boccacino:

And you mentioned ... I'm glad you brought up ... I mean, I'm not glad because of the atrocities and the horrible words that Donald Sterling was captured having said about the Clippers, although it did lead to a positive change of getting him out of MBA ownership. But is it just me, Ryan, or does it seem like there has been this preponderance of legal issues in sports? I mean, you could look at Ja Morant, what he has gone through with the gun issues, Calvin Ridley, the NFL players gambling on the league and getting suspended. Would you agree that there's kind of been a rise in issues that involve legality in sports? Or are we more aware of it because of the 24/7 media cycle?

Ryan Smith:

I think it's the latter. We're more aware of it. And the things people used to do, they didn't come out before, and they certainly didn't come out in this way. There was no 24 hour news cycle. It's funny to me how when I talk to people who are in their 30s and below, they don't know a world without the 24-hour media cycle. I mean, we grew up with some of that. We grew up having to wait for the nightly news. And when you're doing that and also, when you live in a world where the attention on athletes and the attention on sports figures isn't as great in that way as it was in the '80s and '90s, say, and years before, then you just don't have as many stories. Now when somebody does something, everybody knows about it.

And I continue to get surprised at how many people continue to get in trouble, even though they know people are watching. That astounds me. I can't tell you how many times I've done legal analysis and I'm like, "I can't even believe I'm doing this." Did you not learn from the last seven guys who did this? But the thing is, I just think we have so much coverage, there is so much attention paid, there is so much going on with social media right now that every story has a potential to get out there, whereas in the past, I think you had a lot of larger figures in sports who were protected in some ways, who might've had flaws, but they were hidden in some ways. And now that just doesn't happen anymore, now everything is fair game.

John Boccacino:

I mean, imagine if, I know this goes way back, but we didn't know a lot about Mickey Mantle and his off field transgressions, or even Michael Jordan was lucky to come around and not have social media or camera phones out there documenting his ... The Atlantic City trip got overblown for sure, but there's all the rumors about the gambling and getting suspended from the league that led to his retirement. I mean, it just feels like it's a whole different era when it comes to covering sports. We want to know

about the athlete in general, and that makes it easier to tear them down from the pedestal that they might get placed on.

Ryan Smith:

It does. I mean, think about the Ja Morant story. If not for social media, he wouldn't have been suspended a game. The whole thing is because he put it on Instagram. That's it. I mean, if there was no Instagram, we wouldn't know anything about it. And with that though comes the thing of, I do think and this is what kind of saddens me about this a little bit because it's just not who I am as a person, I do think many of us today, we are looking for people to fall. And that is something I don't necessarily like, not even about this job, but how we are as a society, like someone's doing well and we're waiting for the shoe to drop. I'm hoping that as we go, we can be a little more understanding to the fact that people make mistakes.

I mean look at some of these athletes who have made mistakes recently, people in their teens or their 20s. I made so many mistakes in my 20s and I am so blessed that there was no 24-hour media cycle, or Facebook, or Twitter, or any of that, when I was that age. And now I have, it's funny, I have twin nine-year-olds and they keep wanting to set up a YouTube page. And one thing we've been telling them is ... Because their friends have YouTube pages, now these guys are nine and so they're not going to have a YouTube page for a while. One thing we've been trying to educate them on because we know how powerful social media is, even though they don't have phones or any of that social media stuff right now, we try to tell them what you put out now becomes the narrative of who you are as a person going forward.

And when I tell them that at nine, I try to imagine all the things that I might've put out when I was 10, 12, 15, 20, 25, 30, that might live on and cloud what my reputation is now in this business. I mean, that's terrifying to think about. And yet, we put this incredible burden on young people now when they make one mistake. So look, I'm not saying that those things will stop being covered, I'm just hoping we can have a little bit more empathy, especially for younger folks and younger athletes who are just going to make mistakes. We're human.

John Boccacino:

You and I are both very fortunate that Fagans, or Conrads, or 44s-

Ryan Smith:

Or Sutters.

John Boccacino:

The Orange Crate, Chucks, anything out there that didn't have-

Ryan Smith:

Oh, Chucks, don't get me started.

John Boccacino:

Well, it's great though because ... And that's what we love about doing the podcast is talking to our alums and our students and our faculty and our staff about their success stories. And I want to go back to a point you said earlier when the great Harry Kalas mentioned coming to Syracuse. And then you



come here and you don't study journalism. So what was your thought process on coming to Syracuse in the first place? And why political science?

Ryan Smith:

Okay. So I'm going to admit something. I would say I've never said this before publicly. And hopefully, people can use it as a lesson. So first year I was at Syracuse, I was a swimmer, so I swam. That was my thing. And then I stopped doing that midway through second year, and then all I did was just hang out at Chucks and Sutters and 44s and all these other places, and just had a great time. And keeping in the back of my mind, by the way, that I wanted to go to Newhouse eventually, so I remember someone told us, "Hey, you got to declare a major." And when I was there, I don't know if it's still the same way, you had to declare for Newhouse by the end of your second year. So I had about a month, I had maybe about a week or so to declare. I remember it clear as day.

And my friends were like, "Aren't you going to apply to Newhouse? Aren't you going to see if you can get in?" Right before the deadline. And I was like, "Yeah." But then I met a guy out, this is so stupid. This is what happens when you're a teenager. I met a guy out and he was, "Man, Newhouse is really hard. Party, man. It's not going to hold up if you're going to try to become great at Newhouse." I was like, "Maybe I should do something else." And that was honestly one of the weirdest decisions I've ever made in my life. I was just like, "Why not be poly sci?" Now it worked out because I ended up loving poly sci. It led me to law and the rest is history. And I actually really liked the direction, but I kind of went to Syracuse thinking I would go to Newhouse, and then completely dropped the ball.

And I tell that story to call myself out, but also to let people know ... It's funny. I talk to a lot of college students today, and there's so much anxiety people have over their majors. What do I do? I got to do this, I got to do that. I don't know if I want to do this. And I just tell them, I do think treat it with far more importance than I did. The lesson is not to be foolish like I was, but the lesson is that even if you don't make the perfect choice right now, it doesn't determine the rest of your life. And I just think we have to tell people that more often because, John, if I'm being really honest, what really changed and helped my life at Syracuse was two things, the people that I met and the experiences that I had. That was everything.

I mean, I have lifelong friends from Syracuse. I had experiences in classes that I remember there were a couple poly sci classes that I had that ended up changing my view of life and politics and law that led me to law school. And I've always credited law school as the reason why so much has happened in my life. So it's like those two things were important just as much as having the right major decision was.

John Boccacino:

There's a great phrase I love to rely on. College is a time and a place to do whatever you want to further your development. You're allowed to experiment and try out new classes. And I know you mentioned kind of falling into poly sci the way you did. Are there any examples you want to point out about how, the lessons you learned at Syracuse that really still stick with you and resonate today, besides Chucks being an institution?

Ryan Smith:

I could give you examples like try not to get punched in the face as a bouncer. I'll tell you that story if you want.

John Boccacino:

Were you a bouncer at one of the bars?

Ryan Smith:

I was for a little while, a bar back and a bouncer at 44s. I was a much bigger dude, not super big, but I was the kind of big dude who was not big enough, but sometimes thought he was big enough and could have an attitude when I needed to. But then a couple times, I got punched in the face there, and yeah, that changed. My bouncing days did not last long. But when you talk about, let's see, you were talking about what experiences really resonate.

I can tell you one. There's a professor I've never forgotten that really ... I'll take it from an educational perspective. And he kind of was a little bit of a set up for life in terms of how I look at education. There was a professor there, Professor Robles, and he taught a poly sci course there. I took his class. And originally, I was kind of messing up, not really doing all that great. But he really seemed to have faith in me. I don't know why. We had a couple of conversations and he just said, "I think you have a great mind for this." And I don't know, back then, I didn't really think much of myself in terms of intelligence or education. And it just sort of changed my perspective. I ended up getting an A in his class, but him believing in me spurred me along to continue to do well at Syracuse. I didn't start out doing very well, but I finished very well. And that ended up leading me to law school.

I tell that story only to say this. I know it might seem like professor had faith in you and that worked out well. It was more than that. One thing I kind of took from that is I have really even in my career tried to stay around the people who are not negative about me, but who are positive about me. They give me fuel. And I've used that, I used that in law school. When I went to law school, I was with all these people who knew so much about law and I knew nothing. And the moment I got there, I was like, "I feel like I'm at the bottom of the class." So I relied on what I learned from Professor Robles. Stick with the professors who have good things to say about me, not the ones who are ripping me because I'm not this and don't know, and don't know this about property or that about civil procedure.

And it's really kind of fueled me. That's one thing I always liked about Syracuse. I think that a lot of the professors that I came into contact with, if you took an interest in them and what they were teaching, they took an interest in you. And so my thing was always, especially once I started getting my act together educationally at Syracuse, it was like, "Try to find professors and stick with professors that want to encourage and be positive about me," not the people who are like, "Oh, you don't belong here," because the positive stuff is what keeps me going.

John Boccacino:

Having that experience with Professor Robles, the fact that we're sitting here, I hate to say it, but three decades after graduation, and it still sticks with you, it still is a recall, it's fresh at the tip of your memory, is really powerful. And from a sports perspective, I want to talk a little bit about the memories you have because you were here for some fantastic basketball teams and fantastic football teams. What kind of stands out? What were some of your favorite memories from a sports perspective?

Ryan Smith:

Derrick Coleman walking into Chuck's, what was that? Seeing Derrick Coleman and Billy Owens walking around campus, walking into 44s, walking into Chuck's while you're sitting there at the table. I remember I had a class once with one of the Gate brothers from lacrosse. I mean, these guys, if anybody knows lacrosse, these guys are two of the greatest players that ever lived, basically stuff like that. One thing was funny was with the swim team when I swam, we had our weight sessions in the same place

where the basketball team worked out. And it was so funny because you'd just be walking around routinely seeing guys like ... Well, Seikaly was already gone, Rony Seikaly was already gone.

But you would see guys like Coleman, Owens, Thompson, Sherman, Douglass. They'd be walking in and out while you were doing your weight session. And then you'd see Boenheim coming in. And I feel like the memory that I have of him was that he would scowl like, "Am I really waiting for the swimming team to work out so we can get some work done. Is that really happening?" I always felt like my never ending view of him was this guy that was scowling at you. But there's just so many great moments there.

One thing I love about Syracuse is I don't know if it's that way now, but the funny thing is, all these dudes, they're just hanging out with you. They're hanging out in your classes. You're in bars with them. You're sitting around on campus. You're in the quad just hanging out. It's like people were kind of together with each other back then and I hope it's that way now. But there were so many experiences of me hanging out with some dude who played football, or basketball, or whatever, that it almost was so common that I can't even think of one particular moment that's like, "That was the moment."

The one thing I will remember is: Remember the year they lost to Indiana? I think I was on a recruiting trip that year because they were recruiting for swimming. They came up and I remember them walking ... Who was it? It might've been DC or Seikaly, or one of the guys walking into a bar. And I thought to myself, "Should I say something?" Ultimately, I decided not to because: Who wants to hear from some random guy about how you lost the title game?

John Boccacino:

One of them make the front end of the one and one, so Keith Smart couldn't make the jumper to win it.

Ryan Smith:

Exactly. What happened, Rony?

John Boccacino:

I can tell, Ryan, you've got a lot of passion for what you do for a living. You've got a lot of passion for Syracuse. When people find out that you're an alumnus of the Orange, what does that mean to you?

Ryan Smith:

Well, at ESPN, people should know, ESPN is Syracuse central. So here, it's like, "Oh, you're with the Orange, I'm with the Orange." Everybody's with the Orange. It's the greatest thing ever, by the way. But everywhere else when people find out I go to Syracuse, the first question I get is, "Did you go to Newhouse?" And then I have to say no, which makes me feel sad. But what it really means to me is there's a tradition. Syracuse has a recognition everywhere, everywhere, especially in this career, and it's just the coolest thing ever. And I tell people all the time, wave your orange flag proudly, man, because in this industry, we are the pinnacle. People talk over and over again about should ... People ask me now, the same way my mom asked Harry Kalas, "Where should my kid go?"

People now ask me, "Should my kid go to Syracuse if they want to get in journalism?" It's the coolest thing to be from a place that is recognized for excellence in media and entertainment and journalism. It's just the coolest thing. And not every ... You don't always get that with everywhere you go. But when I went to Syracuse, I always looked at it like I had gone so far beyond where I ever thought I would be, and being from Syracuse, now I get to use that everywhere I go. People cannot imagine how big the name is, no matter what field I'm in, in journalism. It's just incredible.

John Boccacino:

Well, speaking of incredible, it's been a fascinating conversation here with Ryan Smith. You can catch him at ESPN's flagship Sports Center program, catch him on Outside the Lines, ABC News, 20/20, all over the place. He's a media mogul combining legal issues with sports issues. And Ryan, it's been a real treat telling your story here. Thank you so much for making the time, and continued success.

Ryan Smith:

Absolutely, absolutely. It's good to see you, John.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.