

# A CONVERSATION WITH JUDY WOODRUFF

Judy Woodruff, broadcast journalist and former anchor of CNN's *Inside Politics*, started her career in Atlanta. In January 2007, her documentary on Generation Next (America's 16-to-25 year olds) airs nationwide.

by Charles and Mary Love

**W**hen Judy Woodruff met us in the hallway at Duke University's Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, where she has been teaching a seminar on the media and politics, she appeared as youthful and energetic as the students rushing around her. Slim and smartly dressed in a cropped tweed jacket and jean-style slacks, she struck the perfect balance between city sophistication and campus casual.

Born into a military family in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Woodruff moved frequently as a youth, both in the U.S. and overseas. In her teens, she settled in Augusta, Georgia, where she was crowned Young Miss Augusta 1963. After graduating with a major in political science from Duke University in 1968, Woodruff moved to Atlanta to cover weather, local news and a variety of other topics for the local CBS affiliate. In 1975, working as a reporter for NBC's eastern bureau, she was assigned to cover Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign. After the election, she became NBC's chief White House correspondent.

Woodruff has been, among other things, host of public television's award-winning documentary series *Frontline With Judy Woodruff*, a reporter for the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, and, for 12 years, host of CNN's *Inside Politics*.

Recently, in addition to leading her seminar at Duke University, she has completed *Generation Next: Speak Up*



Photo Courtesy of CNN

and *Be Heard*, a project to interview American young people and report on their views. Results of her interviews have appeared as segments on Jim Lehrer's NewsHour (PBS), and will culminate in an hour-long documentary on PBS, scheduled to air January 12. Woodruff and her husband, an executive editor for Bloomberg News, have three children, ages 17 to 25, and live in Washington, D.C.

Judy invited us into her campus office and graciously answered our questions about her early days in Atlanta, the fast-paced world of reporting the news, and her thoughts on Generation Next.

**ASD: Did you enjoy living in Atlanta after college graduation?**

**JW:** I did. I made great friends and have fond memories of going to parties and doing things that young single people



Photo Courtesy of CNN

**Woodruff has a laugh with Wolf Blitzer.**

do. I was a junior member of the High Museum and went to lots of activities there. I also traveled quite a lot to the Bahamas, and occasionally to Europe when I had time.

**ASD: Have you kept up your ties with Atlanta?**

**JW:** After Al and I married in 1980, my life pretty much moved to Washington. But when I went to CNN as host of Inside Politics it was, in a way, like coming home because I was going to work with a company based in Atlanta. Even though I wasn't working out of Atlanta, I would go back and forth to do specials.

**ASD: What are you teaching in your seminar at Duke?**

**JW:** I'm including in the seminar everything I know about the media and politics. I've really tried to create a class around the subjects that interest me: the history of

television, the influence of technology, and how the coverage of political news has changed.

**ASD: How has technology affected the delivery of news?**

**JW:** The effects have been dramatic. Both the Internet and 24/7 cable news have had an extraordinary effect on television. What had been deadlines in the morning, in the evenings and late at night have become around-the-clock deadlines. There's been a speeding-up effect on news delivery. Journalists have to be aware of news as it's breaking.

**ASD: How has this affected the content of the network news programs?**

**JW:** You can't just say "here's what happened today." There is more pressure to do analysis, to take the story to the next level, and to do it quickly.



Judy Woodruff in front of the Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy at Duke University.

**ASD: Has TV journalism become more competitive?**

**JW:** It has always been competitive, but now the competition never lets up. You have to be watching over your shoulder every moment to make sure there's not some breaking story you're missing. And you're doing all this in an environment of economic pressures, tighter budgets and more competition for audiences.

**ASD: It seems there's more cynicism these days about news reporting, that it's become more superficial and entertainment-oriented. Do you think that cynicism is justified?**

**JW:** In part, I do. In my opinion, there's too much coverage of these personal-interest, even prurient-interest, stories that have to do with celebrities, women and children as victims and so on. They are almost like running soap operas. Meanwhile, there's less coverage of important issues like the deficit, healthcare and education in America. You could argue that covering education policy all day would be a yawner. That's true. But you can do it in a measured way.

**ASD: Do you think there's less objective reporting of the news these days?**

**JW:** To me, there's no such thing as pure objectivity in reporting. The straight news reporter is still a human being, still has opinions, still decides what to include or exclude. After straight reporting, comes reporting with analysis,

which means you should have a little more experience as a reporter. Beyond this, we get into what we call opinion, and I think it should be labeled as such. But increasingly, on television, it isn't always labeled. It's become more acceptable on some news channels to gently insert opinions.

**ASD: Doesn't this make it more difficult for viewers to distinguish between facts and opinions?**

**JW:** I think most viewers are smart enough to know when a reporter steps over the line. I think you just need to be smart, you need to listen to many different sources of news, so that you've always got something to balance what you're hearing.

**ASD: How did the Generation Next project get started?**

**JW:** I was interested in doing something about public debate in this country—the arena of public opinion. Out of my conversations with the Pew Charitable Trusts came the decision to do something about the younger generation. The voting age was lowered in 1970 from 21 to 18, so there's been an interest for some years, among politicians and others, in better understanding 16-to-25 year olds. What are their interests and values? Are they voting? Why or why not? The folks at McNeil/Lehrer Productions agreed to be the television anchor. So there was a confluence of interests.

**ASD: How was the project implemented?**

**JW:** We started research in early 2006 and began shooting last June all over the country. We had an RV donated by the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association. Young people were invited to the RV to answer questions on a laptop in the kitchenette. Of course, I also did a lot of television interviews and also what we call "Café Judys," sessions during which I would interview a group of people outdoors. In total, we completed over 500 interviews.

**ASD: What did you learn about these young people?**

**JW:** It's impossible to generalize about them. But there are some interesting facts. There are 42 million of them and they are the most ethnically diverse generation ever. They are 17% Hispanic, 14% African American, 4% Asian, plus smaller minority groups. Something else you should know: one out of every five is a child of an immigrant and one out of every 10 was born outside the U.S.

**ASD: Are there other characteristics about this generation that stand out?**

**JW:** They've lived through a time of prosperity, yet are stressed in different ways. Some at the lower end of the



Photo Christopher Buchanan



Photo Matt Mendelssohn

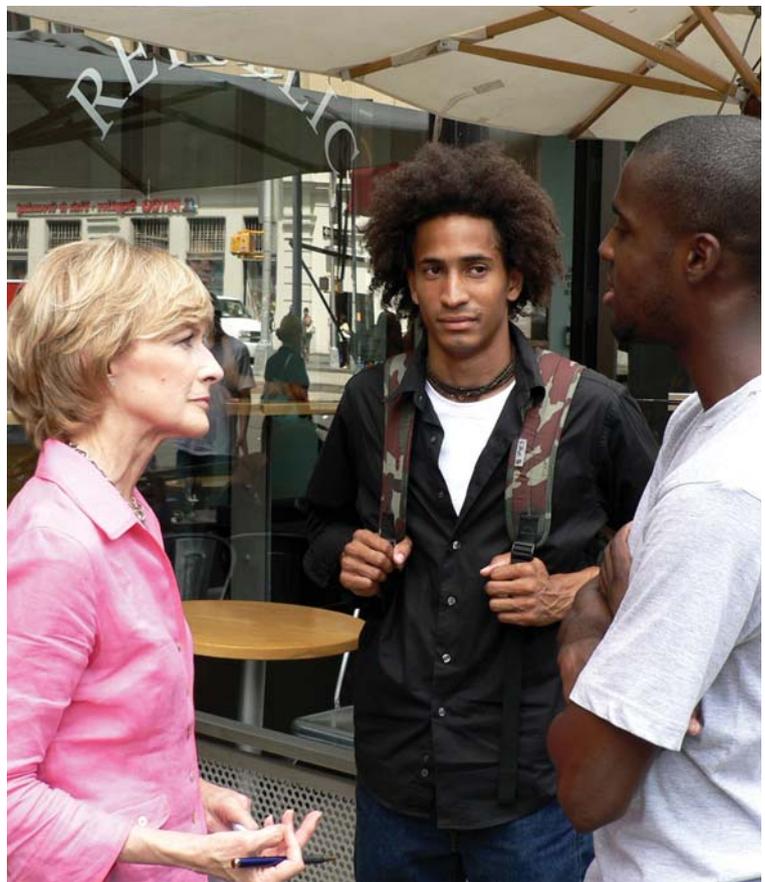


Photo Christopher Buchanan

**Top left: Woodruff on the road with Generation Next. Bottom left: Woodruff on the Georgetown University campus. Right: Woodruff interviews two Gen Nexters in New York City.**

socio-economic ladder have had difficulties affording a good education and finding a decent job. Those in more comfortable circumstances are stressed to get into the best schools and to do as well as their parents did. They are also a generation whose parents have been very interested in raising them the right way. The term hyper-parenting has been used. Some parents are described as “helicopter parents,” hovering over their shoulders, making sure every homework assignment is done well. On the positive side, these young people are smarter, better educated and more tech-savvy than earlier generations.

**ASD: Is this generation more or less interested in politics?**

**JW:** Our generation was an activist generation. There was Vietnam, the women’s rights movement, the civil rights movement. This generation, according to the experts, is closer to their parents than the previous generation; they are not rebelling. It doesn’t mean they are satisfied with the way things are. Some of them are quite cynical about politics; others say it’s absolutely important to vote.

**ASD: A few final questions about yourself. How did you**

**preserve your dignity, charm and positive relationships with colleagues in the rough and tumble world of Washington politics?**

**JW:** I don’t know how to answer that except to say that I’ve loved what I do. Journalism can be cutthroat. But I’m as competitive as the next person. I have a thicker skin than it may appear.

**ASD: And how have you managed to balance your professional and family lives?**

**JW:** I’ve been determined from the beginning to have a family and career and guess I was just too foolish to think through what the contradictions might be. There’s never been a time when I’ve felt I should just stop working. It has helped to have a very supportive spouse [Al Hunt, executive editor for Bloomberg News in Washington, D.C.].

**ASD: Finally, are you planning to write another book?**

**JW:** I’m not there yet. But I’m thinking, when the time is right, I would like to write a book about my experiences—not so much about me, but about my work and what I’ve covered as a political reporter in Washington. ☛